

Perspectives for Managers

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Take Charge of Your Career Transitions

When executives take better charge of their own career transitions they open up new career possibilities for themselves. In this article we will discuss some practical steps on how you can better manage your career and that of the people you lead. We will also show how decisions pertaining to your work-life balance are important ingredients in this process.

As the concept of lifetime employment with the same company evaporates, it becomes important for people to learn to manage their own careers in a way that was not previously necessary. Research by the Gallup organization over 30 years shows a shocking deterioration in employee engagement (the commitment of employees to work with passion and pride, to speak positively about the company, and to “go the extra distance” on their jobs). This reflects, in part, the failure of employees to take responsibility for their own careers. Any employee who devolves responsibility for career or work-life balance to the company is abdicating a critical responsibility.

A most important attribute for anyone in today’s world is self-awareness. As we grow older, understanding and accepting the transitions that we face in both our professional and personal life is essential for maintaining a healthy mind and body. The more aware we are of our own needs, values and wants, the less likely we are to be taken hostage by a company, a lifestyle or even an expectation. We will be more able to manage our own careers and make transitions when the time is right. If we remain ‘trapped’ by the competing demands in our life, we can cause pain to those we love and to our employees, leading to potentially serious negative consequences.

We all face moments of truth in our careers – occasions when we can maintain the status quo, or choose to move out of our “comfort zone” deliberately choosing a more difficult path – one more likely to further our growth and improve our life balance. These moments of truth are Critical Career Transitions. To bring some focus to the analysis of career transitions, we will explore the following approaches:

- I. Seek ways to expand your identity in life
- II. Listen for your life chapters
- III. Find – and maintain – harmony among your themes

I. Seek ways to expand your identity in life

Identity is shaped by three broad roles in life:

1. Personal – what we focus on in personal roles such as spouse, parent, hobbies, etc.
2. Professional – how we continue to expand our professional knowledge.
3. Organizational – what we do to change roles within an organization.

Identity is a collective set of beliefs, behavior and personal characteristics by which we define ourselves and each other. The answer to the question “Who am I?” is focused on identity. What one spends time on and gives attention to, actually shapes our identity from the hard-wiring in the brain to our personal and professional characteristics as an individual.

There are people who lose themselves in their work and whose whole identity is built in one area of life. This can easily lead to long term negative consequences because of prolonged over-stress,



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including burnout out from failure to re-charge and recover energy through a balanced life.

We acknowledge that a ‘truly’ balanced life is difficult to achieve and maintain. It requires a mindset, similar to a pendulum that swings back and forth as needed, under the control of the individual. That is why continuous learning, even when uncomfortable, is critical for expanding our identity in an ongoing manner. It is sad to see leaders who focus on only one part of their life, stop learning, develop a closed mindset and block the development of their identity.

Express yourself fully

Select a way of life that is congruent with your own personal qualities, values and needs. In essence, all life components are tied to your identity. Your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual being is connected and needs harmony. Expressing yourself fully requires a great deal of awareness, effort and careful planning. Career moves and transitions can have a positive influence on the development of a person’s identity. New situations provide opportunities for renewal, for acquisition of new skills and for character development.

Value your time – life is finite

Time is lost when you are involved in activities you don’t enjoy or which don’t add value to your life. Clarify your needs, values and purpose. Note activities that energize you and let your creativity blossom. Identify skills and accomplishments that give you a sense of pride and purpose.

II. Listen for your life chapters

Visualize your life as a book, to which you add chapters as you go through life. Each chapter has a structure, and it tells a story. Some chapters are better than others, and yet they all are part of the same book – your life. Chapters represent phases in your life and are marked by a shift in your creative energy and focus.

Know when a chapter should end

The content of your chapters follow certain themes that flow through your “book” – for example, professional endeavours, family life, hobbies, sports, and so on. In this section we will focus on chapters in professional life, while recognizing that events in our private lives may well ignite new chapters in our professional lives, and vice versa. For example, having children may lead you to make career changes that allow more time with the family, or a career shift may result in the family having to move.

