Chapter 23.   Towards a Strategy for Helping Redundant and Retiring Managers

Introduction

I wrote this short paper shortly before I returned to the US in 1976, at a time when British business was undertaking the first of many waves of redundancies and restructurings at middle management levels. During the time I was living and working in Britain I observed that economic developments there led those in the US by a few years, so I predicted that we would eventually see similar phenomena in North America. Of course, I had no idea the process would last so long or cut so deep as it has.

It was clear from early reports by people who were working with managers who had lost their jobs and were endeavoring to get back on their feet, that those with habits of autonomy and initiative were most likely to weather the transition successfully and create a satisfying life. I hoped to persuade some sponsoring agency to support me in applying self directed learning principles to the reeducation of managers who had lost their jobs. This article put forward a proposed program for giving help and support that would build initiative and autonomy on the part of participants. I have never had the opportunity to apply the ideas put forward here, yet they continue to seem sound and viable to me.

Towards a Strategy for Helping Redundant and Retiring Managers

The Problem

During the recent recession redundancies and early retirements of managerial and professional staff have mounted astronomically. Although some of the reductions

in staff represent "house cleaning" which the affected organizations have put off for some years, there is every indication that the problem will become chronic and will remain with us for the foreseeable future. In this paper I shall present a conceptual framework for planning help for those facing redundancy and retirement and review some concrete approaches which have proven useful elsewhere or which appear promising. I take the point of view that planning to help redundant and retiring managers is a behavioral problem. This by no means implies that economic and administrative aid and the provision of concrete information is not an important part of the helping process. From the point of view of the affected individual, however, redundancy and retirement are events which affect the individual's life patterns extremely deeply. It is not rare for them to cause traumas and dislocations from which the individual never completely recovers. Help which does not recognize the depth and pervasiveness of the impact of these events must necessarily be superficial and quite possibly misguided.

The Dynamics of a Life Crisis

Personal effectiveness may be considered to be a function of four classes of variables.

The Situation. This refers to the aspects of the environment which impinge upon the individual. In organizations the situation can be broken down into (1) Work Systems; (2) Social Systems; and (3) Administrative Systems.

Skills and Knowledge which the individual possesses and brings to bear in dealing with the situation.

Interests, Drives and Motivations which tend make some of activities and outcomes more satisfying and rewarding to the person than others.

The Individual's Goals: Those aspects of the situation or of himself in the situation which the individual is attempting to achieve or maintain.

The Situation

When an individual retires or becomes redundant the situational variables undergo a relatively sudden and massive transformation. At a sudden stroke (no matter how long a time he has had to prepare for it) he is deprived of a major life situation in which he is accustomed to exercising his skills and knowledge, finding an outlet for his interests, drive and motivation, and achieving some of his most important life goals. Often, if he has been narrowly and deeply trained in a technical or administrative specialty he loses the possibility of finding another situation relevant to his skills, knowledge and interests which may for all practical purposes have become obsolescent. At the same time the finding or creation of a new situation which will be economically rewarding and/or personally satisfying, may require an entirely different set of knowledge and skills in which the individual is either mediocre or deficient. For example, highly technically trained engineers and scientists often find they lack the skills at building relationships with others which are essential to marketing themselves and finding another position in a highly competitive job market.

The sudden deprivation of the work situation thus disrupts the individual's total life processes in a very fundamental way. Such massive disruptions are almost invariably traumatic and far reaching in their psychological affects. Fink has

developed a phase progression model which describes and explains the stages through which individuals pass in their adaptation to highly stressful events. I have been testing this model with managers who have been involved in working with redundancies and early retirement, and there is general agreement on its applicability to the situation. The stages are passed through rapidly or slowly depending upon the severity of the trauma, but each individual can be expected to spend some time in each phase (Fink, 1967) .

The initial phase is that of *shock.* In the sudden deprivation of the work situation the individual experiences a psychological danger which is too great to handle. Many of his problem-solving processes become frozen. He may experience helplessness and extreme anxiety, perhaps to the point of panic. There is disruption of organized thinking and a temporary inability to plan and to carry out purposeful activity. During this phase redundant managers may be observed for long periods of time sitting at their desks staring ahead and doing nothing, or perhaps wandering aimlessly through hallways or in the streets. They may temporarily be unable to plan even the simplest activity, not knowing, for example, when or how to go home. Others, less immobilized may be able to go through the motions of their daily routine, but may experience so much anxiety that they are unable to think rationally about what to do to improve their situation.

