

The Missing Element: Complexity in the Role of AFL Senior Coach.

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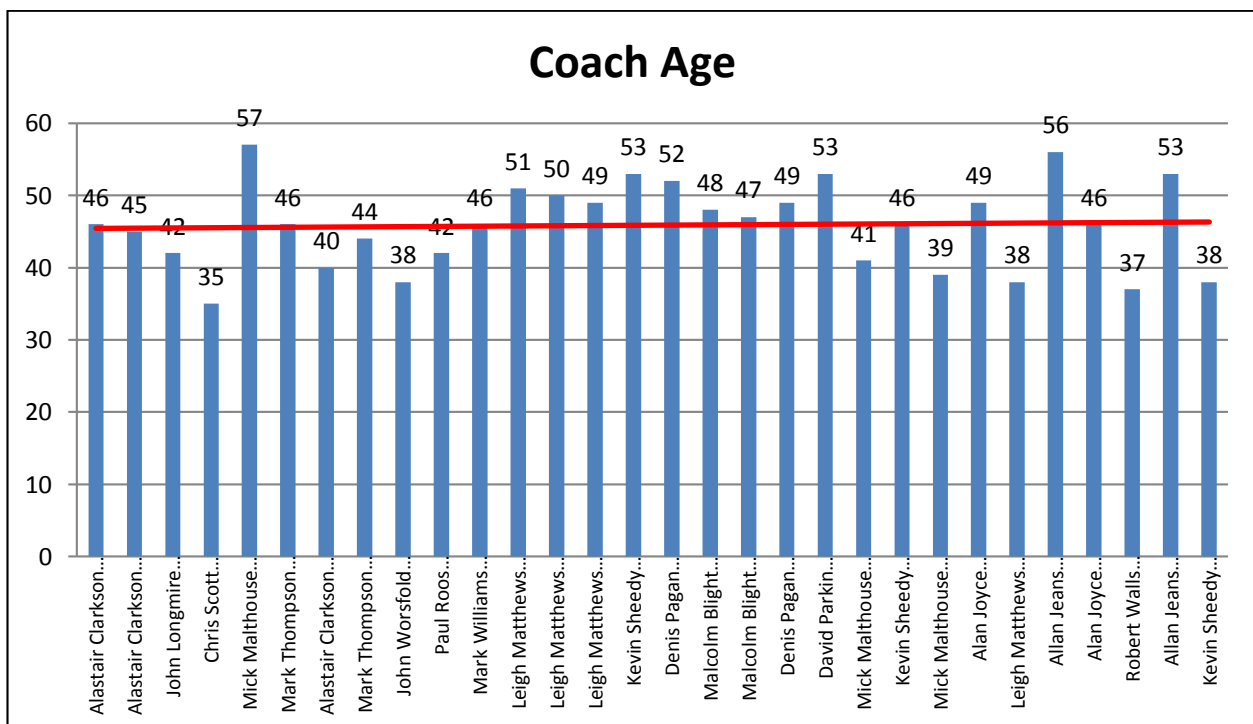
The recent sackings of Senior Coaches Brenton Sanderson and Guy McKenna from the Adelaide and Gold Coast Football Clubs are held up as the latest example of the brutal expectations hoisted onto professional coaches in the AFL as well as demonstrating the expectations of performance in these roles. Sanderson is 40 years old, McKenna 45.

Over the past five years, the high profile coaching appointments of Brownlow Medallists Michael Voss, James Hird and Nathan Buckley drew particular attention to an apparent younger breed of coaches. Of the sixteen coaches currently contracted for the 2015 season, the age spread is 23 years between the Scott brothers Brad and Chris at 38 and Mick Malthouse at 61, but this is not an even sprinkling. Over half the current crop is 42 or under, which means that 50% of the group falls roughly into the youngest 20%.

But at what age do we find Premiership Coaches?

The chart below shows the AFL Premiership Coaches from 2014 back to 1985, with the red line showing the trend – a tiny movement toward younger, but nothing significant. What is of note is the **average age of the Premiership Coach – 46**. What is also of note is that the decade from 1985 saw an average age of 44, the decade from 1995-2004 saw this jump to 50, then the most recent decade average age has been back to 44. Similar to the current coaching crop, our Premiership Coaches also have a 20+ year age spread from 35 (Chris Scott in 2011) to 57 (Mick Malthouse in 2010), this occurring in the last decade, and in fact, in back-to-back years.

