

The high-potential fast-flying achiever: themes from the English language literature 1976-1995

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Examines the discourse on high-flyers in business (management) in academic and practitioner literature (journals and books), published in English in Anglo-Saxon countries in the past 20 years, with a stress on the last decade (1986-1995). Ideas, examples and experiences reported are (in descending order of emphasis) from the USA, the UK and Canada; with a token representation for other Anglo-Saxon countries. Following an outline of the key imagery employed, analyses the literature in terms of the meaning of the said phenomenon: high-flying (fast track, achieving, high-potential) for the individuals and organizations concerned, as well as its wider societal ramifications. Discusses issues pertaining to human resource management, in particular women's careers.

Introduction

This paper aims to examine the discourse on high-flyers in business (management) in academic and practitioner literature (journals and books), published in English in Anglo-Saxon countries in the past 20 years, with a stress on the last decade (1986-1995)[1].

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1995 was taken as the cutting point for this exercise, partly for convenience (the plethora of publications justified an arbitrary cutting point) and partly because thereafter one finds a recurring new emphasis in the literature – in line with the debate on the “new psychological contract, “employability” and “career resilience”, which merits a separate discussion[2].

The discourse that follows will not summarize all the literature uncovered, rather highlight the prevailing trends and significant signposts.

Defining the key parameters

Imagery

The diversity of imagery discovered was considerable, but the most widely used terms were found to be *high-flyers*, *fast track* and to a lesser extent *high-achievers* and *high potential*.

High-flyers, fast track, and high achievers' overall stress is on demonstrative, externalized action. In that, they differ from high potential which denotes possibilities, promise and latent action. Potential implies a context, a framework within which to develop and materialize: it is bounded – which may go some way to explain why this term is most widely used in organizations, particularly the big corporations. Flying, tracking, achieving, on the other hand, are outgoing verbs and they are applied more generally in the context of a career, a business sector, even a social class, as I shall attempt to show.

High-achievers

High-flyers, fast track and high-achievers are fairly close in their denoted imagery. Of the three, high-achievers is relatively

uncomplicated: an adjective indicating success in obtaining desired outcomes, with “high” denoting magnitude (high = much, low = little) as well as level, an inference to the echelons of the pyramidal hierarchy.

Fast track

The imagery of tracking is integral to the concept of career derived from the Latin *corraria*, meaning a “road” or a “carriageway” (Arthur and Lawrence, 1984). It suggests spatial (fast) movement. It denotes a direction (tracking to somewhere) and a spatial field where this movement takes place. Numerous titles bear these signifiers: “get on the new fast track” (Topolnicki, 1993), “stay on the fast track” (Emmett, 1989), “Riding on the fast track” (Crotty, 1988), “The derailment of fast-track managers” (Kovach, 1986), “career wastelands: the way out” (Barks and Vocino, 1988), “what makes Sammy and Suzie run?” (Kenny, 1989), “the open track to elite status” (Collof and Goodge, 1990) – are some of the common images employed.

Fast track is seen as synonymous with achieving business success to such an extent that from being the signified it became a signifier. For instance, *Fast Track* is a title of a recent computer manual (Jarrett, 1988) and the back cover gives the following rationale: “High-flying executives on the ‘fast track’ to the top need to know how business technology and office electronics can help them to progress more rapidly”. Another example is London's Gatwick airport, renamed “the fast track airport” which has been running a series of advertisements since the autumn of 1994, such as “from Guildhall[3] to the gulf by the fast track” (a double reference to business executives as well as a rapid rail and air service). Airports world-wide offer, these days, a special “fast track” to incoming and departing business class passengers.

High-flyers

Johnson (1990) in his business dictionary defines a *high-flyer* as “a young, upwardly mobile executive, often equipped with an MBA certificate, on his or her way to management heaven. The high-flyers are so named for their ability to bridge hierarchical barriers from an early stage, as if on wings. The lucky high-flyers eventually perch somewhere near the top of the pyramid.”

The imagery of flying implies fast and upward movement, versatility and skill. It is similar, and to some extent interchangeable with tracking, as in “preparing the groundwork to track the high-fliers” (Higgins and Blakeley, 1990). A corresponding imagery is the fast moving, high-achiever as a star, e.g. “helping rising stars shine as managers” (Halperin, 1990). Not surprisingly, the ultimate in this genre is that of the high-flyer as pilot: a social club of high-flyers sharing the love of flying aeroplanes merits a report in a professional magazine: High-fliers (Moreau, 1993).

Implications

Some implications follow.

