How to Become Useless

Does competition bug you? Are you fed up with meeting goals and quotas? Planned personal obsolescence will help you cop out.

Businessmen are well aware that technology often makes a product obsolete.

A less palatable fact of life is that people also become obsolete.

Unlike products, of course, people have the ability to combat becoming outmoded. Unfortunately, many of them submit by choice. As a result of their own behavior, or luck of it, they are locked in on a program of planned obsolescence.

You, too, can become personally obsolete. It’s easy if you know how.

Here are some tried and true guidelines that are guaranteed to make any executive an outdated antique.

1. Never establish goals. Without them you naturally gravitate toward personal obsolescence. After all, if you have personal goals, you start planning and thinking about how to achieve them.

By refusing to think ahead, you avoid the frustration of having to choose between the options that could fulfill a personal goal.

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How often have you asked yourself, “What do I want to be next year, in five years, and in 10 years?” And further, “What will I need to do to reach those ends?”

If you have seldom or never asked those questions, you are on your way to personal obsolescence without half trying.

- Don’t try to understand the company’s goals. If you do, you’ll then get on to other things, like what the expressed objectives of your department are, and before you know it, you will be trying to figure out where you fit in the scheme of things and what you might do to be highly rewarded.

This sort of thinking obviously undermines the principle of not setting personal goals. It sets the stage for backsliding, such as speculating on where you stand in the pecking order.

- Avoid developing a managerial philosophy. Whether you are presently a manager, or being considered for such a position, there is no place in your planned obsolescence strategy for a personal managerial philosophy.

The development of a system of ideas or set of values about how to manage others requires some creative and systematic thinking. This, too, is verboten if you’re hell-bent for personal obsolescence.

- Don’t attempt to improve. Improvement implies goal-seeking, which is alien to your purpose.

There is a real danger in any improvement or uplift efforts, since they may beger advancement.

- Develop an abhorrence toward newness. Keep a closed mind, and you can avoid the strain of mastering new techniques or ideas.

If one method produced the desired result before, it should be clear that it always will. Conversely, if an old idea did not work once, it never will.

- Avoid job changes. This exposes you to new situations and activities. It can lead to aroused awareness and knowledge which will make you think. And that means trouble.

Whether it’s a lateral shift from department to department, or a vertical move upwards, avoid it. Learn too much and you’ll never become obsolescent.

- Never hire anyone better than yourself. You’re inviting trouble if you surround yourself with the best men you can find. They’re usually competitive people with ideas.

Hire talentless yes-men and you won’t have to be creative and analytical when approaching business problems.

- Never attend professional meetings, conferences or seminars. Keep from attending meetings designed to advance your knowledge because they lead to thinking, that great saboteur of your planned obsolescence program.

If your boss tells you to go, immediately start figuring how to avoid attending the actual sessions. Perhaps you can obtain enough information to complete the firm’s trip report from after-hour bulletin sessions. If so, look on the trip as a vacation, not a chance to learn.

- Avoid reading. Perusing trade publications, business magazines and scholarly journals is not the way to make yourself obsolete. Once again there’s the danger that you’ll learn something from them.

Let your subscriptions lapse. This, incidentally, will save money you can use on vacations. If the publication is circulated in your office, keep it moving. Knock your initials off the buck slip and toss the magazine into the “out” basket the instant it hits your “in” basket. Even biography or fiction might teach you something.

The best advice is: Don’t read.

Practice makes perfect. If you faithfully follow the guidelines above, you should be obsolete in no time. (And it goes without saying that if you use them anticlimactically, you can guard against obsolescence.)

One nice thing about your becoming an antique, if you do, is that you won’t be lonesome. Management obsolescence is a great problem confronting most companies. So when you’re outmoded, too, relax. You’ll have plenty of company.

REPRINTS of “How to Become Useless” may be obtained from Nation’s Business, 1615 H St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. Price: One to 49 copies, 35 cents each; 50 to 99, 30 cents each; 100 to 999, 17 cents each; 1,000 or more, 14 cents each. Please enclose remittance with order.