Figure I: Age of AFL Premiership Coaches



Half of the Clubs have a coach 42 or under. The average age of the Premiership Coach the last 30 years is 46. And of these 30 Premierships, only 9 were won by a coach 42 or under. AFL Clubs are searching for something in the face of a game that is rapidly changing. The data suggests youth is possibly being seen as the antidote to the increased complexity of the modern game; choosing a coach with more recent playing experience and the assumption they are 'up with it'.

Clubs are right to search for a Senior Coach that can handle everything the role requires. Unfortunately, current processes appear to miss a key piece of the puzzle, one that is assessable and can be understood - **cognitive capability**. But first, we need to take a detour into the world of work and how it relates to the role of Senior AFL Coach.

The Nature of Work

Elliott Jaques¹ (see The Requisite Organisation 1989) and others have over the last seventy years done pioneering work in discovering that work takes place within seven levels, each level differing in terms of increasing complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty. A rough guide to this is given in Table I. The first three levels are about the operational running of business and can go from hands on work to managing systems, processes and budgets that ensures a work system functions efficiently (be it a call centre, supermarket, mining operation, juice factory, chain of outlets, a ship or power station) and achieves its given targets on time and within budget. Here work is about making something or providing a service to a known client base. Time to completions of task is normally short and outcomes tangible. It is estimated that 95% of all work falls within the first three work levels.

The next two work levels are about executive leadership of an organisation, the one setting strategic direction for the future, ensuring investor confidence and that the organisation is well managed and governed while the other is responsible for translating this intent into business plans and ensuring coherence between where the company is and where it wants to be. The former is where we find an MD, CEO of an independent company or a large division within a group, while the latter level of work is that of a general manager or principle specialist.

The last two work levels are concerned with leading and managing global corporations.

Table I: Levels of Work Complexity

Organisational Level	Essential Tasks	Time Span
Level I	Accomplish Direct Tasks	3 Months
Level II	Supervise Direct Work or Do Specialist Work	1 Years
Level III	Direct a program, Blending Components to meet Goals	2 Years
Level IV	Coordinate and Resource Multiple Programs	5 Years
Level V	Direct a Unified System and Set Policy	10 Years
Level VI	Coordinate Multiple Systems in the Global Environment	20 Years
Level VII	Direct Multiple Unified Systems in the Global Environment	50 Years

(Adapted from various sources; including: Lewis, P. (1996) Transformational Change using Stratified Systems Theory. International Journal of Public Administration. Volume. 19 (6), pp. 801 – 826. Acknowledgements to Jaques, E., (1989) Requisite Organisation. Cason Hall.)

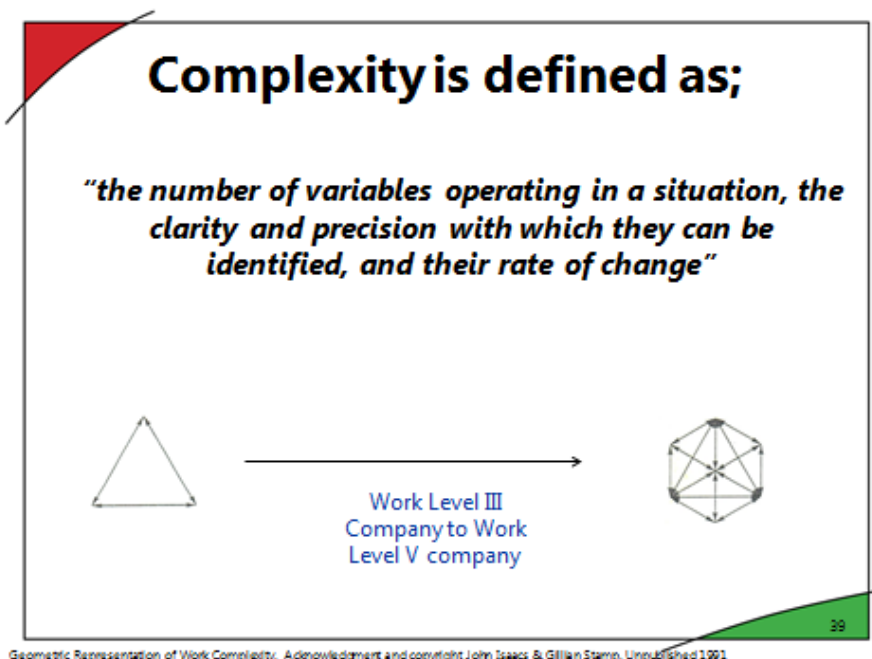
What is the Level of Work or Complexity of the AFL Senior Coach?

