

An Executive Secretary Seminar

A Report from the Internal Revenue Service

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In retrospect it is always easy to see how any undertaking could have been better; perhaps conducted more simply; more productively, or more forcefully. Even in retrospect, however, our Executive Secretaries' Seminar still looks good! With one or two minor exceptions it appears, even from this perspective, to have been successful in every way.

The motivating thought behind our Seminar was expressed in a pre-seminar memorandum to the executives. The memorandum pointed out the well-known fact that, no matter how good a secretary may be, or through study and experience might become, if the person to whom she is responsible does not utilize all her abilities,

and does not delegate responsibilities and duties to her that she is capable of performing, then nothing would be gained from this Seminar, nor from any other educational pursuit.

Further, the memorandum stated that up to now the executive had apparently failed to avail himself of all the assistance his secretary could give him if she were allowed to use her skills and her abilities to the fullest extent; nor had he attempted to enhance her usefulness by expanding her knowledge of the broader aspects of management and by encouraging her to take advantage of the many excellent self-improvement aids available to her either within the Service, in schools, or through membership in

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professional organizations.

Preparation for Seminar

Our preparations included the sending out of advance reading material—but not only to the participants. It was also sent to the executives, for them and their secretaries to read and discuss together. The executive was constantly reminded that his executive secretary could only be as effective as he would permit her to be. In a smaller way, the Seminar was for the executive also, pointing out to him, as it did, that just how much of his less demanding work he could turn over to his secretary was entirely his decision; that it was his responsibility to recognize the extent of her abilities, and his responsibility to *utilize* them.

Much of the pre-Seminar reading was along these lines—stressing ways to determine the extent to which the executive secretary was already in possession of knowledge which perhaps was not being used, as well as ways in which her knowledge could be strengthened so that she would be capable of taking on more of the executive's work than she had before. Of course, some of the pre-Seminar reading was for the boss alone, some for the secretary alone, but most of it was for *both*. Post-Seminar reading will also be provided to insure that goals set up at the Seminar are not allowed to disintegrate through non-use.

Seminar Content

Our Seminar was a forthright attempt to correct a weakness in our managerial chain, by encouraging our Executive Secretaries to take a more professional view of their role. Our theme was "Understanding," as it pertains to our jobs, our co-workers, and to ourselves. The speakers were authorities in their respective fields. These high-caliber professionals were

asked to instruct the participants in such subjects as "Cultural Relationships," "Adjusting to Change," "Management Processes," "Advancement to Professionalism," etc.

At the same time, they were specifically requested not to talk down to the participants, but to project their views at such a high level as to cause them to *reach* for understanding and knowledge that was perhaps just a little beyond the point of easy understanding. We strenuously rejected and refrained from discussing subjects which were at the ground level of every good secretary's basic awareness of her position. Secretarial skills such as typing, shorthand, spelling, punctuation, telephone techniques, etc., were ignored. These make up the broad base upon which the executive secretary builds, and were not considered as meriting discussion by the group making up this Seminar, all of whom had progressed far beyond the need for instruction of this type.

Current Awareness

Stress was laid upon the "need to know something about everything that the executive must know." In today's constantly changing environment, the need to know about such things as equal employment opportunities for minority groups, for the mentally or physically handicapped persons, and for the elderly, is of extreme importance. Participants were made aware that in our present day society they are indeed their brother's keeper; the future must hold promise for an ever more determined effort to share with, and assist, our less fortunately endowed fellow men so that they may become productive members of society. Executives must know how to meet and deal with problems of communications, the impact of electronic data processing, lines of authority,

etc., and, if the executive secretary is to be of true value to her executive, then she, too, must be aware of the problems which exist and of the steps necessary to bring about their solution.

Among the subjects discussed in depth were "adapting to change," "the hazards of communications," "advancement to professionalism," "understanding our organization," "understanding our cultural relationships," and "understanding management processes." "Communications," in the context of this Seminar was not the art of using a telephone, or of writing a letter, but rather the art of making oneself clearly understood by others and, conversely, the art of *listening* receptively . . . to the end that it could honestly be said that one had heard and understood that which another had attempted to convey.

Seminar Leaders

Our leaders were chosen because of their outstanding ability to impart knowledge to others in an interesting, challenging and stimulating manner. They were psychologists and sociologists, as well as management consultants and other representatives of the business world. One speaker came to us as the representative of the Urban League of a large city; one woman speaker was chosen because she had been particularly successful in a position of management in a field primarily dominated by men—the banking industry.

Seminar Location

Of major importance was the choosing of an off-site location for the Seminar . . . the idea being to get the participants away completely from their every-day routine; from ringing telephones; from incoming and outgoing mail baskets; from the boss who needs "just one moment of your time," and

from any and all of the numerous day-by-day distractions of an office. This, as it turned out, was one of the most successful features of the Seminar, and one very much appreciated by those involved, both from standpoints of the learners and of the teachers.

Without distractions, the away-from-home atmosphere leant itself to complete absorption in the work at hand. Classes started promptly at 9:00 a.m., and continued well into the evening hours. The close proximity afforded by the live-in arrangements allowed the women, who were from widely-separated cities, and who, until this Seminar, had known one another only as voices on a telephone, to become at first realities and then friends to one another. No longer would their conversations take place between two shadowy persons having only names and voices. Now they would be between friends and co-workers, with whom they had talked together, studied together and laughed together. Through this greater familiarity and understanding, would grow a greater desire to coordinate, collaborate and cooperate in all phases of the work of the Region.

Results

Participants were asked to submit evaluations of the Seminar. Their replies were informative and encouraging. Almost without exception they said they had learned a great deal about how they could add to their present usefulness and be of greater assistance to their executives. They discovered knowledge gaps which they took immediate steps to eliminate; they felt more secure in their positions because of their new insight into their actual and very important place in the scheme of things; their relationships with their fellow workers at all levels improved, and they became a

part of the entire organization, as opposed to their previous feeling that they were important only to their own small segment of it.

The Seminar, to all intents and purposes, was successful. Without exception, participants were stimulated and enthusiastic, as proven by their definite decision to *do something* about it. It broadened the outlook, increased the knowledge, encouraged continuing self-training, and assured respect for and by the organization as a whole, and for and by their immediate supervisors in particular.

We point with pride to the fact that, of the 23 participants, four have enrolled with the Institute for Certifying Secretaries and will sit for the Certified Professional Secretaries examination. As so much significance was

placed on the importance of "professionalism" throughout the Seminar, we feel that these members of our organization have shown their acceptance of the theories expressed, and have taken a big step in the right direction.

In passing, it might be added that two of the participants were already possessors of the Certified Professional Secretaries Certificate. If the number who are to take the examination are successful, this would make a total of six Certified Professional Secretaries in a field of 23. We believe that 25% is an excellent start on our road to professionalism, and we are quite confident that this percentage will be increased as other secretaries follow in the footsteps of their predecessors.



New AMA Center

The 51,000-square foot Manager Learning Center built by The American Foundation for Management Research near Hamilton, N. Y. The American Foundation for Management Research was founded by the American Management Association. The new Learning Center will enable top management teams to study specific problem areas of their own organizations, arrive at specific solutions and put those solutions into practice. The Center houses the Donald W. Mitchell Memorial Library, a microfilmed information system. It also incorporates advanced electronic data storage and retrieval systems and the most sophisticated audio-visual devices.