- 1 where there is direction, there is a purpose, which could be conveniently summarized as *success*;
- 2 if there is movement we should see evidence for it (*performance*);
- 2 movement requires energy and will (*motivation*);
- 4 movement needs a space, an arena in which to form (*opportunities*);
- 4 tracking, like flying requires know-how and skills (*competences*).

Or, in a formula:

$$\text{success} = \text{performance!} \\ + \text{motivation, competences, opportunities}$$

The meaning of success

What matters most to UK and particularly US practitioners and academics alike is to understand success: “the ability to achieve impressive and satisfying results, not just once or twice but repeatedly, consistently” (Garfield, 1988, p. 15). Cox and Cooper’s book *high-flyers* (1988) is subtitled: “an anatomy of managerial success”. They define “a successful manager as one who reaches the top of a major organization” thereby avoiding “the tricky philosophical issues [involved] in defining ‘success’” (p. 2). A phrase like that, containing three formidable statements all in one, is a rare find. Here is what it denotes:

- success should be clear cut;
- success means reaching the top;
- therefore, successful is one who succeeds.

If this smacks of tautology, I would suggest that is because so does “the great American success story, rags to riches, log cabin to the White House, work hard, get rich” (Oechsli, 1993, p. 38). In the best tradition of Anglo-American simplicism and pragmatism, Oechsli provides us with the unfolding logic that “somewhere along the way, *money* became the sole measure of success (there, there; emphasis added). And indeed, *Money Magazine* is full of stories about

“high-flyers”, “fast track”, “peak achievers”, “super stars”. Money is not only the simplest measure of success, it is also the finest measure. There is nothing as measurable, quantifiable, perfectly comparable like money; nothing is more successful than success – as the (American) saying goes.

The equation of success = money is clearly pronounced in an organizational context by linking position in the organizational hierarchy, attainment of organizational objectives and rewards in cash and kind. This does not mean that position and money (or money-linked perks) are the single reality of organizational life. Dalton and Thompson (1988) clearly demonstrate that, by asking a different question: instead of who is successful – who is influential, a different organizational map emerges, which does not include only the top brass. However, without doubt it is the above equation which dominates the discourse in the English speaking literature.

Emphasis on performance

This emphasis should not be surprising, given the definition of success and given that organization theory (and practice) is dominated by action vocabulary which is achievement oriented – verbs such as “shape”, “determine”, “select”, “choose” (Sanderlands and Drazin, 1989) and which grammatical form encompasses the very outcomes they purport to explain.

If we accept that managers are the embodiment of organizational life and high-flyers (fast track, high achievers) are their ultimate expression, then we would expect that the action rhetoric of performance will be liberally applied to them.

Both fast track and high-flyers suggests an analogy of space, distance to be covered. It implies a quantitative, not a qualitative difference. Essentially all move along the same track, except that some move faster than others and perhaps also reach further. Garfield (1986) puts it clearly: “it appears that they [the top performers] may not be so different after all. Now we can see that differences between peak performers and their less productive co-workers are much smaller than most people think – that extraordinary achievers are ordinary people who have found ways to make a major impact” (p.15).

A high-flyer is defined, by implication, by one’s achievements:

...if management has one underlying goal, it is to achieve! That’s the name of the game, no matter how it’s played (Stuart-Kotze and Roskin, 1983 quoted in Gowler and Legge, 1990, p. 401).

This is worth underlining, in view of Peters and Waterman’s dictum in their all time

best-seller *In Pursuit of Excellence* (1982). In fact, the emphasis in the literature is on wise investment of means to an end (see the following discourse on "time"). The end aim is reaching the top – not excelling. And there are specific warnings against becoming a *perfectionist*, defined as someone who "sets unrealistic standards for themselves and their peers" (Raudsepp, 1990, p. 4).

One expects achievement (performance) to be directly translated into climbing the organizational ladder. Upward mobility is not only an achievement in its own right, but doubly so, since it is a negation of the alternative options: immobility (getting "stuck" on the career ladder) or even demotion, if not dismobility (sacking) altogether.

Motivation: the other side of the (same) coin

If performance is the outer facet of high-flying, motivation is its inner face. While the hallmark of performing is hard work, motivation – its internal corollary, denotes ... hard work.

A vignette attributed to Mary Kay Ash, the founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, brings out this point quite well. Ash has been awarding her employees diamond bumblebee pins, explaining that:

according to aerodynamic engineers the wings of the bumblebee are too weak and the body too heavy for the insect to fly. But bumblebees don't know this, and so they fly anyway (Deal and Kennedy, 1988, p. 40).

