

**The Retirement Syndrome:
The Psychology of Letting Go**

by

M. Kets de Vries

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The Retirement Syndrome

The Psychology of Letting Go

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries¹

¹ Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Clinical Professor in Leadership Development, INSEAD, France & Singapore

Abstract

This article analyzes a problem that can be described as *the retirement syndrome*. In exploring the difficulties many leaders face in letting go at the end of a full career, it reviews a number of the barriers to exit: financial, social, and psychological. It looks at the physical and psychological effects of aging, in the context of retirement; examines the experience of nothingness that single-minded careerists often feel after retirement; describes the talion principle, a subliminal fear of reprisals; and discusses the “edifice complex,” the wish to leave behind a legacy. The article concludes with suggestions as to how individuals and organizations can develop more effective and humane disengagement strategies.

The years teach much which the days never know.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rage at the close of day,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

—*Dylan Thomas*

Growing old isn't so bad when you consider the alternative.

—*Maurice Chevalier*

Introduction

In an Oscar-nominated bleak comedy called *About Schmidt*, Jack Nicholson stars as Warren Schmidt, a 67-year-old Omaha, Nebraska, insurance executive who is set adrift following retirement. The film is the character study of a sad, aging man who is face-to-face with mortality and the emptiness of a life near its end. Schmidt's retirement party is the first of the movie's painfully bittersweet ceremonies. The party, a somber event for Schmidt, portrays quite clearly that he isn't looking forward to his retirement. He doesn't understand why he has to be put out to pasture, and he doesn't like the idea of being replaced—especially by a person he doesn't respect.

Given his career single-mindedness, the future promises no golden sunset for this retiree. Schmidt seems to have cultivated no interests outside work. He is at a total loss as to what he might do. Upon his retirement, he reassesses his life, wondering how all his hopes had come to this. He has grown to loathe his dowdy wife. His treasured but alienated daughter, who lives what feels like a world away in Denver, barely speaks to him and is set to marry a man he regards as a total nincompoop. Searching for some kind of meaning, Schmidt decides to contribute \$22 a month to the welfare of an African "foster" child. His frank letters to six-year-old Ndugu appear to be the only

place where he is able to establish human contact, where he feels a degree of authenticity.

When his wife suddenly keels over while vacuuming their home, the rest of Schmidt's world falls apart. Unable to take care of himself, he begins to deteriorate physically. Not only does he neglect his appearance, it doesn't take very long before his home is messier than a pigsty.

On an impulse, Schmidt—uncertain about his future as well as his past—packs up his 30-foot Winnebago (which his wife had nagged him into buying) to set out on a cross-country journey to stop his daughter's wedding. Along the way—no longer shielded from life by the work environment or his wife—he tests out the idea of connecting with other people. His efforts turn out disastrously: for example, he makes a depressing visit to his childhood home, which has been turned into a tire store, and he tries to strike up a friendship with a trailer-park couple he meets along the way that ends abruptly when he makes a clumsy pass at the wife.

When Schmidt reaches Denver, he discovers that his daughter's future relatives represent his worst nightmare: a rowdy clan of counterculture refugees and wannabes. His future son-in-law sells "top of the line" waterbeds and wears his long, thinning hair in a ponytail. His son-in-law's mother is the ultimate lewd old gal, who has him experience a hot tub (even joining him in the nude) and tells him far more than he would ever want to know about her sex life while spouting out psychobabble. Her intrusiveness is anathema to Schmidt, who has wasted away in the insurance industry for decades; whose sterile, middle-class life was micro-managed by his wife; and who, probably because of his own controlling behavior, drove his uptight daughter to a guy like his future son-in-law. During his mini-quest across the Midwest, we see a man gradually stripped of all his illusions about his past career, his marriage, his daughter, and his life. Schmidt seems destined to end his life as he lived it: a failure, going through the motions of living with a tight little smile that hides isolation, depression, and terror. If Schmidt had known that his retirement would turn out like this, he might have managed his life quite differently.

Schmidt ends up a man full of regrets, a sorry example of poor career and life management. As the story unfolds, *About Schmidt* becomes a cautionary tale for the rest of us. It reaffirms the wise counsel not to put all one's eggs—career eggs, in this case—in one basket.

Although it has often been said that when we grow old, we have to give up certain things, this statement should be reframed somewhat: if we *fail* to give up certain things, we grow old. The challenge, of course, is knowing what to give up, and how. If we want to live life to the fullest in our later years, we have to give up, decades earlier, our single-minded devotion to work and the almighty dollar. We have to invest in matters other than work. If we invest in relationships, for example, we will create good memories with people close to us that will sustain us in difficult times. *About Schmidt* makes us realize how rare are people who grow old with grace. For too many of us, retirement comes as an unexpected shock, a stage for which we are poorly prepared.

As the example of Schmidt illustrates all too depressingly, sooner or later people in positions of power and authority have to let go. The extent to which letting go is a positive or negative experience depends very much on the individual and his or her particular circumstances. Letting go has a devastating effect on some people; they perceive it as a hostile act, whether it happens at a prearranged stage in life (i.e., at retirement), through voluntary or imposed redundancy, through an organizational or political coup d'état, or through ill health.

