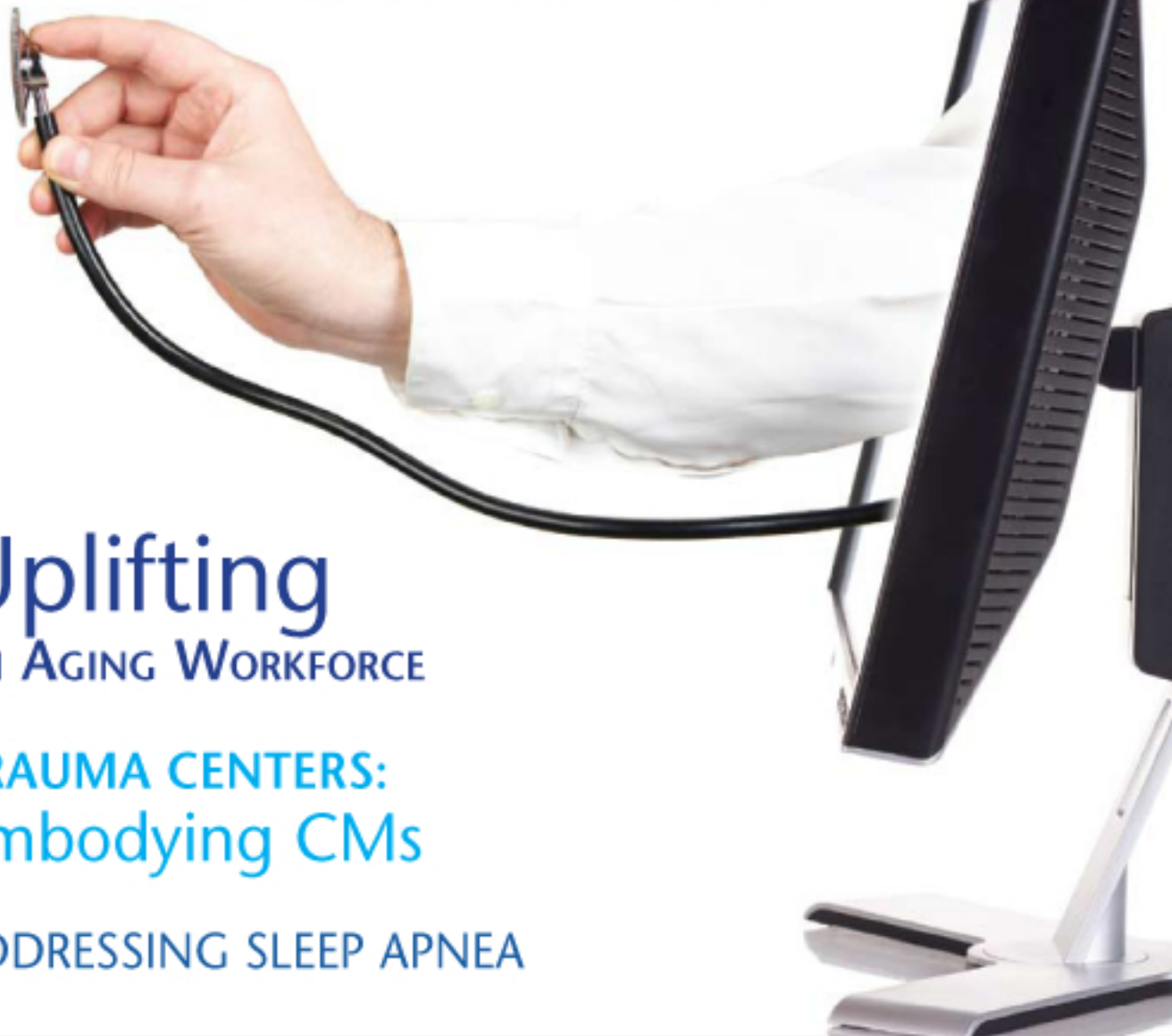


CASE IN POINT

October/November 2009

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MANAGEMENT FOCUS

Crossing the Management CHASM

Developing leaders from technicians

BY VERGIL L. METTS, PHD

Why is it that some people thrive when promoted through managerial ranks, while others no less intelligent and hard-working (if not more so) get stuck in neutral, or outright fail?

I realize you have to control for a range of situation-specific factors to fully answer the question: type of organization; commitment to executive development; talent assessment skill; interpersonal dynamics; and more. But my experience advising organizations and individuals on this critical issue has convinced me you can speak to it effectively, if in a general way.

Handicapping someone's potential in management often hinges on the markedly different skills possessed by a talented technician, versus those required of a successful leader. It's too often assumed that someone great at his or her job — ad agency account person, cost accountant at a manufacturing concern, health care company HR specialist — will be an equally effective manager of people and processes.