The shock phase is followed by a period of *defensive retreat.* This pattern involves a flight from reality and an attempt to fortify a habitual and familiar reality against the awareness of threatening change. The individual minimizes the impact of

the event upon his life. He may state that "things have not really changed", or "this is just a temporary problem". This kind of wishful thinking is accompanied by a lowering of anxiety and by feelings of relief, and sometimes euphoria. It is significant, however, that the improvement in feeling is *not* accompanied by an increase in constructive, problem-solving activity. An indicator of being in a stage of defensive retreat is the person's tendency to reject with indifference or with anger any intrusions of reality from well-meaning associates, friends or family. Rigid thinking is also characteristic of this phase, and the person is unable to consider the possibility of changes in his life style, values or goals.

Except under unusual circumstances, the stage of defensive retreat must eventually come to an end. The individual meets with too many discomfirmations of his fantasy view of reality to maintain it indefinitely. Others refuse to support his unrealistic beliefs; the actions he takes on the basis of those beliefs are unsuccessful, and learning eventually occurs. Thus the individual passes into the phase of *acknowledgment.*

With the loss of the individual's valued image of himself and of the situation, stress increases sharply, and the individual may undergo deep depression and bitterness. The individual finally experiences the negative aspects of reality which he has been defending against, and in the process he tends to lose sight of positive factors. The rigid cognitive patterns break down, and, there is once again some disorganization of thought and problem solving, but this time there is a reforming of perceptions along more realistic lines. If the reality is perceived as overwhelmingly

negative, then the individual may tend towards extreme apathy or even suicide, and the support of others is extremely important during this phase.

As the person rebuilds a view of reality which includes both negative and positive aspects of the situation and of himself, he moves into a phase of *adaptation.* This is the phase in which real planning and action takes place. There is a gradual development of a new self-image consistent with the new reality. The person explores his resources, both internal and external, and as he tests them in the real world he experiences a gradual lessening of anxiety and depression following the success of his efforts. Serious setbacks may throw him back again into a stage of passive acknowledgment, or even into defensive retreat. However, the likelihood of such retrogression is minimized by supportive relationships with others and by a developing life situation in which the individual's effectiveness is on the increase.

Extreme as it may sound, this model is probably at least partially accurate as a description of the adaptation process of most persons as they face up to redundancy and retirement. The significant message of the model is that, in order to be really useful to the individual, outside help and intervention must be very different during the different phases of adaptation to the crisis. The wrong help in a given phase can be damaging as well as useless. For example, strong confrontation during the shock or defensive retreat phases, is likely to increase the stress and possibly to brand the aspiring helper as a person to be avoided. This is not to say that the helper should go in the opposite direction and support the individual in his unrealistic thinking about reality during the phase of defensive retreat. Rather, it appears that the most effective

help during this phase is a combination of *consistent* emotional support with an *offering* of reality to the individual which is not pressed when the offering raises defenses.

Again, during the acknowledgment phase a somewhat different style of help is most useful and acceptable. During this phase of depression and bitterness the individual still needs emotional support, but also needs to be generally led to explore positive aspects of his situation and his own resources. Later, during the adaptation phase, the individual needs less emotional support and is increasingly capable of accurate perception of reality. Now he is ready to use information, advice, and training in skills in which he may be lacking.

Towards a Helping Strategy

The above analysis leads both to a specification of the *elements* which should be present in a program for helping redundant and retiring managers and also to the *priorities* and *sequence* in which they ought to be provided.

Minimizing Stress through Preparation

I understand that recent research on surgical patients has shown that psychological preparation for a trauma can be almost as important as adequate aftercare in helping the individual to survive and to cope effectively. Patients who were adequately briefed as to the unpleasant after effects of a surgical operation recovered more rapidly (and more often) than those who were not so prepared. Informal interviews with managers who have dealt with redundancy suggest to me that the same principle holds true in the case of the trauma of separation from the

organization. Giving plenty of notice of the impending redundancy seems to be a key to preparing the individual. In particular, there seems to be general agreement that finding another position is not only objectively easier when one has not yet been separated from his old one, but that the security of maintaining his old status (no matter how temporarily) is a valuable support for the individual in presenting himself effectively and in maintaining his initiative and drive. Against this must be balanced the discomfort and guilt of others in the organization who must live with an individual who is "under sentence", but the evidence so far suggests, this is more a problem for the organization than it is for the redundant individual. Letting things go until the last moment and getting the redundant off the premises as quickly as possible seems clearly to be a self-serving strategy on the part of the organization, rather than a benefit to the individual.

