Twenty-Two Ways to Develop Leadership in Staff Managers

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CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

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Suggestions for the Use of This Report

Human resource professionals responsible for management and executive development systems and programs can use it to:

- support their efforts to improve the development of staff professionals; and
- increase the leadership pool for senior management positions.

Staff managers responsible for subordinate development can use it to:

- add to their understanding of how executive development works in staff jobs;
- devise ways to increase the developmental opportunities available to staff professionals; and
- create enriched career paths for staff professionals.

Staff professionals who want to develop their own executive potential can use it to:

- guide their selection of developmental opportunities; and
- evaluate their progress in their personal development programs.

General managers responsible for staff units can use it to:

- improve their understanding of the reasons for the differences in leadership between staff and line professionals; and
- develop actions to remedy the situation.

Introduction

First the bad news: A person who works exclusively in staff jobs throughout a career is less likely to develop important leadership competencies than a person who works exclusively in line jobs (or in a combination of staff and line jobs).[1] Life as a staff professional is developmentally impoverished.

The consequences of having developmentally deprived staff professionals are serious. It means it is more difficult to find strong staff leaders, with all the implications for staff performance that this entails. It means we are wasting future talent; the pool of potential leaders for senior management positions is being restricted because women and other minority executives, who have primarily entered organizations via staff positions, are finding it difficult to make it into the senior-potential pool. And it means that in many cases staff professionals, willing but unable to move into line positions, are being career frustrated.

The good news is that this needn't be the case. The development of staff professionals can be greatly enriched. It is essential we do so. Staff executives need to be full partners in understanding and running organizations. With the increasing complexity and rate of change that organizations face, the distinctions between line and staff executives are beginning to blur. Strong, broad leadership is needed to meet present and future demands.

In this paper we will describe the developmental gap and explain why it exists. We will also offer twenty-two recommendations for how the gap can be closed. Our ideas are based in part on many years of experience in executive development and in part on the insights provided by various studies done by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). We hope this paper will contribute to the development of leadership from the staff pool by being used by development professionals and staff managers responsible for development, as well as by general managers of staff units, and staff professionals seeking to help themselves (see the summary of uses that precedes this introduction).

How Successful Executives Develop

Before we can describe the developmental gap between line and staff executives, we must first outline how we understand executive development to occur. The following is based on CCL research, begun in 1982, on how successful executives learn from experience (see Lindsey, Homes, & McCall, 1987; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987; and McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; those readers who are familiar with this work may want to skip to the next section).

Successful and effective leaders get to be that way by responding positively and adaptively over a long period of time to diverse but specific experiences. Basically, these can be grouped into five types:

Challenging jobs. Challenging jobs—starting up something or fixing troubled operations, expanding large operations, working on time-limited projects from crises to systems installation—teach about the subtleties of leadership. These developmental challenges represent what leaders actually have to do. Such jobs teach how to cope with pressure, learn quickly, or deal with balky subordinates. In absolute terms, challenging assignments are the best teacher. They provide both the greatest variety and number of lessons requisite for executive leadership.

Bosses and other people. Bosses and other people, both good and bad, serve as significant role models for values. Exceptional people seem to create a punctuation mark for executives, either by representing what to be or to do or what not to be or not to do. Whether by serving as models of integrity or acumen, poor ethics or avarice, certain bosses exemplify how values play out in management settings.

Hardships. Hardships teach executives about their limits. These include making mistakes, getting stuck in dead-end jobs, enduring the traumas of life such as untimely deaths and tornadoes, and having to fire people. Regardless of the event, managers experiencing hardships will often look inward to reflect on their humanity, their resilience, and, most importantly, their flaws.

Coursework. Coursework can serve as a powerful comparison point, a chance to build self-confidence by sizing oneself up against managers from other organizations. Courses are also a place to trade tips, listen to war stories, and pick up different approaches to solving problems.

Off-the-job experiences. Experiences off the job, usually relating to community service, can be primers in persuasion.

Each of these types of experience teaches something unique, and learning from a variety of experiences can lead to one's being a manager with balance, able to respond adaptively to a variety of challenges. For instance, the confidence built through successfully coping with challenging jobs can lead to arrogance unless tempered by a sense of one's own foibles and limits; this is usually learned through facing hardships.

