

*Coaching high achievers*

## The 20-30-20 Lifestyle Formula

Our society is faced with an interesting conundrum. On the one hand, we live longer; we stay healthier longer in mind and body and many of us actively want to continue working.

But at the same time we are suffering from that chilling disease of today's corporate society, ageism, which prompts many companies to decide that a 50-year-old should be early retired, made redundant or just plain 'terminated'. There are many reasons for this, varying from case to case, but underlying them all is a stark truth about corporate life: by the time they reach 50 or so, 95% of all executives will have reached the Plateau in their career. They've got as far up the corporate ladder as they're going to get. Not for them the opportunities to become CEO, or Chairman, or even CFO of a bigger company or bigger division of a very large company. These moves are reserved for the exclusive 5%.

### 'The Plateau'

So what about what I call the 'Plateaued 95%'? Is that it? The end of business life? In most cases, no. It's as if they have simply come to a stop at a roundabout. They now have to decide whether to try to continue on the same road or whether to branch along a new road to a place where their accumulated knowledge, experience and expertise might be useful and valued.

Many choose to stay on the same road. They'll meet more roundabouts and other obstacles, and they'll become increasingly dissatisfied at the inexorable decline in both their job size and consequent levels of reward and achievement. Worst of all they may be squandering their skills and experience.

There are others who, having reached the first roundabout, take a deep breath and branch off down a completely new road. Yes, it's a risk but in my experience – over many years of coaching and mentoring – I have found branching off can lead to levels of satisfaction that an executive has all but forgotten could exist! The new road can easily re-energise and create an opportunity for another 20 years of flexible and gainful work.

Let's return for a moment to the reason companies give themselves for letting go their plateaued 50 year olds. How do they justify it? Is it in the company's best interests?

Clearly the answer will vary according to circumstances, but on balance I believe it is usually in the company's best interests because:

- The Plateaued 50s are blocking the path for the 30 and 40 year olds who are capable of handling the roles filled by the Plateaued.
- The Plateaued are likely to become less effective, bored and lethargic as they deploy the same experience over and over again in the same environment.
- The Plateaued increasingly will have less relevant skills for a company which moves, as many do, with fast and frantic speed through all manner of changes such as acquisition, merger, de-merger, new strategy, new CEO and many others!

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And, to make matters worse, it's difficult for the Plateaued to move on voluntarily, because of personal inertia, fear and dreaded ageism.

So, in my view, companies should positively plan to let go their Plateaued 50s. They should communicate that intention clearly and confidently. They should set up the pension and AVC structure to support the plan, and they should positively encourage and assist the individuals to develop skills, attitudes and ideas to enable them to move smoothly to the next stage in their lives.

### **Unapologetic**

A clear plan, well and unapologetically communicated, will enable the potentially plateaued 95% to plan early for life after 50, thus avoiding the dreadful crushing feeling of being put on the scrap heap. (Of course, they're not on the scrap heap at all, but this is how it often feels when severance happens out of the blue.)

So that is where the 20-30-20 contract comes in. We expect to spend 20 or so years being educated. We should expect a corporate career of 30 years, and we should look forward to the next 20 years as a time when we can enjoy the freedom of using our hard-earned knowledge and experiences. So how might we use this special freedom? There are an array of options, falling into four broad directions.

### **Retire**

Leave the business world behind. Play golf, travel the world, become a full time gardener, do charity work, become a local councillor.... the list is never ending. The idea is to do something completely different and also, perhaps, to play a little! For many this might seem like an attractive option, but one that is simply not practical. There is still a need to generate some income, even if not at the previous level. Others opt for retirement, and then find that they miss the buzz of corporate life, the thrill of achievement and of competing in the world they have lived in for so long. They may even just miss the clear sense of identity that comes with going to work. If so, they will probably move on to one or more of our other options.

### **Set up or buy a small business**

"I want to be my own boss!" is the key motivator here. Indeed the success rate for 50+ year olds starting a business is significantly higher than for any other age group, presumably because their experience, expertise and contacts mean that fewer mistakes are made; and managerial skills are well developed. The energy levels may be lower than the 30-year-olds, but the grey hairs more than make up for that!

### **Become a consultant**

For many this is the obvious choice. It uses skills, experience and contacts gained over the years, and it's not so different from a 'proper job'.

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Or is it? There are two major pitfalls for would-be consultants:

- The first is marketing. Most 'big company people' have little idea of how to market themselves back into the corporate world. The difficulty's more likely to be psychological than technical, but it is a real issue.
- The second concerns the difference between having managerial responsibility and decision making ability as a corporate person, and advising without the challenge and buzz of making it happen. This can cause real frustration. Gamekeepers do not always make satisfied poachers!

### Become an interim manager

The rise of the Interim Manager as a second career is a relatively new and increasingly popular phenomenon for four good reasons:

- The individual continues to operate in the environment he or she knows, and continues to use the skills they have developed.
- There is variety and challenge, with assignments typically lasting from 3 to 9 months.
- There is the flexibility to work less than 12 months in the year.
- IMs are usually highly valued by their temporary bosses and by others in the organisation, engendering that all-important self-respect.

Quite often it's possible to set up an agreement with the last company to be available as a consultant/project manager to that company for a number days a year, perhaps for 2 or 3 years. This can be good for the company in that it enables them to retain access to the experience and knowledge of the individual, whilst creating the space for the younger managers/directors-to-be to move up.

The individual, safe with their consultant's contract which guarantees a level of income and activity, can become a valuable mentor to the newer breed of manager.

A more exciting and entrepreneurial variation is for the company to become a minority shareholder in a business set up by the departing executive. This is only likely to be appropriate for a small minority of people, but for the right person and the right idea there could be real benefit to both the company and the individual.

So, in summary, I believe that the 20-30-20 lifestyle has been a growing reality in many organisations and for many people since the recession of the late 80s. In my view it's time to 'come out!' Let's be honest about the 20-30-20 lifestyle and find more and better ways for all of us to make the most of our second 20-year period. It's time to be clear about and creative about its consequences and, above all, about the opportunities it presents.

*Bill Pitkeathley*