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Plan your own development

Bob Dick (1990) Planning your own development. In B. Smith, ed., *Management development in Australia*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich [pp 260- 266].
An invited chapter.

This chapter is intended to help you think about your own management development. It takes the form of a workbook which will help you to decide what you really want from your job and career. Having made that decision, you can then begin to plan the development which will help you achieve it.

The workbook makes use of the notion that we often realize our needs only when forced to make difficult choices through which those needs become apparent. This became apparent in Schein's (1978) book on careers. Schein found that certain job aspects, "career anchors" as he called them, were important in determining satisfaction with career choice.

In Schein's research, recent graduates in management thought they knew what they wanted from their jobs and careers. Five years later many of them had changed their mind in the light of their experience. For some of them this realisation came too late — they had already chosen unsatisfying career paths from which escape was difficult. It was often only after making difficult choices that many of them discovered if the choice was good or bad.

I have found that if people imagine a choice vividly enough, they can often identify what they want from a job. If they also check their judgment against evidence from their life and work, this can also help. In workshops on life planning or career planning, people commonly identify sessions based on Schein's career anchors as a particularly valuable part of the workshop for developing career insights.

The purpose of this workbook is therefore to confront you with vicarious choices which may help you to identify your career anchors.

Using the workbook

The following descriptions, arranged in pairs, are about two quite different jobs. You are asked to imagine that you have been offered the two positions simultaneously. There are reasons why it is desirable to accept one of them. Obviously you can't accept both.

Read through the description of the two jobs. The choice you face is clearly not real. But the more vividly you imagine it, the closer to being a real choice it can become. So imagine the situation as vividly as you can. Imagine being faced with that choice, and being asked to respond immediately. Assume that in all respects not mentioned, the two jobs are equally satisfactory for you.

When you understand the jobs, and can imagine the situation, make your choice.

Then imagine, as vividly as you can, that you have made that choice. Ask yourself, what are your anxieties about the job you have chosen? What are your hopes? You can use your response to work out what is important to you in a job.

You will then be asked to try to remember similar choices you have already made, in your work or life. Again, the choice and how it worked out can be an important source of information.

The exercise will be more valuable if you do not look beyond the description of the job until you have imagined: (a) being confronted with the choice; (b) making the choice; (c) identified your anxieties and hopes. Therefore, take one step at a time if you wish to get the most out of the exercise. You will also get more out of it if you answer from your real wishes, disregarding for the moment the expectations others have of you or what others regard as “right”.

Preparation: making choices vivid

In each of the three choices which follow, you may find it easier if you go about it as follows...

Firstly, recall or create a situation in which you might be offered a choice between two attractive jobs. Identify or create a person who might make such an offer; then choose the situation in which it might occur.

Begin by creating the physical environment. Imagine the room, the weather, the time of day, the lighting, the temperature. Then recall or imagine the furniture, and arrange it within the physical space you have created.

For each of the three situations which follow, go through the same sequence in your mind. Then use the job descriptions to complete the imagined interaction. Imagine yourself entering the room, being greeted, and being asked to sit down. In your mind, see the face of the person offering you the jobs, and hear his or her voice. At the end of the job offer, the person says “I don’t like to rush you, but I need an answer as soon as possible.

Finally, imagine yourself saying “I’ll take job x”. Having made this irrevocable choice, imagine yourself leaving the room. Then notice the feeling and thoughts which you would take with you.

Step 1—Situation 1

You are a highly skilled professional, and recognized as such. It is on the basis of your professional expertise that you are offered these two jobs, both well paid and offering chances of further advancement and development.

Job **A** is a very challenging job. But you believe you have the technical expertise to handle it well. It involves offering your professional services to a client group who are regarded as offering a considerable professional challenge, but where almost all of the problems are resolvable using professional expertise. Your professional expertise is also directly relevant to the career opportunities which would follow from it.

Job **B** is also challenging. It is, however, entirely a management position. In it, you would be responsible for managing a group of professionals and service staff outside your own area of expertise. You would be responsible (and held accountable) for their performance, while understanding little of the technical details of it. Further promotion would be in the direction of other positions in general management or administration.

Choose between the jobs before you read on.

Step 2

Now imagine, as vividly as you can, that you have irrevocably chosen one of the jobs. Imagine what your thoughts and feelings would be like. Distinguish between what others want of you or for you, and what you really want for yourself...

On a piece of paper, write down your ideas for further consideration later. In particular...

What are your anxieties?

What are your hopes?

What does that tell you about yourself?

What does that tell you about what you look for in a job and in life?

Step 3

The dimension represented by the choice is that of...

technical *vs* general

The person who finds the technical (professional) job most satisfying prefers to accomplish things through her own efforts and expertise rather than by having to depend on the expertise and effort of others. In particular, continuing to practise her professional expertise is important. Administration may be acceptable, but only if it involves supervision of other professionals in the same area.

The person who finds the general (administrative) job more attractive prefers to accomplish things by organizing the efforts and expertise of others. This usually requires going outside professional boundaries, which such a person finds acceptable.

On a piece of paper, jot down your answers to the following questions...

What choices have you faced in your career, or family, or social life, which resemble the choice between performing through using technical expertise, and performing through using management skills to organize the work of others.

