

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT — SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVES CONTINUE TO GROW

Why are some executives successful in managing their organizations well into their 60's and 70's, while others are put out to pasture long before they reach retirement? Part of the answer is that those executives who continue to succeed in their roles also continue to grow. They are continual learners who constantly strive for excellence and demand a great deal of themselves well into their later years. Many executives become unable to impact their organizations because they don't see themselves as servants of their organizations. They no longer exhibit the combination of physical and mental agility, inquisitiveness, and energy required to leap ahead of their competitors. As Peter Drucker states



and, in fact, illustrates, "People grow according to the demands they place on themselves, and successful executives continue to ask what is the most important contribution I can make to the performance of this organization?" They ask, "What self-development do I need? What knowledge and skills do I require to make a contribution? What standards do I need to set for myself?" Successful executives do not take their success for granted; they realize the importance of continual improvement so that they retain the ability to make contributions that count.

Why is career development critical for executives? Perhaps the most important reason, as Drucker notes, is "to help their organizations achieve the goals that are expected." Organizations change only when people change, and executives model behaviors for others to follow. In short, executives who strive for excellence continue to learn and stimulate others to do the same. This synergy exponentially increases the contributions executives can make to their organizations. It helps them gain greater control over factors that affect their own performance as well as the performance of their direct reports. Ultimately, this advances and extends their careers.

Where should the direction and standards for executive development come from? The direction is derived primarily from the needs of the business, and, just as we identify **business** goals, we also should identify **individual** goals for personal development. These goals are inferred from the strategic business plan that an executive is expected to implement. Each executive should think broadly and ask Drucker's question. Other sources of information naturally include customers—knowing their present expectations and anticipating their future needs. Reading and being aware of changing technologies (the Internet) and economics (global competition) also helps you to anticipate what preparation is needed.

Progressive companies recognize that achieving business goals requires more of their leaders than good analytical skills and the ability to set appropriate numerical targets. "Soft" leadership skills are essential for reaching targeted objectives, especially in today's flattened organizational structures. Thus, a number of companies have found it helpful to clarify leadership expectations for executives. An Executive Leadership Competency Model assists executives in benchmarking their skills and planning their development accordingly. A competency model is developed with input from members of the executive team, who first identify the important competencies needed for successful implementation of the business strategy. Specific behaviors are then selected for each competency. For example, the word "leadership," no matter how well-defined, does not indicate the specific behaviors desired. In competency models, leadership is defined and examples are given to illustrate the behavioral expectations for leadership in the organization.

Gauging one's effectiveness in light of an Executive Leadership Competency Model requires acquiring self-knowledge through outside feedback. Sometimes a trusted mentor or friend can provide helpful suggestions. Usually, however, more direct and objective feedback is necessary. This can be obtained through a 360° feedback questionnaire as well as through the use of benchmark executive assessments by an industrial psychologist. Correct feedback allows precious time to be invested working on the "right" things rather than being wasted in pursuit of wrong or unnecessary development initiatives.

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Executives committed to development need to distinguish between short-term and long-term learning requirements. Short-term learning may be obtaining information that affects one's industry or functional area, such as a change in tax laws, whereas long-term learning may require improving one's listening skills or developing one's leadership and social presence. These require great commitment and involvement over a long period of time.

Executives who continue to grow will not only impact the bottom line and extend their careers, but also develop the next generation of leaders, preparing their organization for success in the future.

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