The role of the AFL Senior Coach has increased in complexity over the past forty years, seeing Ron Barassi become the pin-up celebrity professional coach, the last of the playing coaches disappear with Carl Ditterich, and the emergence of Football Departments employing a full cadre of assistants and specialists. These are natural responses to complexity in the role brought on by both the professionalism of the national competition in addition to the natural demands of a highly competitive industry.

The modern-day Senior Coach requires the overall directing of a program of work that blends together multiple components to achieve an outcome. Pathways must be identified and chosen, plus a willingness to adopt and change streams if needed, including thinking ahead into the following year as injuries and other factors take their toll. This longer-timeframe thinking must be put into action while at the same time making multiple crucial decisions each game day to adjust the flow of the game to suit the particular strategy of the team.

Successful Senior Coaches are starting to now move their role to where we see multiple streams and systems in place designed to achieving an outcome over 3+ years. The weaving together of list management, fitness programs, best practice techniques from the global sporting world, media commitments and the training program to embed strategy are beginning to become core requirements and are blurring the line between the Football Director and the Senior Coachⁱⁱ. Management skills are now necessary not just for players, but professional management of a variety of staff specialists and line coaches.

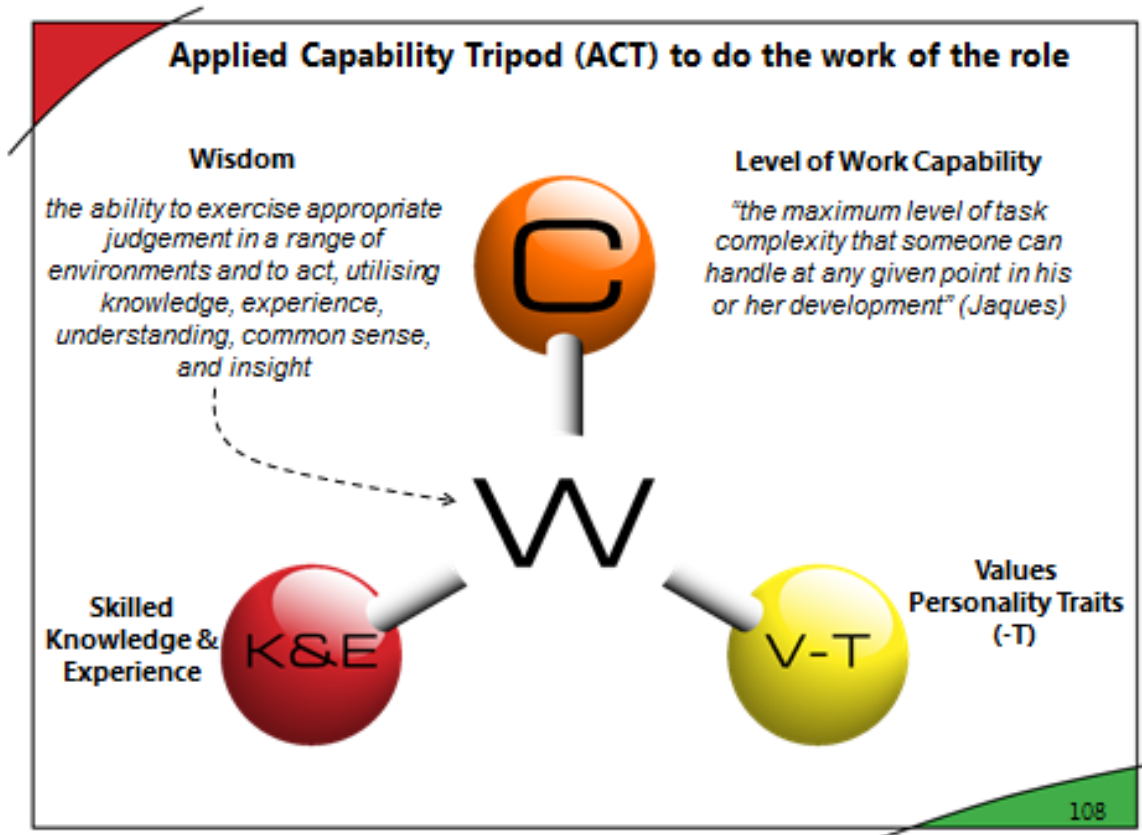
The role occupied by Paul Roos at Melbourne is one that was deliberately raised in complexity using the concept of setting up the systems and finding Roos' successor. The position sees a program of work extending over 3+ years designed to create a system that can then be run, modified and improved by the chosen successor Simon Goodwin. In other Clubs, the value of receiving advice on overall program matters has been found through the creation of the 'Director of Coaching' or 'Senior Assistant' roles which are designed to 'mentor' younger coaches. What we are actually seeing here is the installation of a source of value-adding input of a wider perspective to help calibrate the systems the coaches are charged with creating.



