Managing Supersession in the Armed Forces: An HRM Approach

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Supersession is too important an aspect of organizational existence to be dismissed lightly. It is a situation to be managed jointly by the organization and affected individual with the clear understanding that organizational interests are overriding. The Human Resources Management (HRM) approach aims to ensure that staffing manning of an organization effectively meets the quantitative and qualitative aspects at all times to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. An important element of HRM is Human Resource Planning (HRP). This calls for long-term manpower projections based on which intake would be determined. This paper makes attempt to identify key issues using the 'HRM approach' in managing supersession. While staking no claim to provide definitive answers (a rather tall expectation) the endeavour has been to highlight an approach within the framework of contemporary motivational theories.

"Therefore, do you always without attachment perform action which should be done, for performing action without attachment man reaches the Supreme."

- Transliteration of Stanza 19, Chapter III, *The Bhagwad Gita*

The term 'supersession' encompasses a range of meanings that vary with the individual as also with the position an individual occupies in an organization, thus, giving rise to differing points of view or perceptions. It must be recognized that perception is nothing else than what reality means to the perceiver, though the meaning attributed may actually differ from reality. To resolve this seeming paradox, it is accepted that the Sun rises in the East and sets in the West, which is simply a perception. A discerning observer with a rudimentary exposure to school-level geography will acknowledge that in reality the Sun actually neither rises nor sets! Thus, the perception of supersession in turn determines its reality as perceived by the organization and individual and which further determines the responses to it by both. Supersession is also a recognized (though not always readily acknowledged) phenomenon of organizational existence that has widespread ramifications to both; the organization and the individual. These can be potentially (though not always) damaging to both and thus have to be either minimized or at least their dysfunctional aspects need to be effectively managed. An understanding of supersession as also its etiology would go a long way in its

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According to the Oxford Dictionary the term 'supersession' originated sometime in the 15th Century: derived from the French *superseder* and the Latin *supersedere* with the meaning 'to be superior to'. Thus an individual supersedes another, or takes the place of the other (a person previously in authority), and that other gets superseded. In its contemporary meaning in an organizational context, supersession could imply that an individual has been passed over for promotion or has been overtaken by an erstwhile subordinate or even colleague on grounds of being unfit for promotion for whatever reason. It is within this contextual framework that this paper would attempt to examine the various aspects of supersession with the objective of identifying possible solutions leading to its effective management using the 'Human Resources Management' (HRM) approach.

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The traditional approach to managing supersession has, more often than not, unfortunately been one of drift or letting the organization or individual live with the situation and find own solutions: a somewhat 'hit-or-miss' approach with the hope of a satisfactory outcome not entirely as a result of conscious effort but rather as an outcome of chance. The individual is left to own devices to cope and the organization somehow 'lives' with it: sometimes to its disadvantage. Either way, both the organization and individual run the risk of sub-optimal solutions. Supersession is too important to be left to an outcome of chance and especially in the armed forces.

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To understand the 'HRM' approach to supersession, it is necessary to understand the meaning of HRM itself as also the term 'management'. Management at its simplest is 'the conversion of required resources into pre-determined results'. Human Resource Management is thus a process that meets the staffing function (or the filling of necessary vacancies) in an organization. It ensures staffing at all times in both qualitative and quantitative

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terms. This could also be considered as 'human inventory management' – along a continuum whose extremes are situations of either surpluses or deficiencies in manpower: with the understanding that both extremes would be situations where an organization's efficiency and effectiveness would be sub-optimal. In reality all organizations function at some point along this continuum.

Supersession at officer level would be examined from points of view of both the organization and the affected individual with organizational interests being overriding factors. The objective would be to evolve a frame of reference to identify 'satisfying' solutions. The solutions would be examined against the backdrop of theories on individual motivation propounded by Abraham Maslow, Paul Alderfer Clayton and Fredric Herzberg. The objective would be to construct a frame of reference in which optimal (or at least *satisfising*) solutions could be identified resulting in a win-win situation. The word *satisfice* was coined by Herbert Simon in 1956, a "handy blended word combining *satisfy* with *suffice*"…that attempts to meet criteria for adequacy, rather than to identify an optimal solution. This approach is of relevance since 'managing supersession' is little else than a compromise: a '*satisfising*' or adequate compromise in the interests of both the parties.