A chapter in your professional life may end when you sense a need for deep renewal and want to kick-start motivation. There is no magic formula to know when your creative energy and focus are shifting – your intuition and gut feeling are the best indicators. However, a chapter can end in at least four ways:

a) Accomplishment of major goals and/or business objectives.

For example, completion of a major R&D project, successfully achieving a company turn-around.

b) A feeling of stagnation, or unfulfilled expectations.

For example, a job that does not challenge you or where you see limited possibilities for further professional growth.

c) The need for a change in priorities, to find new horizons or develop new skills.

For example, switching from consulting into line management, or leaving the corporate world to enter academia.

d) A major unexpected event – either negative or positive.

For example, bankruptcy and closure of your place of work, sale of your company, a promotion, or a transfer abroad.

Where possible, we should end our chapters with a sense of closure, so we can move on with our lives without regrets. Saying “hello” to a new chapter works best when we have said “good-bye” to the old one.

Do not take pre-conceived career plans too seriously

In the business world we tend to think of careers as “corporate ladders.” We challenge you to visualize your career, not as a corporate ladder, but as a “long and winding road” (with due respect to The Beatles). On a ladder we run the risk of focusing on the next rung, locking ourselves into a set career path and closed mindset, and limiting our choices. At most, we might jump from one ladder to another – if we recognize an opportunity to do so.

We prefer to take career plans with a pinch of salt. If we view our career as a long and winding road, we might not always see clearly the road ahead, but we are more likely to recognize a fork in the road and find unexpected surprises – both of which can offer great opportunities to further our development. Serendipity can be a wonderful door-opener if our minds are ready to accept the unexpected. Besides, if we visualize our career as a winding road we are more likely to enjoy the scenery along the way... A “long and winding road” can stretch you out of your comfort zone, where the reward will often be learning and exhilaration.

Do not restrict yourself to pre-defined areas of competence

We have known great managing directors with financial – not commercial – backgrounds; extraordinary staff people coming from executive line functions – and vice-versa; supply-chain managers who are not engineers. Or management consultants successfully running large industrial corporations. Cross-functional experience can dramatically enhance your professional effectiveness by broadening you beyond the confines of narrow silos.

As you reflect on your potential career moves, we encourage you to consider every area of human endeavor as your playground. If you are not a lawyer, engineer, doctor, or accountant or career diplomat, it does not mean that you should avoid the fields of legal affairs, engineering, medicine or finance. These areas – and others – are crying out for leadership in strategy, innovation, and

organizational effectiveness. Your previous fields of expertise are a springboard for future achievements, not a shackle that ties you to the past.

The concept of chapters is real, even if borderlines between ending one chapter and starting another can sometimes be blurred. Understanding your chapters means understand better what makes you “tick” and what gives you courage to take risks. Chapters bring a broader perspective to career moves and personal decisions. Knowing your chapters, and sensing shifts in your focus, can be critical to making the correct decision when faced with a career transition. It ensures you remain true to your own personal compass rather than having to fit into other people’s agendas.

III. Find – and renew – harmony among your themes

We return here to the idea of “Themes” mentioned earlier, those core activities that are – or should be – the highest priority in our lives. While themes can vary, they will often reflect how you define your identity. For many people three main themes run through their lives: Family and close friends; professional occupation (paid or unpaid); and leisure pursuits. Themes can run in parallel, similar to beautiful music. In chamber music trios, the violin, the cello and the piano may follow different scripts. If they complement each other and are well balanced, they can produce magnificent harmony. However, if one instrument overshadows the others, or is out of sync, the resulting disharmony can wreck the entire piece.

Harmony is not about perfect balance!

Harmony is subjective: What works for one person does not necessarily apply to another. Harmony is not about some idyllic perfect balance between our themes. Finding harmony is a never-ending struggle to ensure that no single theme overpowers our life permanently to the exclusion of the others. This is only possible if we make a conscious effort to reassign priorities when our lives are not in balance.

