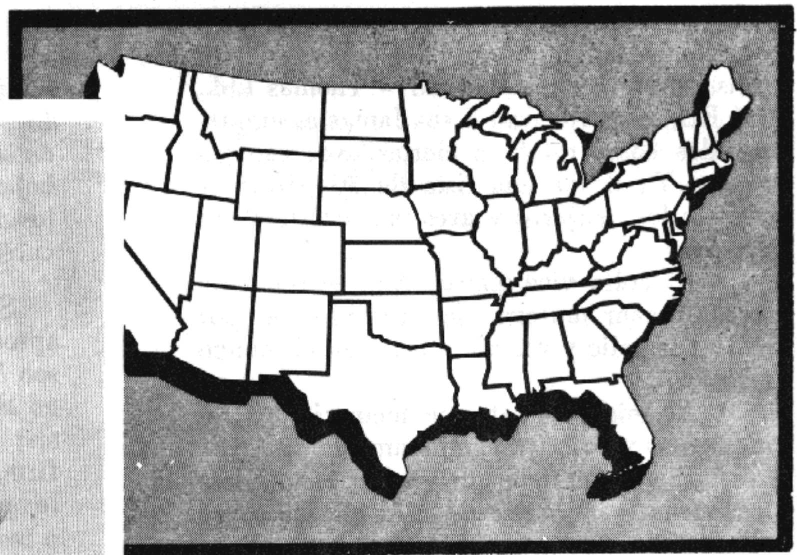

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Executive boredom

Mature executives don't get bored. They have the commitment to a vision of the future of their organizations that keeps them enthusiastically engaged in their jobs day after long, hard day.

This article is adapted from Mr. Hayes's recently published audio-cassette program, The Mature Executive, *AMACOM, 1978.*

To be sure, some managers may get bored with their jobs. Perhaps even some CEOs lose their zest for their work. A distinguished president of a not-for-profit organization, for example, declared recently that a top executive is good for only seven to ten years in his or her job. As this president analyzes top-executive job performance, the first two years an executive spends on a job are invested in getting acquainted with the organization and deciding what needs to be done; the next two to three years are given to implementing this program; and thereafter, having done for the organization whatever he or she could, the executive finds the job becomes more or less repetitive—and boring. For this president, ten years is as long as any CEO can stay in the office and off the golf course during the workday.

This attitude is ridiculous. That some very good people have accepted it doesn't make it right—or understandable. Perhaps what they mean is that the organization has become bored with the executive because he or she lacks enthusiasm and spontaneity. Or perhaps it is a matter of the CEO or other executive becoming so predictable that the tension has gone out of his relationship with his organization.

Effective managers must be predictable and unpredictable in turn—at the right times and for the right things. For those actions and decisions that relate closely to a subordinate's feelings of security, that define for him or her what is to be done on the job and how well, the supervisor should be predictable, consistent. But for many other actions and decisions, a healthy dose of unpredictability can keep the organization just enough on edge to make each day interesting. It's like a wife greeting her husband at the door on an evening with a new dress and hairdo but with nothing special scheduled; he has to

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wonder what in the world is going on, and with that wonder there would be just a touch of excitement.

Needed: a vision of the future

Poor management can also lead to a bored organization. Inadequate long-term planning, for example, seems to correlate with a lack of organizational zest.

Even today some managers do not believe in long-term planning. If management is an *ad hoc* adventure with only modest and not very challenging incremental changes each year, boredom can set in early. But when the leaders of an organization believe in taking a long view, when they have a vision of where the organization is going and of what it can become, excitement follows.

Inspiring leaders have dreams. They may know they will not live long enough to see their dreams come true, but nevertheless they strive constantly to realize their vision of what might be. They are always busy because they have so many things they want to do before they retire—or die. For example, a young man I knew found out during a hospital stay that he had terminal cancer. After being told, he asked for a dictating machine; he wanted to write a book. This was something he had wanted to do, and he now realized that his time was running out. He finished the book before he died. It was an excellent little book of meditations for young clerics, a fine piece of work. This outstanding young man lived life fully to the very end because he had dreams.

A lack of focus for self-development

Managers who become immersed in routine, who do nothing more than visit the same old customers each day, who plod about the laboratory, who tour the hospital, who watch the customers in the bank, can quite easily get bored. Routine tasks *are* boring. But good managers are creative—and long-term planners.

Managers who do not adopt planning as an everyday process may fall behind in their knowledge and skill. The organization and their jobs pass them by, and they soon become physically and mentally tired. Lacking a plan for the future, their self-development efforts lack direction and focus, and the state of the management art in fields that are important to their futures advances much more rapidly than their own knowledge and skill. The demands of their jobs increase, but their skills decrease. While young these managers may have been outstanding, but at the threshold of what should be their most productive years, they are barely adequate.

That jobs grow, and undoubtedly will continue to grow, in their demands should be obvious to all who work. Even the most prosaic jobs are affected by the day-by-day impact of technical innovations.