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The HRM perspective aims at an 'optimum' organizational pyramid: one that must at all times conform to the size commensurate with its objectives (itself a dynamic and ever-changing concept). This would ensure that there are no surpluses or deficiencies in the qualitative and quantitative aspects of manpower and also minimize superseded manpower at all levels. Such ideal optimization is a theoretical goal to be aimed for though almost well nigh impractical to achieve in reality. The reasons are not too difficult to comprehend. To ensure optimal size it is necessary to examine the rates of organizational inflows and outflows. Under ideal conditions, it may be possible to project and match inflows and outflows in quantitative terms to a degree through mathematical modeling. However, in real terms the outflows cannot be exactly matched with inflows since outflows are probabilistic and stochastic events occurring at all levels of the organization. Outflows at each level would have to be exactly matched with inflows to conform to the optimal pyramid. A stochastic process is one whose behavior is non-deterministic in that the next state of the environment is not fully determined by the previous state of the environment. Since inflows in military organizations are only from the bottom of the pyramid such exact optimization is impractical.

Unlike in the civil sector where lateral inflows and outflows are possible at all levels of the organization (including at the top) out of and into the environment,

this is impractical in military organizations. In both organizations it is impractical to accurately assess inflows and outflows, which are related to the accuracy of forecasting and are an element of Human Resource Planning. Demand forecasts are invariably based on strategic projections (not always accurate since they are based on assumptions or scenarios that can and sometimes do change). Vacancies therefore cannot always be accurately quantified. Opportunities for promotion and career paths also vary at different levels of the organization. Hence an optimal pyramid in reality is a myth. Supersession is thus inherent in pyramidal organizations and more so in military organizations. While in civil organizations it is possible to shed surpluses in manpower on account of greater mobility into the environment, this is somewhat restricted in the case of military organizations. Military skills do not always have complementary counterparts in civil organizations and even if they do it may not always be possible for the entire outflow to be absorbed, thus restricting scope of mobility out of the organization. The target organization may also be reluctant to permit such 'entrainment' on account of disturbing own seniority system and adverse reaction from its own members. The inevitability of retaining superseded manpower in required numbers and in their current positions in the pyramid is thus almost a *fait accompli* in military organizations.

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The Hierarchical Theory of Needs proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation* is a theory in psychology. He placed human needs in a rigid pyramidal hierarchy with the lowest "deficiency needs" of physiological, security and safety, love and belonging and esteem needs at the bottom: and the "higher-order needs" of self-actualization at the top. If the "deficiency needs "are not met, the individual is anxious, tense and, in an organizational context, de-motivated. Individuals also strive to realize higher-order needs as articulated by Maslow: *what a man can be he must be*, or realize their full potential (real or perceived). In this model, higher order needs can be realized only after lower-order needs are fulfilled. This hierarchy of needs was from an individualistic perspective, since Maslow was from the USA, a highly individualistic nation. The needs and motivational drives of those in individualistic societies tend to be more self-centered: focusing on self-improvement, with self- actualization being at the apex of the pyramid. However, self-actualization is not representative of individual needs in collectivist cultures where the needs of acceptance and community life predominate. Contradicting Maslow, the Chilean economist and philosopher Manfred Max-Neef has argued that fundamental human needs are non- hierarchical.

Notwithstanding criticism and little empirical evidence forthcoming to support Maslow's theory, it is still useful for our purposes. The superseded individual is, after all, both an individual with aspirations as also a member of the organization (or society).

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While individualism is sharply on the increase in our society, the community element is still present. Indians continue to display a need for 'Affiliation' as proposed by the American social psychologist David McClelland (20 May 1917-27 March 1998). In his model of motivation he proposed three needs: Achievement, Affiliation, and Power. Need Affiliation (n-Aff) is the need to form friendly relationships and human interaction: a need 'to feel liked' and 'accepted' by others. A person with a high need for affiliation is likely to be a team player. The Indian psychologist Udai Pareek, who worked with McClelland, added the need for 'Extension' or n-Ext to the list. This is the drive to help others in need purely as a function of one's realization that the other person needs help and that one is capable of providing it. Both these theories are food for thought in an Indian context and can suggest an approach to managing supersession.

