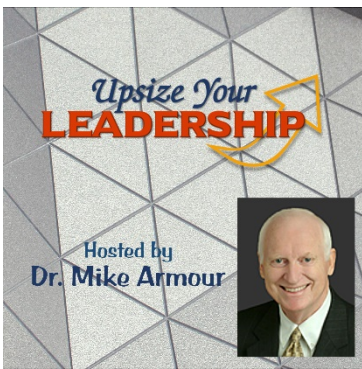# Five Reasons Management Careers Plateau

Critical Transitions on the Corporate Ladder

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Episode UYL2021
Podcast Date: December 17, 2020

Every year, thousands of men and women embark on a management career. All have dreams of success. And the path to success, they believe, is to apply themselves to mastering the skills of their craft. Therefore, when their career gets stuck – as it inevitably does for a large percentage of them – they double down on trying to enlarge their skills.

Many of my coaching engagements have been managers who are stuck and think that working with an executive coach will arm them with the additional skills to make the next rung on the organization ladder.

What I've found, however, is that for many of these people, inadequate management skill is not the challenge. Oh, they undoubtedly need to improve their skills. But something else is holding them back. And that "something else" is what I want to talk about today. In the next twenty minutes, I want to give you vital perspectives to help you Upsize Your Leadership.

The management ladder is not a steady climb. Some rungs require longer steps than others. Unfortunately, these longer steps can be too much of a stretch for some people. Their careers plateau, even though they have long been seen as high potential performers.

What causes such promising careers to level off prematurely? Why do some people handle the first rungs of the management ladder with agility, only to reach a standstill part way up?

No one factor, of course, explains it. But after coaching over 700 executives and managers, I've noted one particularly common cause. It's the failure to navigate one or more of five critical transitions.

Some of these transitions first present themselves in lower management. Others make their appearance in the latter stages of middle management or upon entry into upper management. Failing at any of these transitions, however, can put an absolute cap on career advancement.

Decision-Making Time Frames

The first transition is learning to think in progressively longer time frames. Most managers start off in positions where they supervise frontline operations. Their decisions are accordingly operational and short-term in nature. Relatively few of their decisions involve a time horizon more than a few days or weeks away.

At a slightly higher level (although still in lower management), the time horizon for planning and decisions shifts to quarterly and annual priorities. In middle management, this time horizon moves even farther into the future. Here managers routinely plan and implement initiatives which may require two or three years to complete.

Then, in upper management, planning and decisions are commonly associated with time horizons stretching out a decade or longer. I once coached a senior executive in the defense industry whose decision-making horizon was twenty to twenty-five years.

In general, the higher the level of management, the longer the time frames in which the manager must think. Yet, researchers have found that we all have a certain time frame to which we naturally gravitate when analyzing complex challenges. Large numbers of people are most naturally inclined to short-term thinking, others to long-term thinking.

You can see this contrast if you're part of a group brain-storming about how to reach a goal that's years in the future. As people pitch out their ideas, some, without prompting, will start to identify essentials milestones which must be reached within the next two or three years. Others will be more focused on the steps necessary in the next three to six months to get the initiative underway. Both are making sound suggestions. But one thinks automatically in multi-year terms. Another automatically thinks in quarterly or semi-annual terms.

For people whose default time frame is long-term, time in lower management positions can prove frustrating. Lower management provides few opportunities for them to work with long-term scenarios.

For short-term thinkers, the challenge is to adapt to intermediate and long-range problem-solving in middle and upper management. They must retool themselves to think routinely in time frames outside their natural inclination.

Ambiguity

The second transition is learning to feel comfortable making decisions in the face of ambiguity. **As the time frame for planning grows longer, the data on which the plan is based becomes more ambiguous.**

For entry-level managers, decision-making usually draws on concrete data. Because their decisions are largely near-term in nature, they have current, relevant data to rely on. Or if they lack this data, they can gather it easily enough. They also have an added benefit. If their decision is ever questioned, they can cite concrete data to defend it.

Once the time frame impacted by decisions grows longer, concrete data is less abundant. Ambiguity in the available data expands markedly. Decisions turn increasingly on the interpretation of trend lines and assumptions about those trends. When the time frame is years into the future, ambiguity may force managers to make decisions as much on intuition as on hard data or measurable trends.

Many people who are decisive and confident making decisions backed by data prove to be uncertain, insecure, and hesitant when decisions require them to sort through ambiguity. Further, they may face a self-confidence crisis if challenged to defend the decision which they have made. After all, they have little data to back it up.

