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On Being a Junior Executive

THIS *Monthly Letter* is for people who believe that progress can be made toward becoming an executive. It is not for those who look upon management as an inherited talent, or one which descends upon a man like a prophet's cloak when he is elevated to managerial rank.

Young men and women who feel the urge to move ahead in business have every encouragement to do so. No matter how greatly the economic life of the world may change, there will still be opportunities on the junior level of management open to people who have developed their executive ability and trained themselves in administration.

Who is a junior executive? Everyone is entitled to be called a junior executive whose job requires him to exercise independent judgment in the handling of staff and in dealing with business responsibilities. He may be a team leader, a foreman, a supervisor, a department or branch manager, or an assistant to the chief executive.

Whatever he is called, he is responsible for the proper conduct of his job, setting the top executive free from routine detail so that he may concentrate on the larger problems of the business. The junior will do, within his sphere, all that the chief himself would do if he were there.

Any two-by-four clerk can criticize. He can point to where his chief stumbled or where the workers could have done something better. The junior executive does not indulge in this sort of thing. He assumes responsibility for keeping his chief from stumbling, and accepts responsibility for the quality of his people's work.

Human skill is a basic requirement in the junior executive. He must gain the collaboration of his work group. He must bring out the best efforts of others and unite those efforts in a common purpose. If he can clear a path for other men to walk in, he has contributed greatly to them, to the business, and to his own satisfaction.

Cardinal qualities

It is customary to summarize the executive functions in this way: originate, direct and scrutinize.

We should emphasize ability to originate. The junior executive who conceives and develops ideas is best of all; in second place, but still good, is the person who can accept and adapt good suggestions and put them into operation; behind these, and practically useless as managerial material, are those who cannot themselves think of new and improved ways of doing things and cannot accept, understand and apply suggestions from others.

The man in the top grade has many personal qualities: patience, self-control, perseverance, self-reliance and a sense of values.

Without these basic qualities no man can carry out the three persistent tasks of management: applying science and technical skill to some material or service; systematically ordering operations; organizing sustained co-operation.

How are you to show your value as a junior executive? One of the best ways is by saving your superior's time. Before you go to him with a problem, try not to. If you must go, choose a time when he is most conveniently able to give such matters consideration. When you do go, take a complete outline of your problem or plan, not just a sketchy suggestion. Half-baked ideas show you in a poor light.

Personality

Personality is your personal identity. It is what enables you to bring together a basic need and the results of research and digest them into a workable plan.

The more personal qualities you apply to your work, the better junior executive you will be. The success or failure of any project of magnitude turns upon the individual skill, the capability, and the leadership of the man who whips it into shape.

Personality demands the discipline of character which can say "yes" and "no" to men and proposals, not out of blind obstinacy, but with the firmness which is derived from a conscious weighing of alternatives. This quality is the end result of good habits of thought.

Personality includes firmness of mind. George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, written in 1871, is not current reading for those responsible for administrative training, but it contains at least one seasonable sentence. Mr. Cadwallader, the rector, says of the squire: "Brooke is a very good fellow, but pulpy; he will run into any mould, but he won't keep shape." That is a true picture of a man who will never make an executive.

The man with an optimistic turn of mind has an advantage. People do not like to work for a pessimist. The up-and-coming junior is always optimistically alert for opportunities to use his talent constructively.

Opportunity is nothing else but a special arrangement of circumstances in which we can, if we have the gumption and energy, show our excellence.

Special opportunities do not lie in any particular industry or business or profession, but within people. They are at hand according to a man's ability, his vision and his will for action. Ability presupposes constant learning; vision means seeing bits of evidence which others ignore; the will for action arises out of joy in striving with and overcoming difficulties: and this is the highest human felicity.

About ambition

The man promoted to junior executive rank must not be like the point in Euclid's first definition: having position but no magnitude.

Ambition is a dynamic thing, having an end in view and devising means to attain that end. It is the driving force of the man who wishes to be, not to appear, the best.

The ideal way of promotion is this: your superiors pull you up because they need your help; your associates push you up because they believe in you and like you.

There is nothing neurotic about an ambition that works in this way. The man of neurotic ambition does not wish to make a contribution to anyone above or below him, but merely to surpass others.

Ambition is not fulfilled easily. It requires direction, energy, patience, vigilance and determination. Francis Bacon gave a new twist to Aesop's fable of the hare and the tortoise. As Bacon tells it: "The lame man who keeps the right road outstrips the runner who takes the wrong one. Nay it is obvious that when a man runs

the wrong way, the more active and swift he is, the further he will go astray."

You must tailor your ambition to fit your abilities. Don't try to force it. Either make over your desire to fit your everyday life, or determine to make over your life to accommodate your desire. If there is conflict, if there is a seesawing, you and your family will be unhappy.

