RECOGNIZING POTENTIAL LAW ENFORCEMENT EXECUTIVES

Part III in a Series on Leadership

Jim Lundy, an internationally recognized expert in the identification, training and development of effective managers, has written a book titled Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way. Given the increasing complexity of our nation's correctional agencies, it has become clear that we may have to adopt the philosophy suggested by the title of Lundy's book if we expect our agencies to be viable in the new millennium. Viability begins with the quality of leadership, and if correctional agencies are to avoid going the way of the dinosaur, leadership must be the best possible. Law enforcement agencies are recognizing a long-acknowledged need in private industry: the fast-tracking of managerial candidates.

This article summarizes findings from an exploratory study that contribute to developing a fast-track management system for law enforcement. The research formulated and tested a law enforcement executive management (LEEM) profile. The profile is based on the personality characteristics, skills, knowledge and abilities of demonstrably effective executives within an agency. It provides a good starting point for looking at career development issues in law enforcement.

Selection Methods

The criteria for selecting law enforcement executives today are not as sophisticated as they could be. Traditional selection from the ranks runs the risk of elevating individuals who are expert in the duties mastered through experience but who may be deficient due to a lack of exposure to the full range of expertise required by new executive functions. Selection from outside the department may introduce needed new talents and policies but could fail if the individual selected is unfamiliar with the traditions, policies or local culture of the new environment. Most law enforcement agencies do not have the luxury of granting potential managers educational leave or training sabbaticals. Agencies often select the people who are "in the right place at the right time" for high-risk jobs.

Research and field evidence indicate that effective executives learn to be effective through a maturation process where skills, knowledge and abilities are developed and enhanced. This is why, particularly in the private industry, significant resources are devoted to identifying and training those who demonstrate leadership potential. Given that executives are developed, not born, law enforcement, like private industry, needs to minimize the risk associated with current selection processes through a surer method to identify and measure management abilities.

The research described here was conducted under the Visiting Fellowship Program of the National Institute of Justice. The study developed some exploratory hypotheses about the personality, performance and skills that predict success in law enforcement management and leadership, based on the performance of existing executives. This study marks a pilot effort to discover traits exhibited by effective executives and to measure prospective candidates for promotion against these traits.

Findings supported all three hypotheses presented:

Certain management, personality, cognitive and "Type A" variables are significantly more widely represented among populations considered to be effective managers than in nonexecutives. These traits can be identified for management selection and development.

Significant relationships appear between management-potential variables in the executive group which do not appear among the random sample of nonexecutive personnel chosen for comparison.

Some individuals among the nonexecutive group display management potential similar to that exhibited by effective managers. Although relationships between desirable variables may reach significant levels in the nonexecutive group, they usually appear more strongly among executives.

Method of Research

The research formulated and tested the LEEM profile. It identified 20 variables of personality, cognition and skills-based performance, then used written tests to measure them.

Participating in the research were 13 federal, state and local jurisdiction agencies drawn from the four quadrants of the nation. Each agency provided a sample of its current executive managers and a sample of nonexecutive personnel randomly selected from the ranks from which executive managers are drawn. A total of 148 executives and 364 nonexecutives voluntarily participated in the study.

Dividing subjects into the two occupational specialty groups of police and corrections received serious consideration. Because this was a pilot study, however, it seemed better to look for common ground between the two types of agencies.

For assessment purposes, numerical scores of individuals on each variable fell into one of three groups of approximately equal size: those scoring between 10 and 30 percent, 40 and 60 percent, and 70 and 90 percent. The tests selected to measure an individual's standing within variables were protocols widely used in both private and public industry. These protocols have special application to law enforcement as well, for many of the skills, knowledge and abilities required to manage complex organizations effectively in private industry (e.g. strategic management capability, organizational skills, etc.) also are necessary for the effective management of our nation's complex correctional systems. The tests used were:

The Makings of an Executive

The study identified three characteristics which significantly separated executives from nonexecutives: critical thinking ability, that is, the ability to recognize problems and the acceptance of the general need for evidence supporting what is asserted to be true; education; and career commitment, that is, the decision to make an occupation the area in which a person intends to spend his or her professional life. Ten secondary characteristics could be used to support the primary three: original thinking ability, competitive drive, speed and impatience, vigor, achievement drive, ascendancy, emotional stability, sociability, self-esteem and personal relations. Responsibility and cautiousness showed little variation along the entire range of scores, with nonexecutives demonstrating potential levels of these two characteristics equal to those displayed by executives.

Critical Thinking. Critical thinking ability was the most significant of variables noted among demonstrably effective managers, with more than 60 percent of executives scoring in the highest decile of critical thinking ability.

Because it is a learning process, critical thinking is a skill that can be developed. (People are endowed with the ability to think, but they still have to learn how to do it.) When critical thinking ability is compared with age, rank and education, the positive relationship between these variables indicates a

complementary relationship and identifies a number of factors that appear to contribute to the structure of effective management, such as the ability to evaluate an argument.

Education and Career Commitment. Education and career commitment are the two other most important identifiers of management potential. Like critical thinking ability, they can be acquired and developed throughout our personal and professional lives as formal and informal knowledge.