Having a variety of experiences is a prerequisite for success. The flip side also holds. Not having a variety of experiences or failing to learn from them can lead to failure or derailment—having one's career involuntarily and prematurely stalled or stopped through demotion, plateauing, or being fired. As mentioned above, challenging jobs are the best teacher. The following types of jobs were reported to be the most developmental:

Start-ups. Start-ups are assignments in which the manager starts from scratch to produce something—for instance, products, plants, or subsidiaries. With little history and few rules to follow, in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty, the manager must plan, build teams, act, learn from mistakes, and, finally, produce. This kind of job teaches one to be able to stand alone and take charge.

Fix-its. Fix-it jobs—for instance, turning around troubled units or integrating feuding or nonaligned departments—teach managers about both building and using structure and management and control systems, as well as how to cajole and persuade others that the new ways and systems are better than the old. Some realize for the first time how toughness (tearing down and restructuring) and compassion (rebuilding, motivating, and cajoling) can be demanded at the same time.

Stark leaps in scope and scale. Large leaps in responsibility—switching to new businesses or facing large increases in the number of people, dollars, or functions that must be managed—put the manager in the position of having responsibilities that can no longer be handled alone. A lesson here is that guiding, prodding, and structuring are needed when one can't get intimately involved in every problem or project. Managers must learn to delegate and build team ownership and many ultimately see such job shifts as transitions—from doing things themselves to seeing that things get done, from controlling to guiding, from setting objectives to developing subordinates so they could learn to set priorities for themselves.

Projects and task forces. Projects and task forces—and other temporary assignments (such as plant closings, acquisitions, negotiations, dealing with the board, and troubleshooting)—are normally carried out with tight deadlines and require managers to work with unfamiliar people and subject matter. Taking the time to hole up and study is not an option. Instead the manager must learn to ask questions, rely on the expertise of others, find a tutor, and understand the values and perspectives of others. Learning on the fly is required to be successful.

Line-to-staff switches. Moving from a finite, measurable line job to a corporate staff planning job is one of the most focused ways that managers learn to think strategically. Line managers who think they understand planning often see it quite differently after they have moved into a staff financial or business planning assignment and looked at the practices in other units, analyzed various financial scenarios, or scanned what competitors have done.

These five types of jobs teach the lessons of adaptive action: coping with the demands of executive management, learning the business and requisite technical knowledge, and learning to deal with many different demands (fix it, start it, maintain and expand it, learn it quickly on the fly, deal differently with different groups of people, and rise above the day-to-day tactics to both think and act strategically).[2]

One of the largest differences between successful and derailed executives is in learning the lessons these challenging jobs can teach. For example, successful executives don't often learn effective interpersonal skills from just courses; they learn them primarily when they need to as a result of meeting a people-challenge on the job. Similarly, they often learn about setting up new systems from fix-its and turnarounds, and developing other people from having a big leap in their management responsibilities.

As a group, successful executives, line and staff, regardless of organization, learn similar lessons from similar job challenges. In contrast, derailed executives have essentially no learning pattern from job assignments. They may have been in very challenging jobs, but they didn't learn the lessons from those assignments. They had the experience but missed the meaning. In addition, leadership development involves successfully making key and large transitions from one type of job to another, from one way of doing things to another, from one skill set to another. Such stark changes help create the motivation for development to occur, and also increase the executive's repertoire of skills—all leading to the adaptive flexibility executives need to respond to new challenges.

Differences Between Staff and Line Development

In looking at staff professionals in terms of the elements of executive development described above, one can see significant differences: They receive far fewer challenging jobs (start-ups, fix-its, etc.) than line managers, and when they do receive them it is later in their careers; they have fewer stark transitions to deal with; and, although the leadership demands they experience are largely the same as those faced by the line, they do not experience some crucial demands. Staff managers do not have the same opportunity to develop as line managers.

These observations are supported by recent research at CCL and by indirect evidence.

CCL Research

Two pieces of CCL research address the differences in staff and line development. In the first case, as a part of the continuing investigations on how executives learn, we asked 250 executives (roughly half line and half staff, all with 15 to 30 years of experience) to describe their most significant learning experiences. Although this study was conducted in one organization, and is limited by that fact, it represents the only systematic comparison of the pivotal experiences of line and staff executives that we know of at this point.

Staff executives reported the same assignments as the line, but with much less frequency. Tables 1 and 2 (page 6) show the statistically significant differences in frequency of experiences for the two groups (these are experiences that were cited significantly more often by one group than the other). Note that the experiences reported by the line are the ones that are most powerful in leadership building: job-based assignments and lessons (which made up 61% of the total events line managers reported, as compared with only 34% of total events reported by staff[3]). Staff executives report more "soft" assignments and lessons which are more political and indirect in nature.