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Family life, and professional occupations, are typically the main time-hoggers. Few business people would question their importance. But the theme of leisure pursuits is equally important although it often attracts less attention in the business world. By leisure pursuits, we mean any activity which can broaden your mind and open doors to new worlds – endeavors as diverse as mountain climbing, cooking, studying, or playing a musical instrument. The importance of serious leisure pursuits in achieving harmony cannot be over-emphasized. A serious hobby will fully engage our conscious mind, allowing our unconscious to work undisturbed on the major issues we are facing.

Achieving harmony requires creativity

How many of us are fed up with seeing only the insides of offices, hotels and airports during our business trips? If you are creative, life's themes can overlap with one another. For example, you can combine a business trip to Beijing with a visit to the Great Wall to expand your cultural horizons. Or, family time and work responsibilities can overlap if your spouse or children accompany you on a business trip or to a business conference. Other overlaps can occur between family and friends and your own leisure pursuits – for example, golf or play tennis with your family instead of with business colleagues. The “never-ending struggle” to find harmony is helped if your expectations at home, at work, and with your inner self are well thought out and openly agreed to. If the decisions you take about achieving harmony are based on values and priorities that you share with your spouse or your loved ones, don't harbor unnecessary guilt feelings when you pursue one theme at the expense of others. What is crucial is that no single theme takes over your life permanently, to the exclusion of others.

In this article we have focused on ways to take more control over our careers. It is impossible to discuss career transitions independently from work-life balance issues, and vice versa. We have put forward three philosophical reflections that attempt to link both of these crucial topics. We have suggested that if you seek ways to expand your identity in life, if you listen for your life chapters, and if you find, and maintain, harmony among your themes you will open broader career possibilities while achieving improved balance between professional endeavors and private life.

Today, young employees enter the workforce with expectations of having more time for balance in their lives. AC Nielsen's global on-line survey of more than 22,000 people in 46 countries in late 2006, found that work-life balance, together with healthier life-style, tops the list of New Year's resolutions around the world. While more “visible” in Europe and North America, AC Nielsen's survey shows that these concerns have high priority in every corner of the world. Youth is not necessarily focused on corporate loyalty or status symbols. Their workplace focus is more on relationships and outcomes. They expect greater workplace flexibility and broader career opportunities. Each generation has its own distinct values, view of authority, connection to the world, sense of loyalty and expectations of leaders and the workplace.

As never before, managers at all levels must ask “how is the balance in my life?”, and have the courage to take control to live a “quality of life”. It is a myth that to be a high performer and to succeed at the highest levels, work life-balance must be continually sacrificed. Today's

interconnected world offers almost endless career opportunities if we are willing to openly embrace change and new challenges.

High-performing employees hold more power to influence their career choices than they realize. They can follow the models of highly successful leaders who are assertive when facing critical career decisions and who manage their careers and their lives in a way that maintains balance and achieves great business results. They never let themselves, or their lives, be a “hostage” to anyone, anything, anytime, anywhere.

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Take charge: Manage your transition as another career change that you are looking forward to experience. See yourself as flexible, willing to risk, adaptable, and open to exploration. Understand transition as movement: Consider your change as a series of events and the transition as advancing steps to the other conclusion. She is a co-author of *ATD's Career Moves* (2013) and contributed the *Take charge of Your Career: Breaking Into & Advancing in the T&D Profession* Chapter to the *ASTD Handbook*, 2nd edition (2014). Reitman holds doctorate and master's degrees in higher education administration from Teachers College, Columbia University. In a recent post on Govloop, Mark Hensch says, "When it comes to professional development, no one can take you to the best version of your career besides yourself." Unfortunately, one of the biggest mistakes that employees make is depending on their boss, mentor, or teacher to tell them pathways to pursue. And sometimes it is years down the road before we come to the realization that we have taken a path that does not fit our natural talents and tendencies. My Story. If you are part of NexGen, the following advice may be helpful as you map out your career and discuss individual development. Your career will always be a lifelong learning journey, but you already know because you're a smart cookie. It's daunting to ask for feedback "sometimes it feels like you're inviting criticism, but who you ask and what you ask for will make a difference. Ask individuals you admire and trust in the office, then ask for specifics (like, how did my presentation skills go in that last meeting?) then be open and curious to hear what they have to say.