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The crescendo effect in career motivation

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Explains that the crescendo effect in career motivation is the driving force behind employee participation, involvement and the lasting value of commitment. Undoubtedly, much of the corporate world has given up on career motivation and commitment since, on average, businesses lose, and have to replace, half their employees in four years, half their mid-level managers in five years and half their senior executives in seven years. For more than ten years the Human Resource Programme at Northern Illinois University in the USA has focused on studying companies that steadfastly continue to base their strategies for attraction, retention, motivation and employee involvement on career motivation and commitment. Presents a practicable and workable new strategic model based on career motivation to provide a profitable alternative to the turmoil of perpetual churn. Describes parallel organization initiatives to galvanize, simplify, build and leverage human resource career motivation and commitment.

The implicit "strategy determines structure" model underlying most contemporary strategic human resource (HR) planning and policy procedures begins with a forecasted staffing target and works backwards to arrive at required structure of recruiting, selection, placement, and training (Mintzberg, 1989). We have spent ten years studying career-oriented employees and their commitment to career and organization, and what we have learned has radically altered our view of strategic HR planning and led us to develop a very different model (King, 1996).

What drives this new model is not staffing or conventional work motivation, but the gradual creation of career motivation and commitment for the employee, a process that lies at the core of all successful enterprises. Career motivation generates the energy that holds these businesses together and their very existence depends on it (Meyer *et al.*, 1996). The social psychological dimensions that govern the interrelationships and energy-giving states of a business organization's elementary building blocks – its employees' self-identity, self-insight, and career resilience – we call the force of commitment. Because of the linkages between commitment, productivity, quality of work life and value, these forces are measurable in human and economic terms. Commitment is linked inextricably to the creation of value as both a cause and effect. As an effect, commitment measures whether the company has delivered superior value in supporting employee self-importance, self-direction, and self-control. Employees persist in overcoming work obstacles and become invigorated or they become disaffected. As a cause, commitment initiates a series of motivational effects that cascade through each individual and throughout the entire business system in overlapping and interrelated combinations, as defined by multi-level components of a multi-phase crescendo model, thus:

- *First component level – self-identity.* High scores distinguish individuals who tend to identify and define themselves in terms of their work. Individuals high in career identity are involved in their jobs and careers, seek upward mobility and do not wish to delay gratification in their development.

Career identity reflects the direction of career goals – whether the individual wants to obtain a position of leadership, advance in the company, seek higher status, or perhaps make more pay. This generalized value resulting from an internalized normative pressure is how central one's career is to one's identity. Individuals who are high on career identity are likely to find career satisfaction to be more important than satisfaction from other areas of life (primacy of work) (Meyer and Allen, 1987).

- *Second component level – self-insight.* High scores indicate respondents who are realistic about themselves and their careers, as well as how well they relate these perceptions to their career goals. They see their own needs and capabilities, and the organization career requirements, as sufficiently related or similar that the possibility exists for a mutually rewarding employment relationship and providing path-goal clarity. In this case, because of path-goal clarity, self-objectivity and goal flexibility, the individual finds it natural to deepen identity and sharpen understanding of and commitment to career. They look for feedback about how well they are doing, use this information to set specific career goals and formulate plans to achieve their goals. Their sensory perception or career insight affects the degree to which they pursue their career goals (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986).
- *Third component level – career resilience.* High scores are attitudinally related to the highest form of affective career commitment and come from individuals who are strongly attached to their career goals and values, and to the organization and their career for its own sake, apart from purely instrumental work. This is represented by an inherent willingness of individuals who have insightfully identified with their careers to make personal sacrifice, perform beyond normal expectations, work selflessly and continue career contribution, to endure difficult times, and not desire to leave the organization or their careers for self-interest or personal non-career gain. Resilience is the magnitude or extent to which the individual resists career barriers

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or disruptions affecting their work. People high in resilience have high self-efficacy, seeing themselves as competent people taking risks and responsibilities for their careers, with low need for dependency and able to control what happens to them. Resilience, as a motivational domain, influences a person’s persistence in pursuing career goals (London, 1990).