The typical staff profile has more events involving other people, courses, and early work experiences. Although these are certainly valuable, they are not the ones that normally teach the most leadership lessons. It should also be noted that staff lessons reflect two enduring laments of staff managers. The category "political lessons" shows a concern about getting things done in a complex environment, and "how to work with executives" indicates the necessity of their coping with situations and people beyond their control.

From the standpoint of leadership challenges, CCL research shows that line and staff managers face about 80% similar challenges—although the challenges occur more frequently in the line. Both sides have problem units to turn around, systems to install, teams to build, and so on. The 20% difference, however, is critical.

A unique challenge on the line side is the pressure and feedback of profit-and-loss responsibility. This creates a learning opportunity where success or failure is relatively obvious and finite (see the development value

Table 1

Highest Frequency Staff Events*

- Projects/Task Forces
- Values Playing Out
- Role Models
- Early Work (Nonmanagement)

Major Staff Lessons Learned*

- What Executives Are Like
- How to Work With Executives
- Be Prepared to Seize Opportunities
- How to Cope With Situations Beyond Your Control
- Political Lessons

*Significantly higher than reported by line executives.

Table 2

Highest Frequency Line Events*

- Fix-its/Turnarounds
- Leaps in Scope/Scale
- Starting Something From Scratch

Major Line Lessons Learned*

- Dealing With People
- Technical Knowledge/Business Knowledge
- Organizations as Systems/Strategic Thinking

*Significantly higher than reported by staff executives.

list below). Line managers get a lot of feedback on how they are doing against measurable standards.

Also, the line has more frequent and direct contact with outside customers and therefore line managers can develop a better feel for the business. This probably leads to their developing a better understanding of the market and customers and more effective customer-contact skills.

On the other hand, it should be mentioned that a unique challenge on the staff side is the necessity of dealing with ambiguity—the lack of a bottom line. This can be a developmental plus in the sense that facing ambiguity and the ability to develop strategy is a key aspect of senior management work. Although most line managers spend their entire careers in the line, this developmental value is occasionally taken advantage of by line managers who are moved temporarily into staff jobs. This is not common, accounting for only about 2% of the reported developmental activities, but the converse, staff managers being temporarily moved into line jobs, is rarer still. So even in the area of cross-over development, line managers have an advantage.

The differences between staff and line experiences can be further understood by looking at the sample experiences and lessons given in Table 3 (pages 8 and 9).

In addition to the findings above, we recently evaluated the scores on managerial effectiveness given to 112 line and 80 staff middle managers and executives. These individuals had been participants in CCL programs during the last year, and the instrument used to gather the data was Benchmarks®. Each participant was rated by subordinates, peers, and superiors on a number of items comprising sixteen scales measuring managerial effectiveness (there were 412 ratings of the 112 line executives, and 515 ratings of the staff executives). Line executives received significantly higher ratings of effectiveness than staff executives on eleven of the scales (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 15 in Table 4 [page 10]). For the five remaining scales there was no difference. So, not only do the managers themselves report that line managers learn more of the skills and perspectives necessary for effectiveness than staff managers, the people working with the managers see it that way as well.

Indirect Evidence

There is also quite a bit of indirect evidence of the difference in line and staff opportunities for development. Many staff professionals and managers are frustrated. They are often paid less than line professionals. Only three of the top ten highest paid positions in large corporation are held by staff

Table 3

Some Sample Staff Experiences

"When I was an analyst with my previous employer, we were constantly preparing for some type of presentation or decision-making meeting. These were typically high-level meetings and we were under extremely short-time pressure. The only way to achieve success was to focus only on information and aspects that were critical to a decision."

"The president of the company put heavy pressure on R&D to develop new products. I was asked to develop one of the products and put together a prototype marketing plan. I felt the product wouldn't meet customer needs and recommended to my supervisor that it be cancelled. The suggestion was not passed on to the president. We completed the product and ended up losing a significant amount of money before it was withdrawn from the market."

"I changed careers at age 25 and entered the personnel field. I was assigned to professional recruiting with a boss who knew little about it but was a great developer of people. He took a genuine interest in me and spent considerable time with me sharing his broader knowledge of labor relations."