So, hard work (synonyms: determination, persistence) are the key to success. Once again we find a tautological quality in the discourse: hard work bears results (external indicator: performance); hard work is also a sign for personal drive (internal indicator: motivation). "Motivation is the driving force behind successful performance in any field. It differentiates the high achievers from the average, often more than ability or experience" says SHL, the UK market leader in psychometric testing (Baron, 1994, p. 67). Are we surprised that psychological science is party to this tautological argument? We should not be, as Townley (1994) and Rose (1985) among others teach us. Psychologists make a good living from working within organizational conventions.

Competences: beyond hard work?

The basic assumption provided by the literature is that hard work, long hours and determination will make any Jim, Tom and Harry into a high-flyer (as to Harriet, see following). But on the other hand, the clout of admiration eclipsed through the discourse of success

stories brings forward another proposition, that of the high-flyer as a legend of our times – a person so unique whom the average mortal will never match, a super (man, woman) indeed.

Which of the two models applies to the nitty-gritty of organizational life? What are the right competences which make one a high flier and keep one on the fast track?

Kakabadse (1985, 1991) settles the conflicting evidence by suggesting that hard work (aha, here we go again) is a key to success, but so is relationship management. This involves managing relations with peers, superiors and subordinates. His suggestion echoes a considerable number of reports which stress good interpersonal relationships as a key competence (e.g. Emmett, 1989; Kovach, 1986; Mercer, 1993; Randall, 1993; Wentling, 1992). Further support to the centrality of relationship competence is found in the debate on the position of women at the top. Kottis (1993) attributes the small numbers to their failure in accessing informal organizational networks which are gender-based, while Lewis (1992) reports that women encounter more difficulties with their superiors than do men. Marsh (1991) found that four out of five key "fatal flaws" to women's career progression were relationships related.

So relationship management adds that special ingredient to what otherwise seems a slog's climb to the top. Thereby highlighting the inbuilt paradox for fast climbing the organizational pyramid. To start with, one should focus on shining through hard work and tangible results; thereafter, that alone will not do. Judged well not only by one's superior, but also by peers and subordinates, is necessary to continue the climbing, – into the domain of impression management we go.

Gould and Penley (1984) report that hard work (yes, alas) is the most consistent with career progression, but impression management, such as self-enhancement, networking and ingratiation may help as well. While any strategy of building and maintaining impressions is valid – its appropriateness varying along with personality, industry and occupation (Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1995), creating an early visibility is paramount (Golzen and Garner, 1992) particularly to senior management (Kakabadse and Dainty, 1988), as is the build up and maintenance of one's reputation (Gowler and Legge, 1989).

The journey upwards

To be or not to be – on the fast track

As an internally driven enterprise, the management of one's career on the fast track is

clearly seen as one's own responsibility, particularly in the early stages of climbing the organizational ladder. Being a high-flyer on the fast track has its rules and code of conduct. The first and foremost seems to be – keep on moving. Preferably to a higher position of course, but as remaining in the same job for longer than is considered normal encourages a perception of “staying behind”, it is moving that matters most, even if it is a lateral move.

This is consistent with the dynamic imagery, inherent in the terminology of *fast track* and *high-flyer*. The expectation is that one doesn't stop moving (Feild and Harris, 1991), since that would inevitably slow the progress, frustrate the achievement and hence change one's status. On average a UK or US top executive has been employed in three to four separate organizations and has held nine separate jobs at the top of their career (Kakabadse, 1991). For that reason, the “mommy track career” (Miller, 1989), a “time off” period for women who wish to reconcile their career with the family, has been controversial. The counter-claim is that slowing the track means becoming second best at the job. One is either on the fast track or not at all: “move quickly and not to stay in one job too long” (Emmett, 1989) is the common advice.

Fast tracking – high-flying – achieving are thus woven into the fabric of effectiveness in the Anglo-Saxon version of corporate life. Upward mobility is perceived to be tightly knit into career progression and its associated rewards, that is, with success. But this is not merely a logical consequence of “organizational dynamics”. In this day and age, with the advent of white collar unemployment on both sides of the Atlantic, a fast movement forward is necessarily seen as the only guarantee against redundancy. In other words, one needs to move forward not because otherwise one will stay put, but because otherwise one will retreat! Or, as Kanter phrased it eloquently: “one may become marooned on a slow track to nowhere” (Kanter, 1977 in Lawrence, 1984, p. 25).

