

Career Rehabilitation for Ex-Prisoners of War*

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November, 1972

630-72

* Paper presented to Conference on Career Planning for POW Returnees,
Office of the Secretary of Defense, Washington, D.C., November 16, 1972

Introduction

As we have learned from the experiences of World War II and the Korean conflict, the reintegration of repatriated prisoners of war is a considerable problem. Not only must each repatriate reintegrate himself as an individual, but he must reintegrate himself in his family, in his community, and in his career. A good deal of study has been devoted to the personal and psychological side of this issue, and it has been traditional to conceive of the repatriate's problems as primarily psychological and medical. Yet, if we stop to think about it, some of his greatest problems lie in his social and occupational re-adjustments because these have been genuinely interrupted. That is, the psychological stress of imprisonment can, under some circumstances, be a basis of personal growth -- the individual can come out of captivity stronger as an individual; but there is no way he can build his relationship with his family and friends or develop his career while he is physically isolated for a period of years. Particularly with respect to his career, those years are truly lost years which the repatriate may never be able to make up.

It is most gratifying to note that this conference is facing the career issue squarely. Because of the fact that the career is genuinely interrupted and probably damaged, it becomes especially important to try to understand the problems which the repatriate faces when he comes home to pick up the pieces. And again, I want to stress that his physical debilitation, his periods of anxiety, and his various family problems must be separated from the unique problems he will face in trying to rebuild his career. It is this rebuilding that will be the focus of this talk. We will have to look at the individual's side

of it -- what his problems are and how he can cope with them; but we will also have to focus heavily on the organization's side of it -- what its problems are and how it can cope with those problems and remain a constructive, supportive force toward the career rehabilitation of the repatriates.

This talk will be divided into three parts. Part 1 will deal with some general ideas about career development which apply to all of us. Part 2 will attempt to apply these ideas specifically to the problems of the repatriate; and Part 3 will deal with some of the issues which organizations who employ the repatriates will have to confront.

Part I. A general concept of career development

All adult behavior is organized around and motivated by the person's self-concept or self-image. This self-concept can be thought of as having two components: 1) a cognitive component which reflects the person's picture of himself -- who he is, what kind of person he is, what his talents and abilities are, what his weaknesses and vulnerabilities are, where he is trying to get in his life, and so on; 2) an emotional component which reflects the person's feelings of self-worth or self-esteem -- how much he values himself, how good he feels about parts of himself and how bad he feels about other parts of himself.

All persons strive to enhance their concept of themselves, that is, try to know themselves and try to feel good about themselves. We all try to have a self-image which we can accept and be proud of, and which will be acceptable to others especially those others about whose opinions we especially care. The self-concept is the organizing principle of the personality, the factor which gives consistency and meaning to our

lives. The self-concept also contains our ideals and goals for the future and thus gives direction to our lives.

One of the most important mechanisms for building, maintaining, and enhancing our self-image and our feeling of self-worth is the ability to build and maintain an occupational role. Many psychologists have shown that the major determinant of initial occupational choice is the person's effort to fulfill his image of himself. Occupational success is a major measure of self-worth. If one asks a person "who are you", one is likely to get as an answer his job title, his rank, and his employing organization; if one asks a person "how well are you doing in life", one is likely to get his estimate of his own success in his job, his income, and other job related answers.

Part of the process of building a career is to expose parts of oneself -- one's skills, values, and motives -- in the process of doing a job and getting feedback from one's failures and successes. This feedback comes from observing one's own performance and from the opinions of one's bosses and colleagues in the organization within which one works. The employing organization thus influences the career and the self-image in two ways: 1) in the job opportunities it makes available; and 2) in the feedback it provides on the degree of success in performance. The provision of opportunities, i.e. challenging work which fully engages the talents and abilities of the person, also communicates to the person whether the organization values him as a responsible, self-determined adult or whether it views him as a dependent, irresponsible child who needs constant supervision and control. The quality of the supervision and the kind of feedback the person receives further reflect the organization's view of him and thereby influence his image of himself.

For most of us a continuous flow of opportunities and feedback is what we depend upon to build and enhance our self-concept. When we cease to get feedback, we begin to lose confidence in ourselves and may therefore not fully take advantage of the opportunities inherent in a job. Even high level executives suffer from such loss of confidence when they feel that they cannot determine how well they are doing.

Most careers, even those which involve changes in organization and type of job, are continuous in their development. The individual sees a connection between what he is doing now and what he has done in the past. If he switches, he usually has a clear picture of what he intends to leave behind, what he is looking for in the new situation, and what he is bringing in the way of skills, motivation, and attitudes to this new situation.

If a person interrupts his career to go back to school, travel, take a sabbatical, go into the military service, or the like, he is usually doing it according to some plan which fits into his self-image, and usually is learning something which will enhance his later career. Even being drafted into the military can be a learning experience leading to personal and career growth. The person emerges with a new but integrated view of himself.

