

Beyond the Velcro Approach

Many adults have a Velcro mentality-they measure their progress by the achievements and acquisitions that stick to them. The transition to mid-life requires a different approach.



Carl Jung lamented the lack of "colleges" to prepare 40-year-olds for the rest of their lives. "Thoroughly unprepared we take the step into the afternoon of life," he said. But even worse, he added, "we take this step with the false presupposition that our truths and ideals will serve us as hitherto. . . . We cannot live the afternoon according to the program of life's morning - for what was great in the morning will be little at evening and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie."

Taking their cues from Jung, many theorists in adult development would describe the first half of life as the young adult's quest for competence and for a way to make a mark in the world. The young adult proves him- or herself and finds happiness through external achievement and the acquisition of skills and goods.

David Letterman unintentionally created a perfect image of this approach to life in his "Velcro man" routine.

True to his goal that "if anyone learns anything watching this show, we've made a mistake," Letterman one night put on a full-body Velcro suit and spring-boarded himself onto a wall of Velcro. He stuck firmly, as only Velcro can, proving nothing whatsoever - which, of course, was his goal.

From Velcro to inner values

Adults in the first half of life - and many older adults who haven't successfully navigated the territory of full development and individuality - are "Velcro-ing" their way through life. They stick acquisitions and achievements to their outside surfaces, just about anywhere they can: a promotion here and a car there, as well as relationships, experiences, houses, and job titles. They keep score on their lives by the criteria that are important to them.

Yes, that is a caricature, perhaps too much like David Letterman and too simplistic to describe the many phases of adult development. But while "first-halfers" have full and healthy concerns for contributing to the world and expressing their values, the sense they have is, for the most part, one of "agency."

Agency, from the Latin root, means to go out, to be an agent for change, and to act in and on the world. And a great way to know if you are succeeding at that is to keep score in some kind of "Velcro" fashion.

The second half of life is something quite different. Once an adult starts to measure time toward the end of his life versus from the beginning, he or she often experiences a shift away from Velcro and agency. The mature mid-life adult exchanges competence and acquisition for integrity and values. From active mastery, a need for passive mastery emerges; stardom becomes less important than well-being.

Mid-life adults are certainly no less competent than earlier in life. It is not a matter of losing skills. It is a matter of emphasis. The second half of life is when "less is more" becomes a reality, and when internal values take precedence over Velcro scorecards.

In our work as Human Resource Development professionals, we can use any of the adult

psyche-development models. From Jung to Erikson to Sheehy, the models differ enough to be interesting, but are similar enough to raise the same questions. The basic question the HRD professional should be asking - and which we aren't asking often enough - is how this first-half/second-half view of adult life should affect our profession.

Change and renewal

Certainly such a view of adult life should play a part in career development issues. But HRD professionals don't often consider it.

Say we're dealing with a depressed, recently downsized, out-on-the-street, 50-year-old executive who's spent 25 years climbing the corporate ladder. Do we really want to send such a person into a class on resume writing, interview skills, and networking? What he or she could really use may be a deeper, personal-renewal experience for finally remaking life in his or her own image.

The aging of the baby boomers alone should have us asking how the HRD field can better serve corporations and individuals who are fast crossing into the second half of life. We often focus on skill and organizational development. That emphasis may prevent us from being as helpful as we could be, not allowing us to see the huge challenge of full adult development for the opportunity it provides.

Perhaps the person who best describes this challenge and opportunity is Frederic Hudson, founder of the Leadership Institute of Santa Barbara, California. Hudson's view is that our society has gone into a "flow state" in the last few decades but that most adults don't know how to operate under the new rules.

We bought into, and therefore still fall into, the mistake of perpetrating a linear view that may have been more functional in a more stable time. Such a linear view of progress throughout our adult years is not helpful today, now that we are living longer and managing so much change.

"Mid-life, like every other life period, is like a Ferris wheel with up-and-down times that repeat over and over again," says Hudson. "Throughout the middle years we experience high periods of stability followed by low periods of transition, and on and on and on. . . We are human beings who adventure through life with both stable and unstable times, and we have the capacities for managing both."

