The Dilemma of Staff Immobility

THOMAS E. POWERS *

Only when a person gives up hope does he stop actively reaching out; he loses his energy, he ceases planning, and finally he even stops wishing for a better future. —KURT LEWIN

IN The Peter Principle, Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull postulated that “in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence.” As a generalization, the “principle” can perhaps be attacked from many quarters, but one of its more obvious fallacies is the assumption that every employee actually rises in a hierarchy.

A hierarchy’s pyramidal shape makes it impossible for a significant number of employees to rise very far, if at all. From bottom to top, the number of positions decreases, often geometrically, at each level in a hierarchy. In a large school system, for example, there may be twelve curriculum coordinators, four directors, two assistant superintendents, and one superintendent. Those who cannot advance in the hierarchy, and obviously this will include many, are faced with “immobility.”

An “immobile” employee is one who is caught up in a set of conflicting circumstances. On the one hand, like many other organization members, he is strongly upward-mobile, aspiring to a higher position in the hierarchy; on the other hand, when the organization hands out promotions, he is continually overlooked. This failure to advance in the organization, to achieve upward-mobile aspirations, is the peculiar dilemma of the “immobile” employee.

Sooner or later, the unfortunate predicament of being “exiled” at his present level in the hierarchy surely becomes all too apparent to the “immobile” employee. How he will behave after recognizing the full extent of his dilemma is a critically important question. Will his failure to achieve career aspirations have serious adverse effects on his own satisfaction and his organizational effectiveness? If, in the words of Homans “... the frequency with which a man emits

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an activity is... a positive function of the frequency with which it is rewarded," and if promotional opportunity is a high ranking need for an upward-mobile employee, then thwarted mobility could conceivably have a negative effect on job performance. Zaleznik et al. have shown in many studies that workers tend to elicit more responsible behavior when needs for job status are taken into consideration.

Two questions come to mind in examining how serious "immobility" might be to an organization: (a) Is "immobility" likely to characterize a significant number of employees? (b) Do "immobile" employees behave differently from other employees in the hierarchy?

As for the first question, the literature on the behavior and attitudes of organization members abounds in evidence that the vast majority of employees are upward-mobile. The upward-mobile employee as a salient organization member has been vividly described by Presthus in The Organizational Society. It seems apparent, therefore, that most employees actively seek or hope for advancement.

Yet there is the inherent restrictiveness of the pyramidal-shaped hierarchy in which the number of potential upward-mobile personnel usually exceeds the number of available higher roles. Granted, some school employees, for example, will realize career ambitions in another school system, but the outlook is less promising for those who are not geographically mobile. And regardless of one's geographic mobility, the proportion of upper positions to lower positions probably is about the same nationwide as for any local school system. Therefore, a large "im-


mobile" group would appear to be an inevitable consequence of the limited number of higher positions in a hierarchy as compared with the number of employees who aspire to move upward.

The second question regarding behavior is less easily answered due to insufficient research. Two recent studies do, however, shed some light on the question. In investigations of administrative behavior, both Foster and Powers identified an "immobile" group in their respective samples of assistant principals. The "immobile" assistant principals in both studies aspired to the principalship, but each had been rejected for promotion on several occasions. The principals in the schools to which the assistant principals were assigned were asked to rate the performance of their assistant principal(s) on the Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ), an instrument which describes normative and personal dimensions of administrative behavior. In both studies, the mean scores for the normative and personal behavior of the "immobile" group were significantly lower than those for the other assistant principals.

**Negative Effects**

Interviews conducted with the respondents in the aforementioned studies suggest a low level of job satisfaction experienced by the "immobile" assistant principals. The adverse remarks about the assistant principalship were sharp and pointed: "It stinks. I'm neither fish nor fowl, teacher nor principal." "I'm a half-breed," protested one "immobile" assistant principal. "There is no status or prestige in this job," observed another. A significantly higher number of "immobiles" than other assistant principals mentioned something negative about the school system.

In Powers' study, the "immobile" assistant principals were asked about reasons they saw for not as yet having been selected for the principalship. The proportion of total responses to this question, which can be classified as "sour grapes," is somewhat alarming. Half of the reasons given for failing to be advanced were: "administration plays favorites," "given the runaround," "my religion," "my race," and "lack of standards in selection," while less than one-sixth of the responses acknowledged the reality of "too many candidates; too few openings." 

The implications of the above negative responses are most apparent. Since a large number of "immobiles" blamed the school system for prejudicial practices, such perceived action could hardly be expected to inspire high performance and job satisfaction among the "immobile" group.

In exploring the question of a relationship between behavior and "immobility," one may ask himself if poor performance is the cause or the effect of immobility. In essence, does one become an "immobile" because of incompetent behavior, or does one behave incompetently because of "immobility"? Common sense dictates that some employees will be "immobilized" because of less than adequate previous performance. Yet the extent to which adequate performers may begin to perform less than adequately after becoming "immobile" has not as yet been properly researched.

Regardless of whether less than satisfactory performance is the cause or effect of immobility, the available evidence shows that "immobiles" are perceived as relatively poor performers and experience little job satisfaction. The possible consequences of these findings in themselves should be sufficiently important to warrant special concern by school organizations.

An organization cannot function at peak effectiveness when some employees perform below standards and are dissatisfied. In business and industry such employees can

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9 Ibid.
often be dismissed for one reason or another, but in public organizations dismissal procedures can be complex and thorny, and therefore cases of marginal performance in particular are not easily handled. Consequently a school system may have to make the most of a situation in which “immobiles” fill many administrative and instructional roles. No one would defend such situations as desirable, but presently they appear unavoidable.

One possible way to reduce the number of potential “immobiles” is to fill some positions with personnel who are not upward-mobile, who do not seek advancement, but who are eager to remain in a particular position in the hierarchy. While this idea is perhaps sound enough in theory, such personnel are no doubt very scarce in a society which places high value on the status, power, and income which higher organizational roles offer. Besides, “immobility” will continue to characterize a portion of the members of our society if, according to Whyte, “the unity of society depends on the existence of a hierarchical order which gives each section its special status and function within the whole...”

Therefore, it would appear that “immobility” is a dilemma that will continue to haunt organizations and certain upward-mobile personnel. Yet must the effect be one of total dissatisfaction and frustration for the “immobile” employee and of unsatisfactory contributions for the organization? There must be ways to keep “immobile” personnel “alive,” at least within their capabilities. While one’s best performance, however marginal, perhaps cannot be improved upon, it must be kept from slipping to a state where it is organizationally and personally disruptive.

How can this be done? Although promotion may be out of the question, there are other means for keeping an “immobile” happy and productive. Rewards he seeks other than promotion can be extended to him for satisfactory performance. “More money,” “more authority and responsibility,” “a more challenging job,” and “more respect and recognition” were frequently mentioned by “immobiles” as factors which would contribute to an increase in job satisfaction. It would seem that an interested school board and imaginative superintendent could find ways to satisfy these needs through a variety of formal and informal practices. Such practices will not necessarily make the “immobile” more effective or completely placate his upward-mobile drive, but they may save both the school system and the individual from the harmful effects of what otherwise might be sharply declining interest and satisfaction.

Neither Foster nor Powers found great numbers of personnel who were not upward-mobile. Of 240 assistant principals in the school system Powers studied, only 38 assistant principals were identified as not being upward-mobile. Foster’s school systems contained 52 assistant principals, and _all_ were upward-mobile.

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12 Powers, “Administrative Behavior and Factors Related to Upward-Mobility,” _op. cit._
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