The American psychologist Paul Alderfer Clayton (born 01 September 1940) modified Maslow's theory by re-categorizing Maslow's hierarchy into his ERG theory (Existence, Relatedness and Growth). The lower order needs (Physiological and Safety) were re- designated as 'Existence' needs and Maslow's interpersonal, love and esteem needs as 'Relatedness'needs. The Growth category incorporated Maslow's self-actualization and self-esteem needs. Clayton thus compressed Maslow's five level-hierarchy of needs into three: Existence needs (desire for physiological and material well-being-Maslow's physiological and safety needs), Relatedness needs (desire for establishment of satisfying interpersonal relationships-Maslow's social needs) and Growth needs (desire for continued psychological growth and development-Maslow's esteem and self-realization needs)

While acknowledging that unsatisfied needs motivate behavior, in modification to Maslow's model Clayton proposed the *frustration-regression principle* in that when higher-order needs are not met, the individual may move down the hierarchy and operate at a lower need. Thus a previously satisfied lower level need can be reactivated and influence behavior when a higher level need is not satisfied. The ERG model allows two- directional movement along the needs-hierarchy unlike in Maslow's model that permits only unidirectional and upward movement along the pyramid.

In a further interpretation of Maslow's theory, Dr VS Mahesh has evolved the 'East- West' model of motivation. In this he suggests that Maslow's 'lower-level'

needs can only be met by others and therefore fall outside the individual's domain whereas self- esteem and self-actualization are within the individual's domain. Dr Mahesh asserts that individuals operating in their own domain are 'self-directed' whereas those operating at 'lower' need-levels are 'other-directed' since their needs-gratification is dependent on 'others' and therefore they are not quite autonomous. However, it must be recognized that individuals do not fall exclusively in either of these categories. The key word is predominantly: while mobility between these extreme positions is possible, individuals can be predominantly 'self-directed' or 'other-directed'. The relevance of this to styles of leadership in the management of supersession is evident. Autonomous activity guided by effective leadership could be the key to get the best out of superseded individuals.

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Frederick Irving Herzberg (17 April 1923 – 19 January 2000) the American psychologist introduced the two-factor theory of motivation. This distinguishes between 'Motivators' (challenging work, recognition, responsibility, achievement and scope for personal growth) that give positive satisfaction arising from intrinsic nature of the job itself, and 'Hygiene' factors (status, job security, salary and fringe benefits) that are of an extrinsic nature. Hygiene factors are contextual job factors that can cause dissatisfaction if missing, but do not necessarily give satisfaction and motivate employees if present, just as medical hygiene only prevents disease rather than enhance well being. Hygiene factors are thus extrinsic to the work itself, and include aspects such as organizational and supervisory practices, and salary. Essentially, hygiene factors are needed to ensure that an employee is not dissatisfied, but Motivators, being intrinsic to the job, are needed to motivate an employee to higher performance. Thus dissatisfaction and satisfaction on the job are the extreme positions along a continuum, with Hygiene factors ensuring no dissatisfaction (but not necessarily satisfaction) and Motivators ensuring satisfaction. There is considerable evidence to validate this theory.

At the time of supersession and having been passed over for promotion, the affected individual has to contend with a situation where an erstwhile junior is now either a colleague or perhaps a superior. An erstwhile colleague may also have become the superior. It is assumed that the individual had an acceptable degree of job satisfaction (or at the least was not dissatisfied) prior to supersession. In Maslow's pyramid there is now a loss of recognition and self-esteem thereby blocking the scope for self-actualization (assuming that physical, security and safety needs have been met). In Clayton's ERG (modified Maslow's approach) model 'Growth' needs could have been blocked, but the individual could re-activate either 'Relatedness' or 'Existence' needs. In Herzberg's model, the individual now has no challenge

(assuming there was challenge earlier) in the job and is either not satisfied or dissatisfied. Within the framework of all three theories, the individual has to cope or 'manage' the situation and the organization contended with the fallout unless effective managed.

The point of view of the organization, further movement along the Maslow pyramid is now blocked. The ERG model still provides for 'frustration-regression', whereas from the Herzberg model, 'Motivators' are not possible, but 'Hygiene' factors where present could result in a state of (at the least) no dissatisfaction. The frame of reference or 'manoeuvre space' for both the individual as also the organization, howsoever restricted, provides the window of opportunity for 'satisficing solutions'.