Sometimes it may even be possible to prepare the individual in advance of his being told that he is redundant. For example, George Lehner has devised a "What if I Lost My Job?" workshop which consists of one three-hour session for three people at a time in which individuals are encouraged to begin making some plans in advance of the event (Lehner, 1971). The opposite of this approach is seen in the way retirement is dealt with in most organizations where the individual and the organization seem to collude in a conspiracy of silence about the more serious consequences of the impending separation. The individual is encouraged to act as though he believes that the transition will be pleasant, one which he has been looking forward to all of his working life. This is nowhere more apparent than in the false gaiety of the farewell

banquet. This is not of course to imply that retirement is never a happy occasion, but rather to point out that it is not particularly helpful to the individual when we ignore and encourage him to keep silent about the unpleasant aspects.

Strengthening the Support Network

One of the most difficult aspects of redundancy and retirement is that they are transitions into which the individual is impelled at the same time as a major source of social and emotional support is removed. To the extent that the individual's membership in some social networks within the organization is supportive and satisfying to him, he will experience their loss as a deprivation which he must cope with along with all the other difficulties of the transition. In the case of redundancy, and to a lesser extent in retirement, the individual's social relationships with community, friends and family undergo considerable alteration and stress at the same time. The desperation which this occasions some individuals is attested to by the perennial stories of men who cannot face telling their wives and neighbors about their redundancy and go off each morning dressed for work to wander aimlessly until it is time for them to return in the evening. Such extreme reactions are luckily rare, but for every man who becomes redundant or retires there is an alteration and usually a loss in the network of social relationships which has supported him. This loss occurs just at the time when, according to Fink's model, the individual most needs support and reassurance as to his basic worth from those around him.

With this process of social deprivation in mind, it seems reasonable to give a high priority to the establishment of an alternate source of social support and

confirmation of self-worth. For a variety of reasons it seems to me most desirable to utilize a small group as the basic helping/learning setting for redundant managers and for those who retire. Such a group should have the following composition and characteristics.

- The group should ideally be an ongoing one, covering the period from when the individual first begins to face his retirement or redundancy until the transition has been effectively adapted to. This is not to say that one time events cannot have facilitation or learning value, but the trouble is that one cannot predict exactly when each individual will be psychologically ready to confront his problem and utilize the help of others. With an ongoing group one can work intensively with individuals when they are ready for it and deal with the set-backs and crises as they come up.

- The group should be composed of others facing the same life crisis so that members can develop cohesion and a sense of identification with one another's situations. This is important for reducing the feelings of isolation, self-blame and worthlessness which are common blocks to successful adaptation.

- It is desirable though perhaps not essential, that a group be led by someone who has experienced a similar life crisis to those which the members are facing. This will facilitate the leader's credibility and reduce the social distance between him and the members.

Developing Initiative through Helping One Another

The work emphasis in the group discussions should be on self-help and mutual help rather than upon help by the leader or other outside resources. In fact, after some experience it should be possible to design guidance programs so that the self-help groups need have no leader at all. This has been successfully done in therapy groups, and there is no basic reason why it should not be accomplished with redundancy and retirement groups as well. It is particularly important in the case of the latter, because a major purpose of the small group activity is for the members to come to see themselves and each other as competent, resourceful individuals, who are capable of giving as well as receiving help.

The activities of the group should be designed to facilitate the development of initiative, autonomy, self-confidence and feelings of self-worth. To some extent feelings of confidence and self-worth are generated simply by being an accepted member of a cohesive group. However, such feelings are rather shallowly based if they depend only on affiliation and not on action and achievement in the real world. Whether one is dependent upon an organization, upon a leader, or upon his peers in a small group, he is still dependent. In the last analysis, the success of the program will depend upon freeing its participants to make their own paths towards new careers or new involvements in the community. The cohesive small group is thus seen as nurturing the individual through a difficult period of adjustment to the point where he is able to cope on his own. If he then still desires to maintain relationships with members of the group it will be because these relationships were satisfying in their

own right, and not because he is dependent upon them for the strength to cope with the stresses of everyday life.

