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PROBLEMS OF THE FIRST YEAR AT WORK:
REPORT OF THE FIRST CAREER PANEL RE-UNION*

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September, 1962
Number 03-62

Introduction

As part of the study of the influence of organizations on the values and attitudes of new members, the first panel of 15 SIM graduates was brought back to MIT for a three day conference on May 30, 31st and June 1st.

These 15 men had been intensively interviewed and tested prior to their graduation in order to obtain a clear picture of their attitudes, values, and perceptions as students. The re-union conference was designed to provide an opportunity for re-testing and re-interviewing, following one year in industry. Our basic purpose was to determine in what manner they had changed during this year.

The three day conference was designed to fulfill several purposes:

- 1) rapport had to be re-established with the group to obtain its cooperation in filling in the extensive re-test battery;
- 2) specific information had to be obtained about the kinds of problems which the men encountered in their first year at work;
- 3) adequate opportunities had to exist to enable the men to get reacquainted with each other sufficiently to fill in the adjective rating sheets on each other; and
- 4) feedback on the project itself had to be obtained from the group.

All 15 members of the first research panel were able to attend the re-union. The group was chaired by me and attended by Steve Ott and Sue Garonzik, my research assistants. We sat around a large seminar table and tape recorded all sessions. Because of the prior acquaintance of all the members with each other and with the research staff, and because of adequate time allowed at the beginning of the meeting for

informal chatting, the atmosphere was relaxed and informal at the regular meetings. Seven of the men brought their wives; the wives did not attend regular meetings but were invited to the two dinners planned for the group.

A detailed agenda was prepared by the research staff. The basic plan was to obtain information from the members of the group on a variety of relevant questions for the first two days, to be followed by retesting, data feedback to the group, and an evaluation session on the third day. The research staff had prepared agenda topics like the following, to be discussed roughly in the order given: 1) information about your current job and your company; 2) the process by which you were inducted into the organization, what expectations you had about it and your job, and which of these expectations were most violated, if any; 3) what changes you have noticed in yourself as a result of working for a year; 4) how your education at MIT's School of Industrial Management has most aided or hindered you in your adjustment to your job and company, and what kinds of things should have been taught to you which were lacking in the program. At the first session the research panel was invited to share in the building of the agenda, and to suggest other topics of general interest to both the group and the research staff. This procedure helped to build rapport with the group and elicited a number of additional topics; 5) major crises faced by the man during his first year; 6) changes in long run aspirations which may have resulted from actual working experience and a general discussion of what lies ahead; 7) value conflicts and ethical problems encountered; and 8) problems of identity and loyalty which were stimulated at work.

Wives were informally interviewed during cocktails and dinner. The research staff remained with the group through most of each day in order to get as much of a feel as possible for the attitudes, values, and perceptions of the men and their wives. Because the data from the seminars and informal sessions were regarded as exploratory and clinical, no systematic recording of them was attempted (except the tape-recording of the formal seminars). However, the research staff met frequently to exchange observations and raise questions of each other which served to heighten our awareness of certain content themes which ran through all of the material. During the formal seminars, I kept detailed notes to serve as a basis for writing this report. I chaired all of the meetings but allowed the group as much freedom to wander as was consistent with a general time schedule which we had set for ourselves. The meetings ended up being fairly informal and often wandered off the main topic, but usually the sidetracks were on important issues and were considered by all to be worthwhile.

The report which follows attempts to capture the major themes which emerged from the conference. No attempt has been made to evaluate exactly how many men would support any given point, nor has there been any attempt to represent all of the divergent views expressed among the fifteen men. Rather I have tried to be as informative as possible about the kinds of things which preoccupied and worried the men, with an eye toward constructing a more systematic interview or questionnaire schedule for future use with larger samples.

What are the men doing?

Four of the men are engaged in administrative work within a technical organization. Their work includes writing of proposals, estimation of budgets, helping technical people with administrative details of their job, maintaining liaison between customer and technical personnel, overseeing of projects, occasionally running a small technical project for the experience of doing it, studying and redesigning of administrative procedures, designing of new forms, planning for converting procedures to data processing systems, writing of standard procedures, and odd jobs of various sorts. Each of the men emphasized the varied and unpredictable nature of his job, and the degree to which he was required to be, on the one hand, ready to do whatever came his way and, on the other hand, required to be a self-starter defining the boundaries of his own job.

Two of the men are clearly in training. One is in a formal one-year program in a large research lab; the other one is in an informal probationary period of from one-half to two years in length in a medium size electronics company specializing in R&D work. The former person is headed for an administrative role within a staff organization which is clearly defined as such; the latter is headed for project management which may place him in a supervisory position over technical personnel.

