

# From Lateral Moves to Lateral Thinking

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It is rare to attend a gathering of HR managers these days without the conversation turning towards the question of how best to encourage and enable the lateral movement of staff. This is widely seen as the antidote to functionally oriented thinking, and as a way of overcoming the career limitations presented by flatter structures. Yet many organisations struggle to achieve the extent and rate of movement which they feel to be desirable.

Despite this relatively common difficulty, the effectiveness of the approach as a central plank of HR strategy is rarely called into question. Whilst many of the benefits attributed to lateral moves are undoubtedly important for business success (Box 1), the key question is: Are these the best way of achieving them?

Over thirty years ago, Peter Drucker wrote:

*"Whoever tries to place a man or staff in an organization to avoid weakness will end up at best with mediocrity. The idea that there are 'well rounded' people, people who have only strengths and no weaknesses (...the 'generalist'), is a prescription for mediocrity if not for incompetence."*

*The Effective Executive, 1966.*

In short, the effective executive "makes strength productive;" which means that challenging opportunities need to be aligned to personal motivations and individual talents, if people are to excel. It is worth reflecting that diversification into areas which are unaligned to 'core strengths' would be dismissed out of hand, if it were to be advocated as a business development strategy - yet we promote it for individuals. Also, championship winning football teams don't move their goalkeepers to centre forward on the basis that they haven't scored many goals, or to re-energise them if they become stale!

A central purpose of organisation is to make individual weaknesses irrelevant by providing complementary strengths elsewhere. Whilst it is true that current limitations can become important if people are called upon to work at a higher level, this can also be over-played. In reality, the key players in most successful companies are not where they are because of some all-round brilliance but because they excel in one or two crucial, task-related areas. Even if this 'next level' argument were true, it would have little relevance to most staff, as traditional style promotions are becoming increasingly rare.

Because lateral moves often shift people out of positions in which they are achieving important results into unfamiliar and sometimes ill-fitting roles, the net effect on an organisation can be negative. In the extreme, it could result in a company of all-rounders who were perpetually at risk of playing out of position. It could also have a detrimental effect on co-operation and teamwork; especially if other people's performances were adversely affected: perhaps by ending effective working relationships and undermining that precious commodity - trust.

## Box 1 - LATERAL MOVES

At a workshop I attended recently, the assembled managers suggested that lateral moves:

- are an inevitable outcome of flatter organisations
- help to develop generalists rather than specialists
- facilitate the transfer of capabilities, skills and knowledge
- can lead to a better customer focus
- eradicate barriers between functions
- increase the range of challenging opportunities for people
- can assist employability
- address the need for managers to have a flexible mindset.

As Charles Handy notes:

"The idea that people should move around as much and as fast as possible in order to get more exposure and more experience ... can mean that there is no time to learn to trust anyone and, in the end, no point, because the organization starts to replace trust with systems of control." (HBR - May/June 1995)

Where movement is particularly rapid, those involved may never experience the longer-term effects of their decisions. Besides destroying the trust of those left behind, the learning gained by the person being moved will also be deficient - perhaps critically so.

To achieve a better customer focus and to break down barriers between functions, we need to respect other people's contributions wherever they sit in the organisation and whether we ordinarily interact with them or not. Exceptional performance and effective team play - in whatever context - are the result of people excelling at their own strengths, valuing and building upon the strengths of others, and aligning and magnifying these collective contributions through the pursuit of shared values and common goals. The willing and open networking of knowledge, ideas and resources depends ultimately upon this collaborative mindset, not upon a series of job moves that may, in all other respects, maintain the status quo.

As regards employability, most companies want to recruit people who will excel in key elements of their business, not those who happen to have collected a full set of their previous company's business cards. Maximum self-security, like maximum on-job contribution, comes from people understanding, developing and exploiting their unique talents in ways that add real value.

Against this background, we need to fashion an approach that increasingly grows jobs around individuals: allowing the structure to 'float', to accommodate and capitalise upon the company's developing strengths. This should be reinforced by creatively exploiting other development tools to maintain high levels of energy and performance. These tools - none of which are new in themselves - might include:

- actively searching out the learning opportunities which exist within all project activities;
- identifying 'surrogates' for leadership experience, such as cross-functional facilitation - which would also provide the practitioners with insights into issues facing other business units;
- using action learning sets to promote collaborative working, provide knowledge of company-wide issues and deliver tangible business benefits;
- structuring elements of strategy and policy development as a cross-functional learning process;
- exploring opportunities for joint development activities with key customers, suppliers and other external stakeholders;
- using appropriately targeted coaching and mentoring;
- exploiting delegation and empowerment to the full, to build competence, contribution and commitment;
- identifying and leveraging internal networks of latent capability;
- and so on.

In an environment of constant change, it is no longer realistic to attempt to map out career paths in definitive terms. The aim instead should be to adapt the organisation continually: exploiting its collective strengths for business benefit, rather than pigeonholing today's individuals for future positions in yesterday's jobs. In this way, contributions would grow in line with people's developing talents and motivations. This would, in turn, encourage excellence rather than mediocrity and provide an alternative basis for rewarding people, which did not rely upon position-based promotion.

In summary, if we are to unlock the full talents in the organisation and achieve significant business benefit, we need to develop much more imaginative solutions than that offered by lateral moves. The latter have a role to play - especially as a 'diagnostic tool' early in people's careers - but this role should not be over-stated. Lateral thinking, on the other hand, is vital; if we are to generate innovative development strategies which will truly create the energised, 'boundaryless', customer-focused, high performing, and fulfilling organisations we all seek.