A Cafeteria of Resources

The key to developing autonomy and initiative in the group is in the way resources are made available to it, and in which these resources are expected to be utilized. In designing a program such as this, one has the choice of providing a planned sequence of activities which expose participants to resources (people, information, experiences), or one can simply make the resources accessible to the participants and allow them to choose which to use and in what sequence. A key feature of the helping/learning strategy proposed here is that participants would be provided with knowledge about and/or access to a varied collection of learning aids which could be of use to them in assessing their own resources, exploring the economic and social environment for resources (jobs, business opportunities, skills and knowledge development resources), or for improving their functioning as a group (exercises for diagnosing and improving relationship skills and group membership and leadership skills). A great deal of preliminary effort would be devoted to assembling the best possible collection of resources. There would be a list of people who could be contacted to speak to the group on various topics; there would be a library and supplementary bibliography; there would be structured group exercises which could be chosen by the group for their own learning; and there would be a library of films and audio and video tape material. It would be up to the group to choose and to use these materials according to the need of their own members. Early

in the life of the group some guidance would be given regarding the choice of materials and activities, but even at this early stage the group would always be provided with a choice amongst several alternatives. Sub-groups would be encouraged to form to pursue special projects, and as time went on individuals might develop their own lines of learning activity, but the center of activity would continue to be the small group which plan together as a whole whatever activities were carried out. This focus on the group as a whole would be maintained during most of the program in order to enhance its value as a source of both emotional support and reality testing for the members.

Learning How to Learn

Learning in the group would take place by critiquing the activities undertaken as well as through the activities themselves. For example, if the group chose to invite a speaker to address it on problems of finance in starting a small business the members would spend time after the session examining the ways they had used the speaker as a resource and considering how they might improve similar sessions in the future.

A great effort should be made to provide the best possible resources for the use of the groups. This would involve considerable pre-work by the program staff in interviewing expert resources, arranging for the availability of individual resource people, conducting library research, and sifting through the vast array of film, audio and video material available. 'This would, moreover, be an ongoing task as the sources would have to be brought up to date continuously. Experience would doubtless show

which resources were more useful to which kind of groups, and this would aid the search as well as facilitating the elimination of some persons or materials from the list.

Summary

The suggested design strategy flows out of our diagnosis of the situation of the manager facing redundancy or retirement. He is at the brink of losing a central source of meaning and self-esteem in his life: his job. Depending upon his investment in work and his involvement in the family and other outside activities, this may represent a moderate to a severe disruption of his life and of his opportunities to meet his needs and achieve his goals. At the very least it will change radically the social network in which he finds himself and will seriously disrupt, at least temporarily, the daily routine of his existence. In a world in which what a man does is frequently more important to others, than what he is, the manager facing redundancy or retirement is about to lose one of the major indicators of his status and worth in the social system: his work and his organizational position.

When subjected to moderate to severe stress of this kind, people go through a fairly predictable phase progression in their adaptive responses. During some of these phases they are rather inaccessible to help, particularly if it is of a confronting nature. Throughout the process there is continuing need for confrontation to be balanced by a high degree of emotional support.

The need for support during a major life transition can most effectively be met by membership in a small group which is composed of persons sharing a common

problem, and which meets regularly over a period of time during which the stress and adaptation processes can be coped with.

The basic task of such a group would be to help individual members plan and carry out an effective transition to another career or another satisfying life style. In this the group would be facilitated by a trained leader (preferably with experience of redundancy or retirement himself) or, after considerable experience with the program, by a program of written instructions for group activities. In either case the group will be given a great deal of choice in its activities and will move in the direction of greater choice and autonomy with time. The learning process will thus be designed to facilitate the development of initiative and independence on the part of group members. To this end, a rich and varied store of learning resources will be provided by the staff, but groups will have great latitude in choosing which to use. Once chosen, most of the activities will require that the group take further initiative to carry them out.