In years past, for example, all that was required of a home handyman was that he know how to use a screwdriver. How times have changed! With the complexity of modern household equipment, repairs to even the simplest gadget require almost an engineering degree.

Needless to say, the professions are experiencing the same explosion of knowledge and change. Imagine an accountant who ignores the rulings of the IRS or the Financial Accounting Standards Board, and think of the dentist who has more dials and switches on her equipment than the pilot of a small plane. Even art takes new forms. And colleges are giving courses in recreation.

Such changes should not be surprising. Neither should the increasing rate of change. A competitive economic system pushes improvement as a way of life. And even in socialistic societies, where the rate of innovation once seemed slower, change is spurred by the challenge of meeting or exceeding the achievements of capitalistic countries.

Only the completely withdrawn could be bored in such a world.

Most people, of course, do grow in competence. Some

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growth comes from additional formal education; most growth, however, comes from informal special training and on-the-job experience. Association with able people stimulates growth, particularly if we are able to maintain adequate relationships with them. Most research has, in fact, indicated that this kind of on-the-job coaching and experience is the *sine qua non* of effective management development.

Unfortunately, many people who receive outstanding formal educations lose in the process the ability to learn from others. Perhaps what they have really lost is the ability to empathize with people, most importantly, with their subordinates. Perhaps, too, this weakness could be overcome if college graduates started in industry as workers making or selling the product. If managers experienced the work lives of their subordinates, they might understand and empathize with them better. Some highly intelligent college graduates do empathize with their associates, of course, but some never sense the way life is in the shop, at the counter, at the switchboard, or at a routine desk job.

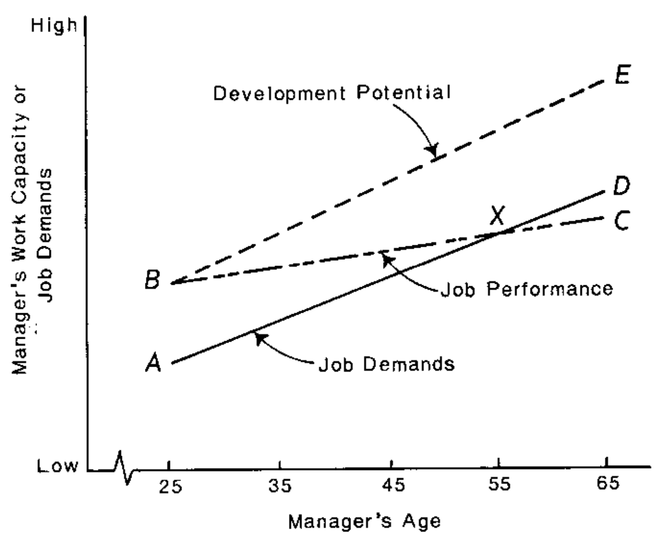
Outstanding managers seem to mature quickly in their skill in personal relationships. Experienced managers recognize this ability as one mark of effective leadership. Effective leaders display empathy for the least significant person in the organization and match this empathy with recognition and appreciation.

One manager's career

The figure to the right diagrams what often happens to promising managers and shows what may be any manager's problem tomorrow—for himself or for someone who reports to him. Points *A* and *B* depict a young manager's capacity vis-à-vis the demands of his job at the time of hire. The figure is obviously for an outstanding manager: His capacity far exceeds the demands of the job. As a result, the company is comfortable and pleased with its new manager's performance.

In the figure, the line *AD* represents the growth in the state of the art. (A graph showing exponential growth would undoubtedly be more accurate.) Compare the slope of line *BC* with that of *AD*. Job demands have grown much faster than this manager has grown in competence. If the performance appraisal system is at all sensitive, this narrowing of the gap between job demands and managerial competence will show in appraisals that move from outstanding to marginal.

One Manager's Career



What is such a manager's supervisor to do? If the supervisor is typical, he or she will attribute the lower appraisals to preoccupation with family concerns—or maturation. These explanations may be partially true, but none suggests a curative. If the person has been promoted a few times, his new supervisors will wonder how his earlier supervisors could have been so wrong about the manager. The problem, of course, is that no one took the

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trouble to forecast developmental requirements for the person if he was to continue as an outstanding performer—his obligation to himself and his organization.

Development is a personal problem

Line *BE* suggests the development potential of the individual, what could have been achieved if he had been alerted to the need and given assistance. Development, of course, is not entirely a company matter. Development is each manager's personal problem—opportunity—and an opportunity that a manager and company should address together very early in a manager's career.

Since most development is self-development, a company's efforts in this regard can only supplement a manager's efforts; they can not supplant them. Many companies and managers mistakenly believe that organizations have the obligation to furnish developmental assistance for their people. No, at best the organization can provide only a few opportunities for growth; the individual, in his or her application to the work at hand, provides most of the opportunities. Interestingly, though, the personnel records of most companies list only company development efforts.

