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The Faculty in Midcareer: Implications for School Improvement

To sustain staff competence, schools must support staff members' ongoing development.

When I began in this school, we had old and new teachers, liberals and conservatives. We fought and argued, and this was one lively place. Now, the kids are different, parents are different, there are fewer of us, we've all been here for years, and there's no spirit left.

—5th grade teacher

There's not much tread left on the tire around here. Many teachers are still okay in the classroom but are just doing the minimum. And as soon as school's over, everyone disappears. We need a shot in the arm.

—High school principal

Yes, conditions are worse now, but they were never that good. The real difference is us: we don't have the same commitment—especially for the "thanks" we get—and at our age we think more about our own needs.

—President, teacher union local

Looming behind every aspect of the debate about schools is a profound demographic change among teachers: almost en masse, they have become a veteran, middle-aged, immobile group. The teaching force is now composed mainly of people in middle to late career who have been teaching in their current school for most of their professional lives. Their average age is approaching 50. Seventy-five percent have been teaching for at least 10 years; 50 percent, for 15 years or more. Fifty percent have taught in only one or two schools (Feistritzer 1986).

More important, as the voices above suggest—and as anyone who visits schools regularly can attest—few veterans seem to be displaying or enjoying the benefits of age and experience. Disenchantment is rampant among them; it is increasingly rare to meet teachers who radiate enthusiasm or principals who praise their competence. Teachers complain about low levels of salary, support, and recognition; about deteriorating conditions in the school as a workplace; and about growing demands made on them, both instructional and noninstructional. Principals complain that staff are coasting—or worse—in the classroom and participating less in the life of the school. The need for staff revitalization is inescapable.

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As they confront this need, schools, as always, are caught in a crossfire of conflicting demands to be more effective, although there is no consensus about what effectiveness means. Proposed remedies range from large-scale restructuring of the teaching force and professionalized training and certification to state-mandated teacher accountability programs, with recommendations to offer support for teachers and improve their control over their working conditions (Mitchell and Peters 1988). The "first wave" of reform proposals deliberately emphasized broad philosophical questions about schooling's structure, mission, and methods. Often absent from these proposals was recognition of the current realities of the teaching force. Consequently, proponents of "second wave" reform have emphasized teachers themselves, stressing the need to enhance their morale, motivation, and participation. This ap-

proach to school improvement emphasizes restructuring through school-based management, decentralizing control, and making teachers active participants in all aspects of school governance (Marburger 1985).

What is the likely success of these second-wave prescriptions? While they are closer to the immediate practical problems of schools than earlier efforts at reform, and while they are based on sound theory about organizational behavior and the conditions that nurture competence, they lack a *career development focus*, an appreciation of teachers' changing characteristics and needs over the course of their careers.

Teachers' complaints are substantive and reflect real issues about schooling. But they also reflect changes in perception, experience, and behavior that are common to veteran professionals generally. A grasp of these developmental characteristics is essential to understanding teachers' morale and performance problems and to implementing effective efforts at revitalization and school improvement.

Career Development

The study of career development in organizations is a recent specialty within the management field. It synthesizes research on organizational behavior with studies of adult ("life span") development. Life span theorists, notably Levinson (1978), Miller (1976), and Gilligan (1982), have traced the cycle of adult development, its phases and transitions, its central tasks and conflicts, its gender differences. Career theorists, led by Schein (1978) and Hall (1988), focus on a corresponding cycle in adults' work lives, mapping normative phases in professional careers and matching the needs of workers with the needs of organizations.

Krupp (1987, 1988) and Levine (1987, 1989) have applied life span research to teachers, emphasizing the school as a context for adult growth. A career development perspective, not yet applied to teachers, explores much of the same terrain, but with a sharper focus on career changes over time and on the potential for organizational response. Together, these complementary approaches suggest that most problems veteran teachers encounter (and present) reflect typical dilemmas of midcareer that are often exacerbated by life in schools. These approaches also challenge commonly prescribed responses to staff revitalization and point to steps that hold more promise.

