

# Executive Development: The Vital Shift

Executives may start out as managers, but a major broadening of perspective is required before a manager can enter the executive suite.

By TOM GLENN

What is an executive? What does an executive do? Executives know the answers to these questions. They also believe that much of the conventional wisdom about them is wrong. But executives are action oriented, not generally given to introspection or theorizing. More often than not, they're intuitive, right brained or double dominant—the kind of thinking not easily put in words. As a consequence, executives have tended to discount or ignore academic theorizing about themselves, sensing it was not accurate, yet recognizing that the orderliness of the behavior that was ascribed to them—hard-headed, no-nonsense approaches that relied on facts—was what was *supposed* to be right.

The nature of the executive captured my attention in 1980 when I set out to establish an executive development program for a large agency of the federal government. A review of the literature on the subject and interviews with executive development experts in industry, government and academia persuaded me that executive development was something of a sham. I never found a satisfactory definition of "executive" nor a clear distinction between "executive" and "manager." Executives have been characterized as super-managers, different from other managers in level, not in kind. Executive development programs apparently were based on principles borrowed from behaviorist psychology (stimulus-response and behavior modification).

But the executives I knew were something more than managers alone. And the

underlying assumptions of behaviorism clashed with my perception of the executive viewpoint. I began interviewing the top executives inside and outside of government to find out what they saw themselves to be and what they thought executive development should be. I later questioned participants in executive development workshops and seminars at several government agencies.

## Executive self-image

The interviewees had very clear ideas about what an executive ought to be, what he or she needed to be effective and what the frames of reference for success were. Their views were surprisingly similar, and the differences between them were more matters of emphasis than total disagreement.

The executives stressed responsibility, choice and autonomy. They defined the executive as *one who decides*. Like a Mozart sonata, *haiku* poetry or a first-class cartoon, this simple definition sketches a bold idea with the fewest strokes, leaving the audience to fill in the meaning.

Executives are, before all else, decision makers who look into the future, set a general course and leave on-course corrections to others. Deciding is the most important thing that executives do. Other people decide, too, but not on the same scale and not as their most important professional duty.

Second, the definition implies the autonomy and responsibility that executives impute to themselves. These men and women accept responsibility with a sense of pride, humility and honor. The best see themselves as ordinary people required by "fortune" to take on decisionmaking on a large scale. They fierce-

ly defend their right to make the decisions their roles have thrust upon them, but they regard that right as an honor not to be sullied.

Finally, they have a deep and vivid understanding of their ability to choose with respect to the future of their organizations. Executives see their roles in the context of the organization and in terms of the relationship between the executive and the technician, supervisor and manager.

How an executive differs from a manager is implied in the hierarchy shown in Table 1. As an individual within an organization moves from one level to another, a shift in perspective occurs, a creation within the self of a new dimension. The person retains all the values, viewpoints and capabilities of the lower level while adding the perspectives of the next higher level. Thus, a supervisor embodies all the perspectives of the technician but adds something new—an ability to see things from the perspective of the supervisor. A person appointed to a supervisory position who does not make this shift is not likely to be effective as a supervisor.

The definition of a supervisor, manager or executive, in other words, is in part determined by the incumbent's perception of the world and his or her place in it. After the change of perception, nothing looks quite the same. The move to the executive level is the greatest change; the revision of outlook is the most thorough. A "vital shift" is required, as one executive said, like the effect of Alice as she steps through the looking glass. If the shift of perspective does not occur, the incumbent is ineffective.

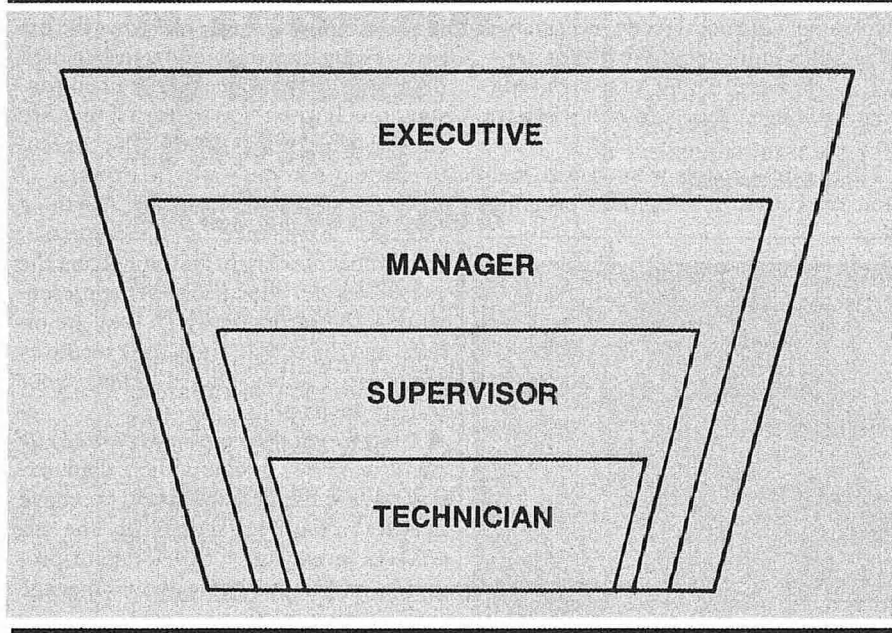
Each level is characterized by a unique perceptual pattern: the technician is submerged in the work itself; the supervisor attends partly to the work, partly to the running of the team. The manager quickly finds that he or she must interact with the environment—the organizational and supra-organizational agreements about the way things are—to be effective. But the manager's first concern is short-term productivity, getting today's product out today with as much efficiency and quality as possible.