It does not pay to be an over-eager, acquisitive, person, whose brow is crowned with a fevered diadem. Competition is, to such a man, too grim, too much a matter of taut muscles, to make a satisfactory basis for life.

Sir Walter Scott tells us in one of his stories that when Queen Elizabeth I gave Raleigh a diamond ring he used it to scratch on a window in the palace: "Fain would I climb but that I fear to fall." The Queen completed the couplet: "If thy mind fail thee, do not climb at all."

At every stage in his progress the junior executive needs to keep in mind that he is only as good as his performance proves that he is. If he fails to deliver the goods, he soon loses his reputation.

Preparing for leadership

Your preparation must be suitable to the greatness of your hopes and the largeness of the enterprise. You are going to capture a fortress: make sure beforehand that your scaling ladders are long enough.

Preparation consists in pushing out the boundaries of ignorance. You need to learn not only what the job requires but how you measure up to the requirements and what you can do to prepare yourself to meet them triumphantly.

It is arrogant to think that you can solve complex problems, or compete successfully with shrewd opponents, or captain a team, without doing your homework. An orchestra leader does not have to be able to play all the instruments, but he does need to know how they should sound when played well, and how they blend to produce music.

Try to match your chief's vision of your organization. Know the universal principles of business, and proceed to bring the knowledge of individual parts to your fingertips. Don't depend upon other people to teach you: the key word in your progress is "learning." If you are not a self-starter you are not competent to start others. You may reach some success as a driver of men, but you will not become a leader of men.

One month of genuine research into your wants, your capability, your personality and the power of your ambition will be worth years of trying this and that in search of satisfaction. If there is any doubt

in your mind about your ability and instinct to be a leader, resolve it. You will never be a good executive unless you are sure of yourself.

An executive must be able to face himself honestly, and profit by his mistakes. He cannot perfect his techniques as a spectator. He is the son of his own works. His development is self-development.

It is of the essence of learning to benefit by criticism. An envious jibe which rouses us to take a clear view of ourselves may improve our work. We may have been sailing a little lop-sided, but when our attention is called to it we can take constructive action, shift our ballast, and get back on an even keel.

Virtues to cultivate

Every young man who aspires to executive position must learn to obey. The man who has not learned the importance of carrying out instructions is not fitted to command. Obedience is a virtue that is only gained in one way — by practice in obeying.

Patience is needed. This word takes in a lot of ground: it implies mental health, maturity and urbanity.

We must be patient even when we are called upon to do things which seem to us to be below the level of our skill or dignity. In a philharmonic orchestra it sometimes falls to the lot of artists who are acclaimed in their own right to provide the conventional background music for the showy vocal parts.

It is not a sign of greatness to be impatient. The sun, the greatest sphere in our galaxy and the most important, ripens the smallest bunch of grapes as if it had nothing else to do.

The junior executive, more than any of those whose work he directs, has need for tact. He will use courtesy to take the sharp edge off power. He will never treat an idea, even a grotesque one, with contempt. He will pay attention to it and discuss it. He will deal justly, but tenderly, with complaints. He will not hesitate to ask pardon for his mistakes.

Making decisions

By a happy combination of several of these virtues the junior executive lays good groundwork for his ultimate test: the acceptance of responsibility.

Decision making is a commitment of yourself. Before you reach it you must have tested facts rigorously and weighed possible results. You cannot always go by the plotted course. The realities may contradict charts and statistics. The leadsman on a ship sings out: "The water's shoaling rapidly;" the captain says: "There's six fathoms by the chart;" to this the leadsman replies: "Four by the line." Is the captain going to sail on, reckoning his chart a better guide than the lead?

When you come to make a responsibility-accepting decision, it is a great comfort to know that you have the respect and support of those around you. If everyone is pulling in the right direction, with esteem for you as a person as well as in your role of top man, your mind is free of jarring thoughts.

Very few persons in top management in these days cling to the idea of running things by dictatorial methods. No general in war, or statesman in government, or executive in business, can perform any glorious exploits, or notable service, without the concurrence of other men's endeavours.

To obtain this means the removal of friction and conflict. Co-operation must be practised by everyone, by those supervising as well as those being supervised. That state of affairs is not brought about by mimeographed messages from the front office, but by personal qualities.

The junior executive should cultivate the capacity for changing his mind. Consistency may be a jewel, but not at the cost of making a mistake. When your people produce new evidence of a convincing sort, repudiate your yesterdays with indifference to criticism. The man who sticks to his opinions tenaciously will find that the world has moved on and left him behind. Ralph Waldo Emerson did not write: "Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." He did write: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

Take time to think

You must learn to live positively in this age of transition, an age in which we are tempted to compromise and to drift with the tide. The enlightened statesmen of ancient Athens encountered such an age, but they had a saving principle that is valid today: they scorned false objectivity, which consists in keeping exactly the same distance away from each of two contrary opinions, regardless of the truth of either.

