

RECORD

ADDRESS - THE RISKS OF MOVING UP

Speaker: *BERNIE HOFFMANN**

Americans value the opportunity to advance. Surveys of worker aspirations consistently show the opportunity to advance among the top five items in a list of things people want from the job. Part of the dream to advance is founded in our cultural heritage, but another part of the dream may very well be the dissatisfaction we experience with the job at hand. In any case, given the opportunity, most of us eagerly accept offers of promotion. Seldom is the decision truly rational. Rather, it is a reflection of the value that one is good when one moves vertically in the organization. Such moves are not without risk as the cycle of changes, concurrent with promotions, tax our system's ability with a series of challenges, the end points which often are unknown.

One way of looking at a promotion is to consider it as a series of separations. First, we are selected from a group of peers with similar skills which, typically, we now end up supervising. How should I now behave towards them? If I stay too close to them, will management believe me to be objective in assessing their merits? If I continue to socialize with them, will I be able to control them? These are some of the questions indicative of this stage. Second, the skills and abilities which led us to being offered a promotion gradually take on a lesser role compared to the necessary skills for managing a function. As our energies direct themselves to the acquisition of more knowledge, a degree of obsolescence occurs to our current skills. Once removed from daily doing, it is not long until those around you become suspicious of your technical competence. While we assure ourselves, periodically, with statements like, "I can always go back", one of the very reasons we verbalize this is that we are no longer so sure.

Third, as an actuary, we produced projections, conducted studies, and submitted our reports. While a pat on the back was appreciated, a great deal of satisfaction was derived from seeing a project completed. Results were tangible. Once managing, completion no longer is based on, "what I do", but rather, "what is done for me". The results of one's intervention in "getting things done" is far less concrete than it is in doing for one's self.

Perhaps the most frustrating experience of that association comes from the nagging questions, "Am I accepted?", "Have I really arrived?", "Am I really worth it?" or "Will I truly succeed?". Paradoxically, as we get promoted because we are deemed capable, our fear of failure increases.

It is obvious that those who have not failed are unequipped to deal with failure. Thus, the fear of, "What would I do if it ever happened?", leads

*Mr. Hoffmann, not a member of the Society, is President of Bernie Hoffmann Associates, Inc., Southfield, Michigan.

executives to behaviors assuring that it will not happen. Examples of the latter include working more, sometimes excessively, under the myth that those who work hard cannot fail; blaming organizational failures in a way that they can be manipulated to appear as someone else's problem - yet another coping technique. "Everyone here loves me", shows certain illusions we create to avoid dealing with failure as one of life's possibilities.

As we work harder, as we kid ourselves more of our invincibility, yet another separation may occur; namely, that from spouse, family and community. Long hours deplete our energies from giving ourselves to those not involved in our work place. Estrangement occurs for that reason and because the executive dealing with so many unresolved issues tends to value his autonomy to the point that even when he is home, he may prefer to be alone. Lastly, in the process of becoming successful, we may find a separation from ourselves. Dress code, etiquette, who to be seen with all may create pressures for us to behave differently from how we used to function or how we really feel. Imbalances occur when our definition of, "Am I good?", shifts from the assessment of ourselves to reliance on the attainment of corporate goals, "thank you's" from our boss, "attaboy's" from those who run the organization. Because the latter affirms our acceptance, which we need so badly, we behave toward their attainment even though these behaviors may contradict what we like doing, what we believe in and what we stand for.

The sequence described is not atypical - does it have to happen that way? We suggest recognizing that we can get caught in this trap and its negative consequence is the first step to preventing this behavior. First, recognize that as we are assured of the consequences of a promotion in career, family and friends, a certain amount of anxiety is natural. To think one can master all changes associated with promotion without some confusion is folly. But, once we recognize that the anxiety we experience is normal, it is equally crucial to recognize that the feelings associated with it are normal. Anger, frustration, doubt, periodic futility, defensiveness are feelings we have been taught to avoid. The very avoidance of these feelings may interfere with our resolution of the issues causing the anxiety. Most of us, in despair, have experienced the resourcefulness of our minds through a process of inventory-taking. If we are down, and if we allow ourselves to be down, sooner or later a voice inside says, "Maybe I will try something different", "Considering all things, maybe I am not so bad after all." When we go through this process, we create new alternatives for ourselves. When we act on them, we have grown. The experience that led to an emotional downer has been mastered - the next time we face it, our minds remind us, "I have been there before." Simply stated then - allowing one's negative feelings in the face of uncertainty may be a healthy way towards resolving these uncertainties.

Second, we find it helpful for executives to periodically reflect on what they stand for. Ask yourself, (a) "What am I good at? (b) What do I like doing? (c) What do I believe in? (d) What is important to me in life?", and fortify yourself to behave those values. Once we recognize that the negative consequences we may experience from acting out our beliefs are far outshadowed by being in harmony with ourselves, a narrowing of consciousness occurs and self-reliance increases.

Third, it may be helpful to view the anchors of our lives to be our families, our friends, our jobs and our view of self. All of these want

us - they compete for us. Periodic checks need to be made to see if there is a balance, i.e., "Are those who want and need us deprived by the job, and is it worth it?", or is it time to decide a rearrangement of our priorities so those who need us will be there when we need them?

Lastly, the newly promoted manager needs to recognize that he is not on the spot to have all the answers, not responsible to help everyone below complete their projects, not always expected to defend employees when something goes wrong but is there instead to assist others to become as self-reliant as the new manager needs to become to maintain his balance on the way up.

