In this stage we often start believing in many myths, which lead to undesirable changes in our behaviour, making us less effective.

There are many questions that our mind seeks answers to at this stage and these are different for different people. There is no “one size fits all” formula to resolve MCC as people go through issues that are unique to them and which need to be addressed differently. However, if there is one thing that is certain, it is that ignoring the issues won’t lead us anywhere. We need to recognise and embrace them upfront in order to resolve them.

When we think of our corporate career life cycle, we can divide it into five stages: The first stage is when we prepare ourselves for our corporate journey. The second stage comprises the first few years of our career. We learn new things and achieve new heights. The third stage is when we pass through our mid-career. The fourth stage is when we go through the final years of our career. By then, we almost know whether we are heading towards the goal we had set for ourselves many years ago or not. And the last stage is when we decide to hang up our boots, sit back and look back on our journey.

All these stages are equally important in one’s career. However, most of the time we find some sense of crisis hitting us at the mid-career, which is stage three of our career.

This is the stage when we have an idea about what’s next, but are seldom clear on when and how we can reach there. We are reasonably clear about where we want our career to head, but we are not quite sure of whether we will reach our desired destination. We look within ourselves and to others for assurance that we are on the right path. Many a time, thanks to this state of mind, even the best of professionals pass through a stage of chaos, confusion and change. It is a point of inflection and a stage of transition. And, like any stage of transition, there is confusion in the mind about how to navigate to the next stage.

Most of the time, the first symptom of a mid-career crisis (MCC) is a confused state of mind. Many simple issues get complicated and we start looking for answers to questions that never bothered us earlier. From this confused mind, we get to a state where we slowly experience a change in attitude, knowingly or unknowingly. We start to change as a person. Many a time, we end up doing things or behaving in ways that we would have otherwise avoided. We adopt certain attitudes which, in our wisdom, we know are not encouraged in the corporate world. Over time, this either derails our career plan or slows down our growth.

That’s when the real crisis starts. We would like to correct the situation and return to our previous state, but it is not easy since we might have failed to identify the starting point of MCC and have taken decisions that cannot be undone. That leads to more
frustration and sometimes forces us to behave in ways that worsen the state of MCC. Then, if we fail to reaccelerate our progress despite our best efforts, we end up having a real crisis that leads to misery, both at work and at home.

Thus, the idea at this stage is to recognise the problem and kill the issue before it becomes a monster and affects our career progression.

Let me refer back to a time, when I was General Manager – Commercial, Coca-Cola India. I had been in the corporate world for about thirteen years and had spent time in three companies, performing multiple functions in different industries. In my mind, I was all set to leap ahead in my career.

When I compared myself to my friends and colleagues, I could safely state that while I might not be ahead of all my contemporaries, no one could tell me I was a laggard. In terms of my personal life, I had nothing to complain about either. But still I was unhappy. At times I felt miserable; it seemed as if nothing was going right for me. I was confused. My life was nothing but chaotic and I was convinced that I was in a big mess.

I spent many hours introspecting and spoke to my friends, seniors, peers and also my juniors. Against my firm beliefs, I visited an astrologer, hoping that he could tell me about my future. I wanted to convey how unhappy I was with my career. In the end, almost everyone sang the same tune and reassured me that ‘all will be well’. Though their words provided me temporary solace, in reality, nothing changed. I continued to feel miserable and it got worse with every passing day. But where was the problem? What was I really looking for? Frankly, I did not have the answers.

However, I was determined not to leave my suffering unattended. During our conversations, my seniors, peers and juniors told me interesting events and stories, some from their own lives. I realised that I was not alone and almost every-one went through this phase. But while some people came out and kept growing, others failed to sail through. These stories gave me many insights into how winners conducted themselves at this stage of their careers. These stories shattered many myths that I used to believe in. Identifying those myths and understanding their effects helped me overcome my MCC.

During this amazing journey to understand the different phases of MCC, I approached a few senior corporate leaders and discussed my understanding and then asked them to share their personal experiences. While some of them refused, most of them agreed. They shared their learnings, the moves they made during their mid-career and their experiences on how they dealt with MCC. But when I read their stories, which I have included in my book, I was amazed to note how neatly they fitted into the patterns I had observed, and how well they addressed the central question addressed in this book: why some sail through while others don’t?

And if I could pick up just five common threads that I found in these CEOs’ stories, they would be:

1. Rewrite your goals/ambitions; they might have changed over time since you started your career, setting your initial goals;
2. Reinforce the confidence in yourself, take clear decisions;
3. Recognise your unique ability that differentiates you from others;
4. Be ready to leave your comfort zone, embrace the unknown;
5. There is no short cut to success. Do what is right, with passion and integrity. Never ever give up or alter the course for short term gains. Enjoy your journey, you just have one life.

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*The opinions/views expressed in this interview are purely personal in nature, and has nothing to do with those of AkzoNobel*