

Our Working Journey and Stress: A Different Perspective.

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Introduction

There are many different types of stress, some good and some 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. Most of us work and we acknowledge stress at work is common place. It is also generally acknowledged that one of the keys to combating stress is to enjoy your work. The often given solution to not enjoying work is to find another job or role that is more appealing 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 may result in psychosomatic illness.

The secret to managing this stress is to understand three critical factors and their interrelation.

Firstly the nature of work.

Elliott Jaques¹ (Jaques, 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 work model is given in Table I. The first three levels are about operational running of business and can go from hands on work to managing systems, processes, budgets that ensures a work system functions efficiently (be it a call centre, supermarket, a mining operation, a juice factory, a chain of outlets, a ship, a power station etc) and achieves its given targets on time and within budget. Here work is about producing or making something or providing a service. Time to completions of task is normally short and success is tangible.

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 the level of work 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.

This model of work complexity has seven work levels and I have dealt with five. The last two work levels are concerned with leading and managing global corporations. It is estimated that 95% of all work falls within the first three work levels. What is important is that these work levels are not about power or prestige they are about function and each work level is responsible for adding value that no other level can do, except when the systems fails. Research has also shown that no work system can function efficiently with any level missing or incomplete and interestingly, Complex Adaptive Systems Theory (the way biological systems are organized) has reinforced this view of work.

That is the first part of the equation. Understanding the nature of our work.

Table I: Levels of Work Complexityⁱⁱ

| 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 |

Secondly, what Work Level is Currently Sustaining Us...

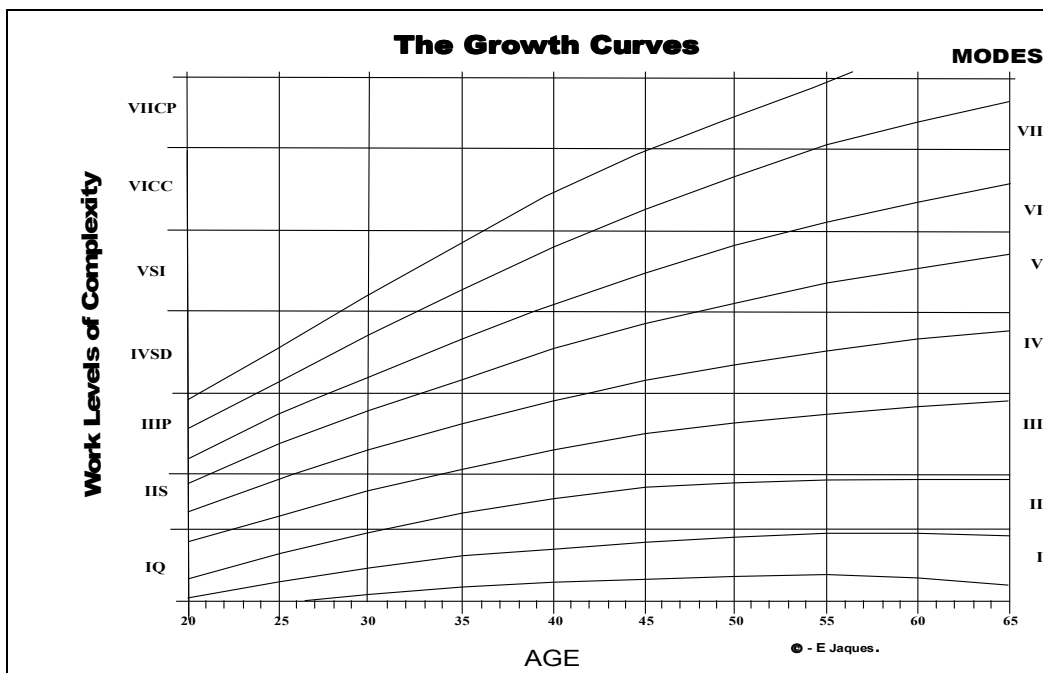
The second part of the equation involves understanding ourselves and the world of work within which we like to operate and to know how and when this may change for us.

