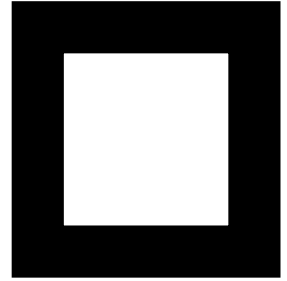


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STRATEGY



MANAGEMENT CAREERS

THE PARADOX OF INDISPENSABILITY

The logic that shapes the first half of your career can leave you trapped in the second half. Managers make predictable mistakes that, despite their technical expertise and stellar performance, can lead high-fliers to fail to rise to the top of organisations. Richard Jolly looks at the paradox of indispensability.

Along with colleagues, I have been teaching about ‘executive derailment’ for many years. It consistently resonates with MBA students and managers alike. This is echoed in my work with senior managers both individually and in teams. There are some important themes that consistently emerge about the journey to the executive suite. Many, perhaps all, managers have to wrestle with a paradox that, unless effectively addressed, can mean that their brilliance fails to lead to the desired promotion.

I have had many conversations with bitter managers berating the fact that poorer performing colleagues have advanced ahead of them. Is it because top management don’t realise what they have achieved? Is it that they aren’t grateful? Is it that other managers have been engaging in manipulative politicking? Sadly, it is often none of these. Top management usually has a pretty good idea what it takes to make it to the top. If you are not getting the promotions that your performance ‘deserves’, it is probably that you haven’t effectively

realised how much you need to adapt as you become more senior.

In the first half of your career, the game is straightforward. You demonstrate your technical expertise, you work hard (often making sacrifices in other parts of your life) and you develop skills and competence that allow you to become a star performer.

In some roles, such as trading, sales, consulting or professional roles such as law, indispensability can be cemented by having such strong external relationships that, if the company fired you, the clients or customers would follow.

In such cases, job security is high — you have become ‘indispensable’. When times are tough, in particular, this is simple, Darwinian self-preservation.

The curse of knowledge

Such individuals rapidly move into managerial positions, where they have to overcome a universal challenge — the curse of knowledge. When you have developed a skill to a high level of expertise, it becomes automatic and, as neurology is increasingly clarifying, uses a different part of your brain. Moving into management means that you have to supervise people who don’t know how to do things that for you are obvious. At this point, you realise something important — people are a problem. They just don’t get it. Are they stupid? Are they intentionally trying to screw things up? What’s wrong with them?

Anyone who has ever been driving behind a learner driver and has found themselves becoming frustrated and critical has experienced the curse of knowledge. The whole point about learner drivers is that they aren’t good drivers, so getting irritated by their incompetence is not a rational approach — you too were once a bad driver. Some managers have selective

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memory about their own learning curve. Helping other people develop skills that have become automatic for us requires learning some basic management skills. These are relatively easy to learn and most managers are reasonably competent after a few years.

So, you have demonstrated your expertise and your ability to supervise others. The team is performing to a very high level. You and the team are regularly heaped with praise from above. Things could not be going better. Given your sparkling track record, the future must surely be equally bright?

A paradox

You subtly ask your boss about what the future holds for you. The boss doesn't pick up on your hints. Eventually, you confront him or her about your career ambitions. Your boss couldn't be more flattering: "You are fantastic: indispensable. Which is why you are the last person I would promote. You are far too important where you are."

So, what has gone wrong? And what can you do about it?

To be an effective executive, you need a strong desire and ability to control.

Consistently delivering high-quality output; exceeding expectations regularly; being an 'over-achiever'. Organisations rely on these types of managers to do the hard work required for value creation.

But this focus on control leads to perhaps the most dangerous phrase I ever hear in organisations: "I don't have time to delegate."

Delegation initially feels like losing control. It is probably going to be faster and lead to a better result to do things yourself. Delegating to someone who is less experienced takes up valuable time. They will probably have to come back to you for clarification or help. You may end up having to do it yourself anyway, picking up the pieces.

This instinct to control, however, can increasingly become a liability, rather than an asset. As you become more senior, the quantity of work that you are responsible for clearly increases and there is a limit to how much you can personally accomplish. The problem is that, if you are focusing on the tactical issues where you have expertise, you are implicitly avoiding the broader strategic issues that will allow you to develop yourself, your direct reports and the organisation. A phrase that is sometimes used to

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describe this is: "When you are fighting off the alligators, it's hard to remember you were trying to drain the swamp."