How did you choose? How satisfying did the choice turn out to be? If you were faced again with the same choice, would you choose the same way again? What does this tell you about who you were? — and who you are?

Step 4—Situation 2

You are a highly skilled professional, and recognized as such. It is on the basis of your professional expertise that you are offered these two jobs, both well paid.

Job **C** is one which offers you a considerable amount of personal freedom. There is some risk attached, however. Continued employment in it is not assured. But in it, you would be able to work as you wished, and develop your professional skills and techniques without having to fear control or criticism from your superiors.

Job **D** is also a professional job. It offers a safe, stable position into the foreseeable future, with good prospects of advancement if you fit in. You would be required to work as a subordinate member of an established team. The working procedures and techniques have already been agreed to, and are largely fixed.

Choose between the jobs before you read on.

Step 5

Now imagine, as vividly as you can, that you have irrevocably chosen one of the jobs. Imagine what your thoughts and feelings would be like. Distinguish between what others want of you or for you, and what you really want for yourself...

On a piece of paper, write down your ideas for further consideration later. In particular...

What are your anxieties?

What are your hopes?

What does that tell you about yourself?

What does that tell you about what you look for in a job and in life?

Step 6

The dimension is that of...

autonomy *vs* security

The person who finds the autonomous but risky job most satisfying prefers to have a lot of freedom and individual responsibility in a job, even at the cost of some loss of security.

The person who finds the secure job more attractive prefers to be able to work in the knowledge that the future is under control, and continued stability is assured, even at the cost of some loss of personal autonomy.

On a piece of paper, jot down your answers to the following questions...

What choices have you faced in your career, or family, or social life, which resemble the choice between gaining a great deal of personal freedom, though at some risk, and gaining security, though at the cost of some autonomy?

How did you choose? How satisfying did the choice turn out to be? If you were faced again with the same choice, would you choose the same way again? What does this tell you about who you were? —and who you are?

Step 7—Situation 3

You are a highly skilled professional, and recognized as such. It is on the basis of your professional expertise that you are offered these two jobs.

Job **E** is a very challenging job, but one which you believe you have the professional expertise to handle very well. It involves setting up and developing, single-handed, a new development. You will be able to count on little help in doing so, and may face difficulties from people offering competing services. Some of your competitors will have access to more resources, and perhaps more expertise. Your accomplishments, on the other hand, will be yours alone, and recognized as such.

Job **F** is also challenging. It gives you the opportunity to help clients who badly need the type of professional help you can give them. Their need is great, and

there are few support services for them. Like many such jobs working with the disadvantaged, it may require a certain amount of self-denial. But it does provide the chance to provide truly worthwhile help to those who need it.

Choose between the jobs before you read on.

Step 8

Now imagine, as vividly as you can, that you have irrevocably chosen one of the jobs. Imagine what your thoughts and feelings would be like. Distinguish between what others want of you or for you, and what you really want for yourself...

On a piece of paper, write down your ideas for further consideration later. In particular...

What are your anxieties?

What are your hopes?

What does that tell you about yourself?

What does that tell you about what you look for in a job and in life?

Step 9

The dimension is that of...

entrepreneurial *vs* service

The person who finds the entrepreneurial job most satisfying prefers to accomplish things through her/his individual efforts, and enjoys the challenge of opposition and difficulty. Such a person may enjoy the flavour of “me against the world” that applies here, and the feeling of having demonstrated, single-handed, her/his capacity to win through against the odds.

The person who finds the service job more attractive prefers to work in jobs that serve others, particularly those in need, even if some self-sacrifice is required for the job to be done well.

On a piece of paper, jot down your answers to the following questions...

What choices have you faced in your career, or family, or social life, which resemble the choice between pitting yourself against the world, and serving others who need the help.

How did you choose? How satisfying did the choice turn out to be? If you were faced again with the same choice, would you choose the same way again? What does this tell you about who you were? —and who you are?

Step 10—Analysis

You have now reviewed three dimensions of career choice:

technical vs general
autonomy vs security
entrepreneurial vs service

Think back over the three imaginary choices. The easier the choice, the more likely it is to be an important issue for you. The greater the agreement between the imagined job choice, and choices you have actually made, the more accurate your self-perceptions are likely to be.

The following task can be done alone, but it may work better if you do it in conversation with someone else, preferably someone who knows you.

On a piece of paper, make a list of the type of job your career anchor seems to suggest would be appropriate for you...

First list those jobs which lie within a normal career development path

...then those jobs for which your present work experience is relevant, but which lie outside a normal career development, and...

...then those jobs which you think might be suitable, but which represent a more dramatic departure from your career development so far.

Step 11

Look back over the jobs you have listed. Choose two or three, from any category, which particularly appeal for any reason. For each of them, jot down the type of career development which would be required for you to aspire realistically to them.

Perhaps you would like to think further over these issues in the next week or so. Or perhaps you would find it useful to talk about these dimensions, and your preferences, with someone who knows you well.

Acknowledgments

This workbook is based on material from Edgar Schein's book *Career anchors*, supplemented by material he talked about during his 1980 visit to Queensland. It also makes use of some ideas suggested by Ian Oliver, of Oliver and Langford Consultants. The placing of entrepreneurial and service on a single dimension was one of Ian's ideas, though one which Schein did not agree with.

References

Schein, E.H. (1978), *Career dynamics: matching individual and organisational needs*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