For company and manager, *X* is the critical point. At *X* the manager has become a marginal employee. At this point it is almost too late to take corrective action; it is almost too late for the last years of the manager's career to be as rich and rewarding as the early years. If the lines representing job demands and competence cross, the manager will be spending his last years in the demeaning role of a "hanger on." Rather than ending his career with the independence and pride of an outstanding contributor, the manager sneaks to the retirement line—a ward of the company.

Why does this so often happen to managers between the ages of 55 and 60? Perhaps it is that their initially very good performance caused them and their supervisors to be insensitive to the rapidly rising *AD* line. Strong basic preparation and initial performance carry managers through many years on a new job without substantial challenge. By the time the manager and his supervisor realize what has happened, the shortcomings in performance are a result of years of neglected development. Development must start early and be continuous; just imagine trying to learn all about electronics in a year or two.

A lag in self-image

It is hard to forget or correct the self-images of the past. To the person who was a star at 30 it is hard to see himself as a has-been at 55.

Some people, of course, do feel themselves slipping. They can feel the world and the organizations in which they are working moving faster than they are and, very wisely, they take early retirement. And sometimes, of course, a supervisor or the board will step in and say, "Look, you're not doing your job and we must do something about you." As a matter of fact, this is where a good board is very important. It is the board's responsibility to evaluate the CEO, and the CEO sets the tone of the organization. But managers at all levels must face up to this problem, regardless of the tone or climate at the top.

Even if a manager's supervisor doesn't take the initiative and tell him where he's falling down, his subordinates usually will. It may not come directly. That's a hard, a risky, thing for a subordinate to do. But subordinates will drop many clues: "Jim, let me explain this to you." Translated this means, "Look, you dummy, you don't understand what's going on anymore. Let me catch you up with what has been happening over the past three or four years." They will say, "Just let me explain that in a little more detail." Your subordinates will use such throwaway phrases to tell you that the state of the management art is passing you by.

In theory an organization's performance appraisal system should pick up those managers who are coasting or who have gone into early retirement on the job. In fact, however, we appraise so poorly that appraisals are of little help. With a good appraisal system we would be measuring a manager's performance against established standards of performance and so would know early when the manager was slipping.

But we don't do this. Few companies have well-developed standards of performance and few managers seem to have the stomach for leveling with their subordinates. What happens instead is that each performance review is a pleasant social occasion with little that is critical or substantial communicated to the employee. Suddenly one day a hard decision must be made, and the employee who was just a happy visit once a year becomes a problem to be handled. It is difficult, though, to confront someone who has for so long thought everything was going well with the judgment that he has suddenly become a marginal performer at best, and more probably a nonperformer, in any hard measurement of his results. This is the high price of managerial weakness.

Such ineffective managerial performance can be overcome with relative ease if companies invest in developing standards of performance. When standards of performance exist, a manager is not dependent on what someone else tells him about his performance; he can judge for himself. He knows when he is doing his job because he has an impersonal, always-present frame of reference within which to judge how well he is doing. Standards of performance are clear, objective, and public. It's like golf. Everyone knows what par is for each hole and for the course; it's published on the scorecard. Even a person who is playing a course for the first time can rate his performance: All he has to do is compare his score with par. If a score is far off par, the golfer knows that more practice or lessons are needed. If a score is at par or below, things are obviously going well. If you have a ruler, you don't need others to tell you the length of the cloth.

Sometimes organizations fail

Now sometimes a manager may be spinning his wheels through no fault of his own. His organization may not be giving him the resources he needs to do his job. After a reasonable effort has been made, if nothing changes, there is little point in fighting a losing battle. Talents like muscles grow with use. If a manager is in a situation that does not tax his talents, stifling his growth, it is usually better for him to leave.

People in political life have learned to resign. Able people in government will often become ineffective, not because of any lessening of their talent, but because of differences in their policy orientation—or in their political sponsorship and constituency—from those in policy-level positions. In such situations, they forthrightly resign—with honor.

In many organizations, however, the word "resignation" has taken on overtones of deception and misrepresentation. Most people in business, for example, assume that people don't resign, they are fired—but are given the opportunity to resign to put a good face on it. How sad! I think there are times in all organizations for able but not fully used people to leave. Sometimes these people have grown beyond their jobs and the organization cannot provide opportunities that are challenging to them. In other cases, people have developed new values as they have matured, values that can no longer be fully realized in their present organization. Certainly, in such situations, to leave is preferable to a slow decline in talents through disuse and to the frustration in values denied.

Boredom is a symptom

Boredom in business? Boredom for CEO's? Yes, boredom can occur, but when it does, it is a symptom of more fundamental problems. The organization may be bored with its managers and their lack of spontaneity and verve. These managers may also not be committed to an exciting vision of what they and their organizations can become in the future. But perhaps even more important, the organization may not challenge these managers through demanding standards of performance. In any case, and regardless of the reasons, when a mature and able manager feels bored, he should seriously consider changing jobs, changing companies—or simply retiring. It is not fair to anyone for half a leader to hold a full-time leadership job. •