The other two men are in more vaguely defined jobs, with the future being equally vague. One of them is in a large aircraft company which he intends to leave soon, the other is in a medium size R&D company in which he had worked before and in which the possibility of moving into management fairly soon is good.

Four of the men are in jobs which may broadly be defined as operations research (OR). One man is with the research center of a large oil company as part of a four man team dealing with systems engineering, automation, programing for data analysis, economic analysis, and other work which the group itself may generate; their work is primarily concerned with refinery operations. One man is a "senior data processing programmer" in a large can company with the primary function of developing programs for the replacement of people. He is part of a three man group working under the chief accountant. One man is an "operations research analyst" in the research center of a large organization which manufactures heavy equipment. His primary job (though not officially described as such) is that of educating his own boss and the line organization in the various divisions to the OR approach. He sees himself as being one of the first OR people in the organization and as responsible for helping to introduce the approach. The fourth man is also in a large manufacturing concern but is working within the line organization in a staff capacity. His duties include manufacturing and materiels planning, inventory control, applications of PERT, and use of data processing procedures to increase efficiency. Much of his job he sees as selling the company its own product inasmuch as it manufactures data processing equipment!

Three of the men are concerned primarily with financial and economic analysis. One man is with an automobile company as a "financial analyst." He gets involved primarily with problems of internal price coordination among profit centers within the organization, the arbitration of disputes in price setting, analysis of profit, and determination of projections. Another man is an "economic analyst" in the supply and transportation

department of a large oil company. His job is to help in the development of a program of how to supply company products to its own distributors in regions where these products are not competitive, which includes working up the proposal, selling it, and overcoming of the resistance of the marketers and suppliers. The third man in this group also works for an oil company as an analyst in the economics department under the comptroller. He is part of a brand new group which is still defining its own job, and has worked on projects such as what to do with the increased production which resulted from a technological change-over to new and better equipment and what to charge for some property which the company is selling.

Two of the men are in technical sales. One is in a two-year training program with a large oil company selling data processing equipment; the other is in a one-year training program in a large plastics company selling both products and processes to individual consumers and other manufacturers.

One man entered the R&D branch of a large consumer goods company. He is still in training but is working toward responsibility for the development of a brand or product which includes liaison with various other departments such as manufacturing and marketing.

Finally, one man entered a small family owned business as assistant to his father with the explicit aim of taking over the business in a few years. He has taken over as much responsibility as he could handle and is the only one of the fifteen who has really begun to operate as a manager in the sense of having already had to make decisions which had major consequences for the business.

It is interesting to note that only one man has ended up in a position of line responsibility, and that twelve of the fifteen are in jobs which are clearly defined as staff, though they may lead to supervisory or line jobs later. In all of the cases except for the two men in sales, the job seems to demand of the man that he introduce innovations based on his education, whether this be OR, economic analysis, improved data processing methods, or simply general improvement of administrative procedures based on technical innovations in decision making. As we will see, it is this demand characteristic of the job which provides on the one hand the greatest opportunities, but on the other hand the greatest stresses of adjustment as well.

What problems or crises have the men faced: In what way were realities out of line with expectations?

"Things are more disorganized than I expected."

"Things move more quickly, they don't lie still."

"All the problems boil down to communication and human relations."

"I ran into conflict with procedures....the informal methods of handling things, shaped by people far higher... can't buck that."

"The company has a program of planned frustration, keeping you one step behind all the time; as soon as you master one thing you discover so many other barriers. You don't know how high the mountain is, but do know that you are nowhere near the top."

"The tight rein that is kept on you, you are not really allowed to be bad (make a mistake)."

"Having to check with everyone."

"Evaluation without feedback for the first six months, then sudden termination if you are unacceptable."

"The number of unproductive people there are in corporations is simply astounding."

(In reference to a defense industry): "They encourage dead wood to stay to get costs up to get more profits, and then have a big cost reduction program at the same time; top management is not really interested in cost reduction, even with Air Force pressure."

(In reference to introducing OR): "The works manager called me in and gave me a Dutch Uncle talk and defined OR (by this he meant the limits of OR); they don't really want the N.Y. office (corporate HQ) to know how bad they are, for example in purchasing."

"I have to become a true consultant, because it is so easy to get a project blocked subtly...have to get acceptance. But what is your home base; to whom do you owe allegiance or loyalty?"

"The problem is to get everyone on board."

"It's hard to tell when you have been promoted."