Fighting alligators feels good — we are busy and can see the achievements we are heroically and often single-handedly creating. We feel in demand, productive. But the more senior we become, our success becomes less dependent on our personal ability to 'do' and more about our ability to 'think'. Having the discipline to take time away from fighting the alligators to focus on the critical priorities necessary for strategic success is difficult, and increasingly so, for managers.

An exercise I have often conducted with coaching clients is to ask them



to define their top three priorities — the things that are absolutely critical to their success. We then go through their diary for the past three months to see how much of their time they are spending on their top priorities. With one CEO, we realised that he was spending around one per cent of his time on his top priority. Why? Too many alligators...

Two modern plagues

And things are getting worse. Two plagues have swept through organisations — email and meetings.

The rise of email has brought some very real benefits, but, in my research with managers, only around three per cent feel that they are effective at managing emails. This is despite the fact that every manager knows there are some simple principles that can be used to improve our usage of email, such as setting aside specific times of the day when we deal with emails, rather than responding as soon as an email arrives in our inbox; and avoiding the dreaded ‘reply to all’ button.

The other problem is inefficient and ineffective meetings. I have challenged managers over the years to invite me into their organisation to see if I could, using some standard facilitation skills,

double the effectiveness and halve the duration of their meetings. Many managers respond that their meetings are terrible — they start late; the wrong people are present; the purpose of the meeting is unclear; people ramble and repeat points already made; no-one is clear what is being agreed; the minutes are not always captured and, certainly, people leave the meeting with a different sense of what is going to happen; and, as a result, little productive benefit is created.

There is a piece of software that highlights this meeting inefficiency. It is a simple digital clock that you can display on a computer or smartphone, but this clock doesn’t tell you the time. Instead, you input the number of people attending the meeting and their average hourly cost to the organisation. Then, as the meeting begins, you press the ‘start’ button. All the software does it tell you how much money the meeting is costing the organisation. Such information inevitably leads to the often sobering question: “What return is the organisation getting based on its investment in this meeting?”

Doing vs. thinking

But managers don’t need lessons on what they can do to improve

their email and meeting protocols. They already know. The challenge is that it is increasingly hard to do the things we know we should be doing. We are now always on. Some managers have yet to find the ‘off’ switch on their BlackBerrys (it does exist) and all managers struggle to take time away from doing things (fighting the alligators) to think.

The 19th-century Austrian statesman, Prince von Metternich, apocryphally categorised military officers against two dimensions: how smart they were and how hard working. The stupid, lazy ones are easy to deal with — get them out. The stupid, hardworking officers are very useful, as long as you supervise them effectively. The smart, hardworking ones were also useful for relatively junior positions. But the ones he focused on were the smart, lazy officers — they know what needs to be done, but don’t want to do lots of work. So they find the short-cuts; they are creative.

While this is not a formula that any modern organisation should use for selecting and promoting managers, it does raise an important challenge about the amount of unnecessary work carried out in organisations.



If managers are going to avoid the paradox of indispensability, we have to stand back from our day-to-day tasks and think.

A finance director client was frustrated about the amount of work required to produce the monthly management accounts summary for the board — a giant, 77-page report. At one particular board meeting, she asked whether all this information was really necessary, as this report was taking up a lot of her department's resources for days every month. The universal response was that everything was critical. She was far from convinced, so the next month she put a couple of pages in nonsense Latin text and waited to hear how many people contacted her to complain that they were unable to do their job without this data. No-one called. She did the same thing the next month in a different part of the report. Again, no calls. When she confronted the board at the subsequent board meeting about what she had done, there was silence. The company now has a very efficient seven-page monthly report.

The underlying disease

The disease is not email or meetings. It's something that has been called 'hurry sickness'. Typical symptoms of this disease include:

- If you are microwaving something for 30 seconds, you have to do something else while waiting for the microwave to go 'ping'
- You eat at your desk while also checking your emails, often on the phone at the same time
- You get a buzz from just catching a plane or a train
- You do something else while you

drive (on the phone, listening to the radio, eating your breakfast)

- You hate the time it takes to boot up your computer so much that you never turn it off
- You do something else while brushing your teeth
- You turn your smartphone on as soon as the plane lands, before you are meant to, and get frustrated by how long it takes to get a signal
- You find yourself consistently getting frustrated while waiting in line or in traffic
- You regularly interrupt the person with whom you are talking
- You do something else on telephone conferences
- You press the 'door close' button in elevators repeatedly

If you look at this list and see some familiar friends, you are probably sick. Some managers are so sick that they don't see what is wrong with these behaviours. But 'hurry sick' managers find it almost impossible to stand back and think. In my research over the last 10 years with thousands of managers, this disease has affected around 95 per cent. The 'anxious over-achiever' is, however, useful in organisations. Indeed, this type is indispensable. But they become increasingly bitter when more thoughtful (and maybe even less hardworking) managers get the top jobs.

