

Let's Be Realistic About Executive Development

Some Major Impediments and Some Fringe Benefits

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The skepticism, even downright hostility, that is expressed in some quarters toward the imprecise art of developing executives is often richly deserved; and professional training people ought to face it.

Much, much good can accrue from well-conceived executive development programs. Indeed, the worsening talent shortage is making them more a necessity than ever before. But even so, underestimating the challenge can be dangerous and the odds against unqualified success are rather high.

It is wise to acknowledge this fact from the outset, for the process is indeed difficult and fraught with failure. If it were *not* difficult and fraught with failure there would not be such high-level concern in the United States over a predicted executive "gap" of nearly two million by 1970. Since

it is not inaccurate to say that our national security, even survival, depends on a supply of skillful shakers and movers in key places, a certified developer of executive timber could name his own price; but such a genius is as yet undiscovered and, alas, likely to remain so.

Human Nature

A basic reason for the whole dilemma is this pesky, indefinable something called human nature. There must be subtle, even drastic changes in behavior in transforming a, shall we say, under-developed executive into a passably-developed one. Yet those of us who have lived through the shattering experience of attempting to change the behavior of a mere five-year old, should not be surprised by signs of resistance in a person of

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35, or 45—or pick just any age that comes to mind. (It is still news to a lot of people that we can't actually teach adults very much. Since we each have a cherished, long-established mental image of ourselves—as a manager, I am “approachable” or “well-organized” or “un-bigoted” or a peerless “leader” or totally “honest”—no amount of exhortation will cause us to change. Something must happen to disturb that self-image and make us *want* to bring it into focus with the flesh-and-blood image that our associates have of us. Unless this phenomenon occurs, nothing really happens.)

Unlikely Candidates

Of course, we often unwittingly commit our initial mistake by selecting unlikely candidates for jobs in top management. We try to make bold decision makers out of intelligent but timorous procrastinators. Or we select nice guys—the type Leo Durocher mentioned so disparagingly—and expect to “develop” them into pennant-winning tigers. Or we nominate a successful specialist who feels secure with things as they are and has no real desire to become a broad-gauged generalist with a specialty.

There will inevitably be errors, along with the hits and runs, even in the best of programs; but the number of executive development dropouts, and washouts, can be reduced if the candidates are carefully screened, and screened earlier rather than later for the good of all concerned.

Of course, it is easier to advise than to accomplish when it comes to choosing the best nominees for this or any

other complex training experience. An authority* in the field has put it this way: “To sort out individuals according to ability is very nearly the most delicate and difficult process our society has to face.”

Mutual Risk

Sophisticated screening methods are available. But this procedure will probably be as successful as any: Require your middle and lower-level executives to personally appraise and identify their most outstanding “comers” (whose personal talents and goals seem to jibe with organizational needs); and then *put their professional reputations for insight and good judgment on the line*, right along with the nominees.

This last stipulation is extremely important because too often managers, courageous in all else, are deathly afraid when it comes to looking a man in the eye and honestly discussing his frailties; it is easier to let someone else higher up give him the bad news. This is called “delegating upward,” incidentally, and is one fundamental reason why many a well-intentioned employee appraisal program is discreetly filed away and forgotten.

Fringe Benefits

So much for the impediments. What about the fringe benefits?

Even if the best-laid executive development plans seem to go awry, management has a right to expect these definite fringe benefits, regardless:

- A number of supposedly talented people have been given their main chance and, in significant ways,

*John Gardner, Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, & Welfare and author of *Excellence—Can We Be Equal and Excellent*.

- found wanting. This is important, but even more important is the fact that top management has discovered who *not to promote*.
- Along with this discovery, management has gained a lot more useful information about the live prospects, the promotables—keen minds, clay feet, warts and all.
 - The whole *organization has become training conscious*. By becoming involved in executive training programs (as instructors, members of advisory groups, etc.) many production-minded chiefs have learned to take a genuine, personal interest in developing their indians. This aspect of the program may not have been as important ten years ago, but in today's shrinking labor market it is vital. Top executives with a reputation for improving their human resources are apt to recruit them more readily and retain them longer.
 - *Communications have been improved*—up, down and sideways throughout the hierarchy—as top and middle managers meet, compare notes, argue, and swap anecdotes about the young hopefuls who are periodically assigned to them for training and evaluation.
 - Because of constructive criticism and honest appraisal, many a candidate has, for the first time, gotten *real insight into his own managerial deficiencies*. Hopefully, he will go on to become an excellent leader and administrator rather than simply a good one.
 - Some important *new ideas* have been smuggled into the higher echelons by virtue of guest speakers, creative management training consultants and special courses.
 - Finally—and this is actually a hard-core benefit rather than a fringe benefit—management has a right to expect a good executive development program to be *an investment that amortizes itself*. If, after a fair trial, it isn't (1) paying its own way by producing real live executive timber to replace dead wood, (2) cutting recruitment costs by slowing down the exodus of top talent, as well as attracting new talent, and (3) improving overall productivity and morale, there is something seriously wrong with the program, or the organization.

Management Obsolescence

Perhaps the ultimate thing one can say about executive development is that the time pressures and complexities of modern life are making it more difficult to achieve but, at the same time, making it indispensable. "The day is coming," says Courtney Brown, of Columbia Graduate School of Business, "when companies will regard refreshment of their management teams as being as important as replacing obsolete machines. The idea that you can get all your education in the first two decades of life has been pretty well blasted out of the water."

Filing Costs

It costs about 4 cents to index and file one business paper, according to

the Leahy Business Archives. To fill one file drawer costs about \$640.