Field study results

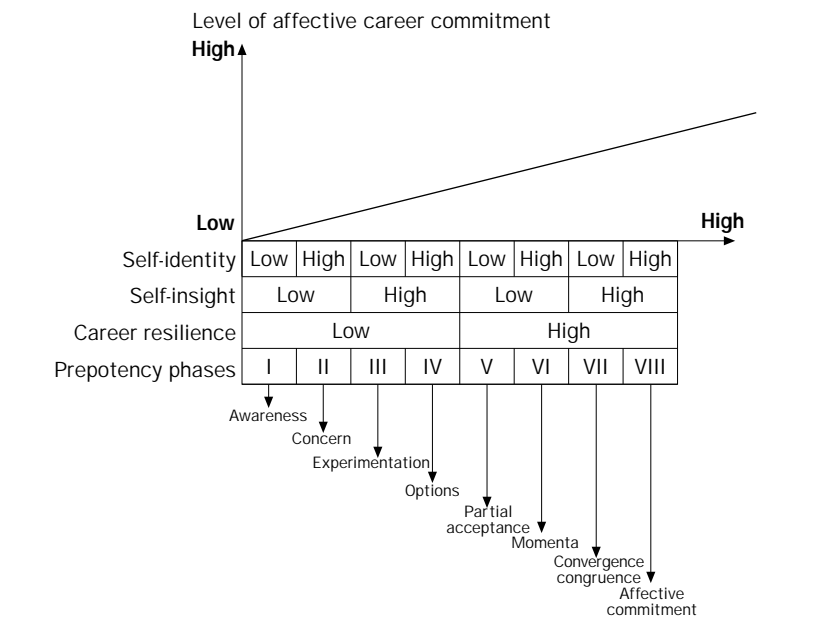
Data from studies of careers and organizations show that the three components make independent contributions to defining the motivation of affective career commitment (King, 1996). The model revealed a crescendo imperative that higher states of attraction to career motivation, at once, derive from and transcend the component dimensions of self-identity, self-insight, and career resilience. A critical discovery is that three dimensions or domains of motivation are indeed dimensions of a greater construct – career commitment. The components have been tracked as ranging in prepotency from identity to insight to resilience, and increase in valence (need strength from low to high involvement which corresponds to increasing career commitment). Graduating increases in identity represent the most commonly prepotent and least valenced initiators of the process. Beyond a point of increasing the volume of identity in overall employee populations, the

momentum of a generalized sense of motivational definition and obligation builds mutually rewarding understanding of widely shared self-insight and, in turn, leverages feelings of intense inspiration and persistence of career resilience. These three in combination crescendo to career commitment.

Using our career survey instrument employing percentile cut-offs, a three-level, eight-phase progressive career crescendo effect emerges (Figure 1).

Prepotency ranges from self-identity to self-insight to career resilience in the formation of career commitment. In addition, valence, as need strength, ascends from Phase I (low) to Phase VIII (high) for stages which are provisionally labelled as cascading in a crescendo from “awareness” through “options” to “affective career commitment”. High scores on career resilience are considered most highly valenced; high scores on career insight are more valenced than high scores on career identity. Basically, percentile cut-offs provided a ready interpretation for why employees can easily become indoctrinated and often become dedicated to a degree approaching complete commitment. Low to moderate identity will lead only to indifferent compliance without strong need for recognition or advancement. Heightened identity, however, will result in increased sense of involvement, identification with organization goals, and path-goal congruence – leading in turn to higher degrees of commitment, implying surpluses beyond those associated with more dependable role compliance. The focus on phases derives from the high versus low destinations on three components of career motivation for commitment; that is, eight combinations logically emerged from our studies and from three sub-scales (identity, insight, resilience) across 14 organizations, each distinguished as two (high versus low) categories (King, 1996).

Figure 1
High versus low career motivation to define crescendo effect of career commitment



Equifinality

It is not intended to indicate that there is one pathway to career commitment, but rather to suggest why differences in valence (increased need strength towards commitment) occur. While ordering the phases in terms of increased valence, the model does not require that all individuals go through exactly the same phases. The phases represent progressively valenced, crescendo effects, with a variety of specific pathways (for individuals) leading to career orientation and commitment (Pascale, 1988).

Several types of commitment can be discerned, even if features of the immediate work group and its style of control prove dominant. Progressively evoked seems to describe the dominant type of motivation measured by the phases, given not only the strong associations with worksite descriptions, but also the substantial persistence of phase assignments observed in studies over several years' interval. However, precipitous or natural formation also no doubt exists and rapid advanced bonding with career commitment is induced by sudden critical identity-enhancing events (Mowday *et al.*, 1982).