"It was quite a while before others who were below me were told where I stood."

"Faced with a decision which was far bigger than me, what do you do, without information."

"I thought I could sell people with logic and was amazed at the hidden agendas people have, irrational objections; really bright people will come up with stupid excuses... They have their own little empires to worry about."

"Technical people are first class citizens and staff people are second class citizens."

"Establishing values where I never had any before. This certain man did not pay his bill, do we sue him or not?"

"Can't get agreement on a diagnosis and then get resistance to change...you are told 'stick around for 30 years and if it is still a problem, we'll look into it.'"

These and many other quotes like them from members of the group exposed a number of major problems which face the young business school graduate on his first job:

1) The problem of how to cope with human resistance to change and innovation. Almost every man in one way or another stated that he was shocked by the degree to which his "good ideas" were not accepted, undermined, sidetracked, or sabotaged. The typical sequence was that the new man would be given an assignment to look into some procedure; he would find some flaw in it or would see ways of improving it, utilizing his education; he would recommend changes and then find that the changes were not implemented for one reason or another. Most of the men felt that their education had prepared them very well technically, but they felt completely inadequate in dealing with the human side of the organization. This inadequacy was strongly supported by an underlying attitude which can be stated as the second major problem.

2) The problem of emotionally accepting the reality of the human organization. How do you get the job done in the best way from a technical and rational point of view in a human organization the reality of which you emotionally resist? As I listened to the men I got the distinct feeling that their basic approach was not how to work in and around a human organization, but how to make the human organization go away. Somehow the reality and legitimacy of the human side was being questioned at an emotional level, and the men were expressing the strong wish that they could exist in a world which they could define as totally rational. I got the impression that those few men who accepted the human organization with all its foibles as a reality soon learned to apply their analytic abilities and high intelligence to getting their job done within it, but those men who resisted this reality at an emotional level used up their energy in denial and complaint rather than in problem solving. The selling and compromising and politicking necessary to get their ideas accepted were seen as "selling out" to some

lower value system. The same man who would view a complex technical problem as a great challenge, found the human problem illegitimate and unworthy of his efforts. I suspect that the unlearning of this attitude may be one of the key processes in becoming an effective supervisor and manager. At the time we saw the men, most of them were still in a state of shock and had not begun really to re-examine or unlearn the attitude, however.

3) The problem of obtaining an optimum amount of autonomy and feedback on performance. Some of the men found themselves in a situation not only of having to define their own jobs but also of having to help their boss define his; others felt such a tight rein constraining them that they did not feel free to make mistakes. In either case the man felt he was prevented from learning anything about his own capacities because in the former case he usually got no feedback, and in the latter case so much feedback that he was hardly acting on his own at all.

A number of men were satisfied with the amount of autonomy they enjoyed but still had problems of obtaining adequate feedback on their own performance. What fed the dissatisfaction in all these cases, of course, was the underlying expectation that they should learn something on their first job and that their supervisors should feel responsible for teaching them. It is not surprising that this expectation would be held by a group so recently out of school. The important ultimate learning for these men might well be how to obtain valid feedback in a situation in which it is not automatically forthcoming, which might in turn mean how to learn to become a good judge of one's own performance. In this sense all of the men expressed a degree of dependency on the organization which might be unrealistic; the organization, on the other hand, by ignoring this need in the new man may be missing an important opportunity to train him.

4) The problem of how to get ahead. Most of the men were very unclear about the question of promotion and the criteria by which a man would be judged as promotable. We decided to try a poll of the group on the question of "how you get promoted?" with the following results from the nine men who responded:

"Hard work, ability, getting the job done"
(electronics company).

"Hard work and ability" (R&D company).

"It's who knows you, visibility, getting along well,
being important to the boss" (large research lab).

"It's who the boss knows" (aircraft company).

"Making oneself more attractive, education, awards"
(manufacturing concern).

"Make your boss look good, sell as much as possible,
use any available levers, effective communication"
(plastics company).

"Assessing the strategy of who makes the promotion,
ability to think critically" (consumer goods company).

"Should you make your own boss look good and go up
with him, or work on your own visibility?"
(oil company).

"If you do your own job well you'll be all right,
ability to think critically" (oil company).

Not only is there considerable difference of opinion on strategy but considerable difference in the underlying attitude of idealism versus cynicism. An interesting question to pursue in the individual data is whether those men who find it particularly hard to accept the reality of the human organization, also have characteristic ways of viewing how one gets promoted. These men might well be the most cynical in the group.

