

THE WORKING JOURNEY

The Working Journey and Stress: A Different Perspective.

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Introduction

There are many different types of stress, the good and the bad, some we can manage and some we cannot. Stress, like work, is part of the fabric of life.

Stress and work are linked very closely, not surprisingly. It is generally acknowledged that one of the keys to combating stress is to enjoy your work. The often quoted solution to not enjoying work is to find another job and if you cannot, channel your creativity into other areas, the community, hobbies, sport or a project that interests you.

Useful advice BUT...

We need to distinguish between the daily work stress of time constraints, knowledge gaps, role uncertainties, office politics and a far deeper internal stress that occurs in our Working Journey, which if left unattended, often results over time in increasing depression and possibly psychosomatic illness. The secret to managing this stress is to understand how three critical factors interrelate and the importance of proactively planning one's Working Journey.

Firstly the nature of work.

Elliott Jaques¹ (see [The Requisite Organisation 1989](#)) and others have over the last sixty years done pioneering work in discovering that work takes place within seven levels of work, each level differing in terms of increasing complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty. A rough guide to this is given in Table I. The first three levels are about the operational running of business and can go from hands on work to managing systems, processes and budgets that ensures a work system functions efficiently (be it a call centre, supermarket, mining operation, juice factory, chain of outlets, a ship or power station) and achieves its given targets on time and within budget. Here work is about making something or providing a service to a known client base. Time to completions of task is normally short and outcomes tangible. It is estimated that 95% of all work falls within the first three work levels.

The next two work levels are about executive leadership of an organisation, the one setting strategic direction for the future, ensuring investor confidence and that the organisation is well managed and governed while the other is responsible for translating this intent into business plans and ensuring coherence between where the company is and where it wants to be. The former is where we find an MD, CEO of an independent company or a large division within a group, while the latter level of work is that of a general manager or principle specialist.

I have dealt with five of the seven levels. The last two work levels are concerned with leading and managing global corporations.

That is the first part of the equation. Understanding the nature of our work and where we presently make our contribution..

Table I: Levels of Work Complexity

Organisational Level	Essential Tasks	Time Span
Level I	Accomplish Direct Tasks	3 Months
Level II	Supervise Direct Work or Do Specialist Work	1 Years
Level III	Direct a program, Blending Components to meet Goals	2 Years
Level IV	Coordinate and Resource Multiple Programs	5 Years
Level V	Direct a Unified System and Set Policy	10 Years
Level VI	Coordinate Multiple Systems in the Global Environment	20 Years
Level VII	Direct Multiple Unified Systems in the Global Environment	50 Years

(Adapted from various sources; including: Lewis, P. (1996) Transformational Change using Stratified Systems Theory. International Journal of Public Administration. Volume. 19 (6), pp. 801 – 826. Acknowledgements to Jaques, E., (1989) Requisite Organisation. Cason Hall.)

Secondly, what Work Level is currently sustaining us...

The second part of the equation involves understanding ourselves and the world of work within which we like to operate and to know how and when this may change.

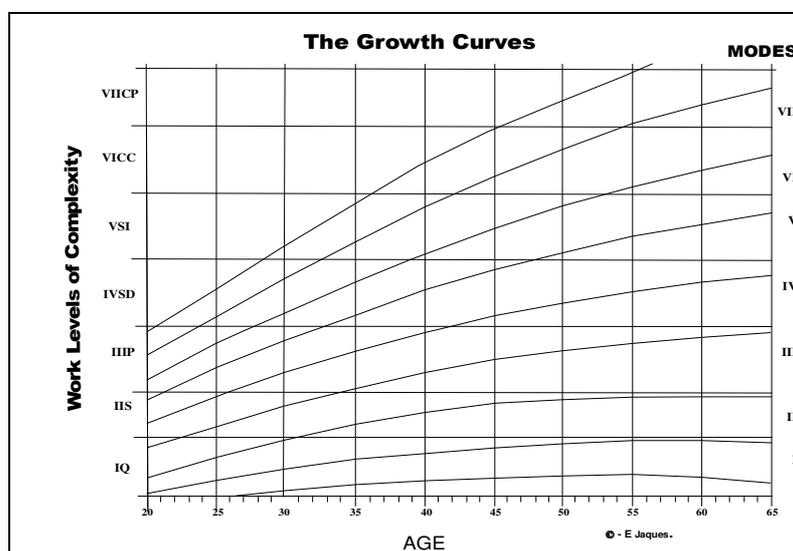
What Jaques et al found in their research is that human capability unfolds along modes or Growth Curves and that the rate of our need for change / challenge becomes increasingly rapid as we mature, *dependent on our growth curve*. These growth curves are linked to the Work Levels. Figure I shows these Growth Curves; up the vertical axis are the Work Levels and along the horizontally axis, age. The Growth Modes cross these Work Levels at different ages for the different modes. Human capability (or capacity) based on Jaques model of mental processing has been a field of extensive research (see for example: Brause, A. 2000, King, S *et al* 1997; Jaques, E and Cason, K. 1994) and is linked to our individual capability to handle ambiguity and uncertainty. This changes at different rates with maturity and is not influenced by education, skills or personality.