This core notion, or what is called "equifinality", may develop in several ways (Miller, 1978). Although available data show that Phases I-VIII can be considered progressively valenced and strengthening, for example, this does not imply that a phase-by-phase entrance to, or exit from, advanced commitment always occurs. Powerful internalization can induce an acute "natural" progression of phases: I→VI→VIII, for example. One can also envision a basic pathway for "evoked" commitment because of gradually accumulating and indoctrinating involvement at work: I→II→IV→VII→VIII.

Career development revitalization

While there are many routes which mature individuals in career-oriented businesses might take (Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulin, 1974), the experience of firms can be distilled to identify an "optimal" path regarded as more sure than many others. It too, is a four-stage process – an orchestrated crescendo – and, similar to the musical meaning of "a gradual increase in volume", our revitalization process is also gradual, requiring many steps over many years. The crescendo has to be managed and the momentum for commitment established to allow people and organizations to reach for ever more challenging goals (Weiner, 1982).

After diagnosing career motivation patterns, we address how human resource strategists start interventions and shrug off the stasis that has plagued so many careers and firms. To place that intervention in context and show where career motivation is headed, we begin orchestrating an overall model (see Figure 2).

Galvanize

To compose the overall score for revitalizing career motivation, this agenda for action needs to be taken "all at once". It is a collective set of many small steps incrementally changing every part of the organization and

the way its strategies, stages of motivation and career development techniques interact (Schein, 1991). Since no single mind nor group of minds can achieve this magnitude of conceptualizing the breadth and multitude of issues involved, identifying or creating a core workforce of committed, dedicated people is a good place to start (Tracy, 1994).

For this thrust to be effective:

- Conceptualize a wide perspective with a sharp focus.
- Recognize that "God is in the details", but derailed plans are neither necessary nor wise.
- Avoid paralysis by analysis and extinction by instinction (overly grandiose schemes of re-engineering and optimizing cultural change programmes will not work; neither will knee-jerk "quick-fixes").
- Initiate action to cultivate career achievement for a core of career-driven employees whose success will carry important positive messages.
- Institutionalize the belief that progress will be achieved by many small steps.
- Identify career motivation profiles of fast-track personnel whose rapid career trajectories distinguish them as "giants who have learned to dance".

Simplify and clarify

Organizational learning from career successes does not have to emanate from endless, perpetual and repetitive chains of individual mistakes and failures (Weiner and Gechman, 1977; Weiner and Vardi, 1980). Simplifying and clarifying social perceptions of career goal-paths to harmonize with employees' self-objectivity and realism of expectations can sharpen career insight and vision. By sounding out what has been wrong and what new self-awareness, skills and motivations are required, it also enables employees to have a future time orientation and hear important information concerning career decision making (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Like removing discordant diapasons in unfreezing and effecting a smooth segue in orchestral change, cutting some instruments is necessary to build anew, and, cutting some paths is a necessary precursor to building the motivational volume and value of career goals (Brown, 1979).

For this thrust to be effective:

- "Unfreeze" to eliminate barriers and causes of resistance to change.
- Remove outdated job classification systems, job control systems, and incorrect data and impressions regarding career-path goals.
- Simplify the organization form and adopt a lean design to concentrate human

Figure 2

The stages of career motivation

Overlapping stages of motivation	Strategies/stages of revitalization	Career development technique
Awareness and concern	Galvanize: create a core work force dedicated to work, organization and career	Self-assessment tools: career planning workshops, career workbooks, pre-retirement workshops
Experimentation and options	Simplicity/clarity: cut unnecessary and confusing complexity	Individual counselling: personnel staff, professional counselling, out-placement, supervisor/line manager coaching. Internal labour market information/ placement exchange: jobs posting, skills inventories, career paths/planning, career resource centre, career communication formats
Partial acceptance and momenta	Develop: build skills, knowledge, and new capabilities	Organizational assessment and development processes: assessment centres, promotability/transfer forecasts, replacement/succession planning, psychological testing
Convergence – congruence and affective commitment	Leverage: sustain momentum and stretch advantages	Development programmes: job enrichment and rotation, team building, self-managing teams, in-house human resource development programmes, external seminars/ workshops, tuition reimbursement/ educational assistance, supervisory training in career counselling, dual-career programs, monitoring systems

resources on smaller and more critical agendas.

- Integrate organization development and training and development to focus on building enactive mastery.
- Link enactive mastery to increased chances of gaining positive job performance results in the short run.
- Use career communication formats to signal to stakeholders and employees alike that something positive is being undertaken.
- Recognize that simplifying actions are short-term temporizations that serve to provide a point of departure, so that effort to build more enduring strengths and distinctive competences for careers can proceed.