An associated rule of thumb is: *promotion opportunities should not be turned down*. In their survey of US corporations, Derr, Jones and Toomey (1988) found that refusal to change jobs or move location is seen to be giving up the fast track. A study of a fast moving consumer goods chain in the UK suggested similar results (Munton *et al.*, 1993) and Herbert and Daitchman (1986) equate immobility with “career suicide”.

high-flying as a corporate rite of passage
Given the conscious, purposeful process of grooming that individuals in organizations go through on their way to the top, and the

series of testing rounds (“tournament mobility”: Rosenbaum, 1979) high-flyers have to endure, it is tempting to use an analogy of transformation rituals following Trice and Morand (1989) application to careers of the concept and processes of rites of passage, derived from the seminal work of Van Gennepe (1960).

Two models of corporate management of fast track will be examined: Derr *et al.*'s (1988) study of the management of high potential employees in 33 American corporations, and the approach practised by two Anglo-Dutch giants: Unilever (Hilton, 1993) and Shell (personal information).

Derr *et al.* found that the working model of their sample was a “funnel”, whereby a relatively large number of employees was identified as having high potential (up to 20 per cent of the company's managerial and professional staff) which gradually narrowed down to a selected few. The authors differentiate three stages in the progression of high potential employees to the top echelon of their companies. These seem to parallel Van Gennepe's three-phased transitional model.

At the first stage – corresponding to Van Gennepe's *separation* phase, the identification of a person as high potential takes place (symbolically putting his/her name on the fast track list) thereby separating that person and his/her career from the rest. At the second stage – *transition* – which may last some 15 years (eight years on average: Kakabadse, 1991) the person undergoes a prolonged series of, what one may call “endurance tests” including numerous job transfers, on-the-job and formal training, being on permanent call in the service of the company. One's loyalty to the firm and its captains is tested, as well as one's physical stamina and mental strength (in a manner that would have not been unfamiliar to Van Gennepe's primitive tribes at the time of his study at the turn of the century).

Typical to that period, a person is in what Turner (1969) called *liminal* status: that is, one's social identity being in transformation, is “betwixt and between” – it is in process of becoming. Significantly, high potentials on the march are known at this phase of their progression as *comers*. Another characteristic of this period is that since all those undergoing the process share the same status, strong links of comradeship are forged, even though they are in competition with each other. At the third stage – *incorporation* – those chosen few who have made it, are invested with the office, responsibilities and privileges accorded to the top management of a mighty corporation.

The Unilever and Shell strategy may be characterized as a “spire” model. Following a

thorough and rigorous selection process, a small number (1-2 per cent) of applicants are taken on the fast track. The *separation* phase comprises two stages. The first of which is brief and intensive and lasts for several months only, during which a candidate is considered and if accepted joins the fast track directly from outside the company (normally on graduation). The great majority will stay on to assume senior positions, unless they are found undeserving within the first four years (Shell) to six years (Unilever).

On entry into the company, the fast tracker starts the second stage of separation with *conditional status*, which if concluded successfully, one will be conferred the standing of a high-flyer. At Shell this takes the form of formal positioning on the CEP ("current estimated potential") grade and inclusion in the *under 36 list* (age 36 that is - see following). At Unilever this is known as the *highly promotable list*. A failure to be confirmed will inevitably lead to the person leaving the company.

Staying on, one is thoroughly probed throughout the *transition* phase, similar to the US experience, as to one's suitability and endurance, by a round of jobs and special assignments. Typical to this period, a high-flyer is seen as a company-wide resource (*liminal* status), rather than belonging to a given division, professional group or job category. In a highly fragmented conglomerate such as ICI prior to its division into two corporations - ICI and Zeneca in 1993, the 200 top positions were ex-territorial, under direct control of the executive directors (Edgar, 1988).

Other career models such as Dalton and Thompson's (1986) four stage model of career progression (apprentice - independent contributor - mentor - director (sponsor) correspond well to this scheme.

Time

high-flying is time-related: a reflection, no doubt, of our fascination with a superior use of time - the currency of modernity - as measured by activity outputs. Fast track therefore also means, literally, moving fast in time units. Whether this implies a projection of one as superhuman (Superman?) or rather as a finely-tuned machine, is open to debate. Both options exist in the imagery of the language: (high) flying has of course the ready connotation of Superman, while the finely-tuned machine is a common imagery for the mechanics of the clock.

Superman flies not only high, but also fast - so fast in fact that he could even control time. Recall that moment in *Superman III* (the film sequel) when the hero stops the globe in its swivel and retrieves time in order,

Orpheus-like, to steal his beloved one - Lois Lane, the ordinary American girl, from the jaws of death. The conquest of death is of course the ultimate conquest of time. What a potent metaphor to achievement!