The Rub – What’s Needed for Success in the Role

For someone to be able to deliver at the Level of Work a role requires, there are three aspects that are required to be in place. These can be seen on the diagram below:

Figure II: Applied Capability Tripod



- **Skilled knowledge & experience** is the technical knowledge in a role. A gardener needs to know how to work the equipment.
- **Values and Personality Traits** refers to person valuing the work required (that is, they actually want to do it, or have a sense of duty to do so), and that they do not carry any personal issues (negative traits or 'minus T's) such that others can't work with them.
- **Wisdom** refers to the ability of the person to understand how the world in which they live functions so they can navigate through.

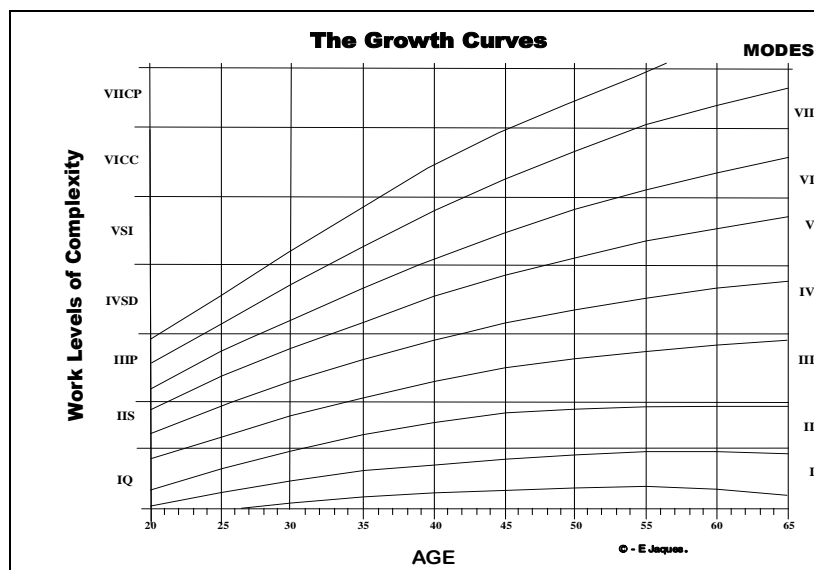
But....the above cannot be brought into play if the person does not have the **fundamental level of work capability to handle the complexity of the role**. Cognitive capability is the baking tray in which all the other factors sit, and it's the least understood element as to what is required for high performance and success.

The Foundation: Cognitive Capability

Cognitive or human capability is the ability to make decisions in the face of complexity; that ability to ‘see the whole board’ and make the calls that engender confidence and trust in the direction set from all those underneath.