A roller-coaster adventure

A cyclical view of human development is very different from the climb-the-corporate-ladder images from the past, especially in downsizing organizations in which plateauing is the new reality.

"The long period of mid-life is a roller-coaster adventure," says Hudson, "with its many discoveries and disappointments, leading eventually to an inevitable confrontation with physical decline and aging. Mid-life has its own developmental territory, with its own breakthroughs and stuck points. There are many gains and many losses, times of ecstasy and times of agony, periods of constancy and periods of transition.



"It is no better and no worse than childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood - only similar and different. In many ways the adult years are a continuation of childhood experience, and extension of the adventure into unknown with the added awareness that it is not going to last forever."

Hudson points out that we have a multi-skilled, enormously talented, and under-utilized group of mid-lifers in North America and Europe. We can define mid-life as any age after

the early adult years - say, age 28 - up to age 70 or more, what with all the life extension and wellness work that is keeping us so active.

We can blame ourselves and our institutions for the under-utilization. Certain institutional rules used to provide scripts and roles in our lives; they gave our parents' lives meaning and duty. But we act as though they are still operative. To a degree, they are. They provide us with something valuable - a degree of stability and resources - but they are less encompassing than they used to be.

Hudson calls this flow state "benign chaos." We have enough structure for a stable supply of resources - we can fly anywhere, call anyone, flick on lights, get jobs, enroll in school, and rent videos - but not enough to provide us with meaning and purpose. That is our job and we have to figure it out for ourselves.

"The institutions once contained our entire lives," he says. "Education degreed you, the company or career employed you for life. But now our job is to dip into the institutions, the container, for what they have to offer, rather than be contained by them."

All dressed up with no place to go

Many mid-lifers have felt the careers they began with vigor turn into old songs with worn-out melodies.

The challenge Hudson describes is to help the group of talented mid-lifers who are all dressed up with no place to go. The help comes in the form of models and tools and learning experiences that allow adults the following opportunities:

- to view their lives not linearly but realistically, as cycles of relative structure followed by transitions, as in Daniel Levinson's *Seasons of a Man's Life*.
- to access the resources around them so they can create careers and futures - especially second-half-of-life futures that are worthy of their own choosing.
- to act responsibly in a world filled with social challenges that need to be addressed.

Many in mid-life are living well under the new rules, but other mid-lifers - for lack of good alternatives and sound models - are galloping off in less healthy directions. They may be idolizing Donald Trump while conspicuously consuming, "wimping out" over stalled careers, playing heavy organizational politics, or putting off scary retirements and the perceived boredom.

Paul Hawken sums it up nicely, this dilemma for mid-lifers. He says that in post-industrial society the only two things we are really short of are meaning and time. That proves once again that it is what you do after you are successful - and after you have acquired the skills and taken all the usual management courses - that really counts.

Hudson and others challenge the HRD field to go beyond the stuff of skill development. They urge HRD specialists to look at self-renewing adult training as a key to tapping latent talent, commitment, and energy for organizations.

Peter Block, a radical in his own right, is certainly in the mainstream of the human resource profession. He is calling for a spiritual regeneration in the American workplace. Such regeneration doesn't have to mean tent revivals in the company cafeteria. It could take the very natural form of people at work learning about self-renewal and seeing that a job in the first half of life can become a source of right livelihood in the second half. That is especially true at companies that have well-defined corporate purposes and are wise enough to promote full human development.

Having it all

Another area in which the view of first-half/second-half adult development could readily

affect the HRD field is the entire area of leadership training.

The literature on leadership has pointed up the ability to vision as a cornerstone skill for successful leaders. But visioning can't be taught like other skills. It is only partly a competence issue.

Competence comes from the measurable, the "doing" part of our lives, in which we can keep score in the traditional quantifiable and qualifiable ways. We've all been forced to quantify behaviors and skills on our appraisal forms through the years. We have gotten to be superb at it.

But visioning comes from the "being," not the "doing," side of our existence; it defies measurements and how-to training. The being side is what Maslow describes and postulates in his classic works. Behaviorists, of course, leave us there. It is impossible to measure the being side of us. I regularly train managers in the principles and practices of positive reinforcement, but there comes a time to leave the quantifiable world and step into other models of being human.