Given the pace of change today, management contends with ambiguity on an ever-increasing scale. Once on a flight I sat beside an entrepreneur who had built a number of nationally-recognized restaurant chains. I asked him to identify his greatest entrepreneurial challenge. Without a moment's hesitation he said, "Finding managers who can maintain momentum in the fact of ambiguity."

Problem-Solving Domain

The third transition is from solving "thing" problems to solving "people" problems. Many fields such as engineering, research, IT, accounting, architecture, and construction attract workers who love to solve problems related to things, procedures, or processes. Solving "people-problems" may hold little interest for them.

Indeed, the very reason for choosing their vocational field may have been their distinct preference for dealing with issues related to "things" as opposed to issues related to people. Had they preferred solving people-problems, they might well have gone into a people-helping field.

Because of this disinterest, they may move into management with relatively undeveloped "people" skills. They simply have never seen the need for these skills or have never taken the time to develop them. The same can be said of new managers in dozens of other fields, as well.

Once on the managerial ladder, however, their time can be more consumed with solving problems in the "people domain" than in the "thing domain." If they are not to derail their career, they must enlarge their interpersonal capabilities and so-called soft skills which never before seemed important to them. They must learn to feel as much satisfaction from resolving people issues as they do from solving problems related to things.

Strategic Mindset

Because lower levels of management focus on shorter-term decisions, they approach their duties primarily from a tactical perspective, not a strategic one. *The higher people go in management, the more they must shift to a strategic mindset.* And this is the fourth critical transition.

As compared to tactics, strategy operates with both longer time frames and a broader field of vision. It must take in the entire landscape and anticipate how that landscape will change over an extended period of time.

People who may be brilliant at tactics cannot always become primarily strategic in their outlook. They can't seem to rid themselves of their tactical impulse. Thus, when they reach senior management positions, they are habitually more "hands-on" than they should be. Many of them gain a reputation for micro-managing or spending too much time in the weeds, so to speak. At times, they may even act more like an individual contributor than as a manager.

As a result, they come to be seen as "not strategic enough" for the highest levels of management. And that limits their likelihood for future career advancement.

Political Acumen

The fifth critical transition is to become politically astute. It will probably surprise some listeners that this transition is on my list. After all, "corporate politics" are generally viewed with disdain and distaste. But "corporate politics" is not a negative concept if we think of politics in the original sense of the word.

The word "politics" traces back to the Greek term *politeia*, which referred to a city-state and its governance. **In essence, "politics" is the art of running a community well.** To do so, one must first understand both the formal and informal mechanisms which make the community work. Then, these mechanisms must be respected and skillfully utilized to get things done.

In higher management, this kind of political acumen is pivotally important in ways that it may not have been earlier in a career. That's because lower management decisions normally affect only people in the manager's immediate working circle. By the time managers reach upper level roles, however, their actions and decisions have potential ripple effects far beyond the manager's purview, perhaps even far beyond the company.

Being politically astute begins with knowing the organization well enough to anticipate where these ripple effects will be felt. Next, the politically astute manager opens a dialogue with those who will experience the ripple effects firsthand.

The goal is to gain their support and to reduce the likelihood of pushback once the manager takes the planned action. The dialogue may also identify ramifications which the manager has not previously considered. This allows the manager to take these ramifications into account while finalizing plans for implementation.

Management literature stresses the importance of managers rallying their team around a new initiative. No less important is rallying other elements of the organization around it. Key management initiatives are commonly undermined, not by the manager's own people, but by people elsewhere in the organization who set out (consciously or unconsciously) to sabotage it. Politically astute managers move early and decisively to head off that threat.

No Fatalities Necessary

So there you have the five transitions:

- Moving from short-range thinking to long-term thinking

- Making decisions in the face of ambiguity

- Transitioning from solving thing problems to solving people problems

- Replacing a tactical mindset with a strategic mindset

- Becoming politically astute

Making each of these transitions successfully is no guarantee of career success. But failing to navigate them puts definite limits on how high a manager can go. Fortunately, the skillsets required for these transitions can all be learned.

Moreover, it's wise to start this learning process early in a management career. Today, more than ever before, talented workers can move up the management ladder rapidly. At a relatively early age, talented managers may find themselves in senior management positions. Preparation for these positions should therefore start sooner rather than later.

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