How are careers managed and developed? In most large organizations, careers are managed by the top echelons in an essentially secret process which only minimally involves the individual. Consequently, most people are not well trained to manage their own careers in the sense of knowing clearly what opportunities are available and how their skills match these opportunities. Hence most members of large organizations learn to be rather passive about their career development, and

need a great deal of counseling and feedback if they try to become more active and self-directed. The organization thus has a great responsibility to manage careers in a way which will enhance rather than destroy feelings of self-worth.

For most members of organizations, the first five to ten years are years of high level technical performance in some kind of staff or line role. Following these years one must gradually learn to make the transition into some kind of supervisory or administrative role which often involves fewer technical challenges and more interpersonal challenges. To make this transition requires new learning and organizational support. The person's image of himself must often change, especially when the physical and technical challenges in the job can no longer be met as his body and brain age.

In his thirties the person is in a period of high achievement; in his forties he is in a period of consolidation and reassessment, facing up to his accomplishments and his limitations. This period is often traumatic as the person judges his actual self against his aspirations and ideals. He often must rebuild his self-image, giving up aspirations which will never be realized and adding new ones which arise from new experiences and new challenges. The person's relationship to his family is often in transition at the same time as his children grow older and as his wife has fewer required child-rearing duties. In recent years there has been a shift in values as well, as young people and women have challenged some of the assumptions about career and sex roles. The person with teen-age children today faces a different set of problems than his counterpart twenty years ago.

In summary, the career is where the individual and the organization and society intersect. Since the career is a key component of the person's self-image and since his self-worth depends to a large extent on career success, it becomes crucial to ask how the career development of ex-prisoners of war is affected and what can be done about these effects? Let us next turn to this topic.

Part II. Career problems of ex-prisoners of war

Whatever else may have happened to the prisoner of war, it is clear that he has a damaged career in the sense of an interruption in his opportunities to perform in an occupational role and to obtain feedback on such performance. His self-image and sense of self-worth have been undermined and damaged to an unknown degree by this interruption. The repatriate knows that he may not be able to perform as well as he did when he was captured; he not only has lost certain skills but has lost opportunities for further learning and further job experiences. He also knows that relative to his peers he has lost ground, not only because of lack of learning but also lack of opportunity to establish himself in an organization, build contacts, come to the attention of his superiors, and other such factors which influence career development in a subtle yet significant fashion. Finally, the repatriate not only is likely to have lowered self-confidence because of lack of opportunity to perform, but he also knows that his superiors, peers, and subordinates may lack confidence in him because of the unknown effects of his having been a prisoner. The repatriate may feel that he can still fly, but he may fear that others will not like to fly with him, and often such fears will be quite realistic assessments of how others

actually do feel.

To put it another way, the repatriate will not have a clear idea of what he can and cannot do vocationally, what opportunities are available to him, what new things he will have to learn in order to take advantage of such opportunities, what problems he will have in learning new things, and how others will feel about him. In addition, many repatriates will have a genuine loss of self-confidence and will therefore be reluctant to test themselves in new performance and even learning situations.

In order for the repatriate to rebuild his self-image and regain a sense of self-worth, he will need a psychologically safe environment which will be rich in information, opportunities for self-tests, and opportunities for feedback and counseling. He will need such an environment for a period of years because the reconstruction of the self-image is a slow and multi-stage process requiring many loops of opportunity and feedback. Only when the repatriate can see himself as no longer physically, emotionally, and vocationally handicapped, and when he can believe that others also no longer see him as handicapped and in need of kid gloves treatment, will he have a renewed sense of self-confidence. During this period of rebuilding the repatriate will probably need many opportunities for vocational and personal counseling to deal with the various feelings which successive self-tests will arouse within him.

So much for the problem of the repatriate. Let us look at the other side of the coin -- the problem of the organization that is employing the repatriate. On the one hand, the employing organization, particularly if it is a military service, will have strong needs to protect

the repatriate and to help him to overcome the damage which resulted from his imprisonment. In other words, the services will feel some sense of guilt and some need to compensate the repatriate for his sacrifice. At the same time, the employing organization has needs to match up the requirements of given jobs with the talents of the employees and to maximize through this process a high level of technical performance. If the repatriate is perceived to be technically obsolete, or if he is perceived to be emotionally too unstable for certain kinds of duty, the service will be motivated to restrict his career, even if the repatriate is highly desirous of picking up the old thread. I indicated above that in most organizations the process of career management occurs at high echelons in the organization. One can assume that the repatriate's careers will be managed in the same way. People high up in the organization will decide how to provide opportunities which "make it up" to the person without, at the same time, providing opportunities that may place him in a job in which he can jeopardize the technical performance or safety of others. This process will be a delicate balancing act if my assumptions are correct about how people in the employing organization will feel. Any counseling program will have to take factors such as these as realities, and help the repatriate to cope with them. He will be a hero, but his opportunities will probably be limited.