Develop

In building, which overlaps galvanizing and simplifying, the organization must set about building new opportunities and capabilities

for more enduring and deepening human resource deployment (Bateman and Strasser, 1984). This entails intimate attention to a wide array of actions ranging from raising aspirations to do better (with performance appraisals) to designing and articulating new organization challenges which will pull career and organization together for a common purpose. That purpose, expressed in terms of visions and directions for career progress, is best phrased in terms which career-motivated employees can identify with, gain insight into and make a permanent part of their repertoire. Encouraging progress along the chosen path requires employees to experiment and discover what works and what fails.

For this thrust to be effective:

- Experiments should be small, incremental, and tentative to start. (Knowledge about alternatives and risks is uncertain; resources may be limited.)

- Momentum should increase to the point where major investments in training and development for building career capabilities beyond mere work abilities may be required (as some experiments pay off).
- Recognize that career learning may occur, and that some individuals and groups may progress more quickly than others.
- Investment in deepening existing skills, systems, databases and knowledge and acquiring new ones is necessary over time.
- Initiatives to invigorate team work on a small scale with essential tasks should be extended organization-wide to grow along the entire career chain.
- The momentum created by the building process should help build the motivational values of identity, insight and career resilience that, in combination, underpin the crucial leveraging ingredient of career commitment (self-efficacy, need autonomy, adaptability, need achievement, need creativity, initiative, inner-work standards, internal control, competitiveness, risk taking and tolerance for uncertainty/ambiguity).

Leverage

The quintessential stage is leveraging strengths and sustaining momentum. As the career organization grows in strength, it can expand the sphere of operations into new development programmes, new jobs and new parts of the career-value chain (Buchanan, 1974). Leveraging capabilities can be by job enrichment and using external support alliances as internal human resource development programmes so that the career core can extend its new-found strengths to a much wider sphere (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). This is a continuing dynamic and mutating consensus which cycles and returns to the initial phase of galvanizing. Pressures of expansion must be balanced against the risks of too much complexity slowing down the pace of innovation and forcing career progress to a standstill (Jamal, 1974).

We label the organization career commitment process a crescendo to emphasize that the four stages corresponding to identity, insight, resilience and commitment (at the level of the individual) are not discrete staccato steps, but rather activities which merge into each other as the magnitude of change (corresponding to individuals' magnitude, direction and sensory perceptions in their careers) increases in volume over time. The reality of all organizations and careers is messy, confusing and complex (Kahn *et al.*, 1964). In the building of both individual and organization, developing distinctive competences in one individual or group, or at one

level of the organization, may proceed faster and more effectively than others (Gorlin, 1984). Moreover, both individuals and organizations do not revitalize only once; rather, it is all at once and they need to do so repetitively (Kidron, 1978). That is what continuing dynamic of a mutating consensus really means. Challenges of one period/phase may be resolved, but those of the next may again require change.

The steps of the career crescendo are summarized in Figure 3. The paths are drawn as straight line vectors, though in practice progress is usually made in cycles of commitment. The dance to the crescendo of music is the samba. One step back and two steps forward describes how organizations and individual careers proceed – and it is exactly what happens with simplification and building at the organization level – and, for the individual, it happens in forming self-insight and resilience. Skilled conductors know full well the conflict when confronted with orchestral players, and that the professional's proficiencies have to be undone or unfrozen if a new composer's score is to be prepared. In analogous fashion, individuals must unlearn old skills (through insight into self and career) and need change (interest in new skills, experiences) if new capabilities are to be acquired (freedom from restraint in actions towards career goals) (Reichers, 1986).

For this thrust to be effective:

- Emphasize that, similar to the early simplifying stages of career formation towards commitment, cutting may have to be radical.
- Contractions should be tangible and observable, that is, cutting parts of line to staff transitions, functions/products, subsystems/levels, or segments/stages of the career chain.
- Constrictions can also be less tangible, but should be observable, that is, eliminating redundant, inefficient methods, procedures, systems.
- Even profitable activities and intrinsically rewarding proficiencies may have to be pared if they distract attention and deflect resources from building the career "core".
- Progress is best achieved by many small initiatives to develop loyalty, value congruence, and affective career commitment.
- Risks should be spread in small, tested steps to protect both the individual and the organization from boldly betting everything on one initiative or thrust.
- Allow the steps to get bigger as risks become better understood and visibly clear progress in career motivation proceeds.
- Small "differential calculus-like" steps should operate like an "invisible

Figure 3
 Crescendo path for career commitment

Career	Simple activities	Complex activities
Dynamic structure	3. Develop capabilities (career resilience)	4. Leverage (career commitment)
Static structure	2. Simplify/clarify careers (career insight)	1. Galvanize the career core (career identity)

organization hand” encouraging individual employee “pygmy-like” initiatives to build a career culture of “giants who have learned to dance”.