As our cognitive ability changes so our need to handle greater work complexity increases and we start to actively search out challenges. For example some people may be happy with Work Level I for the majority of their lives, but in their forties may experience a need for a new work challenge, which may be to supervise, organise and generally, take on more responsibility and a different work level. This is because their growth mode has matured from Work Level I to Work Level II. Another person may find they grow bored with roles rapidly needing new challenges and experiences. They may transition to different work levels more rapidly and are on a faster growth curve. For example, a high potential individual may arrive in a Level IV role at a relatively young age, but without the competencies and skill to function effectively. They need to plan their Working Journeys very carefully

Working below one's optimum work level produces frustration and often surprising outcomes. I remember clearly one case of an illiterate 56 year old painter's assistant who was underutilised by three full Work Levels and who used his capability to bring help to his impoverished village by enlisting the support of the UN and the Church for health and education. Another case involved criminal activity in the mining industry and four employees with identified potential turned down accelerated development, even though they were working two full levels below their capability. Their refusal to participate in the programme puzzled us initially, but three years later when their sophisticated racket was discovered, it made perfect sense.

The vast majority of us just don't have this vital information to plan ahead.

Figure I: The Array of Growth Curves



The third part of the equation is understanding “Flow”,

In his book Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Flow: The psychology of optimal experience) speaks about “Flow” and what constitutes flow. Flow is when one is engrossed in a task, a hobby or work which we really enjoy and in which we lose ourselves and often our sense of time. Flow is an optimal work experience and when we love working, we leap out of bed in the morning, eager to get to the office or to our desk or to our tools. I have often referred to flow as a golden time, a time when our wellbeing at work seems to flow into our Personal Journey as well, and everything seems, well, sort of lubricated. The characteristics Mihaly gives to flow, correspond to our descriptions of people (Stamp G and C, 1993) who are engaged with their work, where their capability, sense of purpose, skills and sense of “being just right” engages with the challenges found in the right work level at the right time. We are cognitively engaged, interested, being allowed to experiment, have accountability, responsibility and feel recognised, rewarded and fulfilled. As someone said *“It is a time when we have bright eyes”*

If we are not in flow with our work we may be underutilised, having more capability than the role requires, or overextended, that is not being able to cope with the complexity of the role. The movement away from flow is on a continuum, if underutilised, and the situation is not resolved, flow becomes boredom, then indifference then ANXIETY, which becomes depression if left unattended. Likewise being over promoted or in a role that is beyond our flow zone, we move away from flow into bewilderment - how do we respond? what decision do we make? - to worry; - waking up in the early hours of the night with the problems churning and finally; - into ANXIETY and if left unattended; - into depression. Both ends of the continuum represent abuse. Being underutilised or overextended for prolonged periods may cause people to resort to substance abuse, depression and withdrawal, loss of energy for life and a host of other related symptoms.

And the company pays as well. Hasty, no, or indifferent decision making causes cost to escalate, lost opportunities, increased wastage, declining morale and loss of market share are just a few of the side effects of employees not in flow. From an organisational culture perspective we have inappropriate behaviours emerging, gossip, backstabbing, favouritism, silos, power grabbing and down the line, poor

performance. For the organisation, ensuring Flow and that the Work Levels are intact is the only way of delivering a healthy organisation with sustainable performance.

The Answer to this Equation is having the knowledge to predict our Transitions from one Work Level to Another. By understanding where we are on the Growth Curves we can firstly manage our stress through being informed and secondly, prepare in advance for future transitions....

What we have found in our work is that as people transition from one Work Level to another they move out of flow and the need starts to grow for making a change. WE ALL HAVE or WILL EXPERIENCE THIS...

A Call to Adventure...