Closely related to the problem of how one gets ahead is the problem of achieving cognitive clarity about the organization which exists above one. Many of the men complained that they could not get the big picture, could not determine the real hierarchy above them and who decided what. Given this lack of clarity it was difficult for them to develop any strategy of how to get ahead. Some men felt that ability was indeed rewarded, but they were unclear what "ability" meant in their context--hard work, critical thinking, effective communication or, doing things the "company way". ("In _____ they are crazy over flip charts; it had to be done just so; I had to dryrun the presentation 5 times.")

5) The problem of identity--finding the appropriate membership and reference groups. For most of the men there existed a problem of defining their domain, of determining to whom they did and did not owe allegiance and loyalty, and of defining their own roles and identity in the organization. Should the good OR man be loyal to the OR department, the line group he is consulting with, the overall organization, or his profession if the demands of these groups conflict; should the administrative man in a technical organization subordinate himself to enable the technical man to get his job done, or should he get his own job done even if this means blocking the technical program at certain points; should the management trainee be seduced by membership in a select group of "jets", or should he strive to be loyal to and identify with the department through which he is being rotated. Some men expressed this as a problem of status. In trying to place themselves they could not decide what reference group to use. Those men who operated as internal consultants (like the OR man)

could not even see potential reference groups within the organization.

6) The problem of how to deal with the boss. Most of the men reported difficulties of one sort or another in dealing with authority. For some the paramount problem was how to tell the boss when he was wrong, for some it was how to work around him in order to get things done, for some it was how to get him to give evaluation and feedback, for some it was how to cope with manifest distrust on the boss's part of the man's solutions to problems, and for some it was how to maintain a sense of integrity with a boss who supervised too closely and infringed on private areas. All in all, the boss did not get mentioned as a major problem by anyone. More of the emphasis fell on the general kinds of dilemmas mentioned in points 1 to 5.

7) The problem of commitment--how to maintain momentum and how to decide when it is time to become complacent or to leave the organization. Most of the men found their first year to be full of frustrations which had the effect of slowing them down. It was as if their experiences were a kind of test of their commitment on the one hand, or an invitation to become complacent and apathetic on the other hand. The dilemma for many of the men was how to judge how much frustration was normal and how to decide whether to adapt or leave the environment.

The complacency solution is captured by the following statements: "I can't convince people when I think I am right; I don't know how people will react when I am wrong; the result is that I ease off, stop pushing so hard." Another man says: "I have adopted the mild-manner approach to change because I 'might' be wrong." "Do you have any evidence that

you might be wrong?" "No, just playing it safe." Finally: "In _____ hedging is cultivated and people try to do it with style."

In considering whether to move or not, the men confront another closely related problem--how transferable is the knowledge gained on the first job? Some men felt they were getting valuable experience and had already made plans to move in one or two more years; others want to move but are afraid that their experience is too specific to be transferable; still others are adopting a wait and see attitude and treating the frustrations as challenges in the meantime. But there is little doubt that for all of them the first year constituted a real test of their commitment and doubts were arising in some minds about their career plans.

What changes do the men perceive in themselves?

The data in this area were not as rich for two reasons--most of the men did not see changes in themselves that amounted to anything in their own eyes, or the ones they did see are ones they would rather not share with the group as a whole. However, a number of themes emerged which are worth reporting.

One theme is clearly disillusionment. In one way or another the actual work situation has proven to be a disappointment and source of frustration to the men. For most of them this has not resulted in a loss of motivation or commitment, but rather in a realization that getting the job done is tougher than most of them had thought, and requires more than thinking out a solution.

A second theme revolves around the problem of identity and the identity shifts which the men sense. The man in the formal training program started out being strongly identified with the other trainees but now as the program is drawing to a close feels himself increasingly identifying with the departments through which he rotates and is actually avoiding too much contact with the other trainees. The economic analyst in the oil company finds that increasingly he is identifying with the group for which he is carrying out a project rather than his home group. One man in sales reports feelings of opportunism growing in the sense of identifying with whichever group it is most advantageous for him to identify at any given time. One of the OR men found that he could not locate a membership group within the company because no-one really understood what he was trying to do, hence he is increasingly identifying with the profession of OR as such but uncomfortable with the lack of a psychological home base. The man who is responsible for introducing data processing methods to his company said he was not committed to data processing as a method when he started out, but now feels he is. Most of the men do not identify with the company as such, but there are several notable exceptions--one of the men in a large oil company who is working on better distribution of the company products, the man who entered the family business and owns a piece of it, and the man in the aircraft company working on the improvements of administrative methods. The others feel that the whole operation is too big for them to comprehend much less to identify with it.

