

## Career Decision Points

A successful career is a result of the choices you make and the company's view of you. Both are equally important.

When you start as a junior manager, the critical choice is small firm vs. large firm. This choice gives you very different types of learning and exposure and decisively shapes you in the formative years of your career. A large firm orients junior managers to discipline and process. In addition, large firms provide access to a lot of formal training, resources and comfort in dealing with scale. A large firm has a bigger pool of senior talent that an aggressive learner can leverage. A junior manager in a small firm by contrast, does a wider range of tasks and learns to be resourceful and entrepreneurial due to limited resources. Latitude for mistakes and the boundaries for learning by doing are unlimited. A junior manager has greater and focused access to the seniors, to observe and develop. Typically, at this level, your bosses will evaluate you on performance and good performance is sufficient to move you into middle management. As a junior manager, the personal level choices will be about the timing of getting married and starting a family. Marriage and family impact your choice of cash, career and location which in turn position you in specific ways in the transition to middle management.

The years in middle management throw up a different set of choices – of focus on functional excellence versus acquiring the broader skill sets of general management. Typical decision choices in a large firm are whether to go for cross-functional rotation or choose to stay true to one's functional background, e.g., HR, finance, Marketing, R&D etc. In middle management, what matters more to present and future success is the company's view of you. A middle manager is closely watched and judged on delivering performance while displaying potential. Leadership potential is judged in the way he/she leads small teams. A middle manager who wants to transit to senior management must watch out for some pitfalls that often trip up smart and ambitious managers. The pitfalls are a lack of understanding of the financials and how money is made in the business and poor people skills. Middle managers' fear of not being noticed makes them choose the wrong behavior. They invariably try to stand out through individual excellence, sacrificing teamwork in the bargain. Typical negative behaviors at this stage include grabbing credit, passing off juniors ideas as one's own, doctoring information, desperately trying to impress senior management by running their peer group down. In today's hyperactive economy, a significant number of middle managers jump to senior management through a rapid succession of job changes. Even if they don't want to move, headhunters sell them into adopting this route. What middle managers need to keep in mind while making these moves is that the potential employer at a senior level will evaluate both the experience set as well as the corporate brands/reputation of the places that they have worked in. The personal choices at this stage are how much debt do you take on as you build assets, balancing your career and your spouse's ambitions for herself/himself and children's education.

At last, you are a senior manager. In the first two years as a senior manager, you need to decide whether you are going to make a serious attempt for the corner office, whether in your current firm or outside. This will mean an objective assessment of yourself, whether you have the leadership mettle and stomach for such a lonely, grueling and high stamina job. A decision not to go for the top job would mean a string of lateral moves and eventual retirement from the firm. As a senior manager and potential CEO in today's world, you are judged on the ability to manage key stakeholder expectations, building a leadership pipeline, learning rapidly and steering the ship through disruptive change. Once settled in the senior manager's job, the choice is whether you limit your contribution to the firm you work for or whether you broaden it to encompass the industry and even beyond, to society at large. As a CEO, the key question to ask is the type of legacy you want to leave behind. This has impact on the way your team and the firm behaves.

An increasingly viable option in today's world is launching yourself in a second career as an entrepreneur / venture capitalist / executive coach/external board member. This choice is linked to personal decisions regarding children's higher education, the responsibility of caring for ageing parents and post-retirement plans.

The truth about careers today and looking ahead into the future is that there are no prototypes or norms to copy as a proven winning formula. Over a three-decade career, there will be hits and misses. A career graph will no longer be a straight upward line or a steady upward staircase. A manager can no longer rely

on the company to manage his career. The onus is on the individual and the choices outlined today are some of the things one needs to come to grips with.