



“Ask Dr. J”



The “Ask Dr. J” columns are authored monthly by Jennifer Christian, MD, MPH, President of Webility Corporation. See previous columns at www.webility.md.

Dr. J’s columns also appear in the monthly Bulletin of the Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC). To purchase a book of Dr. J’s collected columns, go to www.dmec.org.

The columns often summarize issues discussed by the Work Fitness and Disability Roundtable, a free, multi-disciplinary e-mail discussion group moderated by Dr. Christian. Apply to join the Roundtable at www.webility.md.

January 2008 – Growing Down Gracefully

Dear Dr. J:

What should we do when we see older employees go out on disability due to a chronic medical condition shortly after they were reassigned, demoted, or otherwise pushed aside by a younger person on the way up in the organization?

Casey in Columbia

Dear Casey:

Some people find it more acceptable to go on disability than to take a job they feel is less than they deserve due to their seniority or expertise, or is lower on the totem pole of life than they used to be. They will go to almost any lengths to avoid what feels to them like humiliation. They are living in a world in which the only acceptable direction is up, not down.

When my daughter was about 4 years old, she was chattering along on some subject or another and started a sentence like this -- “Mom, when you grow down” -- and I didn’t hear anything beyond that. I stopped listening because I was captivated by what this phrase revealed of her view of the world. She assumed that growing up was followed by growing down -- and then I realized that she was absolutely right. So, my reply to you is going to focus on why we need to help people grow down gracefully.

Here are some facts. All of us human beings start life as completely dependent infants. We gradually build capability until we reach a peak of physical and mental prowess sometime in our 20’s or 30’s, and then start to decline, very slowly at first. We all lose strength, flexibility, stamina, brainpower, lung and kidney function and so on as we age, each at our own pace. Very few 80 or 90 year olds are still employed in full-time highly demanding jobs -- though some exceptional ones are. But eventually, 100% of us die. These are the non-negotiable ground rules of life.

Jobs, careers and work lives also have finite lifespans. There’s a time when we are on our way up, and a time when we realize we have peaked and are on our way down. We may be able to

find a different peak to climb, but eventually, our noses will be facing the ground. Here are some typical scenarios:

- Some jobs are so demanding that only adults who are “in their prime” or have certain special aptitudes and abilities can do them. Time passes, and the job simply gets too hard. People often use the career ladder to solve the problem of declining capabilities in some functional domains. They are promoted to management or self-select more suitable new jobs for themselves when they see the handwriting on the wall. Many people also make gradual adaptations to the way they do their jobs so they can work “smarter” instead of “harder” -- but there’s a limit to it.
- People wash out after a while. The “Peter Principle” operates and people are sequentially promoted until they reach a level at which they are over their heads. Some careers require a fresh or youthful perspective which simply fades away after years in the saddle.
- People get tired and worn out. Those who are in physically, mentally, or socially demanding jobs for a long time eventually have to give up or are forced out of those jobs. The change is due to the loss of that “edge” or the fire in the belly, the development of degenerative joints, decreases in stamina, vitality, or mental sharpness -- any of a variety of changes due to years in grade or age or both.
- People are simply squeezed out. Many organizations today still have pyramidal structures that mandate if you’re not on your way up, you’re out. And, plain old downsizing is still a reality in many American organizations.

It’s crazy when people get the message that if they are washed out or tired and worn out or being forced out of their job, they are completely finished with working. They are probably still able to -- and should -- make substantial contributions elsewhere.

It is especially inappropriate to think that the next stop is applying for disability benefits. They need to come to terms with “downshifting” -- whether due to infirmity, layoff, incompetence, or choice -- as an honorable way of coping with growing down. Creative employers might not have to “throw away” these employees after all. Perhaps they could be “recycled” down to other levels in the organization, but only if the workers are able to do this with dignity in a program that has been pre-packaged as a predictable course of events and a respectable outcome.

I’ve experienced several cycles of downshifting myself, admittedly more due to choice than necessity. In my previous marriage, we moved several times, each time requiring a new “start from the bottom” and a grind up the hill. Then, some years later, my new husband and I started Webility. It was certainly humbling to leave a corporate job with a nice title and a brand name company and have our income reduced by 3/4 for the first few years of a little self-funded start-up company. No more cleaning lady, no more lawn guy, cars getting older and older, letting the paint job on the house go.

Each time, my pride took a beating; it took some dealing with the embarrassment. But paradoxically, it was also very freeing each time to get rid of some of the pretensions and trappings of success, and get back in touch with a more modest reality. To date, I’m happy to say that every one of my downshifts has been followed by an upshift, but time is passing for me, too, and my nose will eventually be facing the ground like everyone else’s.

True, coming down from what you see as your peak is a humbling experience, but there are two sides to “humble”. One side is the negative -- abasement, humiliation, disgrace. The other definition of humble is unassuming; modest; not proud, arrogant, or assuming; and not pretentious. These are generally considered virtues.

We say, as Americans, that every person has an inherent worth and dignity. I think we should say the same thing about the jobs they do. I personally respect everyone who serves others or contributes value -- particularly if their job is dangerous, backbreaking, boring, gross, or difficult. There is no "entitlement" to occupational privilege. In my opinion, if a job is "beneath" one of us, it is beneath all of us.

The American adulation of youth and our refusal to provide respectable options for those who find themselves being "aged out" of their jobs and social roles is causing harm. (To see this more clearly, I recommend you read the book *Another Country* by the sociologist Mary Pipher.) The American refusal to plan ahead realistically and develop options and strategies for the best way to grow down is also producing needless work disability.

What are we going to do, as a society, with all these baby boomers who are on their way "over the hill"? Why not offer the proud ones options that look better than going on disability? In today's labor market, a shortage of skilled workers is already appearing in many industries. Why not find valuable and useful things for "edged out" and aging workers to do? Why not set new expectations for face-saving pathways for us all to follow as we gradually lose capability and stamina?

(Needless to say, employers and the government should also consider the financial incentives being created by benefit design, and make adjustments that encourage continued employment. This may include partial benefits for people whose downshifted jobs would pay them less than disability benefits would. "Make-up checks" for partial benefits analogous to the ones used in workers' compensation make more sense to me than the 100% on or off options now available.)

A new autobiographical book shows how a seeming humiliation can become a positive life-changing experience. Michael Gill's career in advertising slid downhill over a ten year period and his life situation became increasingly precarious due to a variety of things including age, poor personal decisions, and illness. This ivy-league blueblood and one-time executive vice president for one of the top New York City advertising firms ended up going to work for Starbucks as a barista (coffee jockey). In Michelle Archer's review of Gill's recently-released book *How Starbucks Saved My Life* in USA Today, the headline succinctly summarizes the bottom line: "A cup of coffee with a large slice of humble pie." Going to work for Starbucks turned out to be far from the belittling experience you might expect. The punch line is that while the job was indeed very modest and a huge step down, it also made him happy -- happier in fact than he has ever been. (You can read the rest of the USA Today review at http://www.usatoday.com/money/books/2007-09-24-starbucks_N.htm)

So Casey, my advice is that you think about how your company can create an internal conversation that supports a respectful path for people to follow as they grow down. You can do it by providing alternate ways that valued employees can still serve in substantial but less demanding positions. You can also make sure that your human resources / career guidance / outplacement vendors coordinate closely with your EAP to paint a positive and accepting vision of the current situation for people, and help them people accept the humble gifts that growing down gracefully can provide.

Smiling,
Dr. J

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