

The Morale Curve

The Peace Corps, a US based volunteer organization working in the third world, found that many of their young volunteers were experiencing depression and even suicidal thoughts during their first year or so of working in the third world. Walter Menninger, of Menninger Clinic, came up with some interesting conclusions – the stages of morale in job transition. (Menninger, 1969)

These have been adapted by Dr. Laura Mae Gardner (Gardner, 1989) as follows:

Stage 1 Crisis of Entry: the Enthusiasm Stage

This is the “honeymoon period” and lasts about 6 weeks. The feelings experienced include enthusiasm, anxiety, strong motivation, apprehension, energy. The core issue is personal competence (“can I do it?”).

Stage 2 Crisis of Arrival: the Starkness Stage

This is triggered by negative surprises – the price tag becomes apparent. The feelings experienced include slight to severe depression, frustration, grief, disillusionment and loss. There is great regret for the lost “good past” and a great deal of stress. Psychosomatic illness increases and productivity goes down. The core issue is whether to stay or to leave. The average person takes about 6 months to reach the bottom.

Stage 3 Crisis of Acceptance: the Anger/Initiative Stage

The new worker is asking, “How am I going to deal with this?” In order to climb out of the pit, he or she needs to have experienced some success in dealing with the obstacles they have been facing. Feelings experienced at this stage include anger, activism, speaking out, reassessment and initiative. The core issue is, what changes must be made in order to survive? This stage follows about eight months to a year of being in a new situation.

Stage 4 Crisis of Re-Entry: the Moderation/Acceptance Stage

It takes about eighteen months to reach this stage. Feelings in this stage will be a measure of contentment, satisfaction at having survived big hurdles, new awareness of personal competency, less disillusionment with self and others, less preoccupation with the present and more ability to look to the future. The core issue here is balanced realism.

Other research into adjustment issues:

The first term is recognized as the time of maximum adjustment....

If we are to avoid higher attrition rates, there is a need for as much supportive help as is practicable during this period....

...the counselor’s visit would not be a checkup on the [person’s] progress in the work. His or her only purpose would be to listen to the problems like: adjusting to culture, other [workers], to living conditions, the national church, to the home office – all of the troubles that arise in a strange and often seemingly hostile situation. (M. Jones, 1993)

Transition Experience

	Engagement	Leaving	Transition	Entering	Re-engagement
Social Posture	<i>(Present)</i> Commitment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Belonging ▪ Responsibility 	<i>(Future – temporary)</i> Preparation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Loosening ties ▪ Disengaging ▪ Relinquishing roles 	<i>(Future)</i> Chaos <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of structure ▪ Exaggerated problems ▪ Grief/loss ▪ Emotional instability ▪ Dreams/nightmares 	<i>(Present - temporary)</i> Superficial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Observation ▪ Uncertainty of trust 	<i>(Present – Permanent)</i> Commitment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Belonging ▪ Involved
Social Status	Status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reputation ▪ Position 	Celebration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Farewells ▪ Parties/Recognition ▪ Attention 	Status-less-ness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unknown ▪ Must initiate acquaintances ▪ Ambiguity ▪ Scared objects ▪ Special knowledge without use 	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Search for a mentor ▪ Exaggerated behavior ▪ Risk-taking ▪ Errors in response 	Status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Known ▪ Conforming behavior
Psychological Experience	Intimacy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Knowing ▪ Part of “in” group 	Denial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rejection ▪ Resentment ▪ Sadness ▪ Guilt 	Anxiety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Isolation ▪ Panic ▪ Self-Centeredness ▪ Dissolution of Ego 	Vulnerability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Uncertain ▪ Easily offended ▪ Ambivalent ▪ Fear 	Intimacy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Concern for others ▪ Knowing