A related problem for the employing organization will be how to design a training program which will facilitate optimum return to some kind of active duty. By what theory can one design a process of career rehabilitation? How long should a period of school be? How much voice should the man have in deciding the pace of his return? Who should

manage the pacing, the reassignment, the monitoring of how the assignment worked out, and the many subsequent steps which may be necessary before the repatriate is on a track once again? I do not have answers to all of these questions but will indicate some criteria by which one might think about them.

Part III. What can be done

Whoever is responsible for the rebuilding or resurrection of the repatriates' careers will have to provide the following things:

1) A psychologically safe environment for a period of several years; that is, an environment in which trial and error is possible without severe consequences, yet where valid feedback is provided.

2) An environment rich in information sources about career opportunities, current realities, and how the repatriate stacks up against those realities; that is, the repatriate will need good information about himself, about job opportunities, about the process of taking advantage of those opportunities, and about training or educational opportunities which will make him an attractive applicant for such job opportunities.

3) Real job opportunities for the repatriate to try out his skills in a variety of situations, graded from easy to difficult in order to encourage the testing of his limits.

4) Supportive but accurate feedback on how well the repatriate is doing on any jobs or assignments he undertakes.

5) Regular therapeutic and counseling opportunities in order to cope with feelings of failure, frustration, anxiety, anger, and guilt which may result from his efforts to test himself against new opportunities.

Such counseling must also emphasize the opening up of new career avenues if pursuit of old ones leads to frustration and failure.

Let us look at each of these components in turn, recognizing that a good program would interlace and integrate them even though different organizations may be responsible for them.

1. A psychologically safe environment

The responsibility for creating a psychologically safe environment rests both with the personnel and line function of the organization. It will not be sufficient for the personnel people to take a liberal attitude toward assignment and reassignment; the line boss of the repatriate must be highly aware of the problems of career development and must create psychological safety and support on a day to day basis. The line boss will in fact be the key to this process. One of his most difficult tasks will be the management of extreme feelings on the part of the subordinate -- on the one hand, the repatriate may be over-confident, i.e. "I want to go back to flying next week"; on the other hand, the repatriate may totally lack confidence, i.e. "I don't want to take on anything if I might fail at it." Both feelings will probably occur in cyclical fashion and both feelings reflect a damaged self-image and a desire to rebuild it quickly.

The program planners as well as the line boss will have to be careful not to create either a premature sink-or-swim situation in which failure is a high probability, or an over-safe job assignment which permits or encourages avoidance of self-tests and hiding, thereby reducing opportunities for positive as well as negative feedback. In

other words, a psychologically safe environment is one in which challenges and feedback are provided but in a climate of support, understanding, and encouragement. Therapeutic and counseling opportunities must be coordinated with job challenges so that the repatriate has opportunities to discuss his feelings with a neutral party as well as with his boss or peers.

2. An information rich environment

The responsibility for creating this aspect of the environment probably falls primarily to the program planners and the personnel departments of the employing organizations. What will be needed is continuing sources of information about career opportunities, educational or training opportunities, opportunities to discuss the realities of different kinds of jobs, the pros and cons of different career moves, etc. The emphasis must be on making such sources continually available, not only at the point of the first assignment, because of the likelihood that the repatriate will not know what questions to ask or what information to seek until he has had some job experience to give him some self-insight.

The relevant information sources will be multiple. Some information will come from professional career counselors; some will come from superiors and peers in training or job situations; some will come from potential employers in other organizations; and some will come from other repatriates who are facing similar problems or have acquired other kinds of experience. The role of the program planners will be to insure that all such information sources are available, not just in the first few months after repatriation but at various times during the first several years.

3. Real job opportunities

One of the greatest dangers of any career rehabilitation program is that the repatriate will be given jobs which lack real challenge and which fail to provide opportunities for self-tests. Long periods of schooling, various kinds of desk jobs, make work assignments which will not really make a difference to the functioning of the organization may be rationalized as the right kind of work in order to permit the repatriate to get his feet on the ground. In reality, such work or training is often dispensed by organizations in order to protect themselves from risk. Since they do not know how the man will perform, they invent work where his performance doesn't make much of a difference one way or the other.

How can this be overcome? Once again the key is the line boss. It is likely that most repatriates will end up in assignments where there is some latitude on the actual work that they do. It will be up to the line boss to pace this actual work in such a way that the man is challenged because his performance actually does make a difference to organizational effectiveness, while at the same time taking only moderate risks organizationally. To use the flying example once again, the boss may not permit a repatriate to take a plane out himself or be the captain, but he may permit him to be co-pilot until such time as his competence is once again established. If it becomes clear that he can fly, he can gradually be given more responsible assignments; if it becomes clear that he cannot fly at a level acceptable to the organization, he can be encouraged to seek some other career opportunities. Either outcome is preferable to a situation wherein a man does not have an

opportunity to find out one way or the other whether he can fly. Long periods of training often prove to be highly frustrating because of increasing anxiety about ultimate ability to do the job. It is preferable to interlace training with real opportunities for self-tests.