Midcareer

At midcareer all professionals, including teachers, are prone to de-motivation (boredom, loss of enthusiasm, diminished job interest) and a leveling off of performance. The growth curve flattens out, particularly for those who do not move into new roles or change jobs; and energy flags. These trends result from shifts in attitude, perception, priority, and need that stem from changing life and career circumstances. In the workplace, they are reflected in:

- A shift from the primacy of the work role toward personal roles. At the start of one's career, learning the ropes of a job assumes primary importance. In midcareer, one's focus moves toward a growing preoccupation with personal and family concerns. Investment in the job is affected by a sharper awareness of mortality, of time's being limited, of bodily change and potential (or actual) health problems, and by the stresses of changing family composition and roles as as one's parents age and one's children leave home.
- A perception of reduced career opportunity and uncertainty about one's future—one has fewer options, both inside and outside one's current organization; in contrast to one's early career, there is no longer a clear path to follow, no organizational plan for further development.
- A growing focus on material (vs. intrinsic) job rewards and on the quality of one's daily work experience (vs. performance outcomes).
- Loss of the experience of success, as mastery reduces both recognition for performance—one's competence is taken for granted, feedback of all kinds is reduced—and the challenge in the job itself, maintaining competence, is less rewarding than initially achieving it.
- A growing isolation and a sense of experiencing a unique dilemma, as the above issues are rarely acknowledged and shared (Schein 1978, Hall 1988).

The collective impact of these changes increases midcareer professionals' vulnerability to stress, that is, to the physical and psychological dysfunctions that occur when one faces high levels of demand or change but has low levels of control and support (Selye 1974). The personal and professional transitions, the uncertainty and diminishing recognition that characterize midcareer provide classic instances of this stress formula at work. Like most natural stresses, these are usually resolved in time, but not without periodic and sometimes extensive impairment of performance.

As they cope with these issues, midcareer professionals may be divided into recognizable types along a continuum of competence, involvement, and growth (fig. 1). On the high (left) end of the continuum are key members, people who seem endlessly engaged and self-renewing, who sustain both their enthusiasm and their performance at exceptional levels. Contributors are solid participants, no longer on the cutting edge, who do reliable work, whom leaders can turn to for extra help in a pinch, and who often can be good mentors to newcomers. On the lower (right) end are the stable and stagnant, those whose growth has slowed markedly, who are largely going through the motions, and the

key member——contributor——stable and stagnant——deadwood

Fig 1. Continuum of Midcareer Types

Adapted from: Schein 1978 and Krupp 1988.

deadwood, those whose growth has stopped altogether and who have effectively retired on the job.

Special Stressors of Education

Teaching intensifies the stresses of midcareer and presses its practitioners toward the lower end of the continuum. Its flat occupational structure, offering neither opportunity for advancement nor incentives for performance, has been widely decried and is the focus of efforts to create differentiated roles for teachers.

Less often acknowledged are the strains inherent in teaching as an activity. As Levine (1989) notes, citing Jackson (1968) and Sarason (1971), teaching is complex, draining, and isolating—and all of these characteristics become more problematic in midcareer. The enormous social complexity of teaching is captured by Jackson in his portrait of the crowded, busy nature of classroom life and the rapid changes and multiple roles required of the teacher. This complexity makes teaching an exhausting activity marked, as Sarason has noted, by a sharp disparity between giving and getting; it requires constant giving of oneself but provides little in the way of consistent measurable rewards. And for all its complex interaction, teaching, unlike many professions, occurs in isolation from peers. Because it offers few opportunities for practitioners to interact with one another, teaching breeds loneliness (Levine 1989) and denies the kinds of recognition commonly available to other professionals.

As organizations, schools are increasingly ill-situated to reduce these stresses because they are themselves so stressed. The disparity between giving and getting applies not just to teachers but to schools, where high demand/low support is a chronic fact of life. Schools have contended with relentless expansion of their roles, including rapid growth in curriculum; the mainstreaming of students with significant learning handicaps; and greater responsibility for the overall care and development of children, growing proportions of whom come from poor, minority, and single-parent families. Even as they struggle to fulfill these functions, many districts are suffering the strains of organizational decline. Education, like a mature industry, has seen its "customer base" (enrollment) diminish, bringing budgetary restraint and reductions in "plant capacity" (school closings) and staff. In the face of such contraction, employee morale, job satisfaction, and performance typically deteriorate; but the organization is unable to attend to employee needs. Moreover, norms for professional growth in schools have never been high. The extensive ongoing training typical in comparable human service fields such as medicine or mental health—let alone in corporate management—is absent (Krupp 1988). I know of no school district that has sought, or had the resources, to systematically identify and meet the changing needs of teachers over the course of their careers. Moreover, too few veteran teachers are themselves exponents of growth and innovation; too many tend to discourage efforts to enhance professional development.