- Recognize that, while visions of loyalty, value congruence and affective orientation are imposed from the top, it is the bottom-up flow of employee identity, insight, and resilience that accelerates the crescendo to career commitment.

Supporting case field study

Commitment is tied intimately to motivation as both input and output (Dubin *et al.*, 1975). As an output or outcome, commitment validates that employees identify with their work, have insight into themselves and their careers, and are persistent in overcoming career disruptions (Porter *et al.*, 1976). As an input or driving force, commitment creates a series of organizational outcomes that were observed to crescendo through an aerospace manufacturing firm included in our studies as follows:

- Recruitment and application rates grew 20 per cent as the best applicants were attracted to the company’s business. Because the firm’s applicant pool was large, it could be more selective in new hires with an improvement in its selection ratio of 25 per cent (35 per cent to 10 per cent) and to concentrate its placement and training on the most suitable applicants and stimulate increases in productivity and performance evaluations which raised its base ratio (proportion of successful performance evaluations) some 20 per cent (from 72 per cent to 92 per cent).
- Increased productivity enabled the firm to meet delivery schedules more swiftly, reducing backlogs 15 per cent and late deliveries 20 per cent, with employees expressing greater pride and satisfaction in their work. Furthermore, as retention rates

increased over a two-year span and turnover declined 19 per cent (losses over one year/employees remaining fell from 26 per cent to 7 per cent), longer-term employees got to know customers better and reduced late deliveries an additional 5 per cent which further reinforced employee pride and commitment.

- With improvements in commitment over a three-year period, long-term employees learned how to improve quality, which further increased productivity, lowered costs and enriched the quality of work life. The company then used these cost savings to fund higher salaries and wages, increase training and further improve work relations, compensation growth and commitment.
- Extolling the company’s motto “quality determines productivity”, output levels spiralled, defects disappeared and late shipments fell to zero. In the fourth year of the firm’s “build employee commitment campaign”, efficiencies derived from employee commitment generated cost advantages and contractual alliances competitors could not match. Sustainable efficiencies, combined with steadfast growth in the number of committed employees, generated the kind of surpluses that supported the firm launching successful employee stock purchase and options plans enhancing the firm’s ability to attract and retain the right employees.
- By the end of the fifth year of the firm’s initiatives for improving commitment, employees were regarded as “behaving like owners”. They stabilized the firm’s contracting, production, assembly, dispatching, sorting, logistics, and service supply systems, lowered the firm’s cost of capital and ensured that cash flow returned to fund investments that would further increase the company’s potential as a cynosure for employee commitment.

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“Organization commitment” in contrast to “career commitment” is not central to this model, but it is nonetheless essential, not just for its own sake, but also because it allows the company to improve its career-oriented motivations, and because it provides an incentive and opportunity for employees to remain motivated and committed. Still, the source of all commitment, including organizational, is the spiralling pool of identity, insight, and resilience that springs from the creation of superior affective career motivation and commitment for employees. For the individual and the organization, this fundamental belief is not a matter of feeling, but of decision.

Commitment as decision, not feeling

On the long, difficult and complex train of box car jobs in life, affective feeling of emotion is only the caboose, the engine is the decision of commitment. Consider the wedding vow “...will be your husband/wife as long as I love you”, versus “...will be your husband/wife until death us do part”. The former effect is feeble, fickle, fragile, and unstable. The latter cognition is stable, enduring, anchored in concrete conviction of decision. Thus, commitment is a choice decision and not a feeling.

Now imagine a parent saying, “I will be your mother/father as long as I love you”. Less ephemeral and more inspiring is, “I am your parent always and the only parent you will ever have”. Hence, in both institutions of marriage and family, feeling is subordinate to the dominance of decision and affective commitment is the unfailing action, and so it is that the commitment in affective career commitment, like that of family and marriage, is a choice and not a feeling. Career commitment is a verb.