In order to facilitate a well paced program of work assignment it might be necessary to give some training to the line supervisors who will have repatriates reporting to them. Such training could focus on how to provide a psychologically safe environment while at the same time providing real job opportunities and challenging assignments.

4. Supportive but accurate feedback

The heading hints at the main point. It will be of little use to the repatriate to be given vague general feedback that he is doing fine, when in fact he is doing some things well but many other things poorly. Yet there will be strong forces acting to treat the repatriate with kid gloves because of the assumption that he will not be able to take negative feedback. The sense of guilt and obligation which the organization may feel toward the repatriate will most likely show in lowering standards for his performance, giving him false encouragement, and supporting him in areas where he is in fact failing. Then at some later review it will be gently suggested that he might want to consider early retirement or some other career. Knowing that the repatriate already has self-image problems and lack of self-confidence, the organization may collude by depriving him of accurate information which would enable him to rebuild his self-image through accurate feedback.

To overcome this danger the first line boss must be well oriented

to the need for providing accurate feedback, and must be reassured that he will not be hurting the repatriate if he tells him where his performance is falling short of what is expected. If the repatriate is indeed emotionally upset by such feedback he should have opportunities to work on such feelings with a counselor or therapist. But it should not be the boss's role to try to be the therapist and, in this process withhold critical performance feedback. The boss should probably be encouraged to use methods of performance appraisal which emphasize joint target setting by both superior and subordinate and a method of measuring performance which both superior and subordinate agree to at the outset. If the boss can get the repatriate to take initiative to seek out accurate information against jointly set standards and targets, his job of providing feedback becomes much easier.

5. Therapy and counseling

So far these concepts have been treated together as part of a single package, but they are in fact quite distinct and should perhaps be administered by different agencies. By counseling I mean high level vocational and career counseling which would include information about career possibilities, a testing or assessment program which would permit the repatriate to get a better picture of himself, and the providing of contacts for career opportunities if the repatriate changes organizations. The kind of total service which executive career counselors provide to both the individual and the organization should be provided to the repatriate for at least two to three years. Initial job placement will not be enough. Many of the career issues will not

even show up until the person has attempted to stay on a job for a while and finds that he cannot manage it. Such counseling might be provided by the services or the VA, but one might also consider giving financial aid to the repatriate to seek a professional who operates outside of the government in order to facilitate later transition to a non-government job.

By therapy I mean a supportive relationship with someone who can help the repatriate to deal with whatever feelings are aroused by his efforts to rebuild his self-image. It can be predicted that there will be periods of anxiety, loss of self-confidence, depression, anger, guilt, and despair. It should not be viewed as the burden of the employing organization to deal with those feelings, but it is the burden of the services to insure that each man has ready access to professionals who can help with such feelings. Whether such a program should be handled through the VA or whether the services should help each man to find a competent psychiatrist or psychologist in his home community is not clear to me, but some provision must be made for such therapeutic opportunities for each man.

Both counseling and therapy might have to be extended to the family of the repatriate as well, and one might well consider forms of group therapy or encounter groups which would permit a number of repatriates and their wives to share common feelings and concerns.

Conclusion

The five program components listed above must be interlocked and integrated with each other. Information without opportunity is useless,

opportunity without feedback reduces the possibility of learning, and new self-tests which permit a rebuilding of the self-image cannot be risked by the repatriate without some psychological safety and some opportunity for therapeutic relief. From the point of view of the employing organization such a program makes sense in that it has the best chance of bringing each of the repatriates back into a productive job as quickly as possible. It is helping the repatriate to help himself and helping him to become accepted by the work group as a fully functioning responsible member. The stigma of being an ex-POW and the fears which this arouses in others can be overcome if the repatriate is given a chance to prove himself as a contributor to the organization. If he is given too little support he will sink, but if he is given too much support he will never have a chance to live down his stigma.

The burden of the program will be on the first boss. The services should think through very carefully what type of person can handle a repatriate as a subordinate and what kind of training such a boss should be given for his extra role. It is my belief that a good superior-subordinate relationship on the first assignment will be far more important than the exact nature of that assignment. The crux of the boss's job will be to provide the right balance of psychological safety, job challenge, and accurate feedback. He will not be able to rely on medical advice and he cannot be a therapist. His job is to be an especially effective boss, who can help his subordinates to grow and develop. Locating and training this pool of supervisory people is probably the greatest challenge which the career development program faces.

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