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For further examination, the superseded individual could be categorized as 'Mover', 'Marginal', 'Miserable and 'Solid Citizen' with scope of mobility between these categories. The 'Mover' has decided to move out of the organization, and is irrelevant for further examination unless not permitted (or unable) to facilitate outward mobility, in which case would continue to be part of the problem. The 'Marginal' is an individual who does not leave the organization (perhaps has no scope for outward mobility), continues to bad-mouth it, vocalizes feelings of (real or imagined) injustice, spreads dissatisfaction amongst others, does minimal work (so that the organization has a weak case to remove him) and is in effect an 'on-the-job retiree'. Such an individual infects others: peers, subordinates, the 'Miserable' and 'Solid Citizen' alike and is a challenge to leadership. The 'Miserable' displays apathy and is a non-contributor...simpler a drifter. The 'Miserable' too adversely infects others by drawing pay for no work and is also a challenge to leadership. The 'Solid Citizen' is a mature individual. Having assessed the situation in an objective manner and having rejected the 'Mover' route for whatever reason continues to work with dedication. Such an individual finds Maslow's self-actualization in the philosophy of 'work is worship' or '*nishkama karma*'. In the model proposed by VS Mahesh, such an individual has moved up from being 'other-directed' to becoming 'self-directed'. In Clayton's paradigm the 'Solid Citizen' does not regress to 'Relatedness' or 'Existence' needs but finds challenge in work in keeping with the philosophy of 'work is worship'. In Herzberg's schema such an individual looks for satisfaction in work, does not expect the organization to provide challenging work, or finds challenge in current work. Such an individual may well not scale Maslow's hierarchy, but has self-esteem, motivates subordinates and soon gains the respect and recognition of superiors, peers and subordinates alike. Even a degree of self-actualization is possible with this approach since this individual is 'self-directed'.

'Management of supersession' encompasses managing the 'Mover', 'Marginal', 'Miserable' and the 'Solid Citizen'. A factor not to be lost sight of is that organizational interests being overriding factors are paramount and cannot be compromised. In the same vein, organizational effectiveness (of which morale is a significant component) cannot be subordinated in favour of an individual's interests. An individual voluntarily joins the organization and can expect own interests to be upheld only within the overall interests of the organization. However, an individual too would consider self- interest as overriding. It must be accepted that a superseded individual can, technically, serve till superannuation in the rank held and must be kept in view when dealing with all categories. The 'manoeuvre space' lies between these two extreme positions with organizational interests being overriding factors. However, this provides a range of options to the organization.

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In the case of the 'Mover' the organization must facilitate separation unless continued retention is essential. A general plea that vacancies need to be filled is untenable and is a reflection of faulty policy since policy must facilitate further mobility from below. Continued retention must be the exception and not the norm since the organization runs the risk of converting the 'Mover' into a 'Miserable' or Marginal' and accept the individual on his own terms: clearly a 'loose- loose' situation. Where the 'Mover' wants to leave but cannot on account of lack of necessary skills, the organization could provide pre-release inputs. Attempts could also be made to shift the 'Mover' to the category of 'Solid Citizen'.

The 'Marginal' and 'Miserable' have to be handled on the administrative separation route. A situation where the individual draws salary without working or only at a minimal (though unacceptable) performance level while simultaneously bringing the organization in contempt is incompatible with organizational interests. After reasonable attempts to retrieve the position and rehabilitating the individual have failed, administrative separation on grounds of inefficiency must be resorted to. This would require sound policy, effective leadership and legal competence to address law suites and has to be done in a clinical (though not unkind) manner.

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The 'Solid Citizen' is a mature and competent individual who identifies with, and continues to work for the organization with sincerity, dedication and loyalty. A traditional, though potentially

hazardous, approach by the organization would be to take such an individual for granted. This is also a loose-win situation since beyond a point the individual could become a 'Miserable', 'Marginal' or 'Mover' with the organization loosing a competent human resource.