For leaders, the relinquishing of power is especially difficult. The public recognition that has accompanied their position at the top has been a major dimension of their lives. Just as trees need water and sunshine to flourish, many leaders need the admiration of their subordinates to feel truly alive. They crave an endless supply of narcissistic stimuli. For them, retreat into the private sphere represents an enormous reversal. They are suddenly deprived, at retirement, of what to them are essential nutrients: identification with an institution of great power; influence over individuals, policies, finances, and the community; and constant affirmation of their importance as individuals and of their role as leader to others. The prospect of climbing down off the top of the heap and becoming a nobody holds little attraction for them. As former

president Ronald Reagan once quipped: “Two weeks ago I went into retirement. Am I glad that’s over! I just didn’t like it. Took all the fun out of Saturdays.”

This article explores the difficulties many leaders have in letting go at retirement. It discusses a number of the barriers to a graceful exit—financial, social, and psychological—and reviews the physical and psychological effects of aging. It also discusses a number of psychological processes that affect retirement: the experience of nothingness perceived by many in the absence of work, the talion principle (i.e., the fear of retaliation), and the “edifice complex” (the wish to leave a legacy). Although these psychological processes are discussed sequentially, they occur in no special order (and often in combination) in the inner world of the executive, making retirement an insidious process. In conclusion, the article offers observations on how individuals and organizations can develop more effective and humane disengagement strategies.

The CEO Blues

Letting go is so difficult for some leaders that they insist on remaining in a position of power even when they themselves feel that they have accomplished all they can, are no longer happy with their performance, feel isolated or empty or unfulfilled, have exhausted the challenges, and no longer have a clear sense of direction! I call this phenomenon *the retirement syndrome*.

CEOs who reached the top at a relatively early age and have enjoyed a long tenure at the helm are struck particularly hard by the retirement syndrome. Unlike peers who entered the most senior positions later in life, many have lost their initial sense of excitement and adventure. Their worldly success and physical attractiveness coincided at a young age, making the downhill slope much longer and more treacherous than the uphill slope. Retirement leaves them wanting to surpass past achievements but unsure what course to take.

The CEO life-cycle generally has three stages: entry, consolidation, and decline:

- *Entry.* A lot of experimentation takes place for CEOs in the entry stage. New CEOs are very involved in tackling and mastering fresh challenges and thus feel fully alive.
- *Consolidation.* As new CEOs start to produce results, they gradually gain a sense of control. This feeling of mastery is the hallmark of the consolidation stage.
- *Decline.* Eventually—unless CEOs are able to reinvent and reenergize themselves—their performance peaks and they enter a plateau. As they run out of new ideas and start to rely on formulaic solutions, that plateau becomes a decline. A feeling that they are running on automatic pilot suggests that they are no longer creative, no longer able to push the envelope. All CEOs who reach that burnout point—whether they are young, middle-aged, or well past the usual retirement age—should heed those warning signs and say, Enough is enough; someone else needs to take over the reins and bring new ideas into the organization.

Hank DeWit,² onetime CEO of an information technology company who stepped down at age 39 knows well that feeling of decline:

I felt wiped out all the time and spent most of my energy sweating over whether other people would notice my exhaustion and lack of concentration—which made both problems worse. It wasn't a healthy sort of tiredness, the kind where a shot of adrenaline carries you through. I'd lost any sense of excitement; everything had become a chore. I sat through meetings but couldn't have told you the first thing about what we'd discussed if you'd asked me afterwards. I'd been so good, but I'd lost it. People did notice, of course. Gossip filtered up. I started to get paranoid about it, watching my back, avoiding certain people. I felt I was hanging on to the whole thing by my fingertips. I used to say to myself, "Hang in there; you've got years to go yet." I was terrified I'd used

² This name, and all others included in case profiles in this article, have been changed to disguise real people.

myself up so soon; there didn't seem to be anything of me left. Driving in the morning, I'd have to fight the impulse to turn and head straight back home. When the company started to lose market share, I knew my state of mind had to be responsible—at least, I couldn't see any way out, which amounted to the same thing. I realized I wanted to run away, but it was a while before I could see myself getting out in more positive terms, for me and the company. It was too much, too soon.

Getting out and heading in another direction was a practical option for a relatively young executive like Hank, who peaked early in his career. People like him can change industry, try out a new venture, get involved in a nonprofit organization, join the public sector, or go back to school to pursue learning opportunities earlier discarded as unrealistic. For these people there are still a lot of new opportunities and adventures to look forward to.

But what about older leaders looking (or forced) to leave their job? Faced with the question of what to do next, they know that the answer is retirement—and they don't generally like that prospect. Sure, they could step into a non-executive director position or do volunteer work, but those options don't promise the same degree of gratification. An imminent retirement date brings older leaders up hard against a number of painful realities that come with the consciousness of letting go: loss of work (a critical activity in life) and possible loss of health and vitality—blows that threaten their belief in the future; loss of public exposure and public contact; and loss of influence, power, attention, and admiration. In addition, they face the prospect of spending time at home with a partner who has become a virtual stranger, and they know that modes of relating that worked with that partner at twenty may not work so well now, as they become reacquainted.