A third theme is the learning of complacency. For a number of the men, the temptation to ease up, stop pushing, and adopt a wait-and-see attitude

has been very great. The degree to which this attitude has already been learned and put into practice by them is, of course, not possible to determine from these data. But the discussion of this issue highlights the important responsibilities which both the man and the company have to prevent stagnation of human resources which are of such high potential and which represent such a heavy educational investment. One of the important research areas which emerges from these data is a more precise study of the conditions which stimulate complacency and the kinds of circumstances necessary in the work climate to prevent it.

What do the men think of their SIM education in the light of a year in industry?

"SIM training was more helpful in obtaining than in keeping a job" (Electronics company).

"The tool courses have the most relevance, those which you can apply....being a SIM graduate gives you confidence... you don't get snowed" (Research lab).

"I have not had occasion to consult any of my textbooks, the value was in the overall program" (Aircraft company).

"Of most value has been the way you learn to think, awareness of the big picture" (Consumer goods company).

"Having had breadth, you feel more confident...it buffers you from complete ignorance in areas that are not your speciality...and without the status of the education, I could not have functioned" (Manufacturing company).

"Your whole outlook is governed by what you have learned here...." (Family business).

"Good priesthood training...you've been anointed" (Manufacturing company).

The group is clearly divided on the issue of whether the specific tool courses or the general overview kinds of courses are of most value.

Perhaps the compromise of requiring tool courses in a great many areas meets both sets of needs. A number of the men indicated how important the education was as a status symbol and as a source of self-confidence which made it possible for them to function effectively in their own eyes. The broad perspective which the program provides and the training in analytical and critical thinking was clearly valued very highly.

In response to my question of how the program could have been improved or sharpened, we returned to the theme of how to overcome resistance to change and to deal with human problems. Many of the men felt they should have been given more training in the art of communication, in the selling of ideas, in working up effective presentations, in expressing oneself orally or in writing, in boiling down complex material into a few salient points, and so on. It was difficult to determine whether this recommendation was based on a serious assessment of the SIM program or merely represented a way of expressing the major frustration being felt by the group. The message which came through most clearly to me was: "Why didn't you tell us what it would be like," in reference to the human organization.

A second recommendation which relates to the above point was to have more managers participate in the program by presentations of what they are doing and what problems their companies are facing--perhaps a series analogous to the Sloan's evening seminars.

A methodological note

The retesting of the men went very smoothly and some valuable suggestions were obtained from them on how to sharpen the instruments and the general

testing procedure. There is little question in my mind that the high cooperation of the group, their willingness to share fairly personal feelings and reactions, and their cooperation in the testing was in part due to the procedure of building them into a panel group with its own identity, and in part due to the conference which enabled them to re-adopt the research subject attitude. The 15 men were sharing the task and were obtaining some insights themselves which resulted from the discussion, hence were far more motivated than they might have been had we, for example, mailed the test batteries to them. In addition, the men found the re-union to have been a sufficiently stimulating experience that they indicated willingness to reassemble at some time in the future, and certainly to maintain contact by mail in the meantime. I feel that the re-union solidified their relationship with the research staff to the point where future questionnaires will now be treated seriously and returned. In any case, we will have an opportunity to test this last assertion next June.

Some Hypotheses:

It would be foolish to attempt to draw any conclusions from a seminar with 15 alumni; some hypotheses can be stated, however, which reflect the major points emerging from the meeting:

1. The first year at work does not produce major changes which the man himself perceived. If the changes are there, we must look to the test data to find them.
2. The new man does not appreciate what the reality of life in industry is like, and experiences disillusionment and frustration during his first year at work.

3. The major problems of adjustment for a technically oriented graduate of a business school like MIT's revolve around the acceptance of the human organization as a valid part of reality, to be confronted by the same problem solving skills which the man applies to technical problems.

4. The difficulties of dealing with the human problems stem from emotional resistance to accepting their reality, hence some emotional unlearning and relearning must occur before a more satisfying adjustment can be achieved by the man.

5. The degree to which the man is able to accept the human organization at an emotional level may be directly related to his potential as a supervisor and manager of human resources.

6. Strong forces exist in working environments which train the new man to adopt an attitude of complacency.

7. In a large organization the technically oriented new man has difficulties in locating a membership group, and defining his own identity.

In conclusion, the reader should be reminded that the seminar was problem oriented, hence problems were highlighted. However, it is important to note that the overall morale of the group was very high, and most of the men felt that the challenges and rewards of working in industry were well worth the frustrations.

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