What Jaques et al found in their research is that human capability unfolds along modes or Growth Curves and that the rate a person can handle challenge becomes increasingly rapid as they mature, *dependent on our growth curve*. These growth curves are linked to the Work Levels. Figure I shows these Growth Curves; up the vertical axis are the Work Levels and along the horizontal axis, age. The Growth Modes cross these Work Levels at different ages for the different modes. Human capability based on Jaques model of mental processing has been a field of extensive research (see for example: Brause, A. 2000, King, S *et al* 1997; Jaques, E and Cason, K. 1994) and is linked to each person’s individual capability to handle ambiguity and uncertainty. This changes at different rates with maturity and is not influenced by education, skills or personality.

Figure III: The Array of Growth Curves



Without this knowledge, a person may be appointed to a role based on their high level of knowledge & skill, their excellent relationship skills they gained through wisdom, and on their obvious passion for the role. This person may appear to be strong fit, but it brings a danger of putting the person into a position where they are underutilised or overextended. Both situations see a loss of effectiveness and pain for those involved, including those underneath the person in the organisation.

Underutilised refers to a situation of a person having more capability than the role requires. This can manifest itself in boredom, eccentric behaviour or an appearance in ‘going off the boil’. People often feel themselves transitioning to a new level of work and will naturally seek a role at another level to satisfy this internal need to find appropriate challenges. The movement away from flow is on a continuum, if underutilised, and the situation is not resolved, flow becomes boredom, then indifference then ANXIETY, which becomes depression if left unattended.

Overextended is a situation where the person is not able to cope with the complexity of the role. This is the classic ‘best player being made the coach’ situation where this does not work. Being over promoted or in a role that is beyond our flow zone, a person moves away from flow into bewilderment - “*how do I respond?*” “*what decision do I make?*” - to worry; - waking up in the early hours of the night with the problems churning

and finally; - into ANXIETY and if left unattended; - into DEPRESSION. Being underutilised or overextended for prolonged periods may cause people to resort to substance abuse, depression and withdrawal, loss of energy for life and a host of other related symptoms.

The Implications for AFL Clubs

Humans have an innate ability to sense when someone is in the flow. In the case of the football team, when the Senior Coach is comfortable in their level of work (neither overextended or underutilised), it creates a situation that seems obvious to the outside observer. The simplicity of the methods is often praised, players convey that the coach 'talks to them straight', the gameplan appears clear and players are said to be 'playing for their coach'.

Understanding the Level of Work of the Senior Coach allows for significant risk mitigation in terms of appointing someone to the senior role 'too early'. The shape of the growth curves shows that age is the most significant factor in predicting the level of work at which a person will be comfortable at a point in time. But it is *the shape of each person's growth curve* that determines at what age they are likely to pass through the particular cognitive capability needed for a certain level of work. This is the reason why we see coaches successful at a variety of ages, but also likely to explain why there is a certain convergence around the mid-40s when we have an initial look over the last 30 years.

The growth curve of an individual can be understood (we use the term 'appreciated') for both the purposes of filling roles and importantly to assist the individual in understanding where their most valuable contribution can be made both now, and in the future. In the case of organisations relying on people applying the right level of capability to generate economic return, this is crucial. For football clubs who carry the responsibility of the hopes of thousands, appointing the right capability throughout the organisation, especially the Senior Coach, is, in the words of current coaching lexicon, a 'non-negotiable'.

About

The Working Journey advises and provides resources to leaders who want their organisations to be more effective and grow successfully, including educating and implementing principles of work complexity. Adam and Andrew are partners in the Working Journey. Adam is based in **Adelaide, South Australia**, and works across Australia, he can be contacted at adam@theworkingjourney.com

ⁱ Elliott Jaques first introduced his ideas in the 1940's and 50's Glacier Project in the United Kingdom (Elliott J, 1951), while a consultant for the Tavistock Institute. Jaques's models have been used for fifty plus years, extensively, in diverse organisational and business settings and across different cultures. It is also difficult to understand (Solaas, 2003) as there are a number of theories that he developed over time. Jaques primarily described it as the art of scientific management (an indication of its modernist genealogy) which was measurable and not open to negotiation around certain key issues

ⁱⁱ The rising complexity of the Senior Coach role is seeing what is known as 'compression' in Level III and IV between the Senior Coach, Football Director and Senior Assistant coaches in 'mentoring' roles. Multiple roles in the same level of work will naturally cause both diffusion and confusion of accountability, a factor leading to the current supplements situation seen in the Essendon Football Club.