

Combating Managerial Obsolescence and Creating Excellence

By

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Unassailably, managerial obsolescence is a universal phenomenon. Obsolescence in management is an inescapable fact of organisational life. The term 'obsolescence', though inevitable phenomenon, goes almost unnoticed in many organisations. It is less tasticating to observe the fact that every manager is vulnerable to obsolescence at one time or the other. In modern-day organisations where the rate of change is incredible and supersonic, the quickness with which the skills of a manager become obsolete and redundant is equally rapid. Organisations plan for change. Organisations also face boldly changes in environment, structure, technology and other arenas. The history of organisations is littered with the corpses of enterprises which failed miserably to respond to the innumerable demands of environment for change. Not only organisations, even individuals and groups comprising the organisations, plan for change. People in work organisations should make themselves 'marketable' daily. It is an undisputed fact that continuous learning is essential if a person is to keep abreast of developments taking place in his own discipline.

The very term 'obsolescence' is highly unpalatable and is devoid of savoury flavour. Unfortunately, managerial obsolescence is an area where negligible, scant and insignificant academic work is available. This article is attempted at enlightening the concept in brief, examining its causes and the antecedent effects, and providing a bird's eye view of the means of combating managerial obsolescence in organisations.

What is managerial obsolescence ?

Obsolescence is a semi-hot phrase in present corporate lexicon. At the very outset, the title is wrapped up in the paper of management and is tightly knotted with the cords of incomprehension and confusion. The topic is surrounded by definitional controversies. Let us consider the following list of more uniform definitions.

Obsolescence is the reduction in skills or performance of managers over a period of time.¹

Managers or professionals experience obsolescence where their knowledge or skills were not adequate to meet job demands.²

Obsolescence is the failure of a manager to do his job with the same competence as once expected.³

Obsolescence refers to the erosion of applicability of knowledge.⁴

The list of definitions may be never-ending. But all the definitions emphasize one simple fact.....obsolescence refers to reduction of skills and competence. More generally, obsolescence exists when an individual uses viewpoints, theories, concepts, or techniques that are less effective in solving problems than others currently available in his field of specialization'.⁵ Various types of obsolescence can be noticed in individual.

(i) Professional obsolescence : It refers to those whose technical know-how does not include the farthest reaches of knowledge and technique which exist within their discipline.⁶

(ii) Job obsolescence : It refers to a situation in which the individual's knowledge is insufficient when compared to the body of knowledge that is pertinent to the specific technical tasks that he is required to perform in his current job.⁷

(iii) Area obsolescence : It is based upon the individual's lack of knowledge of his own technical specialization.

Obsolescence can also be categorized in several other ways. For instance, one classification suggests that obsolescence can be classified on the basis of skill obsolescence, technology-based obsolescence, and the product-based obsolescence.

Almost all social scientists converge with the opinion that obsolescence is a reduction in skills of a manager resulting from his inability or unwillingness to keep up-to-date with new technological, scientific and other developments since leaving formal education.

Obsolescence index : Paul Mali,⁸ a great management expert, has developed an index called obsolescence index (OI) which is calculated with the help of the following formula :

$$OI = \frac{\text{Current knowledge understood by the individual}}{\text{Current knowledge in the field}}$$

A close examination at the index reveals the simple truth, i.e. for OI to remain constant with time, the denominator and numerator must change at the same fractional rate. In real life, denominator increases incredibly and exponentially over a period of time whereas the numerator may not increase with the same proportion. Obsolescence index is therefore, tending to fall over a period of time for every individual. One point for caution here. This equation is based on rate of change versus time, and therefore high rates of technological obsolescence are related to high rates of growth.

Important factors : Researchers throughout the globe tried to observe any personal characteristics that affect obsolescence of manager's skills and knowledge. Scholars have listed several personal characteristics thus :

age

work experience

mobility

perception of their learning ability

attitude to importance of updating their knowledge

membership of professional associations

There are some other factors, of course, not that much significant—viz educational and professional as well as technical qualifications, type of updating activities in which managers are engaged etc.

Age is one of the important factors that deserves a special mention. A review of literature on ageing carried out by Van Atta, C.M., Decker, W.D., and Wilson,⁹ concludes that :

intellectual capability declines little with age

the most crucial determinants of productivity and creativity are motivation and opportunity

outstanding performers are those who are highly motivated and evidence a large measure of self confidence in their work

creative contributions in scientific research activities mostly occur before the age of forty. In developmental scientific activities however the majority of more significant contributions will occur before the age of fifty.

after the age of fifty, productivity tends to climb because they are generally secure in their positions, have fewer family pressures and are willing to assume risks.

during mid-career—that is, between the early forty and near-fifty, there may be a tendency to 'coast'

since there is often a decline in performance after age forty, it would seem appropriate to consider setting up mid-career reviews for professional managers.

Age influences manager's willingness to participate in career development programmes. Frankly speaking, besides age, there are several factors that are conducive to managerial obsolescence. Most notable among them are—lack of awareness of change, aptitude to learn, outdated education, lack of motivation for development, and low inherent level of aspiration. Many a time organisations are considered to be responsible for managerial obsolescence. In an organisation, for instance, there may be :

lack of communication between personnel, manpower planners, and initiators of technological change ;

failure to detect change that affects managers and organisations consequently ;

lack of adequate training facilities

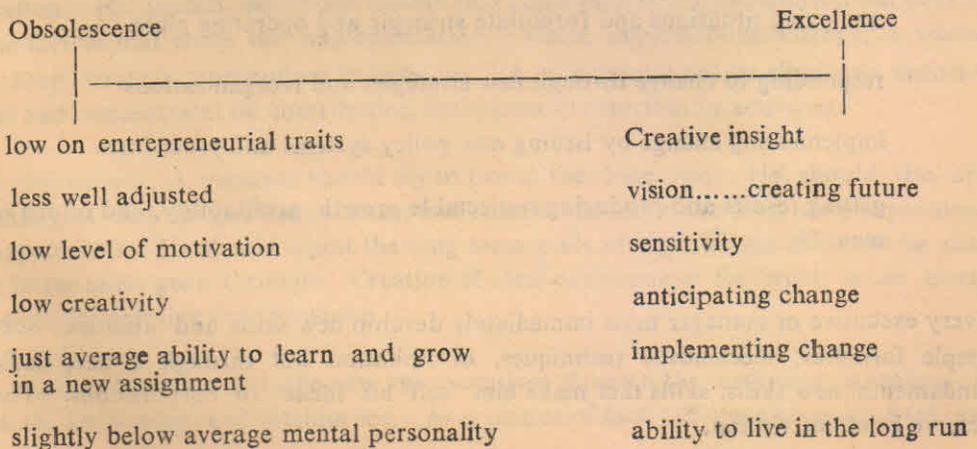
defensive attitude in the absence of know-how

failure to motivate and encourage individual managers to learn for the future.

In organisations, the emphasis is in general in on better performance on the job, rather than on long-term career development of managers and supervisors.

Creating excellence ?

When obsolescence is thought of one end on a *continuum*, excellence can be considered at the other extreme end. This is what exactly is being done in the following figure.



formulas, and cure-all theories to become excellent. Only deeply ingrained attitude to combat obsolescence and create excellence can be the solution.

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