Two immediate harms are done when a person accomplished at their work but inadequately prepared or innately unsuited to lead crosses into management. First, a poor leader is minted. Second, a good worker is lost. Countless organizations are deficient because of it. Longer term, the damage done to the ill-promoted person's confidence may be an even bigger detriment.

The current flows in both directions. Some mediocre-at-best technicians turn out to

be remarkably effective leaders. It takes skill within an organization to assess that kind of potential, and the guts to take risks, for the proof to emerge.

RISING UP

The realm of sports offers reams of evidence. Legendary coach Phil Jackson may tell the story best. Many know him as a record-setting 10-title NBA coach, guiding the Chicago Bulls to six championships in the 1990s and the Los Angeles Lakers to four more this decade. But only die-hard New York fans will remember Jackson as a gangly, role-playing member of the Knicks championship teams of the early 1970s.

Not many would claim he was the best, or even among the best, player on the team. Jackson may not have had Clyde Frazier's jump shot, but he was known as an unusually cerebral player with a deft understanding of defense and a good rapport with his teammates — in other words, attributes that fit well with the requirements of a good manager. Owners of teams in low-level leagues in the U.S. and Puerto Rico recognized these qualities and offered Jackson his first head coaching jobs right after retiring from the NBA. We know the rest.

While Jackson's is a scale-the-heights story, it vividly illustrates how and when certain skills become more critical at different levels of an organization. As the chart on the next page depicts, entry-level jobs require (and reward) technical and tactical skills, while strategic thinking and interpersonal and political skills become increasingly critical at mid-level posts. This is

where leading people and processes starts to supplant completing discrete tasks, a progression fully realized at the senior/executive level.

As is often said, good leaders are both born and bred. Effective organizations can recognize the former and understand how to bring out the right-side-of-the-chart qualities in the latter. Developing good leaders can hinge on distinguishing among training and development. The two terms, often used interchangeably, are anything but the same.

Training imparts knowledge, skills and abilities important to someone's effectiveness in their current position. CME and CPE courses are good examples.

Development, on the other hand, is about building skills for future possibilities. Companies committed to the right kind of executive development, starting early in the career cycle, reap disproportionate rewards later. Jack Welch once said that he wanted his senior managers to be net exporters of talent in the organization.

Why would anyone in their right mind want a manager to develop talent then send them on to something else in the organization? Well, it turns out that the more successful a manager was at developing employees and moving them to new positions, the more the most talented employees wanted to come work for that manager. The more you give, the more you get.

Organizational behavior is one side of the story, and individual actions and thought the other. The best company-funded development won't

Different Levels Require a Different Mix of Skills



make a leader of someone unwilling to commit to it, or one who simply isn't wired to lead. Some have difficulty tolerating what's new and not yet cozy.

I use a litmus test called *dis-ease*, based on the premise that someone completely comfortable in her position should want to move on. Moreover, this person should want to embrace different roles, challenges and expectations, all of which may not immediately feel good, and to live with a dose of necessary dis-ease, if you will.

I put the threshold at roughly 80 percent. Once someone is at ease with that much of a job's requirements, it's time to move up. (Obviously, the organizational dynamics governing if, how and when that can happen are another story, especially during strained economic times.)

A common barrier to effective managing is how much pleasure is derived from completing defined tasks, solving distinct problems and producing other kinds of tangible results, and getting the praise that rides alongside. It's so satisfying, people poised to be good managers often struggle mightily letting go of "the work" itself in exchange for a bigger-picture role determining what work must get done, how, by whom, and to what end. The stuff of management, that is.

WORKING ON, NOT IN

Fundamentally, for a manager to thrive, the idea of work must be redefined and its new meaning embraced: to working primarily *on* the organization, instead of *in* the organization. In helping develop high-level government managers, I've seen vast improvements mandating 90 percent of time be spent working "on the organization" — on policy, protocols, people and the like — with the remaining 10 percent allotted to hands-on work that an individual most enjoys.

What if someone can't get comfortable with more discomfort, or doesn't want to? Or simply loves what they do so much that all they want is to keep at it? That's more than fine: it's a valuable insight many would do well to possess, and for those who manage them to understand — for the benefit of the individual and the organization alike.

Technology and science-centric organizations have done well to recognize and reward this mindset, often by setting up dual career tracks — management on one side, technical on the other. While a senior vice president at a biotech firm may achieve a new pay grade upon promotion to executive VP, her same-seniority counterpart on the company's R&D side may have and maintain the title "senior scientist" for years, drawing higher compensation by meeting benchmarks like technical certifications earned, contributions to patents awarded, and other criteria.

The ranks of Nobel prize winners are filled with brilliant technicians who never held a management title and likely never hungered for one.

Skilled technician Thomas Edison himself was a famously reluctant manager who didn't achieve commercial success until taking counsel (and dollars) from a financier named Lippincott in 1899. Soon, Edison's North American Phonograph Company emerged, and with it an industry. The rest, as they say, is history. [CTP](#)

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