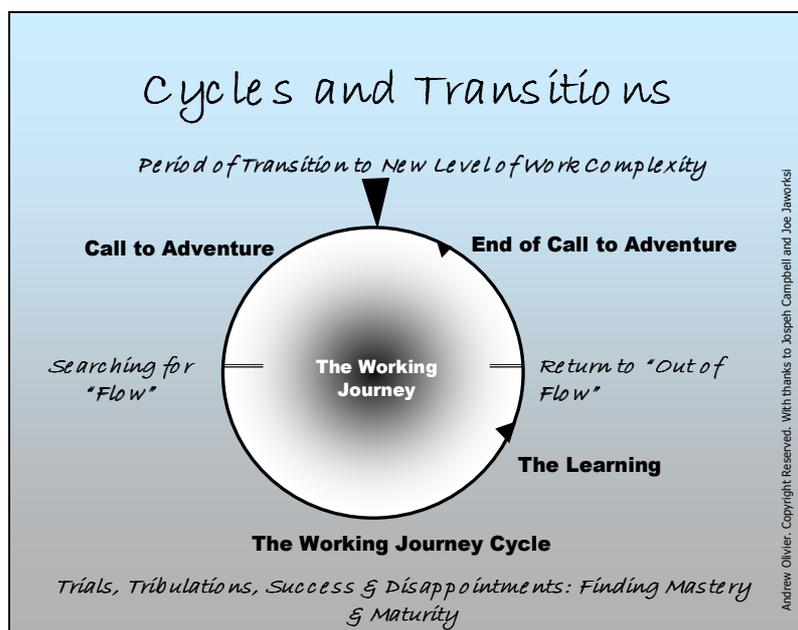
A Call to Adventure is not about another job within the same work level, but a deep call to do something different. When you have a Call to Adventure, you know it. It is not subtle or shy or can be disguised as anything else. Problem is if we don't recognise it and know how to put our finger on it, everything starts feeling wrong. You cannot switch off a Call to Adventure; you may ignore it, but often at a high cost.

A Call to Adventure signals that things want to change and that you can never return to what you are now leaving behind. A Call to Adventure creates the conditions for moving away from Flow and a need to find it again. A Call to Adventure can take years to emerge from a feeling of unease to a full blown strident demand for CHANGE.

A Call to Adventure starts *with a transition and entering* a new cycle that may last depending on our growth curve, *from* five *to* thirty years. For those with high potential, this is often a curse, since each transition requires finding new challenges. In my book "The Working Journey" I reported on a number of Australian executives that I had been privileged to work with and who were happy for me to report on their stories. Without exception each one made a major change to their Working Journey when they transitioned a Work level. For example, Mike Hawker on his journey from Wallaby to CEO made changes with every transition. No doubt, more will follow. But it is not only executives, it is entrepreneurs, artisans, team leaders, lecturers, teachers and ordinary workers who need to know about and manage the stress and depression caused by working below or above our flow bands. One person I worked with had been hospitalised three times and the private clinics could not find out what was wrong with the person. Working together, we discovered he was underutilised by two full Work Levels. Another person with whom I worked wrote a letter saying "*It is not too strong a statement to make when I say this insight has given voice to what I need as a person, and in a very exciting way. I have had a feeling for about two years that my career options are closing down at a time when my personal demand for more growth is expanding, not a good place to be. I have had the feeling of being in a final phase or an ending of something and the growing need to break out of my current path.*"

I was privileged to examine Nelson Mandela's Journey from this perspective, and each time he transitioned a level, he brought new thinking, new ideas and formulated new positions for both friend and foe alike, while locked away! A Call to Adventure requires us to master our new Work Level, which for some, may be a lifelong calling, for others it may be a ten year cycle, but we cannot move on successfully until we have learnt or experienced whatever it is we need to function effectively on that work level. Figure II illustrates this cycle.

Figure II: Call to Adventure



In Conclusion

So, after reading this article and you feel you are underutilised, depressed, and ready for a bigger challenge or want to plan your future, what does one do?

If you have a mentor / coach or business colleague (really effective coaches / mentors need to be one full level of work removed from you) sit down and do a rough work audit. Write down what you do and then on another piece of paper, write down what you want to do in a role. Compare them, is there any similarity? Is it a different type of work? Now consider what you need to do to make that new job / role a reality. Brian Dive (*The Healthy Organisation*, Kogan Page, 2002) has a useful and accessible section on the work complexity model. My book (*The Working Journey*, 2003) has a self-assessment guide in the back pages which I hope to bring online as a free service in the next year. It allows you to position yourself within the Work Level Model and on the Growth Curves.

If you want to do a professional assessment, there are organisations that do this at a fee (often quite a hefty fee) **but the bottom line is you already know if you need to make a change.**

Just remember, the secret to actualisation and energy flow is understanding that “getting there” for many is a journey, and “getting there” shifts in meaning as we mature. However, a lot is more predictable than you think.

Good luck on your quest.

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END NOTES

ⁱ Elliott Jaques first introduced his ideas in the 1940's and 50's Glacier Project in the United Kingdom (Elliott J, 1951), while a consultant for the Tavistock Institute. Jaques's models have been used for fifty plus years, extensively, in diverse organisational and business settings and across different cultures. It is also difficult to understand (Solaas, 2003) as there are a number of theories that he developed over time. Jaques primarily described it as the art of scientific management (an indication of its modernist genealogy) which was measurable and not open to negotiation around certain key issues