What Jaques et al found in their research is that human capability unfolds along eight 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 strongly 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, 2000; King, S *et al* 1997; Jaques, E and Cason, K. 1994) and is linked to our individual capability to make decisions when we cannot and do not know what to do. This capability to handle ambiguity and uncertainty changes at different rates with maturity and is not influence by education, skills or personalty. It is correlated to the work levels and our cognitive processing abilities. As our cognitive ability changes, (when we transition to a new Work Level) so our need to handle greater work complexity increases and we start to actively search out challenges in this new Work Level. 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 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 and need new challenges and new experiences. They may transition to different work levels more rapidly and are on a faster growth curve. They need to plan their Working Journeys carefully. However, for the vast majority of us, we just don't have this vital information to plan ahead. We do as best we can. I remember 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.

This is a very different view about work and how work challenges that will get us going will change, predictably. The scary part is that training, experience and education will not assist us in the effective use of our judgement, when placed in roles where the complexities of the decisions required are beyond our level of current capability or where we JUST KNOW that we can bring more to the table than our role requires. This is where stress starts.

Figure I: The Array of Growth Curves



The third part of the equation is to understand Flow,

Flow is where our Energy band is now and we can predict how it may shift in the future.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi 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 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 perplexity; 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, also 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, 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 (in response to their growing capability and therefore need for cognitive challenges as per the growth curves) they move out of flow and the need starts to grow for making a change.

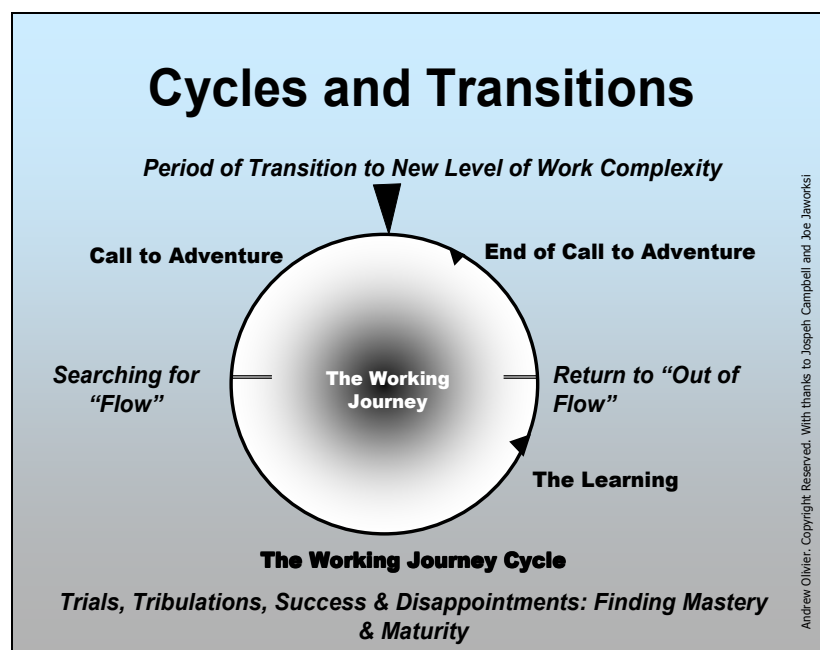
They have a real Call to Adventure.

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 Flow 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 a new Cycle and when we transition from one Work Level to another we enter a new cycle that may last depending on our growth curve, five to twenty or even 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. 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. 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



One person I worked with had been hospitalised three times and the expensive private clinics could not find out what was wrong with the person. Working together, we discovered he was underutilised by two full levels of Work Complexity. 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 been questioning for about two years as to whether I am going mad, 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. “*

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 or business colleague that you trust, 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 in his book (reference below) has a useful and accessible section on the work complexity model. My book 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 now 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. We need to understand this fundamental fact and understand that what one really needs to do if you are feeling stuck is find out where you are on the Growth Curves so you can plan and manage your Working Journey into the future. 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

ⁱⁱ 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.