Proponents of "second wave" reform have emphasized teachers themselves, stressing the need to enhance their morale, motivation, and participation.

Four Common Prescriptions

Hampered by these stresses and norms, urged on all sides to be more effective and accountable, schools' responses to midcareer teachers are often limited to measures that seem intuitively correct—"businesslike"—but often prove ineffective, including:

- Greater central office control over planning, policy, and curriculum to compensate for a lack of initiative among teachers. Administrators seek structural solutions to compel district-wide improvement; unfortunately, these diminish teachers' autonomy and damage morale, particularly among veterans, who find them demeaning.
- Rigorous evaluation and clinical supervision. To motivate veteran staff some districts seek more stringent assessment procedures, while others turn to clinical supervision, a much more collegial, collaborative model of enhancing performance. Neither route offers much promise for midcareer teachers, for whom, as we have seen, personal concerns assume a growing ascendancy. The more senior a professional, and the closer to retirement, the less motivated he or she is to change, and the less leverage is available to the supervisor.[1]
- Inservice retraining. This is generally chosen by administrators and provided in isolated presentations without follow-up; it is "defect-based—designed to correct performance deficiencies (Krupp 1988). Teachers, like midcareer employees everywhere, rarely respond to this kind of instruction, unless they are motivated to change.
- Career ladders and financial rewards. Although these enjoy support among many policymakers, most offer incentives to only a small number of staff. They stress extrinsic rewards for individuals, rather than intrinsic job factors and coordinated participation in the total school (Mitchell and Peters 1988). Although they may yet prove effective in attracting new teachers, they offer little for the vast majority of veterans.

Whatever their merits, these measures do not address the developmental shifts outlined above or the changing motivation and needs of veteran

teachers and the quality of their work life. Above all, revitalization means re-motivation, not retraining.

Revitalization: Tasks, Needs

A more promising approach, adopted by the most successful corporations, takes a human resource development perspective. It assumes that the changes inherent in the cycles of life and work naturally affect motivation and performance in midcareer and that to sustain staff competence the organization must support staff members' ongoing development. In this view, midcareer is a time of transition that confronts the individual with a series of tasks. As summarized by Schein (1978), these include:

- specializing vs. generalizing—deciding whether one's long-range contribution will hinge on continued exercise of the skills one already has or whether to move into a broader role, such as into leadership;
- establishing an organizational identity and area of contribution—finding a niche, achieving a place, and making a recognized contribution to the organization;
- modifying career dreams—coming to terms with the reality that one's early dreams will never be fulfilled or with the vacuum that often follows when one has achieved important dreams by mid-life;
- achieving a balance between work, family, and self-development—reconsidering how involved in work one will remain vs. how involved in family and self-oriented activities;
- maintaining a positive growth orientation—avoiding premature resignation or complacency when options for growth remain;
- accepting the responsibilities of mentoring—identifying one's needs to be a mentor and finding a way of meeting these.

These career tasks have vital implications for every aspect of revitalization. In Hall's (1986) view, they translate into basic needs in the workplace for growth, recognition, and job enrichment, to which we may add collegiality, a need of central importance to teachers. To cope with these tasks, staff members need a work environment that emphasizes:

- Growth—through measures that stimulate teachers' awareness of choice and exploration, emphasize their potential for growth and influence, and model for teachers the leader's own growth.
- Recognition—through measures that counter the tendency to take veteran staff for granted and that help restore the "success cycle" by recognizing their accomplishments and struggles. Veteran teachers need more recognition than beginners, not less.
- Experience-enhancing roles—through measures that create job variety and enrichment for staff, enabling them to use their unique skills, develop new competencies, and expand professional autonomy.
- Collegiality—through measures that enhance mutual trust, support, and collaboration and reduce isolation.