"My immediate superior has changed three times in the past few years. This has necessitated my being sensitive to changes in management style and methods. As the head of a staff organization, I have had to carefully manage these changes so as to not send the wrong signals to my staff."

Typical Lessons Learned by Staffers

"I was exposed to senior management and organization thinking."

"When holding a different point of view with management, document it and share it as a matter of record to allow for a second hearing—help them to see your point of view."

"To move up in the management ranks you have to be willing to place your professional judgment on the line when you have the opportunity to make an important contribution."

"How you do things is easily as important as what you do. Ensure that the corporation does not closely associate you with others whose performance, work, competence, or integrity may be detrimental to your reputation."

"Be patient!"

"I learned how to handle the collapse of a project."

Table 3 (cont.)

Some Sample Line Experiences

"I had to develop a major new product in a very short period of time. The company wanted superb execution but was not very familiar with new-product development. Their history of new products was erratic, generally unsuccessful. I had to build a team and drive the efforts rapidly, while fighting to keep quality. This meant constant battles with many layers of management, keeping their confidence while avoiding errors. This resulted in a rapid, highly successful launch in a company and system I was not very familiar with."

"Two big companies merged and I had to merge their MIS functions. Systems were selected to become standard for the newly formed company. A lot of involvement from managers of the two merging companies was needed. I promoted managers' involvement, and some tough decisions were taken; one of the centers disappeared and only one EDP center survived."

"I was sent to Spain to run a 35-million-dollar company with 850 employees. The company was doing poorly at the time. I had to bring in fresh marketing ideas that had never been tried before in an organization that resisted change—at least initially."

"I accepted a job as general manager of a cabinet-making company, having no prior experience in this industry. Two weeks after I started, the contractor who produced all the company's products was declared bankrupt, and we had to take over the plant and some of the operatives to restart production. My previous management experience was with five or six people; here I started with 72."

Typical Lessons Learned by Liners

"I developed great confidence in my abilities to turn problem situations around."

"High-tech businesses with product life cycles of three years require a highly skilled and flexible workforce and an adaptive organizational structure."

"I learned how to make tough decisions rapidly."

"I learned about business aspects, such as sales and purchasing, which normally do not belong to technical/functional areas."

"I learned how to handle myself with superiors, subordinates, customers, and suppliers in a crisis situation."

"I learned that there are distinct geographical cultural differences; attitudes are different in a union environment also."

Table 4

Developmental Events and the Lessons They Can Teach

LESSONS/SKILLS AND PERSPECTIVES	SCRATCH	FIX-IT	PROJECTS	SCOPE	LINE/ STAFF	DEMOTION/ UNCHALLENGING JOBS
1. Resourcefulness						
• Comfort with ambiguity			•		•	
• Seeing organizations as systems					•	
• Knowing what executives are like					•	
• Knowing how to work with executives			•		•	
• Knowing how to use systems to manage		•		•		
• Finding alternatives in solving problems						
2. Doing Whatever It Takes						
• Perseverance		•				•
• Standing alone	•	•				
• Discovering what you really want to do	•				•	
• Controlling your career						•
• Being ready for opportunities						
3. Quick Study						
• Technical knowledge				•	•	
• How the business works	•	•			•	
4. Decisiveness	•	•	•			
5. Leading Subordinates	•	•		•		
6. Setting a Developmental Climate	•	•		•		
7. Confronting Problem Subordinates		•				
8. Team Orientation				•	•	
9. Hiring Talented Staff	•	•		•		
10. Building and Mending Relationships						
• Negotiation with external parties		•	•			
• Getting cooperation	•	•			•	
• Understanding other people	•					
11. Compassion and Sensitivity						
12. Straightforwardness and Composure			•			•
13. Balance Between Personal Life & Work						
14. Self-awareness						•
15. Putting People at Ease						
16. Acting With Flexibility		•				

executives (Shaeffer & Janger, 1982). They rate much lower than line managers, on average, for promotability to senior positions (Cox, 1986). When downsizing takes place, staff areas usually get cut first, deepest, and hardest. Staffers are less satisfied, feeling they have to adjust to the desires of line managers, and agree that line managers have more decision-making authority—even in areas of their own staff expertise. Surveys of organization-wide attitudes show that staff groups have lower than average climate or satisfaction scores; they feel left out of the mainstream (Porter, 1963; Porter & Lawler, 1965; and French & Henning, 1966).