Whenever the individual and organization enter into a work-related contract, they also enter into an un-written, though implied, *psychological contract* as advocated by Karl Augustus Menninger in which both the organization and the individual have implied expectations at a mutual level. Menninger emphasized that in addition to tangibles (money, goods, specific services), contracts and contractual relationships involve the exchange of intangibles (the pleasure of companionship). He also pointed out that contract relations require that the exchange between the parties result in the reciprocal satisfaction of the parties needs in order for the contractual relationship to be continued. The psychological contract therefore consists of both perceived employer obligations and perceived employee obligations. Furthermore, Edgar Henry Schein (born 1928) of the MIT Sloan School of Management found in 1965 that the psychological contract implies that employees have certain implicit expectations from the organization, whilst the organization also requires similar expectations from the employee (vice versa). A psychological contract is a long-term and open-ended promise. Supersession is then simply a broken psychological contract whereby the individual does not hope to realize growth and realization of potential in the organization. The organization too cannot take the individuals commitment and loyalty for granted any more. Managing supersession then implies reactivating or renegotiating the psychological contract albeit within a reduced manoeuvre-space.

Both the organization and individual must acknowledge that supersession does not imply general incompetence: an erstwhile acceptably competent individual cannot simply become incompetent overnight. What it does mean is that the individual is unfit to assume duties at the next level but has the required skills and competence as also the potential for continued relevance in the organization at the present level. It is important that the organization and individual tackle the issue in a proactive manner rather than adopt the path of inaction and drift.

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At the very outset the organization must initiate a dialogue for a reassessment of the situation, making explicit that in superseding the individual, the organization has acted in its overall interest. At the same time the organization must acknowledge that supersession implies loss of self-esteem and blocked growth for the individual along the Maslow pyramid, as also feelings of inadequacy at a social and familial level. From the ERG perspective, Growth needs have been blocked with scope for

the individual to operate at the level of 'Relatedness' or even 'Existence' needs. The two- factor model of Herzberg would suggest that since 'Motivators' are now absent and assuming that 'Hygiene' factors are present, the individual would at the very optimistic be 'not dissatisfied'. However the organization must emphasize that the worth of the individual at present level is not a fact in issue, but only that competence at the next level has been found wanting. To an extent this would reaffirm the organizations faith in the individual and assuage hurt self-esteem. It is of extreme importance that the individual not be given either a martyr's role or that of an incompetent to play. In such an event there is every possibility of the individual playing either one or both these roles and become either a 'Marginal' or Miserable'. Such an approach is not easy, but not impossible either. Traditionally, the erstwhile competent officer is now looked at with a jaded eye sometimes bordering on ridicule with predictable outcomes.

The concept of 'time-scale rank' needs to be examined along with its merits and shortcomings. The earlier concept of a time-scale Wing Commander   (and equivalent) was nothing more than recognition that the individual in the rank of Squadron Leader had attained a modest rating throughout the service that merited the external trappings of the next rank signifying a 'dry' or

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in situ promotion. Vacancies earmarked were outside the 'selective' pyramid and both the individual and organization were aware of it. From Herzberg's model this was a 'Hygiene' factor bringing the individual to a position of at least 'no dissatisfaction' tantamount to a recognition of minimum performance. However, granting ranks of time-scale Group Captain (and equivalent) simply maintained the level of 'no dissatisfaction' at enhanced pay and is clearly an erosion of the rank's status. Many an AOC have confirmed to the author that such individuals posed a challenge since they exhibited reluctance to work beyond a bare minimum and yet harboured ill feelings towards the organization. This also had a negative spill over to selective grade Group Captains. Beyond a one-time time-scale promotion, further time-scale promotion signifies populist measures pandering to mending bruised Ego's while jeopardizing motivation and morale of select grade officers: clearly a loose-loose situation. Rather than devalue the rank, providing increments in pay in the same rank may be a better option.

It is equally important that the affected individual takes stock of the situation and introspects. The fact that upward mobility has been blocked must be faced with a mature mind. It is equally true that the organization has in no way implied that present performance has been lacking. The pyramid gets narrower at succeeding levels and it is the organization's prerogative to choose whom it deems fit. The option to be a 'Mover' could be examined but, if rejected for whatsoever reason, then the individual must return to duty either as a 'Solid Citizen' and work to best

of ability. Clearly the positions of 'Marginal' and 'Miserable' are untenable. The position of 'Solid Citizen' suggests a valid psychological contract whereas the latter two signify a unilateral breach. Remaining in the organization and working with dedication would go a long way in enhancing recognition, self-esteem and finally an element of self-actualization. Once having exercised the option to stay, the individual has to find satisfaction in work, albeit with favourable environmental conditions created by the organization. This would meet the 'Hygiene' factors while both the organization and individual could provide motivators though possibly in diminished measure.