If schools are to become places where veteran teachers can renew their commitment and competence, two factors will be key: a systemic focus on human resource development, and leadership.

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Human Resource Development

Schools will need a focus on the ongoing development of their human resources: a deliberate effort to match the changing needs of teachers with those of the district and to help teachers address their own career questions. To combat boredom, complacency, and the loss of challenge and recognition, both jobs and organizational structure must be designed to provide experience-enhancing roles. These include (1) measures that increase the variety of one's total career experience and (2) those that improve the quality of experience a given job provides. The former include such possibilities as:

- job sharing;
- voluntary transfers to new jobs within the district;
- temporary released-time assignments to special projects;
- developing multiple specialties (becoming adept at two disciplines or two grade levels) so one can move between assignments;
- traditional methods that enhance job variety (team teaching, peer study and supervision groups, intra- and inter-school visiting; curriculum development workshops; attending conferences; mini-sabbaticals).

The latter, known as *job enrichment* or *quality of worklife* (QWL) efforts, consist of ways to enhance professionals' control over work conditions. The goal is to give staff more control over resources and methods and hold them accountable for results. The management literature is replete with tales of companies reborn by this kind of initiative, which is also at the heart of the school-based management movement. However, job enrichment does not mean simply abandoning management responsibility, as if teachers already have all the answers to the ills of schools; it means increasing teachers' input and giving them resources and experiences that will help them devise creative solutions to school problems. Accountability is much more complex—and less welcome to many teachers—than many educators imag-

ine. Steps to enhance the quality of worklife in schools include:

- increasing teachers' control over budget, curriculum, schedule, class size, and so on;
- providing opportunities for teachers to study and develop new models of school structure and pedagogy;
- requiring and permitting teachers to take greater responsibility for colleagues with performance problems;
- limiting the imposition of externally imposed competency requirements and substantially increasing the role of teachers in determining appropriate outcomes to measure.

To complement experience-enhancing roles, veteran teachers need career planning and support services, measures to help them make informed decisions about their careers and resolve personal issues that impinge on their ability to work. These services include career counseling, part-time internships in other jobs, and retirement preparation programs. Inservice can play a helpful role here if it aims at the motivational dilemmas of mid-life and midcareer.

As much as they dislike mandated retraining programs, teachers respond readily to programs they choose to meet their own felt needs. They show real enthusiasm for workshops on midcareer/mid-life issues, stress management, and the like. These can be targeted to staff groups according to age and career stage or to entire faculties. The key is to offer teachers information about the predictable stresses of life and career and the chance to share the personal and professional concerns they rarely discuss. These programs often spawn teacher-initiated follow-up groups that help members reduce stress and sustain performance.

Leadership

Like everything in schools, revitalization depends on leadership. Bennis and Nanus (1985), like other students of leadership (Zalesnik 1977), distinguish between managing (doing things right) and leading (doing the right thing). Leaders are concerned with vision and with people—not with the nuts and bolts. They emphasize their organization's basic purposes, and they communicate actively and effectively with their staff. They enunciate their vision with clarity and energy; they attend to the culture of their organization—its structure, processes, climate, values, and shared assumptions. They foster trust by practicing what they preach and by modeling realistic self-regard and growth.

Teachers need recognition not only for achievement, but for their effort—at times simply for their struggle—to meet the ongoing everyday demands of the job.

In this view, school administrators must project energy, commitment, and a clear vision of the school's mission and core values. In schools that lack a vision, the principal works with the staff to develop one. When this vision emphasizes collaborative growth and planning and nurtures peer support, revitalization is enhanced. As part of developing a vision, leaders can initiate team building, both through workshops and retreats for this purpose and through involving faculty in decision making. Mitchell and Peters (1988), noting that "good schools are the best incentives for good teachers," suggest that participation in school governance is the most important organizational incentive for professional development. Saphier and King (1985) offer a list of cultural norms for schools that emphasize participation and speak to the career needs listed above.