Awareness of these real and potential losses and the need for a changed lifestyle are frequently exacerbated by consciousness of what was lost, or sacrificed, years earlier, on the way to the top—a fulfilling personal life; good relationships with spouse, children, and friends; and time to develop outside contacts and interests. Facing retirement, CEOs prefer to cling to power rather than confront these painful realities.

They prefer action over reflection, with its tendency to give way to depressive thoughts. They do anything and everything within their power to postpone the day of reckoning, perhaps fearing that Malcolm Forbes was right when he observed that “retirement kills more people than hard work ever did.”

In addition to these personal conflicts, people facing retirement also have to deal with financial and social concerns. Retirement benefits are typically lower than full CEO income, and the sooner one leaves the firm, the lower the benefits. Accustomed to socializing with people who have comparably high disposable incomes, and wanting to stay in familiar social circles, many CEOs feel financial pressure to remain on the job. Additional pressure to remain may come from spouses and children, who are used to the perks and reflected glory that come with top leadership.

Yet these constraints, realistic though they may be (and prominent though they may seem to figure in decision-making), are only the tip of the iceberg. The crisis of letting go hinges on a hidden but potent mass of psychological and emotional factors. We turn to those now.

The Physical and Psychological Effects of Aging

The stage in life at which individuals usually attain a position of top leadership coincides with the time when the effects of aging start to become more noticeable. When CEOs look in the mirror before a big meeting, what is reflected back to them is the fact that time is finite. Despite the inevitability of aging and death, many people are surprised to see evidence of physical decline in themselves. When the unexpected happens and the face frowning back at them from the mirror shows the ravages of age, they feel as if, as one wit put it, they’re being penalized for a crime that they didn’t commit.

As the years go by, a number of obvious bodily changes present themselves—dental problems, wrinkles, graying hair, balding, the need for glasses (or stronger glasses), hearing loss, weight gain, diminished bladder control, sagging breasts, loss of physical

fitness. Psychologists studying the aging phenomenon have discovered that changes in facial appearance and the genitalia are a great threat to an individual's sense of self. Sexual problems, particularly the decline in sexual ability in men, are also devastating to self-esteem; and women struggle with the effects of menopause and the loss of their procreative capabilities. As might be expected, a welter of emotional reactions, such as fear, anxiety, grief, depression, and anger, accompanies the physical effects of aging. With advancing age and declining fitness, people tend to look at life as time-left-to-live rather than as time-since-birth. While before thirty people tend to feel "immortal," in their forties they realize that this is not the case at all. Those changes in perspective, along with increasingly dependent parents and/or the death of parents, and the stress and strain that accompany adolescence and nest-leaving in one's children, all take their emotional toll. Physical decline leaves people with no option: they have to come to grips with their own mortality; they have to dismiss, once and for all, their tarnished but cherished illusion of personal immortality.

Physical changes of necessity have psychological effects, because the self is tied inseparably to the body. The loss of attractiveness, health, and fitness strikes people as an assault on the self, and that assault can reactivate feelings of inferiority and compensatory strivings that are remnants of difficult childhood experiences. Leaders feel the assault more than most people, because they tend to have a heightened narcissism (a result, generally, of both predisposition and position). Narcissists are more aware of decline—after all, the realization of one's mortality is the ultimate narcissistic injury—and thus decline has a greater psychological impact on them than it has on other people. Since the ego is first and foremost a *body* ego, narcissists especially, but all people to some extent, cling to a "phantom age," an age of success and attractiveness that they imagine they can hold on to forever. Unfortunately, the malfunctioning of the body reminds people forcibly and undeniably of their real age.

In his memoirs, former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing describes with startling frankness the fear and unhappiness that the awareness of his aging brought him:

It was while I was President of the Republic that I started to lose my looks. This development had started earlier, but insidiously. I have never completely accepted the way I look: too tall a stature, preventing a natural bearing; the hips too wide just below the belt; and, during adolescence, as the photographs show, something sweetly soft about my face, weakening its structural lines.

I started to lose my hair when I was very young. I first noticed it in the bathroom of a hotel in a little German Kurort, which was lit by a window in the middle of the ceiling. The light was falling vertically, and I saw in the mirror how the light went through the crown of hair (each strand of which I could see separately), and fell directly on to the scalp. It filled me with a kind of terror. . . .

Like all of nature, like every animal, I am the object of a slow process of decay. . . . But even if I am its object, I refuse to be its witness and I try to avoid all its signs. I never look at myself in a mirror, except to shave, and even then I make sure that the light is as dim as possible. When I walk along the street, I take care never to look into shop windows which might reflect my image.

