Plateauing In Your Career and Life – and What to Do About It

We all plateau.

When the promotions stop, when your work barely changes from day to day and holds no challenge, or when your life follows the same routine from day to day and week to week, you’ve plateaued.

Judith Bardwick, author of The Plateauing Trap, will discuss plateauing and what to do about it during a webinar, “Plateauing In Your Career and Life—And What to Do About It,” from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. EST on Wednesday, Dec. 3, 2014.

Plateauing takes three forms, according to Bardwick. “Structural plateauing” occurs when you reach a point in your career when you are no longer being promoted, no matter how hard you work or how good a job you do. “Content plateauing” occurs when you’ve mastered your job and fall into a routine where you perform the same work from one day to the next.

Then there’s “life plateauing,” in which your life becomes too predictable. You see the same friends, go to the same restaurants and do the same things from one week to the next.

Origins of Plateauing

Plateauing didn’t always exist in the workplace. After World War II, Bardwick said, career advancement seemed limitless, as American industry grew, the birthrate was still fairly low and “those who were committed to success, walked into the most expansionary period of corporate growth in history.”

Few people at the time had college degrees, until the federal GI Bill created an opportunity for many, especially men, to graduate from college.

At the same time, “companies developed the desire to prevent unionization by employees,” Bardwick said, “and the idea developed that if you treated your employees marvelously well, they would make a commitment; productivity would increase and employee retention would be high.”

So companies gave employees a lifetime commitment and “employees formed the fundamental expectation that there is no limit to what you can become,” she said. “The American dream
was realized to an extent that could not now be duplicated.”

Companies became multi-layered and bureaucratic, creating many more management positions than were needed, but also creating opportunities for promotion. Government programs also multiplied.

As the baby boomer generation grew up and the economy hit several recessions, many more employees were competing for fewer high-level jobs. Baby boomers plateaued before they expected, too, since there are only a small number of jobs at the top of corporations.

As economic conditions changed, companies downsized and outsourced. As a result, she said, “everyone has become a business of one. That’s why we must ask ourselves, ‘What do I have to offer that someone would want to buy? What can I do that will get someone who pays me closer to their goal?’”

Today, “plateauling is happening earlier and earlier” in the typical employee’s career, according to Bardwick, who noted that many young employees have been unable even to find jobs, in spite of their college degrees, so they are still living at home with their parents at age 30.

“It’s very different for the millennials, because the situation is the reverse of what it was after World War II,” she said. “In reality, this group is facing a lack of opportunity.”

In spite of talk about the improving economy, employment conditions remain recession-like, she said, adding that economic societal changes, government policy and personal attitudes share the blame for poor employment conditions. Around the world in developed economies, significant growth is very scarce and the opportunity for greater success has declined. Many young people feel cheated of the opportunity they expected to have.

**How to Deal With Plateauling**

Living a life or having a career that can be graphed as a hockey stick isn’t necessarily a bad thing, because everyone plateaus.

Promotions end for almost everyone long before retirement, because positions decrease geometrically as you go up the ladder. Opportunity decreases and competition increases. This is structural plateauing, the result of a decline in the number of jobs the higher up you go. It is the opposite of the Peter Principle.

“My guess is that the largest group in the population is really comfortable with routine and the things that we call plateauing, they would call pleasant, predictable and comfortable,” Bardwick said. “When you offer these people a change – and the responsibility and power that could come with it – while they know they should say yes, the truth is, basically they’re really scared of change.”

Changes add risk that many people try to avoid. The danger for people who try to avoid risk and find comfort in repetition is that doing the same thing for too long “kills passion.” To perform at their best, people instead need “a keen sense of learning and being alive.”

Being aware that you’ve plateaued can make some people miserable, but for others it can be a stimulus to create a healthy change and a new beginning. Even little changes can help convert the plateau into a hill or even a mountain.

To deal successfully with today’s rapidly changing workplace, “people have to develop confidence and resilience, which nurture the ability to begin again when first attempts don’t succeed, because you will only succeed sometimes,” she said. “You can only do that by engaging in tasks that involve manageable risk. Confidence is created by engaging risk and resilience. These are the qualities that people need in order to cope with widespread and accelerating change.”

Those who continue their education even after joining the workforce take themselves off a content plateau and may have a competitive advantage over others. But in a borderless world, with millions of educated and skilled people vying for success, even a high level of education doesn’t always result in promotions. “For those who are smart enough to have majored in the right subject and developed skills that won’t come easily for most of us – not just working on a computer or thinking, but conceptualizing – there will be opportunity,” according to Bardwick. “However, new opportunities usually come from big, new inventions. It’s always very difficult to know what those will be.”

Organizations also need to take steps to address plateauing. They can, for example, address content plateauing by creating more opportunities for employees who will not be promoted.

Failure to create new challenges results in disgruntled employees. Disgruntled employees either quit and leave – or they quit and stay, which can be even worse.

“Organizations should be flatter,” because when fewer promotions are available, promotions become less important, she said. Employees and employers “need to realize that every reward that comes with a promotion can be earned without a promotion. There’s no reason why you can’t give structurally plateaued employees greater responsibility and more freedom to make decisions. There’s no reason why people can’t be allowed to be leaders in various ways. Earning, autonomy and leadership should continue increasing as people meet new challenges.”

Individual managers can help, too, by treating people as individuals, “which is the opposite of what HR (the human resources department) does,” according to Bardwick. “HR generally treats everybody the same way, because that is considered fair treatment.”

But if managers treat people as individuals by developing a relationship with them, they can learn what people need or want most to make work more fulfilling. Learning a few details about employees, and getting to know their interests and priorities can make a significant difference.

“It is really important to get expectations to where people don’t feel forgotten and think they are a failure,” Bardwick said. “People need hope; they need goals that feel important to them and that can be achieved. It is to the organization’s advantage to collaborate with employees to enable them and make them feel like they are making a valuable contribution. Manageable risk is your best friend.”