Line and staff roles are inherently different and in some ways unequal. The staff does exist to serve the line, and staff managers are thus required to persuade and advise more than direct and decide. Problems are more abstract and ambiguous. There is no bottom line, so there is less direct control over satisfaction and rewards. A great deal of the frustration, however, may be related to the differences in development opportunities between staff and line jobs.

Another View of the Problem

Another way to look at the gap in leadership-building opportunities between staff and line is to examine the elements that make any experience developmental. These can be summarized as follows, in order of the frequency in which executives mention them:[4]

1. Involves possible success and failure that will be obvious to others.

2. Requires aggressive, individual "take charge" leadership.

3. Involves working with people not worked with before, with a lot of people, or with a lot of new people.

4. Creates additional personal pressure (e.g., tough deadlines, high stakes, heavy travel, or longer hours).

5. Requires influencing people, activities, and factors over which you have no direct authority or control (e.g., superiors, peers, clients, political or economic situations, participation in volatile markets, tough competition).

6. Involves high variety and diversity: doing something very different (e.g., switching from line to staff, changing functions, using new technologies).

7. Involves one's being watched and monitored by people whose opinion counts.

8. Requires building a team; starting something from scratch; fixing or turning around a team, project, or operation.

9. Involves a tremendous intellectual, strategic, or problem-solving challenge with little or no history for guidance.

10. Involves interacting with a significant boss or senior executive (e.g., someone who is notably supportive or unsupportive, a positive or negative role model, or someone whose style clashes with your own).

11. Features an important missing element (e.g., top management support, necessary resources, skills or technical knowledge, credentials, credibility).

When you look at typical staff and line assignments over a career, the staff probably has an advantage in only two of the eleven developmental elements, numbers 5 and 9. (Staff jobs typically involve more indirect influence and have a more strategic, cognitive flavor and content.) Two are about even, numbers 7 and 10. (Even though staff jobs are in headquarters locations, where top executives are housed, the executives probably spend more time in the field and in meetings with the line than they do meeting with lower level staff.) The remaining seven favor line assignments. (The line advantage is especially strong in numbers 1, 2, and 8.)

Thus, over time, line managers accumulate more leadership-building experiences than staff managers.

The Effects of the Experience Gap on Development

As described above, the leaders (staff and line) in organizations are those who have successfully completed a diverse series of assignments, especially challenging jobs. Over time, line managers accumulate more leadership-building experiences. They are far more likely to have diverse assignments, in various locations, involving different kinds of people and products. Many sets of skills are therefore developed. Staff managers are more likely to have similar experiences, in the same place (typically at headquarters), involving familiar people and issues. The same set of skills is employed over and over, although the applications become more and more complex.

The effect of these differences is substantial. One way to look at this difference can be seen in Figure 1 (page 14), which is a model of how various skills play out over time for successful executives. Referring to this, one can say that instead of a steady de-emphasis on technical skills, staffers continue to develop these all the way through their careers as they face increasingly complex technical issues and problems. Simultaneously, staffers do not expand their leadership skills, despite an increasing need if development is to occur.

Line managers, with their more varied experience, are likely to see their skills develop in the way the model shows.

Another effect of the experience gap is that it saps the motivation of staff professionals. Several studies[5] have shown that, money and advancement notwithstanding, the most important aspects of work are related to challenge, achieving something worthwhile, and autonomy (see Table 5, page 15). The experiences that are most likely to build confidence and provide a sense of efficacy and achievement are those that staff managers are less likely to have. This is another source of frustration for staff professionals.