During my seven years as president, whenever I was seated opposite a journalist or took a child in my arms in a crowd, I did not think for one second that they saw me as I had become. I was convinced that they saw me as I thought I had remained—a semi-young man of thirty-five, with hair around my temples, firm and flexible muscles, barely hardened or matured by life, and only just rid of the physical softness of adolescence. I keep all my old suits. I go on wearing them indefinitely. As they hardly show the wear, they help keep me in the illusion in which I live—that of a body which the passage of time has not affected [1991, p. 110].

Self-consciousness about the deterioration of the body—a sense, almost, of being defective—can stimulate the search for outlets that can substitute for attractiveness and virility. For some people—and CEOs are prime candidates, given the prestigious position they occupy—the wielding of power is an important substitute; symbolically if

not actually, having power becomes a replacement for having looks. Henry Kissinger, former U.S. secretary of state, even hinted at a compensatory relationship between power and sexuality when he said ambiguously, “Power is the greatest aphrodisiac.” Kissinger was well aware of the sexual attractiveness of power to members of the opposite sex, but his comment also suggests that power turns on the power-holder as well.

An explicit example of the perceived relationship between the body, genitalia or sexuality, and power is illustrated by a tradition—a real anthropological curiosity—that existed in an Indian Hindu kingdom until the turn of the seventeenth century:

It had been the custom of the Maharaja of Patiala to appear once a year before his subjects naked except for his diamond breastplate (composed of 1,001 brilliantly matched blue-white diamonds), his organ in full and glorious erection. His performance was adjudged a kind of temporal manifestation of the shivaling, the phallic representation of Lord Shiva’s organ. As the Maharaja walked about, his subjects gleefully applauded, their cheers acknowledging both the dimensions of the princely organ and the fact that it was supposed to be radiating magic powers from the land [Ross and others, 1982, p. 524].

Leaders may lose their looks, but if they still have their power, they have an allure nonetheless. No wonder so many leaders are reluctant to let go.

The Experience of Nothingness

It has been said that no one grows old by living; on the contrary, people grow old by losing interest in living. People so preoccupied by loss and personal vulnerability that they have no hope for the future often get stuck in depressive thoughts. The idea of letting go of power and responsibility, thereby compounding their vulnerability, is particularly unattractive to such people. They sometimes act out in foolish ways as they fight the inevitability of change. As the author and critic Henry Louis Mencken once

said, “The older I grow, the more I distrust the familiar doctrine that age brings wisdom.” If the power of position is the only thing a leader has left, he or she may display great single-mindedness and persistence in maintaining that power base. Already isolated at the top, they fear the loneliness and depression that they suspect might follow a loss of power. The threat of going from somebody to nobody overnight, of being a nonentity experiencing nothingness, generates an enormous amount of anxiety. President Harry Truman confronted this threat candidly when he said, shortly after leaving office, “Two hours ago I could have said five words and been quoted in every capital of the world. Now, I could talk for two hours and nobody would give a damn” (quoted in Graff, 1988, p. 5). Many leaders—given their narcissistic disposition—dread this change in status. Estranged from others by both their position and their devotion to the workplace, alienated from spouse or significant other by years of uncommunicativeness, many leaders facing retirement have no one to turn to for emotional support to counteract this fear of nothingness. As long as they can hold on to their power, they at least have the personal contact of sycophants and yea-sayers.

The late U.S. President Lyndon Johnson provides an illustration of the psychological stresses involved in the process of letting go. Since early childhood, Johnson suffered from nightmares about paralysis: “He would see himself sitting absolutely still, in a big, straight chair. . . . The chair stood in the middle of the great, open plains. A stampede of cattle was coming towards him. He tried to move, but he could not. He cried out again and again for his mother, but no one came” (Kearns, 1976, p. 32). Strokes were not uncommon in Johnson’s family. His grandmother had been paralyzed from the neck down by a stroke and sat in a chair like the one in his dream. It is interesting to speculate how far Johnson’s childhood terror of paralysis, demonstrated by this dream, influenced his later behavior and actions—to what extent his search for power was a compensatory reaction to his fear of helplessness. And yet even after he had become successful beyond his wildest dreams—as president of the United States, he was arguably the most powerful person in the world—he *still* had a fear of becoming paralyzed. (Incidentally, two previous U.S. presidents, Franklin Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, had suffered from a similar condition as his grandmother.)

Did the two images—that is, of his grandmother and these previous two presidents—become mixed up in Johnson’s mind? Later events suggest that they may have. In the late 1960s, Johnson realized that his time as president was running out. His health was suffering; he was embroiled in political crises; it was becoming clear that the Vietnam War could not be won with conventional weapons; and he could no longer depend on his usual congressional allies; the chances of his winning a second term were remote. As his presidency drew to a close, the old nightmares returned in different form:

This time he was lying in a bed in the Red Room of the White House, instead of sitting in a chair in the middle of the open plains. His head was still his, but from the neck down his body was the thin, paralyzed body that had been the affliction of both Woodrow Wilson and his own grandmother in their final years. All his presidential assistants were in the next room. He could hear them actively fighting with one another to divide up his power. . . . He could hear them, but he could not command them, for he could neither talk nor walk. He was sick and stilled, but not a single aide tried to protect him [Kearns, 1976, p. 342].