The executive learns that he or she *is* the environment, a principal shaper of organization reality, a dreamer who makes dreams come true. The executive both influences and is influenced by the broad world around, both within and without the work organization. The executive has at his or her disposal the perceptions of the

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**Table 1—The Hierarchy of a Large Work Organization as Perceived By an Executive.**



technician, the supervisor and the manager.

What distinguishes the executive is an added ability to see things in a much larger context and a willingness, for example, to postpone today's productivity so that tomorrow's will be better. More important, the executive is more able than others to make decisions about the future that produce no measurable improvement but are aimed instead at intangible benefits (such as an improved quality of work life for the members of the organization).

The key quality that sets the executive apart from other members of the organization, then, is cosmology or perspective. The executive, in effect, has made a vital shift: he or she has grown beyond others in the ability to see the world in larger terms. Congruent with broader perspective are the following qualities executives see in themselves:

■ *An ability to see relationships that were not apparent before.* Sometimes this seeing is the actual creation of relationships, sometimes it lies in seeing similarities and patterns others miss, sometimes it is the ability to discern patterns by shifting from one viewpoint to another.

■ *A propensity for seeing things in global and long-term perspectives (the God's-eye point of view that Maslow speaks of).* The executive finds it comfortable to think in terms of decades, continents, populations—even galaxies.

■ *An inclination to view the world as a hierarchy.* This can be from the general systems standpoint, or through a similar perceptual scheme that shows seemingly unrelated events as parts of a whole.

■ *An openness to new ways of thinking about the world.* This requires seeing things from a different perspective, an ability to think in varying modes of logic. Symptomatic are the perception of thinking models as tools, neither correct nor incorrect in themselves, but useful or not depending on the situation; and an inclination to listen carefully to others.

■ *A proclivity for the ambiguous, the undefined, the unclear, the uncountable.* One senior referred to this quality as the recognition that all decisions must be made without sufficient data. Another called it the essence of judgmental thinking.

■ *A tendency to rely on his or her own judgment.* This is developed from years of experience and considerable growth.

■ *A desire to exploit his or her own potential.* An executive takes on the biggest jobs he or she can handle, not for self-aggrandizement, but to avoid the waste of his or her own fully ripened human potential.

■ *A desire to cope with big issues.* The really important things in life—people, love, laughter, the human condition—are executive concerns.

■ *A desire to live and work passionately.* An executive fully invests emotional, spiritual and intellectual resources.

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## The measure of judgment

Executive development cannot depend on a technique, formula, recipe or algorithm. It must derive instead from an understanding of the way people enrich their own ability to understand, create meaning and articulate purpose. As a result, to expect applicability of a learning experience as soon as an executive or aspirant returns to the job is to miss the point. An executive development program does not teach skills or competen-

cies. It offers the executive the opportunity to increase depth and breadth of judgment—the faculty that determines the quality of a decision. In much the same way, the results of executive development are not directly measurable, nor are they immediate. We do not know how to measure, count or weigh judgment, although we recognize it when we see it.

HRD professionals who want to keep their executive development programs

should adhere to the following rules and principles:

■ *Executives are active people and learn best by doing.* Make developmental learning experiences active rather than passive.

■ *Act as a conduit.* Listen to what the executives say they want, and translate their desires into experiences. Remain in constant touch with them to learn if they are getting what they need. The executives—and not you—are the experts.

■ *Go first class or don't go at all.* Anything short of excellence is unacceptable. Remember how bright and competent the executives are. The quality of the presentations, the setting in which they are offered and the way in which the executives are treated must always reflect your respect for them.

■ *Executive development should be run by an executive.* Few people other than executives themselves understand executive needs. Executives should be the architects of executive development programs, and an executive should manage their implementation.

■ *Keep trying new and experimental programs.* Preserve and repeat those learning experiences that are clearly valuable, and discontinue those that fail. But always set aside part of your resources for innovation. If you do not, the program will quickly ossify.

■ *Be sure that every offering in the program has within it an element of surprise.* If you bore the executives, you do them a profound disservice. Every seminar and workshop should offer something novel, not in the form of gimmickry, but in ideas. New ideas, whether they are accepted or not, are the fertile ground for growing judgment.

■ *Remember that executives learn as much from one another as they do from a presenter.* Therefore, always build in time for them to spend with one another, and keep the groups in seminars and workshops as small as possible—ideally under 15 people.

■ *Learning is enhanced by a new setting.* Consequently, try to arrange for presentations to be made away from the work place as often as possible. Isolate the executives from the pressures of home and office to give them every opportunity to learn.

■ *You are not teaching executives to be managers.* Do not aim at improving efficiency or productivity. That is the job of management training, not executive development. Give the executives a chance to develop their own wisdom.

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