If you are forever hankering after the safety of straddling the fence; if you feel that what you did yesterday and the day before yesterday is all right for today because it got you into no trouble: if you think like that you are not displaying executive qualities.

Instead of contenting yourself with following a formula, you will ask about every case: is the formula applicable to these circumstances; has something happened to change the conditions under which the formula was arrived at?

This entails open-mindedness, being willing to listen to and give consideration to other people's opinions. Only the mediocre person is sure beyond doubt. The executive-minded person is pursued by the feeling that there may be a better way.

That is why he takes time out for meditation. He may not call it that, but he does step aside from the noise and hurry of encumbering work to take a prospect of things as seen from the great distance of lake or stream, of garden or park or some other quiet place. There, he prepares himself to meet the surprises of the future, events that are yet unknown. Robert N. Hilkert, First Vice-President of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, told his staff: "Meditation may well be one of our best managerial techniques."

Some people flee from their thoughts. At lunch they poke dimes into music boxes to drown silence and thinking; in the evenings they stuff the void with television; between-times they fill with talk if they don't carry pocket radios. They explore no roots; they sprout no ideas; they grow no plans; they make no effort to cultivate their sense of values.

The junior executive is of a different sort, always on tiptoe to meet existence. Out of his well-ordered mind, where facts and experiences are not only stored but studied, he gives harmony to things around him, and brings new things into being.

Who else but such a man can attain dignity? His effective activity is sure-footed. He does not need the crutch of self-pride. He is given appreciation and does not miss adulation. He is known for what he is, not for what he might fancy himself to be.

Dealing with staff

Executives polled by *Fortune* some years ago about the qualities contributing most to their personal success placed "ability to handle people" above ability to make decisions or the possession of technical knowledge.

The main job of the junior executive is to achieve results through people who are under his direction. He must frame his instructions and orders with the difficulties in mind so as to win the best possible response.

You can give yourself good marks in this department if: (1) your workers leave your office after a briefing with a feeling of uplift and confidence; (2) your workers are clear-minded about what you want them to do; (3) your workers know that you are pulling your weight.

Employee resentment is roused particularly by these executive attitudes: saying "no" habitually to requests and suggestions; procrastination of decisions; inadequacy of instructions, leaving the worker to find his own way to an ill-defined goal.

You don't, as a junior executive in business, act like an army sergeant on the drill square. When he barks an order all he wants is a reflex; when you give an order you want intelligent reaction.

An ancient Greek poet said: "Our high rank, with greatness long acquainted, knows to use its power with gentleness." You know, of your own experience, how pleasant it is to have a boss who wants you to make good, who helps you to make good, and who rejoices when you succeed.

Vital to getting what you want is good communication of ideas. One of the special qualities of the proficient junior executive is his ability to translate complicated directives or muddy instructions into common-sense terms so as to get things done.

And here we come to the crucial test: getting things done. The junior executive's worth will not be determined by the number of reports and memos he writes. He demonstrates his managerial capacity by grasping quickly the essentials of a problem, deciding rapidly what he will do, making clear to all concerned what their part will be, and then seeing that his people get on with the job.

The executive's vocabulary is full of active verbs leading to effective work. He does not sit at his desk waiting for the day to come to him. He goes out to meet it, pushing himself into the way of ideas waiting to fall on those who are good catchers.

Keep on learning

You are not doing justice to your opportunities if you depend upon daily experience as your only teacher. You may be discharging your duties acceptably, but you may feel that you are not progressing. Listen to this: "A man's efficiency depends absolutely upon the strength of his purpose. Systems, time-cards, stop-watches, calculated economy of time and effort are as if they were worthless fiddle-faddle unless a man's spirit is blazing with purpose." That does not come from any wild-eyed visionary, but from a textbook of one of the oldest business education establishments, The Alexander Hamilton Institute. You will find it in *Business and the Man*.

If you are driven by purposeful ambition you will broaden your outlook by making wide contact with knowledge of all sorts. Wherever you touch the stream of life you will find benefit. You are not limited to a narrow knowledge of a particular business. You are seeking a broad, intellectual environment in which your ideas have room to grow.

The top-flight man is not afraid to read good books outside his business library. He is not afraid of the splendid words and ideas he finds in them, like honour, integrity, fair play, conviction, enthusiasm.

Learning adds zest to life and helps you to overcome difficulties. It enables you to play a leading part, and by the high manner of your playing you will stand out as a good executive.