Johnson would wake up so terrified from this dream that he was too afraid to fall asleep again and risk a repeat. He could soothe himself only by going through a specific ritual. He would get out of bed and walk through the White House until he reached the portrait of Woodrow Wilson. After touching the picture, he would be able to return to bed and sleep. It was almost as if Johnson needed to make this symbolic gesture in order to reassure himself that he was still alive and not paralyzed, that it was Wilson who was dead. The symbolism of paralysis and the need to overcome it are significant indications of Johnson’s mental state. Faced with the imminent loss of power, his delicate psychic equilibrium, which cost him so much to maintain, wavered. Powerlessness, in his worldview, meant paralysis, nothingness, and death.

Given the strong conscious and unconscious imagery that letting go clearly arouses, is it any wonder that leaders hold so tightly to power.

The Talion Principle

One complicating factor for those faced with the prospect of relinquishing power is the *lex talionis*, or talion principle, which derives from early Babylonian law and states that criminals should receive as punishment exactly the injuries they inflicted on their victims. This eye-for-an-eye retribution has been the law of many societies throughout history. Although modern society has found other systems and forms of justice to compensate for injury, the ancient law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth still operates in the collective and individual unconscious. It is manifested in feelings of guilt, a general fear of retribution, the everyday language of revenge—e.g., “settling a score” and “getting even”—slips of the tongue, and such symptoms as general anxiety, stress, depression, and bad dreams.

What does the talion principle have to do with retirement? A great deal. Leadership involves the making of difficult decisions that affect the life and happiness of others—sometimes positively, more often negatively. Because of their unconscious belief in the talion principle, leaders file all those decisions in a memory bank and, as the number of “victims” mounts, increasingly expect retaliation. As a result, leadership is frequently accompanied by paranoia. While paranoia can strike anyone, leaders are especially vulnerable, because they do in fact face many dangers, both obvious and hidden, in the form of opponents who would like to oust them and constituents who would like to berate them (but have to hold their tongue to hold their job). One simply cannot be an effective leader without rubbing some people the wrong way. There will always be followers who feel stepped upon and dream of (or enact) retaliation, just as there will always be followers who envy leaders’ power and plot to attain it (especially when the time comes for succession).

Leaders, as their position at the top testifies, are extremely adept at the power game. Sensitive to any shift in their power base, they bridle when power shifts even slightly toward potential successors. They may lash out, attempting to put ambitious ladder-climbers in their place. For leaders, then, ideas of persecution are a rational response to a world populated by real, not just imagined, enemies. With no place for leaders to hide, they tend to be mistrustful, guarded, hypersensitive, and unusually vigilant.

Sensitive to signals of danger and hostility, their primary mode of reaction becomes defensiveness.

Given the very real dangers that leaders face, healthy suspiciousness is an effective adaptive mechanism. Being vigilant in the presence of perceived or likely danger is simply an extension of their wish to survive. Power is therefore a protective shield for them, because without it they are more vulnerable to both retaliatory acts and contenders for the throne. The anxiety that many leaders feel over the prospect of retaliation after loss of power can trap them in an escalation of aggression: they take preemptive action, initiating destructive measures to crush real and/or imagined opponents even before there is any indication that those opponents intend to retaliate. Such behavior is not in the organization's best interest, of course.

The CEO of a company in the insurance industry did everything in her power to postpone retirement. For decades, she had been known for her abrasive personality, and she had made many enemies. During her tenure at the helm, she had called for many purges of top executives, and she had repeatedly engaged in questionable re-engineering efforts that had led to the dismissal of thousands of employees. With that history, she dreaded the mandatory retirement date that loomed in the near future. In an unguarded moment, she referred to those SOBs who would finally get a chance to get at her when she retired. She feared that after retirement she would be more vulnerable to lawsuits from people who felt wronged by her. That fear colored not only her rational thoughts but also her dreamlife. A repetitive dream had started haunting her some time earlier: She was lost in dark forest, overcome with feelings of anxiety about things to come. From far away, she heard the barking of hounds, and she started to run, fearful of being attacked. The dream left her with a sense of dread—a dread not unlike that she felt about her upcoming retirement.

Because images of danger dominated her inner life, she went through a number of convoluted steps to get the non-executive members of the board to negate the mandatory retirement date. With the help of a headhunting firm, she tried to persuade the board that no one within the company or available outside was ready to take over the reins at this critical juncture in the history of the organization. Her efforts increased

the level of paranoid anxiety on the part of the non-executive board members. They bought into her argument that grave dangers that would fall on the company if she were no longer there, and thus they agreed to have her stay on for a few more years to shepherd the company while preparing a successor to take over.