Max DePree, the president of Herman Miller, says that "Leadership is more tribal than scientific, more a weaving of relationships than a massing of information."

Non-behavior-based models are not just the realm of space cadets and giddy New Age trainers, who have one eye on the corporation and the other on Shirley MacLaine. If used correctly, such models provide the necessary language to discuss leadership.

Freud only saw two sides of human potency:

- one's work - doing
- one's relationships - loving

Most developmentalists add a third: yourself, or being. In the life of organizations we push so toward the doing sides of our lives that we barely have time left for the loving sides, let alone the being.

Tom Peters reports on this "doing" phenomenon in *A Passion For Excellence*. "We are frequently asked if it is possible to have it all - a full and satisfying personal life and a full and satisfying, hard-working, professional one. Our answer is no. The price of excellence is time, energy, attention, and focus, at the very same time that energy, attention, and focus could have gone toward enjoying your daughter's soccer game. Excellence is a high-cost item."

That has to be one of the more disgusting and damning reports on a pathological view of leadership, if we have ever had one.

So we extol and make heroes out of doing-masters, who hardly have time for loving - or relationships and intimacy. And that leaves the third state being equally unattended. Is it any wonder then that we are short of leadership and creative vision in our society?

Present shock

Have you ever worked hard on a problem, hashing over the options and muddling through, and then - a day or a week later, in a relaxed moment - gained the creative insight to have a real solution? Some would say that you finally got your insight because you uncluttered your mind of all the surface doings you force on it, and made room for some new thoughts - some real creativity.

Creativity and play stem from being, not doing. Pure play is non-purposeful - for the joy of it all. It is a being state. So is visioning. You strategically plan when you are analyzing and doing. But real visioning is pre-planning. Visioning comes from the side of us that dreams and longs for a better world, or at least a new and better mousetrap or software product.

Leadership is in poor shape today. In part, that is because of a lack of visioning. The old management skill of planning may have been enough when the world's rules were more stable. But we are in a flow state now; it is permanent white water. We don't have to worry about future shock anymore, because we are in present shock. And so only visioning will do - when adults can stay in the being side of their lives long enough to envision a new order of things.

Leadership training used to be just for executives. But video programs on leadership skills are now being offered to shop line supervisors. Trainers who do skill training on visioning are wasting their time and energy. Capacity training of the executive-transformation/self-renewal variety is more about helping people view the world differently, get in touch with their values, and discover (or rediscover) their life mission and purpose, which have usually been crusted over, undernourished, and shriveled by a process of cultururation.

This is precisely the transformational training that Hudson and others offer, and we need more of it. Ropes training may be fine transformational work, but it is more metaphorical than real and it is weak on long-term application and adult development theory.

Second-half-of-life/self-renewing adult training is based on sound developmental theory. It can show mid-lifers how to gain a vision for their next life/work structure. It can also provide a forum for mid-lifers to create better career, family, social, and personal balance in their lives, in a culture that overemphasizes doing. And it can prepare mid-lifers for the upside and the downside of the life cycle, something woefully lacking in most Americans' "progress-is-our-most-important-product" view of life.

Organizations need not fear the temporary nature of a visioned state for employees and managers. All systems need constant renewal. Old visions must be displaced by new, more appropriate ones, sometimes with small adjustments and other times with major overhauls. The only thing that can really hurt a company or make a leader ineffective is living off of yesterday's vision without renewing it to fit the changes in the internal or external environment.

Optimal lives amid benign chaos

At the least, then, in the areas of career planning and leadership training, second-half-of-life development theories have important applications in HRD. No doubt, there are more. Human resource specialists will be further challenged by mid-life career workers who want to live optimal lives in the benign chaos of a flow state society.

Exciting advances in skill development, organizational design, total quality management, and employee involvement all depend on effective leadership and a sound understanding of the human mind and heart at work. Let's hope that they are paralleled and supported by equally exciting applications of how adults can live balanced lives beyond the Velcro approach, based on our own visions of what looks worth doing.

As HRD professionals, we owe employees and their employers the tools to learn to manage the ups and downs of a long lifespan. We can help people learn to grow as complete human beings making right livelihoods in both the first and second halves of life.