It is traditional (and understandable) for an organization to focus on the HRM aspects of recruitment, screening, selection and placement: aspects which the Armed Forces have addressed most effectively. However, the aspects of training, development and, most important, that of retention seems to have been out of focus. Letting a valuable human resource (officer) either move out of the organization or stagnate must be seen in terms of 'sunk cost' and non-availability of expertise to the organization. It is incumbent on the organization to effectively train and develop officers so at to assist in realizing full potential or detect 'the end of the road' as early as possible. Towards this objective the aspect of effective Performance Appraisal assumes importance. Many a times Commanding Officers make 'populist' appraisals out of misguided feelings of sympathy thereby postponing supersession to the next level at the cost to the organization and eventual disillusionment to the individual. The earlier an officer is released on account of limitations, both the individual and organization stand to benefit. The individual either moves out into a second career at an early enough age to facilitate growth, or reconciles and works effectively within the organization. This needs to be seen as a proactive approach to supersession as against a reactive one.

It is necessary to dwell on the aspects of Organization Climate and Culture as also the importance of effective Leadership. Organizational Climate refers to the internal environment of the organization and reflects the values and philosophy of its founders and top leadership. It must be acknowledged that values being stable rarely change. Organizational culture refers to the aggregate of behavioural patterns of its members and is a reflection of the Climate. While the relationship between climate and culture is rather complex, suffice to state that behaviour patterns or culture reflect the climate. Traditionally, rising up the hierarchy has been an index of success thereby, in the context of a pyramidal organization, being restricted to a decreasing few. Therefore an individual seems to decide the individual's worth, with success automatically linked with upward mobility. In reality the relationship between an individual's contribution and position in the

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organizational hierarchy is not direct. There is need to foster a climate and culture where an individual's contribution rather than solely position in the organization is highly valued. This would greatly address meeting an individual's need for recognition, self-esteem and identifying with the organization. It need hardly be emphasized that the onus falls entirely on top leadership.

The role of effective leadership cannot be underplayed, the effectiveness of which would be decided not solely by motivating the 'Solid Citizen' (who is self-motivated anyway), but by effectively helping the 'Mover', 'Marginal' and 'Miserable' become a 'Solid Citizen'. This requires a leader to appreciate that it is the individual's contribution that matters and not whether he/she is superseded or promoted. In the author's experience, cases of superseded officers working with greater dedication vis-à-vis luckier colleagues validate this point of view. This is not to devalue upward mobility in any way (which merits deep appreciation), but only to highlight that supersession *per se* need not imply incompetence in all cases. Of course there is an extremely valid case to identify the incorrigible 'Mover', 'Marginal' and 'Miserable' and to objectively deal with the individual administratively and without rancour.

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Supersession is too important an aspect of organizational existence to be dismissed lightly. Pro-action rather than reaction should be the approach. It is a situation to be managed jointly by the organization and affected individual with the clear understanding that organizational interests are overriding. The HRM approach aims to ensure that staffing manning of an organization effectively meets the quantitative and qualitative aspects at all times to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. An important element of HRM is Human Resource Planning (HRP). This calls for long-term manpower projections based on which intake would be determined. Any shortcomings in HRP would inevitably be reflected in surplus manpower, stagnation and supersession. Populist measures like time-scale ranks serve little else than postponing the stagnation to the next level with adverse financial effect as also degraded efficiency and effectiveness. Retention of its Human Resource must be recognized in which the management of supersession is an important element.

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This paper has attempted to identify key issues using the 'HRM approach' in managing supersession. While staking no claim to provide definitive answers (a rather tall expectation) the endeavour has been to highlight an approach within the framework of contemporary motivational theories that could shed some light showing the way ahead in keeping with the philosophy of the Gita: *tamaso ma jotirgamaya · from darkness to light*, as also the message enshrined in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: *from Darkness to Light, through struggle to Victory*.

Notes:

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