The Edifice Complex

The fear of nothingness and the depression that accompanies it are accentuated by the need all of us have to leave behind a legacy. A common preoccupation of leaders is whether their successors can be relied on to respect the “monument” that took them so long to build—the organization or program that is the actualization of their dream. Leaders who suffer from the edifice complex don’t deal well with the prospect of retirement. Fearing that their legacy will be destroyed, they hold on to power for as long as possible. The potency of the edifice complex lies in the fact that, at an unconscious level, many people equate leaving a lasting legacy with defeating death. Thus a continuing personal presence in the workplace can be an expression of a leader’s difficulty with facing mortality, with letting go in the final, inescapable sense.

Anticipating a decline of one’s legacy in the hands of one less committed is bad enough; seeing that legacy renounced is scarcely bearable. And yet that is what some retiring leaders face. Burdened by conflicting emotions and facing an uncertain future for the first time in perhaps many years, they have to watch as the dream that has been their personal motivation, as well as the driving force behind the organization, is condemned by an anointed crown prince or princess as part of an inferior past, as having no place in the future. CEOs who placed work at the center of their entire adult lives are often devastated when the power dynamics begin to shift and a named-but-not-yet-in-office successor begins to win converts to his or her very different dream for the future of the organization. First anger, then sadness and depression, are the inevitable results. Believing in their own dream, and knowing that much more work needs to be done to bring it to fulfillment, they may have serious second thoughts about stepping down. The wit who said that the primary task of a CEO is to find his or her

likely successor and kill the bastard had a point: that “bastard” stands to destroy the outgoing CEO’s most cherished dreams.

Believing in one’s dream does not inevitably mean a rough retirement, however; there is another possible scenario. Taking great pride in what one has accomplished goes a long way toward making the disengagement process easier. Leaders who are committed enough to their organization to help develop a capable successor in the months or years prior to retirement generally experience a vicarious gratification that expedites the process of letting go. That nurturance of a successor also helps to ensure that the next generation buys into the retiring CEO’s dream. Leaders who can’t get beyond envy of their successor generate anger not only at the younger man or woman but at the ungrateful next generation, society at large, and the aging process.

Envy of the next generation is common in organizational settings. It is not unusual to find senior managers acting vindictively toward younger executives, for example. The bitterness the former feel at not having succeeded where the latter might induces them to set up traps and impediments to block up-and-comers. There can be no more unhappy creature than an ill-natured senior executive, who is capable neither of receiving pleasure nor of conferring pleasure on others.

The spiteful tactics of jaded top managers, though potentially devastating, are frequently subtle: under the guise of giving newcomers ample opportunity to prove themselves, CEOs often create parallel excuses for handicapping the progress of these individuals. The drama that often accompanies management succession is a clear example of the working of generational envy, particularly in those instances where potential crown princes or princesses, ostensibly groomed specifically for the leading role, come to a bad end, having aroused the envy of their bosses. Famous succession dramas around legendary CEOs such as Armand Hammer of Occidental Petroleum, Peter Grace of W. R. Grace, and William Paley of CBS contained elements of generational envy. The famous words of Louis XIV, “Après moi, le déluge,” are well worth remembering. Old men can be dangerous; they often care little about what happens to the world once they no longer run it.

The Process of Retirement

Loss of status, loss of recognition, loss of income, physical aging, and emotional stress: the connotations of letting go can seem overwhelmingly negative. Organizational culture and societal pressure frequently reinforce this negativity. It is clear that the problems of the retirement syndrome have to be addressed on both an individual and an organizational level. Organizations are notoriously negligent in this regard. People on the verge of retirement are all too often abandoned to sink or swim, with no help or preparation from the organization. And many of them sink; they plunge down into bitterness, resentment, and depression through their own inability (or unwillingness) to face up to reality and let go.

John Simon was a leading executive with an investment bank. His experience of letting go reflects many of the negative and damaging effects that lack of personal preparation can have:

Well, of course I didn't want to go. Nobody ever does. They might talk a lot of rubbish about looking forward to retirement, but they're only trying to make the best of it.

They had the cheek to offer me early retirement when I was fifty. I thought it was a joke at first and couldn't believe it when I realized they were serious. They didn't push it once I made it clear how I felt. Then when my fifty-fourth birthday was coming up, they suggested I might like to reconsider. The human resources people had spent God knows how long preparing an in-house brochure on retirement strategy, and I remember them handing it to me as if it was some kind of prize. I made up my mind right then that I was going to stay on as long as I could. Nobody else knew as much about the business as I did. I thought they were ignoring everything I'd done over the years. I mean, I hadn't put all that into my work just to turn it over to some business-school graduate with a silly haircut because the human resources people thought I should.

I didn't think about retirement at all. Towards the end, I cut down the amount of traveling I did, but that was because the company decentralized a lot of operations and much of what we handled went directly to the regional offices. I didn't feel any more tired at fifty-four than I had done during the previous fifteen years. At times I felt a bit out on a limb. Nearly all my colleagues had gone and my division—like the rest of the company—was full of much younger men and women. They seemed very cliquy and I didn't have much to do with them.

