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## Challenges of Employee Plateau

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*Contrary to popular belief, career plateau does not necessarily connote negative performance. Plateaued individuals are often solid citizens who see themselves as indispensable to the company and they choose to stay in their positions rather than move. Another set of plateaued employees are those who produce work of a poor quality and generally do not have positive feelings about their jobs. These low performers feel that promotions are based on personality, education and reputation instead of professional ability. This seems to point to the fact that people with low visibility to senior management are likely to become deadwood or to plateau than those on jobs that give them high visibility.*

Rarely has the management of employees received more attention than it does currently. By choice or by default, a new era of human resource management practices and philosophy is emerging. The transformation to a service economy, the information explosion, advances in technology and the intensely competitive global and domestic markets have created enormous pressure on corporations to change not only what they do but how they do it as well. In this environment when companies want to compete effectively in today's market place, they generally use one of the three competitive strategies— cost reduction, quality improvement and innovation. These competitive strategies call for different skills and behaviours from employees. Unfortunately, those who cannot exhibit the flexibility, skills and risk taking ability which are essential requirements for successful strategies, find themselves plateauing – in other words they want to advance but cannot. Either the company has no openings or the management believes that the person lacks the executive skills to be promoted. In fact, people are reaching career plateaux far earlier than did their predecessors and far earlier than their own expectations. It is important, therefore to prepare to deal with this phenomenon effectively, particularly when the first signs of an impending plateau are seen.

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As time marches on, the job profile changes and the characteristics of organisations change and, as a result, so do too people's careers. Firstly, careers often involve vertical movement - that is promotions up an organisational hierarchy. Naturally, people working in different organisations experience vertical movement at tremendously different rates. In today's organisation, in which layers of management are being reduced, there are fewer rungs in the organisational ladder, making opportunities for vertical movement more limited than it used to be. Secondly, careers often involve horizontal movement which reflects changes in specific job functions or change in one's field or speciality. Of late, a growing number of people have been willing to make such horizontal moves, even though doing so may involve considerable amount of retraining. This varied exposure improves employees' flexibility and employability. Quite often, employees justifiably feel that they might be able to make a vertical movement sooner if they first make a horizontal movement into a field with greater opportunities for advancement. Careers also involve diagonal movement when an employee shifts away from the inner circle of management which is the base of power. For example, manager at the corporate planning headquarters moving as vice president of the company's operations in one of its regional offices.

Whether it is a vertical, horizontal or diagonal career change, the fact is that today there are too many people for too few jobs. Armed with their MBAs and high expectations, they are not moving as fast as they want and they are not receiving the material rewards that they thought they would receive. In the future, unless the plateauing problem is understood, more employees will be disappointed and frustrated.

Contrary to popular belief, career plateau does not necessarily connote negative performance. Plateaued individuals are often solid citizens who see themselves as indispensable to the company and they choose to stay in their positions rather than move. Another set of plateaued employees are those who produce work of a poor quality and generally do not have positive feelings about their jobs. These low performers feel that promotions are based on personality, education and reputation instead of professional ability. This seems to point to the fact that people with low visibility to senior management are likely to become deadwood or to plateau than those on jobs that give them high visibility. Another interesting dimension is the relationship between the business strategy of the firm and the incidence of plateaued employees. Employees in a firm with a defender strategy had proportionately more plateaued employees than those in an analyser firm. A defender is a firm in a mature industry with an established *product* line and little growth potential. Its competitive strategy is to stay in its niche and improve its productive efficiency.

The relationship between the length of job tenure and plateau was attempted to be uncovered by collecting data from a sample of hundred sales persons. It was found that the earlier in their careers, the deadwood move very frequently whereas the solid citizens moved more slowly but are currently more productive than the deadwood. Another revealing factor is that plateaued individuals are more likely to be working in territories classified as dog as per the BCG matrix whereas non-plateaued employees are more likely to be assigned cash cow territories. Non-plateaued employees tend to spend a considerable amount of time in the early stages of their career developing interpersonal skills and contacts which enabled them to continue progressing in their careers.