School administrators must attend more closely to the interpersonal dimensions of school life as a staff ages. They can refocus on their own personal connections to each staff member, getting to know and to re-know teachers in depth through active listening, a true open door, and transparency—appropriate public acknowledgement of their own midcareer stresses (Krupp 1987). Because so many midcareer performance problems are rooted in the loss of motivation, the loss of the success cycle, and the sense of being taken for granted, school leaders must emphasize recognition, exploration, and the awareness of choice among teachers whenever possible. They can seek ways to maximize teachers' success and experimentation, vigorously recognizing and rewarding staff for their accomplishments and for willingness to pursue new interests or experiment with new approaches to problems, even when these fail. Teachers need recognition not only for achievement, but for effort—at times simply for their struggle—to meet the ongoing everyday demands of the job.

Finally, as Krupp (1988) notes, to be credible in all these efforts to promote growth, leaders must model growth themselves; they must confront and resolve their own midcareer challenges. School leaders who exemplify leveling off should not expect to see their staffs forging ahead.

Caveats

To list these measures quickly is to oversimplify the task of revitalization. School leaders who actively seek to help teachers renew their commitment and competence should bear in mind the following:

- Expect resistance. Sadly, many veteran teachers, particularly in hard-pressed schools, have been unable to maintain a positive growth orientation. So disheartened that they have settled for the relative comfort of powerlessness ("There's nothing I can do, so I can't be held responsible"), they often mistrust and reject sincere efforts to resolve their longtime concerns. They can be quite suspicious of efforts to

involve them in participatory governance. To rebuild trust takes time and perseverance. Quick turnarounds are unlikely; revitalization requires a long-range outlook stretching over years, not months.

- Revitalization alone is not enough. To improve its effectiveness, any organization, particularly one marked by an imbalance of giving and getting, needs youthful energy as well as mature experience. It is unrealistic to expect staff renewal to meet all the needs of a school and equally unrealistic to assume we can re-motivate all teachers. We must help those on the lower side of the midcareer continuum to move toward the higher side—or move out.
- Revitalization requires real cooperation among all parties. Teacher unions especially need to participate in planning and implementation and to share in the responsibility for helping teachers with performance problems.

Re-motivating staff is a great challenge to an administrator. Remaining positive and promoting participation can be burdensome; frustration is inevitable. Moreover, many administrators are in midcareer themselves, struggling with the very issues they are trying to help their teachers manage. Recognition and collegiality will be important to them, too, but less available. Like teachers, they will need support from one another to sustain their struggle and overcome the isolation of their work. In the face of such complex requirements, modesty is a necessity. Leaders' expectations must be realistic, not only for teachers but for themselves. "Real achievement," writes Herzberg (1987), "requires a task that makes it possible." Small improvements, small achievements at everyday tasks can make meaningful differences in morale and performance; they must be savored, celebrated, and shared.

A Higher Mission

My focus throughout has been on teaching as a career and on strategies that help teachers master career problems. Yet the origins of teaching are not as a career but as a calling, a vocation. Inextricably bound up with the teaching of children is a sense of a higher mission, however vaguely defined. One risk in efforts to professionalize teaching and make teachers more "productive" is that we may emphasize means over ends, emphasize the technical components of teaching—and of revitalization—at the expense of the calling. Drawing this distinction, Huebner (1987) writes:

> If teaching is to be improved, we must attend to the teacher, not merely to the teacher's income and benefits, and not to the resources available for teaching. Rather, we must attend to how a teacher's work influences the teacher's life. . . . For many, teaching is something they have wanted to do because they like children and youth, or because their interests have significant value for other people, or because they want to make a difference in the quality of human life. . . . The living that can be produced with a teacher's income is not much of a life by today's standards, but the living that is teaching is as rich and as meaningful, and as socially valuable, as any can be.

When undertaken only in the name of greater productivity and a better bottom line, revitalization becomes a technical exercise, another intervention that misses the mark. As an effort to help teachers rekindle their vocation, to help their teaching and their living become more meaningful, to make their tasks more possible, it offers them and their students a vital opportunity.□

1. Supervision and evaluation offer little stimulus to veteran teachers' performance. They often suffer from perceived arbitrariness, and they lapse into ritualized routine over a long career. Moreover, as Herzberg (1987) notes, they play at best a secondary role in *motivating* employees, because they are extrinsic to the job itself.

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