I was very friendly with the outgoing CEO. We'd joined the company at the same time back in the 1970s. Our wives were friends and we all met socially. He stayed until his sixtieth birthday, then came in twice a week in a consultancy capacity for a further fifteen months. I assumed I'd do much the same thing; at least, I certainly didn't think that at fifty-four that would be it, finish, the end. When nobody said anything about consultancy, I mentioned it myself, and that's when they dropped the bombshell about dismantling the division. They tried to do it nicely. The VP of Human Resources said it wouldn't be "viable" anyhow once I left; the company was getting behind the regionalization policy and opening more offices overseas. But I got the impression they thought I was taking up space. I seemed to be the only person to whom it came as a surprise. I felt stabbed in the back.

I know I was bitter. It didn't help that I started to get ill for the first time in my life. Just aches and pains—the doctor couldn't find anything seriously wrong—but I had to have a series of tests and got into a depression. I refused their offer of a leaving celebration; it seemed such a sham. Who was celebrating what? Now I regret that a bit because I left under a cloud, after more than twenty-five years in the place.

That was three years ago. I feel better now. I'm off the anti-depressants and quite by accident last year I discovered a real passion for gardening. We've got a large garden but I'd never really done anything in it—just used to pay the gardener. Then last summer he was off with a bad back for several weeks and I

took the place in hand. Now we're really making it into something special. It's practically a full-time job. Things are better with my wife as well. It was misery when I first was at home. She's an artist, very wrapped up in what she does, and of course there's no retirement ceiling in her kind of work. I don't think she understood what I went through when I retired. It was ironic that the same week I left the company she had her first major solo exhibition. We're the same age and there she was, getting all the accolades, still pushing ahead, when I felt pushed aside. We talked about it. It wasn't easy. Last month was my fifty-eight birthday and she gave me an oil painting she'd done of my favorite part of the garden. I hadn't known she'd done it; it was a fantastic surprise. It seemed to round everything off, somehow.

John Simon came to terms with his position, but the cost was high. Though his personality contributed greatly to his problems, they were exacerbated by the insensitivity with which his company dealt with him. Although the firm's efforts to confront the issue of executive retirement had been well meaning, they had not gone far enough to be effective.

Contrast Simon's experience with that of another retiring executive, in much the same situation. Victor Carlotti was managing director of a chemical division of a large multinational company:

When I was in my early sixties, the company was taken over and the parent company began intervening more in our operations. Shortly afterwards my old [managing director] left and the atmosphere changed overnight. I became increasingly unhappy with the changes and on my suggestion my early retirement (albeit only one year early) was accepted. My pension was unaffected, the company continued to pay me until my sixty-fifth birthday, and I received a small bonus.

I'd begun thinking about how I'd manage my retirement at least three or four years earlier. I knew I'd have to try and structure life after retirement in the same way I'd structured it in business. I knew I'd need a certain amount of

discipline, and as far as possible I planned things in advance. I wanted to do some charity work, and I had that lined up for the time when I left the company. I finalized all those details about six months before I finished work. I took a couple of courses on post-retirement. They were organized by a local organization. I also took a coach to help me explore various options. The company was very helpful in providing me with one.

As the time grew nearer, I had generally very positive feelings about retirement. I suppose I felt apprehensive about some aspects, but basically I took it philosophically, if not 100 percent enthusiastically. The company's attitude helped; they were happy for me to work from home several days a week. I wasn't too bothered about the loss of responsibility and decision-making. I was most worried about having nothing to do, which is why I put so much preparatory effort into restructuring my life. I was prepared to manage on less income and in fact we moved to a smaller house about a year before I retired, as our old house was starting to need a lot of maintenance. With the children out of the house, it had become far too big for us.

I knew the person who took over from me quite well. As a matter of fact, I trained her for the present position. In the last few months, I took her around, introduced her to my major customers, and did a certain amount of handover work with her. I felt kind of proud of how effective she proved to be.

Initially, I did think about taking on another position, some sort of paid employment. I made some inquiries and talked to a few people. But with all our children and grandchildren living abroad, I knew we'd be doing a lot of traveling and that really ruled out that sort of commitment. We spend at least four months of the year out of the country. When we're in England, my voluntary work for the cancer society regularly takes up two mornings a week, with some occasional meetings on top of that. I'm on two boards as non-executive director, a position that doesn't take too much of my time. Most of our friends are also retired, so we see more of them. I read more, and enjoy it more, swim and walk a great deal, and go to the theater or to a concert at least

once a week. We've also made it a habit to take two major trips a year. The most recent were one to India and, eighteen months later, a tour around the world, something my wife and I have always wanted to do. My wife and all my family were very helpful and positive about my retirement. In the end, we were all looking forward to it.

Now, three years on, I can genuinely say that I feel contented and very much engaged with life. I've met many people who feel that they've lost a lot with retirement, but that's not the case with me. I did wonder before whether I'd feel resentful, whether I'd feel I was missing out, or left high and dry. I know plenty of people who do. Would I go back now? Well, a couple of years after I'd left, my old company approached me with the offer to become the interim COO. I was very flattered, very pleased; it did mean a lot to have been asked. But the office has relocated, and we travel so much. . . . It wasn't too difficult to decide to turn it down.

