

The Manager of Today



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THE MANAGER of today is different from the one prototype among the giants of yesterday. I do not say he is better. Leadership in unrelated periods cannot be appraised on a comparative basis. Each individual in history must be judged by the standards which prevailed among his own generation. Performance must be determined in the light of that code, and of the problems which the manager is compelled to face. All such factors change with the passing of years.

Certainly today's manager comes to his post of responsibility much better prepared for the duties which he is to assume. To begin with, if he is employed in a well established business he has come up the ladder step by step. In so doing he has both tested himself and been tested by others in the exact harness which he is to wear. He has been able to watch his competitors at close range. Seldom is he required to take a sudden plunge into the unknown, as were his predecessors. He is not a pioneer as they were, but a man whose conduct is largely governed by time-tested rules.

Behind both knowledge and wisdom there must be power. The man who is to become outstanding as an executive must have a driving force that spurs him on no matter how dull the routines, how slow the progress, or how discouraging the setbacks that come to him. He must face each new day with fresh enthusiasm and pride.

By and large, he is a man of considerable, formal education. Far more often than not he is a college graduate, and the percentage of those who have gone on to advanced studies is steadily increasing. Happily, this does not mean that the door of opportunity is not still wide open to the man who is compelled by economic necessity to leave the school early. But it does require him most systematically to continue his self-development and to achieve both intellectual breadth and depth in his mature years. Leadership in management is a matter not so much of the knowledge which the individual has acquired through formal education as it is of his ability to bring into full play all the resources of his mind. This can be developed at any time of life.

The high executive of today has one very solid value which did not exist yesterday. That value is security. He knows that his pension will be adequate to take care of himself and his wife comfortably when he retires. The limitation here is that it locks him in to his job. As he approaches middle life he knows that it would be imprudent for him to jump ship and sign on with another corporation, no matter how attractive the salary, for no new employer could match the security that will accrue to him if he stays on.

Money seems to be incredible to many individuals. Not the real driving force which motivates the typical executive today is not money but the deep inner satisfaction of believing that he is doing a tough job well. Industry being as complex as it must be in his turbulent modern world, the man himself is often the only one who really knows how well he is meeting his responsibilities. His achievements are seldom spectacular, only his failures attract attention. Seldom does life offer him the change to conceive and carry out an idea so brilliant that it completely transforms the operations of his company. He receives no awards for merit; no resolutions are passed by his board of directors commending him for outstanding performance. He is lucky if his picture gets published in his company's annual report to the stock-holders, and, that's all.

His effectiveness consists in making, wisely and promptly, large number of decisions in each working day. The top brass cannot personally evaluate the quality he displays on a particular occasion if they do not even know that the problem exists. Ordinarily they will be fully occupied with the multiple decisions they themselves are facing. Perhaps the most striking difference between the present-day executive and that of yesterday is that the former is much less of a risk taker. His advance planning looks to the orderly growth of the business by evolutionary processes, as distinguished from violent explosion. By this I do not mean that he lacks courage. Some of his day-to-day decisions require character and firmness of a high order. He can

be very outspoken and independent indeed in his judgments, and he certainly gets more encouragement from top management for preserving that attitude than his predecessor ever did.

Today's executive must also keep immaculate books of his own to support his personal income tax return, and when the time comes to fill out the blanks he will probably need professional help. He knows that if he makes a mistake it will later be publicized in the newspapers, he will have no chance to reply, and by the mere press story he will be pilloried as a common cheat. We do hope that the present democratic government will continue the process set by the care-takers.

Few who have not had to face executive responsibility realize the burden which the individual must carry in making his decisions with respect to the control of government agencies; just keeping abreast of the current regulations and making sure that the proper reports are filed is a very time-consuming part of every man's job. We speak glibly today of free enterprise, but the truth is that our system is steadily becoming less free and correspondingly less enterprising. Within the corporation itself there necessarily is also a maze of procedural system with which the executive must comply. Whether or not government now operates by consensus, as the current cliché has it, any large and geographically dispersed business certainly does so. There are committees for everything. No single individual can possibly keep abreast of current developments in the enterprise except through discussion groups in which he and his colleagues exchange information and opinions. They tell him what is new with them, and he responds in kind. Early in his career he learns, too, that he must master the art of advocacy, since his proposals will often be in conflict with theirs.

A familiar example of such situations is found in the differences that arise among executives over the allocation of available capital. No corporation ever has enough cash to meet all the urgent requests that come to top management from the responsible heads of the various departments. Once man wants to abandon a product that is losing money, and close down that plant. Not so the executive in charge of that division, who declares that it has never been given a fair chance. He is all for hiring more salesmen, going after more territory, and doubling the amount being spent on television commercials for the product.

Quite understandingly, each executive firmly believes that his proposal will bring the highest rate of return on the investment and the speediest repayment of the capital. To achieve his purpose he turns lobbyist and tries to line up support among his colleagues, like a politician making the rounds of his fellows. He also studies thoughtfully the personality traits of his superiors and adopts for each the approach he thinks most effective. Whether the executive realize it or not, each is being constantly evaluated by his superiors in terms of whether or not he possesses precisely that quality. The science of administration is now taught in our business colleges, but no classroom could ever impart the best administrators' gift for getting completely assimilated with the employees they supervise. He has to know the strengths and the limitations of each individual on his team, and not merely on the basis of what happens in the office. He must be alert to what happens after office hours too. He must instantly spot signs of trouble in the private life of an individual, and put his hand on the shoulder at the right time. Respect is not enough. He must win also the affection of his staff.

Such is the way of life of the executive today. Few careers now open to young men and women require a wider range of talents. Yet few, in my opinion, offer greater rewards when measured in durable satisfaction.

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