Rank and Age. When rank and age were compared to all other assessed variables, management potential increased among the highest scorers, peaked, and then began to decline among those between the ages of 56 and 60. Many of the executives in this age group already hold the highest rank and have assumed roles that may require different characteristics and skills. These executives are perceived more as evaluators, teachers, mentors and motivators than as strivers.

Among the executive sample, potential increased with rank until the next-to-highest executive rank was reached, then began to decline in the highest executive rank. This was particularly noticeable in critical thinking ability and career commitment. The peak and decline partially appeared in critical thinking ability, original thinking ability, ascendancy, vigor, achievement drive, speed and impatience, and competitive drive.

Although some declines were found, top executive scores in most areas of this study remained consistent with, and in some instances higher than, those demonstrated by line staff and all levels of supervisors. This indicates that the skills, knowledge and abilities acquired and developed over a professional career are retained and used by effective leaders in their top-level management roles.

Anticipating Future Needs

Law enforcement needs to identify and develop new managers regularly and early enough to meet the eventual demand for upper-level managers -- and to do so while the present generation of leaders is still around to help guide the process. Although it would be easy to build an agency-specific management profile, certain factors continually appear among effective executives, irrespective of geographic region or agency type: critical and original thinking ability, education, career commitment, tolerance hresholds, sociability, achievement drive and vigor.

The findings of this study indicate that troth the enhancement of management skills and the development of future managers are possible. They support the preponderance of evidence found in other research indicating that certain identifiable factors play a role in effective leadership in both private industry and the corrections sector.

These leadership qualities have been evidenced by current leaders identified by their agencies as being effective, and also to some degree in their subordinates. Almost one-third of the non-executive group participating in the study displayed management potential levels similar to those of the highest executive group. These findings suggest management potential indicators among subordinate ranks, and possibly a pool from which management selection could be made.

Although managers are developed, not born, today's pressures on society dictate that public safety personnel cannot be left to evolve slowly. Profiles such as those developed by this study can facilitate a viable fast-track process for developing the most promising candidates for criminal justice leadership.

Today's Effective Law Enforcement

The demonstrably effective executive manager is between 34 and 60 years old -- on average, 45. He or she is well educated, probably having obtained additional higher education beyond the bachelor's degree (the range runs from less than one year of undergraduate study to a Ph.D.). The parent agency has given this manager significant exposure through 11 to 15 different assignments over a seven- to 30-year tenure (20-year average). This person is assertive and inquisitive with high achievement drive.

Able to handle confrontation, the manager enjoys distinct personal satisfaction in successfully completing a task. Expecting good performance from self and others, the manager is moderately tolerant of those who try to carry out directions but intolerant of failure or inaction.

Relatively elevated in self-esteem, the manager is unafraid of prudent risk-taking and is seldom satisfied with existing conditions. The manager displays a notable degree of critical and original thinking ability.

The manager might well be called a "workaholic," but a goal-oriented one. This individual has a high degree of job involvement and career commitment. Critical thinking ability at various ranks, ages and educational levels.

Rank	% scoring in deciles 7-9
Line staff	17%
Supervisor 1	19%
Supervisor 2	21%
Executive 1	56%
Executive 2	75%
Executive 3	57%

Age Range	% scoring in deciles 7-9
21-25	11%
2-30	23%
31-35	17%
36-40	41%
41-45	41%
46-50	44%
51-55	33%
56-60	25%

Level of Higher Education	% scoring in deciles 7-9
None	17%
< 1 to 2 years undergraduate	23%
2 to 4 years undergraduate, associate degree, or both	12%
Bachelor's degree to 2 years beyond bachelor's degree	38%
Master's or doctorate	61%

REFERENCES

Chenault, Joann. 1987. The mission option in executive training. Training and Development Journal. (June).

Chusmir, Leonard H. and Christine S. Koberg. 1986. Creativity difference among managers. Journal of Vocational Behavior. (October).

Etzion, Dalia and Eli Segev. 1984. Competence and task allocation in a simulated work environment: Its consequences for individual organizational performance. Simulation and Games. (December).

Gordon, Leonard V. 1978. Gordon personal profile inventory. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Heimovics, Richard D. and Robert D. Herman. 1988. Gender and the attributes of chief executive responsibility for successful or unsuccessful organizational outcomes. Sex Roles. (May).

Hornstein, Harvey A. and Fred T. Mackenzie. 1984. Consultraining: Merging management education with organizational development. Training and Development Journal. (January).

Jenkins, C. David, Stephen J. Zyzanski and Ray H. Rosenman. 1979. Jenkins activity survey. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Lang, Dorothy. 1985. Preconditions of three types of alienation in young managers and professionals. Journal of Occupational Behavior. (July).

Norris, Stephen O. 1988. Research needed on critical thinking. Canadian Journal of Education. (Winter).

Sherman, Debora and Clark Taylor. 1982. Basic skills for the diversely prepared. New Directions for Experiential Learning. (September).

Watson, Goodwin and Edward M. Glaser. 1980. Critical thinking appraisal. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

~~~~~~~~

By Arnett Gaston
~~~~~~~~

Arnett Gaston, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist is an adjunct associate professor at the University of Maryland Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, and a private consultant.

Copyright of Corrections Today is the property of American Correctional Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.