Commitment structure determines strategy

The commitment-based crescendo model effectively explains successful strategy in the business world. In most of the firms and industries we have studied, the companies with the highest retention rates also have the best earnings. Commitment explains earnings better than economics of scale, experience curves, scope, market share, or any other strategies associated with sustainable competitive advantage. It also explains why “strategy determines structure” models do not work.

Consider how the traditional “strategy determines structure” company plans a response to a slowdown in sales growth. It may hire more sales personnel; it might raise commissions to generate more aggressive selling; it might drop its price to attract new customers; possibly it could extend its product line, and the consequences for each of these planned actions, in succession, may well be to hire inexperienced and ineffective salespeople (lower sales productivity and higher cost); it could attract more dissatisfied customers who bought under “hard sell” and regret their purchase; it would appeal to more of the wrong kind of customers with no interest in the product, service, or company, and only short-term shoppers interested in price; and finally; it would discover that adding new products only escalates the costs of a more cumbersome product line.

Rethinking, re-engineering, and downsizing

When it comes to difficulty and hard times, the traditional approach is to re-engineer or downsize. Either is likely to weaken employee resilience and decimate workforce commitment, in turn reducing employee retention rates, quality of sales product and potential cost savings. The lion’s share of quick-fix cost reductions are planned for the benefit of stockholders only, and usually destroy commitment. However, cost savings shared with employees to strengthen motivation can be used to enhance identity and resilience to leverage commitment.

The commitment-based model of management thought may seem obvious, but it is really counter-intuitive to conventional management thinking. As we discover more about the motivational forces of commitment and their interrelations, we have gained new insight into thinking strategically. The goal is to fulfil behavioural requirements of attracting, retaining and engaging the workforce through a well-balanced set of career motivations, and hold them together long enough for them to become innovative and learn how to create the value of commitment to the mutual benefit of employees, managers, and the organization. However simple this may sound in concept, it represents a fundamental restructuring in thinking, as radical as the shift to “organizations as systems” was to classical and neoclassical management. Affective employee career commitment assumes the position of the total system, organizational commitment and management leadership fall into subsystems within it. All three benefit from the increased focus and balance of their relationship.

There are mechanics as well as dynamics of commitment systems. Just as entropy steals

the energy from a mechanical system, disaffection steals the energy and knowledge from a business system. Without knowing it, managers have engineered enormous entropy into their businesses in the name of maximizing value congruence, organizational commitment and managerial leadership (Tracy, 1989; 1994). In fact, this entropy destroys value for everyone involved, including managers.

The opportunity to reduce entropy in most businesses is immense. With employees changing jobs at increasing frequency (annual turnover of 25 per cent is common), customers and shareholders defect at alarming rates as well. With this much friction and entropy, it is no wonder productivity, quality and growth are languishing. Business is conducted among strangers, expectations and trust are lowered, and energy dissipates rapidly.

Quo vadis: the crescendo as an orchestrated organon of incrementalism

To make the new model or organon of career motivation building to commitment work, most organizations will have to make fundamental changes in their strategies, by many detailed adjustments in both their business and human resource practices. The crescendo is effectuated not by being 1,000 per cent better on one thing, but by moving incrementally to become 1 per cent better on 1,000 things. For the high road of business practices requiring total customer satisfaction, innovation and an all-hands approach, this may entail changes ranging from refined customer targeting, to revised capital budgeting, to new skills training. For the high touch in developing human resources necessitating revised and more selective hiring strategies, this may require modifications in personnel ranging throughout the organization as a non-linear series of process steps:

- leading the career motivation system;
- building career and organizational awareness;
- building confidence, credibility and changing symbols;
- legitimizing new viewpoints;
- making many tactical shifts and partial solutions in modifying career development;
- broadening organization career support;
- overcoming opposition and resistance to change;
- consciously structuring flexibility into organizational and career alternatives and goals;
- tentative trial testing of career programmes, paths, and trajectories;
- creating pockets of career commitment;

- crystallizing focus of organization development on career commitment;
- formalizing and institutionalizing commitment;
- continuing all dynamics of career motivation as an open-ended and mutating consensus of identity, insight, and resilience.

Ultimately, these initiatives will need new emphasis, measurements and monitoring, and they will need new criteria for allocating value among employees so as to galvanize, simplify, build and leverage the career value creation process. These changes are costly, but there is a plethora of evidence of the voluminous, systemic benefits they yield. From beginning to end, the crescendo model empowers critical human resources in concert with all organizational stakeholders to make sense of the successes and failures around them and become a learning human resource organization that can magnify value to itself and all other stakeholders as well.

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