In the end, the most important things for me were that I was both fortunate and determined: fortunate that I found it easy to adjust first of all to the idea of retirement, then to retirement itself, and determined that I was going to make it work. And of course I had my wife with me all the way, encouraging me to see retirement as a new phase in life, rather than as the end of something.

Not everybody has Victor's foresight and up-front approach, of course, and not everybody facing the necessity of letting go has either the time or the inclination to prepare as he did. Furthermore, not every company is as helpful as his was at easing the retirement process. For Victor, retirement was an event, and a positive one at that.

In most companies, unfortunately, retirement planning is viewed as largely a personal concern, and management provides little or no feedback or guidance. In view of the effect that senior executives' poorly managed departures can have on company morale, this policy is dangerously shortsighted. It may reflect a company philosophy that is equally blinkered. Today organizations are tempted to ease out senior people at relatively early ages for several reasons: early-retirement policies can be seen as a way

to rejuvenate the organization, as an alternative to laying off people during downturns, as a way of saving money (after all, older people are generally more expensive to employ), as an alternative to firing because of poor performance, and as a way of unclogging employment channels in order to create promotion opportunities for younger people. However, early retirements can create critical shortages of experienced personnel, and the loss of senior people may affect the organizational “memory,” which in turn can have negative effects on morale and performance. Organizations that fail to deal effectively with retirement issues need to face up to and deal with several major issues: how to recognize and maximize the value and quality of experienced executives, how to anticipate and contain the emotional and psychological costs of retirement and redundancy, and how to balance the psychological needs of executives with good policy for the company. The development of strategies to meet these issues can greatly ease the stresses of the retirement syndrome.

No one can avoid aging, but most folks can opt to age *productively*. Retirement policies should be enabling, allowing executives to address the adjustments they need to make when counting down to retirement. One such policy is phased retirement, whereby individuals can control their own gradual reduction in working time. Phased retirement can have the additional benefit to the organization of encouraging experienced personnel to remain in an increasingly part-time capacity. The cost of retaining older executives on a part-time basis is far less than recruiting, selecting, training, and motivating younger people with less work experience. Likewise, giving outgoing CEOs the opportunity to serve for some time as a consultant to the company makes the retirement process less painful and facilitates a graceful exit. Cutting down hours, phasing in the company pension, job-sharing, and working at home—all variations on the gradual process of letting go—can help to cushion the shock that might otherwise come with an abrupt departure from work. The feeling of still being needed reinforces executive morale and promotes a positive attitude toward the future. Companies that build in policies such as these and help individuals prepare for departure give outgoing executives the opportunity to look beyond work and enhance their quality of life after retirement.

Anyone who thinks that such a plan seems too idealistic, given today's economic and social realities, should remember that sooner or later we are *all* going to have to let go of our professional tasks and ties. Intelligent and sensitive organizational policy should recognize that universal transition, building room and time into the organizational culture to deal with it. Helping executives depart with grace is good for the retirees, of course, but it has a positive effect on the working atmosphere as well, making the organization a better place to work.

Companies have an obligation not only to the bottom line but also to the men and women who work for them. The high price that organizations pay when senior executives hang on beyond their "expiration date" tends to be visible to all, and companies that address retirement issues often do so only to avoid that price. But the dark side of power-holding can strike anyone, from retiree to neophyte, with its ability to detach the individual from the realities of life outside, its diminution of a personal life, its tendency to warp the responses of both leader and followers, its propensity to enmesh a leader in isolation, and its over-reliance on external symbols of success rather than inner stability. We dare not forget that real aging comes not when we pass a certain birthday but when regrets take the place of dreams, when we desert our ideals. Worry, doubt, self-interest, and despair are the furies that destroy a person's spirit. We need to go beyond Benjamin Disraeli's lament that "youth is a blunder; manhood a struggle; old age a regret."

Retirement and old age may seem a long way off to many of us. But on the day they come, it will be too late to do anything about them. If we sow little but weeds at the height of our career, we cannot expect to harvest a valuable crop later. We need to own our own lives now and at every stage we enter; and that kind of ownership requires that we diversify our interests and keep on learning. As Aristotle once said, "Education is the best provision for old age."

In addition to investing in new interests, we need to invest in meaningful relationships. In fact, that is the best investment we can make. If we want to create a pleasant ending to our life, we must make and cherish happy moments during earlier years. Possessing

good memories gives us a sense of aliveness at any time, and memories offer a fine cushion in old age.

If we plan ahead, value our relationships above all else, keep learning, and allow ourselves to let go, we need not follow the route of Warren Schmidt, the tragic hero of *About Schmidt*. Knowing how to grow old in a dignified way is what wisdom is all about, and wisdom rather than Schmidt's regret can be our destination. When we accept that life is full of tension; when we are no longer tormented by childhood guilt; when we are able to pass up short-term pleasures for long-term values; when we are able to use judgment astutely and compassionately—then will we be on the road to wisdom. Attaining wisdom is one of the most difficult chapters in the book of life, but also one of the most rewarding.

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