What is cause for concern is the fact that there is a lack of candour on the part of companies and employees alike regarding career plateau. Management tends to treat plateaued employees with benevolent neglect and often uses subtle ways of removing them from the mainstream. Perhaps, the main reason for management's reluctance to confront this issue with the employee is concern that motivation and production will be diminished. As far as the employee is concerned embarrassment and fear of loss of prestige are primary reasons for avoiding open discussions on this subject. Making matters more complex is that the term career plateau seems to carry with it a stigma of failure. The intensely competitive environment results in great emphasis on promotion, greater responsibilities and perquisites of rank.

When an individual fails to gain a desired promotion, he becomes the object of speculation on the part of peers and subordinates. That is why an executive today knows that he must reach a certain position by the age of 40. Otherwise, he will be unable to advance further. He may have to make room for younger employees who are moving up the organisational pyramid. Sensing the impending career plateau, employees often voluntarily withdraw themselves from competition rather than risk loss of face, defeat or having to acknowledge that they have been superseded. They then go to great lengths to show disinterest in further promotion stating that they wish to avoid stress, long hours and time away from the family. The inevitable realisation that one has become unpromotable can be devastating or be a source of relief. At the beginning of the career cycle, individuals think that the higher the rank the more powerful and less vulnerable they will become. In their forties, their illusion is destroyed and realisation sets in that promotions do not make one invulnerable to sickness, defeat and disappointments. This realisation often leads to a more graceful acceptance of the plateau. While formulating strategies to cope with career plateau, management must realise that such employees comprise a large and growing segment of the workforce. Management should not allow apathy and loss of productivity in this group because they are indispensable to the day to day operations. Firstly, management should make facts with regard to plateauing known. Plateauing is a normal phase in an individual's career. If this information is acknowledged, then it can destroy the myth that plateaued individuals are failures and early in their careers people can have more realistic expectations about promotions. Secondly and more so for solid citizens, organisations should try to eliminate content plateauing when someone performs the same tasks over a period of years and no new learning takes place. As promotions become scarce over the years, different rewards must be used for plateaued employees whether it is attending a management development programme or a mention in the company's newsletter to cite a few.

An extremely useful activity that can make the transition smooth for a plateaued employee is to give honest feedback. Negative appraisals are seldom conveyed in the correct perspective which should be to impart information on the employee's strength, weakness and opportunities.

Organisations should stop clinging on to the myth that middle adulthood is necessarily a time for abnormal behaviour. The retraining programmes for a plateaued executive should be oriented less towards technical duties and more towards those assignments requiring judgement and application of experience. Training and coaching of younger members as a mentor may be very appropriate at this stage. Decreased competitiveness, changing values

and diminishing concern for promotion may result in a detached and objective outlook which facilitates critical analytical skills that are an essential requirement in an internal consulting role. Plateaued employees are less likely to take decisions without a high probability of certainty. Admittedly, this can often be considered a drawback in certain areas, it can be a useful attribute in research, long range planning, security, arbitration and other areas where certainty, accuracy and judgement are more important than speed, innovation and creativity. Such untapped talents may lie in many plateaued employees. The maturing process in such employees may bring a new sense of co-operativeness which replaces competitiveness. Such employees may enjoy new respect, credibility and confidence among their peers and juniors.

On a concluding note we would like to draw upon the research that writer Daniel Levinson embodied in his monumental study of adult male life cycles in his work "The seasons of a man's Life." He states that "for every executive of about 40 who gains the prize and the affirmation that he has been seeking, there are perhaps 20 who get little or nothing." According to him, the odds of executive success are 20 to 1, through the impression that those who did not win the prize are failures is uncharitable and grossly unjust. Nevertheless, in the business and professional world, we must concede that each of us will inevitably reach our career plateau. But, as we mentioned earlier, willingness to acknowledge and develop strategies to deal with this issue would definitely result in a more productive and loyal workforce.