

Stars should stop and think before shooting for the top

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So you're a star at your job. Does that also make you management material? That's a question many of us must ponder as we consider our own career paths and look at the progression of people around us.

True professionals who love their work, no matter what the field, get their intellectual and emotional satisfaction from thinking deeply about the problems and issues associated with their specialty. But the opportunity to move into management can be very seductive. It is not only an opportunity to apply different skills but also to develop and implement a vision. At the most senior level, that means being able to leave a legacy, whether to shape a school as a principal, or a magazine as an editor.

A switch to management can also be appealing for professionals who feel stuck in their work. Most professionals reach a point on their career ladder from which they can move no further. Instead of solving new and ever more complex problems, they are doing the same work over and over again. They no longer feel stretched, and the result is often boredom.

And then there is the status thing. In most industry sectors, the stars are rewarded by being promoted into management positions that offer more money and prestige. There are some exceptions to this rule, such as in pharmaceuticals and media, where high-level professionals -- a "Mr. Polymer" or a star columnist -- get full recognition of their value because of their scarcity and special ability to generate revenue. But more usually, it's senior managers who reap the greatest rewards. No matter how much they love their specialty, many professionals are intrigued by an offer of more money and power.

People have always grappled with the question of whether to move up the professional ladder or move into management. When I first started my career working for an oil company in the early eighties, a major complaint among young professionals, such as engineers and marketing analysts, was that they didn't want to sacrifice career progression by staying on a professional career track. They would opt for a management career track that brought faster promotion and greater rewards.

So the question is not new but, today, the answer is not always the same. There has been a sea change in many people's attitudes about promotion. With heightened career consciousness and greater awareness of the cost of personal sacrifices to self and family, there is less of a knee-jerk reaction in accepting a promotion into a leadership role.

My research indicates that most managers and professionals today are motivated primarily by the need to be constantly learning and challenged. I have labelled this motivational type a "personal developer." Typically, personal developers will agree with a statement like: "I feel most alive

when I am being stretched and when I am taking risks out of my comfort zone." When professionals who are personal developers hit a career plateau, they are attracted to opportunities to master whole new sets of challenges. That makes them particularly prone to being lured by the siren song of management.

Why do organizations promote talented but untested professionals into management roles? In part, it's because someone who practises his or her craft with effortless elegance is usually focused on the right results, articulate in describing the issues and poised in the face of problems -- all characteristics that provide a halo effect so that the person is seen to have management potential.

So the great trainer will be promoted to manager of training and the brilliant accountant will be groomed for partnership. Every profession has a management reward for high performance: The teacher becomes principal, the advertising copywriter becomes creative director and so on.

Yet, those who aspire to greater heights should be careful about what they wish for. Many people who finally get their dream job in senior management can't stand it. As one employee relations specialist put it: "In my mind, this was just a progression to the next step, but in fact it wasn't . . . It was a whole new ball game. I didn't like having to play the management politics, and I missed doing the actual work, which made a difference in employees' lives. This was the job I had worked so hard for, and it just made me feel inadequate."

Questions about which path to pursue tend to surface at certain career stages. In their 20s, some people have not had enough experience to reflect meaningfully on whether they are more of a professional or more of a manager. But even at this age, there are already clues. Take, for example, the 25-year-old who had summer jobs as a supervisor in retailing and describes her accomplishments in terms of being the one to solve conflicts between team members and to soothe the ruffled feathers of a staff member. She likes being the "go-to" person when there is a problem to be solved, and says she likes to be in the "thick of things."

In contrast, consider the comments of a person attracted to the professional ladder. "I like to do my thing without dealing with the politics or management headaches. I like to apply my skills at the highest level to best serve my clients."

The management or professional path choice often becomes salient again in mid-to- later career. Often, a talented professional is promoted through the management ranks and one day finds himself or herself with a huge management job. What has happened is that he or she has drifted away from the original source of engagement. A nurse, for example, turns to that occupation because she wants to relieve the suffering of others. As head nurse, she has little opportunity to engage in what initially attracted her to the profession.

Perhaps the greatest reason why so many senior managers are moving into self-employment is to reconnect with the professional content they love. Just because you are a talented professional doesn't mean you wouldn't be an equally talented manager. Just as I know many talented professionals who committed career suicide when they chose a management position, I also know many who are in the process of creating a serious legacy as a leader. The challenge is to

know which kinds of things you like to think about and which roles and environments bring out the best in you.

The path to pursue

Should you pursue a professional or management path? There are no easy answers but here are some questions to consider to help you make the choice:

- What kinds of problems do you like to think about? Do you prefer to think more about technical issues, getting down and dirty with the content, or to focus more on broader, management-related problems?
- Do you prefer to just get on with your work and allow someone else to navigate the politics, or do you get your energy from dealing with the mix of personalities associated with managing others?
- Would you prefer to refine and practice your craft at the highest level, or are you more interested in honing your management and leadership skills?
- Does it bother you to see work that is below the highest professional standards or is good enough acceptable to you, given broader business objectives and priorities?
- When you think of leaving your mark, what comes to mind: your profession, the people in your organization or the wider business world?
- Do you derive genuine pleasure from getting the best out of people, dealing with management problems, making business decisions, and charting a course for how business is done?
- Can you make career decisions independent of the relative prestige and money associated with different choices?