A leap of faith

You are never promoted because you were good at your last job. Yet we instinctively assume, when we have been promoted, that our previous behaviours have been rewarded — a mechanism called positive reinforcement.

There is always a leap of faith; a hope that the individual will be able to adapt to the different demands of the more senior role. This issue is getting more challenging as roles become more specialised and, therefore, promotions can often mean a radical change in the nature of the role.

Nowhere is this more challenging than in law firms, where the efforts that associates make to get promoted to partner are intensely demanding over many years. Law firms have attempted to codify the competencies necessary to be made up to partner. But it is only when someone is made up to partner that it is possible to tell whether they are able to make this transition





effectively — the role of a partner is different to that of an associate and not all partners take up their broader responsibilities successfully.

The way forward

If indispensability is so constraining, what is the answer — dispensability? Clearly this has risks, particularly in a challenging economic climate. Yet this is exactly what is required. It takes a lot of confidence for a manager to go to his or her boss and say: “The team is working so well that they don’t need me any more — I am ready for my next challenge.”

This confidence only comes from having identified, supported and developed a number of people who could easily step into your role when you move up. Many managers see themselves as solitary heroic figures. These individualists are easily identified — they don’t have any succession plans in place. At its worst, this phenomenon leads to a narcissistic belief that they are the only competent person around. It takes a confident, self-aware manager to surround themselves with people who are frighteningly impressive.

Comatose

Consider the following rather drastic hypothetical situation. You get food poisoning and slip into a coma — you have no communication with the organisation for three months. Would the organisation survive? Many managers like to believe that things would be much worse without them. But when managers, for whatever reason, disappear for prolonged periods of time, those around them typically step up and fill the void. So when you wake up from the coma and rush back to work, the attitude can be, “OK, crisis over — I’m back. Give me all your alligators.”

When the response is that things are going well, in fact probably better than when the ‘heroic’ manager was in place, a wakeup call has been delivered.

I have worked with organisations who believed that certain key individuals were indispensable. But when they left or were finally fired, within weeks they have been forgotten and things are going fine. Very few managers are truly indispensable. Charles de Gaulle once said: “The graveyards are full of indispensable men.”

The desire to feel indispensable is compelling and dangerous. It paralyses organisations with unnecessary, thoughtless work and micro-managing, bottle-necking managers.

What do you think?

The cure is delegation — breaking the cycle of dependency that limits both performance and motivation and helping employees become more self-reliant and responsible. Authority and responsibility need to flow down the hierarchy, particularly as organisational structures become more complex in the age of the matrix organisation. Accountability needs to flow up the hierarchy. Some managers have the mind-set that this approach is abdicating control and responsibility. It is not. The responsibility for the tasks that you have delegated is still yours after you have delegated.

One of the key challenges of effective delegation is the perceived loss of control. Managers need to learn that there is a spectrum of different degrees of authority that can be delegated. On one end of the spectrum, the manager says, ‘Look into this issue for me; gather the facts; I will decide what to do.’ At the other end, the manager says, ‘Do what you think is right; I don’t need any further communication about this’. Having the ‘antennae’ to know where along this spectrum is appropriate in any given situation is a skill managers have to learn. But the more you are able to involve people in defining what the solution should be and in implementing this solution, the more engaged they will be in carrying it out.

Jeff Immelt, the Chairman and CEO of General Electric, said: “The four most important words in business are ‘what do you think?’”

- Every employee wants the same thing from their boss. Someone who:
- Believes in them and their potential
 - Defines a clear and challenging task
 - Locates this task within a broader organisational context or purpose
 - Is available when needed for advice and coaching
 - Is supportive and ensures they have the ‘air cover’ and resources necessary to succeed
 - Provides feedback and appropriate rewards
 - Gives them space so that they can learn and develop

If managers are going to avoid the

paradox of indispensability, we have to stand back from our day-to-day tasks and think. We have to create an environment where others can grow and be held responsible. We have to fight our instincts to control. As Alfred P Sloan, the man who ran General Motors from the Twenties to the Fifties and created the largest and first truly modern corporation, dominating the auto industry for over 70 years, put it this way: “The most important thing I ever learned about management is that the work must be done by other men.”

This is not just another management skill — it is the principal way you build a business. ■

