

Managing the Career Progression

Written by Dr. Chris Alexander, PE | Monday, May 15, 2017

I'm not sure about you, but I have several places where I do my best thinking. My favorite place to think is late at night in my study after everyone else in the house has gone to sleep. I guess my second favorite place would have to be mowing (third would be while jogging). It probably sounds a bit crazy, but riding around on my Snapper ZTR (zero turn radius) mower is one of the best times for me to think. Over the years, I've thought about all kinds of things, including business ideas, conflict resolutions, and long-term plans for life.

If you're reading this article, odds are you have a career. The average American adult spends 50-60 hours every week working; however, according to a 2014 Forbes report¹ most Americans are unhappy at work. If you are like me, the first thought that comes to mind is – why are people unhappy?

I can't help but think that job dissatisfaction relates in part to our not understanding what it takes to have a successful career. When most people start their careers, they are excited about their job and looking forward to making a difference in the world. However, somewhere along the way, likely after 15-20 years, disillusionment creeps in. Most people never recover.

It seems to me that part of the problem relates to *unfulfilled expectations*. Very few of us have a clear understanding of what exactly our boss expects of us. In fact, I would say if you know exactly what is expected of you, count yourself lucky! So, I'm going to take another guess – my guess is probably no one has ever explained to you the “career progression” concept. What I'm going to share with you is a culmination of thoughts accumulated over the past 25 years, but it really came together based on a conversation I had with a friend of mine about 10 years ago while we were sharing a lunchtime experience at our local What-a-burger. He was exposed to Career Progression concept while working at Mobil Oil Company in the 1980s and what he shared with me really resonated.

Basically, during most people's lifetimes their careers go through three stages:

- Sole contributor (typically, first 3 years)
- Accomplish through others (typically, Years 3-10)
- Accomplish through vision (typically, 10 years or more)

In this article I'll share a few thoughts on the various aspects associated with each stage of the Career Progression.

Stage 1: Sole Contributor This is what we'll call the “getting your feet” wet stage. Here you'll be asked to accomplish basic tasks and, basically, do what you're told. You might think you're God's gift to your employer and poised to conceive the next iPhone, but at this point you're probably not being paid as much for your intellectual horsepower as you are for doing what your told. There are exceptions; however, for the most part this stage of your career is where you need to focus on doing what your told and producing the right answers in the allotted timeframe. Most bosses don't like having to wait for your responses and

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2014/06/20/most-americans-are-unhappy-at-work/#662a681a341a>

trust me, they're unlikely to forget if you give them a wrong answer. Your "report card" at this stage will be evaluated based on doing what you told with as little drama as possible.

Stage 2: Accomplish Through Others Employees who reach this stage have demonstrated proficiency as a sole contributor; they know how to do what they're told with minimal supervision and have demonstrated a general ability to get along with others. If you are fortunate enough to reach this stage (or unfortunate, if things don't work out), this is where you discover the power of leverage. If you have a job you find challenging, at some point you will come to realize there are only 24 hours in a day and you can't work all of them, no matter coffee or Mountain Dew you consume!

It is at this stage of your career that you will be put in a management or supervisory role. It's also possible at this point that the Peter Principle starts to kick in (i.e., people are promoted to their highest level of incompetence). In having watched countless careers over the years, I've concluded that a lot of people in management probably shouldn't be. The main reason is that the first stage of your career is mostly about YOU; however, all future stages are very much NOT about you. Great supervisors (who go on to become great leaders) realize that treating their staff with respect and putting their interests before their own is not only important, it's critical.

One final comment – to be successful at this stage you need to learn the importance of accountability. Tell people what you expect of them, give them a reasonable timeframe for accomplishing the given task(s), and hold them accountable. Don't be ruthless in your assessment of their accomplishments, but you're not being paid at this stage of your career to be everyone's friend. You are being paid to accomplish through others and get the work of the company done. Don't ever forget that!

Stage 3: Accomplish Through Vision Employees who reach it to this career stage have demonstrated proficiency as a sole contributor and they know how to inspire their staff to accomplish the greater needs of the company. They put others before themselves, but are not afraid to hold others accountable. They work hard and they expect others to do the same.

Although probably 1 in 3 of the workforce get promoted to this level, only about 1 in 20 (at most 1 in 10) should ever be here. Here's the reason why – to "accomplish through vision" you need two essential ingredients: a VISION and PEOPLE skills (just remember the "VP" acronym and you'll remember this concept). As conveyed previously, great managers and leaders care more about their staff members than themselves, or their careers. Let's admit it, this is REALLY tough, because we all struggle with being selfish. The second part is even harder and it's the vision part. Vision is having a plan for the future, something that improves life. Business guru Marcus Buckingham stated in his book, *The One Thing You Need to Know*, that "What defines a leader is his preoccupation with the future." In my more than 25 years in studying and watching business leaders, I have met very few people with a vision for the future. I would argue it's probably between 1% and 2% of the people I've known.

To wrap things up, I would like you to consider a few questions. At what stage of your career are you currently residing? If you are supervising people, how are you doing in helping your staff maneuver the Career Progression? I leave with you a quote from President Dwight Eisenhower:

Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.

My challenge to you, regardless of your career stage, is to rally people to a better future and let's be honest – that starts with YOU!