Speed means might. High-flying is a burst of energy. Fast tracking requires a powerful engine. The mechanical movements of the clock, on the other hand, are the ultimate of fine tuning and co-ordination. Synchronization is the key and the emphasis on conservation, balance and measure. The strength is in controlling, not expanding. The trick is following the best track (without being side-tracked), flying the right course (by the shortest route), aiming for major achievements (without losing time on secondary ones). Staying on the fast track, hence, requires a fine balancing act between fast and slow movements - between rushing time and investing it wisely.

Upward mobility in the Anglo-Saxon model of management is critically time-dependent, on how long it takes to accrue experience which will be considered sufficient to legitimate an ability to manage a top position. In other words, experience means time. So time is not something one can jump over by brilliance and ingenuity. Experience (time) must be accumulated and, quite literally, *experienced*. The best one can hope for is for a combination of Superman and a clock, i.e. applying much energy (hard work) but efficiently (working to targets). This is how one beats time. This is how one becomes successful. Ergo, success means winning against time, because, we learn from the USA, *time is money*.

Age, as an aspect of time, becomes another comparative measure of success: at what age does one reach a key position, at what age does one become recognized as a top executive? The answer to that seems to be - as early as possible. Though, given the emphasis in the Anglo-Saxon corporate world on experience it is unlikely to be as early as, say, in the French model (Roussillon and Bournois, in this issue). The 30s are the age cohort most commonly encountered in the literature as the decisive time to take a significant step forward, ranging from the early 30s (Kakabadse and Dainty, 1988) to 39 at the latest (Rosenbaum, 1989), with 35 often mentioned as the "magic" year to make or break a career at the top.

Women high-flyers - the case of (fe)male models

I suggested earlier that if managers were the embodiment of organizational life then high-flyers are its ultimate expression. By implication, women high-flyers, the rarer of the breed, would be the clearest manifestation of

the language of achievement and success: truly *la crème de la crème*.

Given that there are very few women in top executive positions[4], the majority of publications do not paint a rosy picture for women's chances to break through "the glass ceiling". The following headlines are typical: "Women managers: room at the top?" (Wentling, 1993), "Women at work: breaking the glass... or just window dressing?" (Ettore, 1992). "There are cracks, but the glass ceiling is still widely intact" (Marengi, 1992), "Women in business: fast track derailment" (Gregory and Kleiner, 1991).

Breaking through the glass ceiling is difficult and the perception seems to be that the only way to do that is the men's way - and do it better (Morrison *et al.*, 1987). Wentling (1993) reports the perception of US women in middle management positions on how to make it to the top and the formula she comes up with can be summarized as "work hard, harder, the hardest".

An alternative approach, greeted with controversy, is to provide women executives with the option of a parallel career track to help them balance career and family obligations, thereby moving in a slower, more flexible pace to the top (Burton, 1991; Miller, 1989): this became derisively known as the "Mommy track". Critiques pointed out that was a certain way to ensure women will never be able to make it, by competing from an inferior position against men.

Clearly, the literature's position is that women are discriminated against and, as one commentator put it: "the ceiling isn't glass; it's a very dense layer of men" [5].

So what can we learn from those chosen few who made it to the top? Quite a lot actually. It seems that once women break through the glass ceiling they may be even more successful than men. Powell and Butterfield (1994) found in a study on promotion decisions in a US federal government, cabinet-level department, that women were positively discriminated; and an anonymous report on a US study suggests that women in senior positions are promoted faster than men (Anonymous, 1994).

Notes

- 1 Articles in journals (academic and practitioner) for the period 1986 onwards were found using the ABI/INFORM business database (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor; MI) and from 1990 onwards also in BIDS (Bath Information and Data Services).
- 2 See the papers by Iles; and Baruch and Peiperl in this special issue and Altman and Iles in Altman, Y. (Ed.), *Careers in the New Millennium*.
- 3 Guildhall is the City of London's town hall (by implication, the headquarters of London's business and financial hub).

- 4 Less than 5 per cent of the major US corporations (Loden, 1987) and less than 2 per cent in America overall (Marrujo and Kleiner, 1992). The figure for Canada is less than 5 per cent (Applebaum and Shapiro, 1993). In the UK 1.7 per cent of directors in 1994 were women (Remuneration Economics, 1994).
- 5 Attributed to Anne Jardim, director of the all-women Simmons College Graduate School of Management, Boston, MA. (Bickerstaffe, G., "Degree of reluctance", *Financial Times*, 21 October 1994, p. 14).

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