Why the Developmental Gap Exists

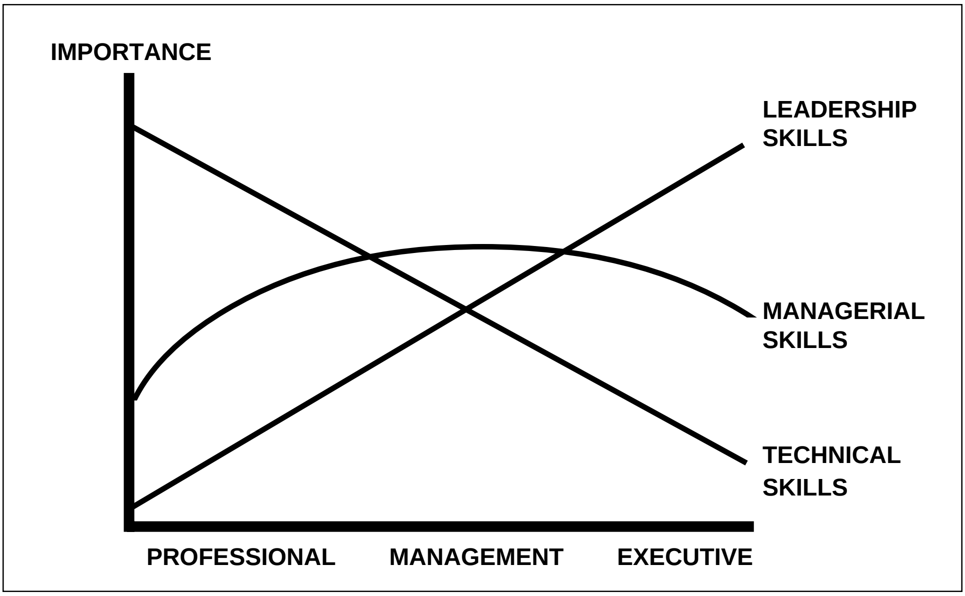
There are many reasons for the difference between line and staff leadership development. The obvious one is that there is a natural division of labor between the two. Staff supports the line. But we think a major reason is the informal nature of much development. Much development happens ad hoc, following the path of least resistance. In this situation, the natural advantages of the line are realized and the disadvantages of the staff are not addressed.

It is only recently that the effectiveness of a variety of experiences for managerial development has been understood. When it was planned in the past, much development was not very effective. For example, executives were often put through job rotation programs, but little attention was paid to how specific jobs related to leadership skills. The same is true of the “assistant to” method of developing executives. While such experiences certainly add perspective and maybe teach some indirect lessons, they are generally not leadership-building experiences.

Development should not be left to chance. Having managers with narrow leadership experience or who are frustrated in their roles benefits no one. We therefore offer the following recommendations for improving staff development.

Figure 1

Changing Requirements for Success



Professional (Entry/Personal Contributor): Technical/functional skills (what you can personally do) are most important at this stage; managing the work of others and personal leadership skills are not yet critical.

Management (Middle Management/Supervisor/Manager of Managers): Getting the work out through others (which requires people and process management skills) is at its peak at this stage; technical skills begin a gentle decline, and leadership skills begin to come into play.

Executive (General Manager): Leadership skills are the most critical at this stage; detailed technical skills are at the lowest, and management skills have plateaued in the middle.

Table 5

How Important Are These Job Aspects?

1. Chances to do something that makes you feel good about yourself.
2. Chances to accomplish something worthwhile.
3. Chances to learn new things.
4. Opportunity to develop your skills and abilities.
5. The amount of freedom you have on your job.
6. Chances you have to do things you do best.
7. The resources you have to do your job.
8. The respect you receive from people you work with.
9. Amount of information you get about your job performance.
10. Your chances for taking part in making decisions.
11. The amount of job security you have.
12. Amount of pay you get.
13. The way you are treated by the people you work with.
14. The friendliness of people you work with.
15. Amount of praise you get for job well done.
16. The amount of fringe benefits you get.
17. Chances for getting a promotion.
18. Physical surroundings of your job.

Source: Rewick & Lawler (1978).

Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at closing the gap in leadership development (and leadership challenges) between line and staff jobs and careers.

1. Evaluate Staff Professionals for Management Potential and Intent Early

Although many staff professionals prefer to remain individual contributors, it's not true that most don't want to be managers or couldn't make better managers if given proper preparation and opportunity. Roughly 40% of Fortune 500 CEOs had their primary background in finance and law, so success is not so much based on where or how one started as it is based on one's later experiences.

The AT&T studies (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974) found that 29% more of low-assessed managers were promoted than the high-assessed if the former had more challenging jobs. Many staff managers don't get these early opportunities. The CCL studies found staff executives whose first real supervisory experience took place around age 40; for line executives the experience occurred on average at age 23. Moreover, managers (line or staff) that encountered their first leadership challenge at mid-career tended to fail. By then the stakes were too high and the tolerance for mistakes was lower, and people whose background included many technical projects with similar groups of people were less prepared than those who had encountered start-ups and fix-its and had managed varied groups of people previously.

Early identification of those staff contributors who show signs of managerial and leadership potential and interest is the first step toward providing them with opportunities for leadership challenges.

Although most staff professionals are evaluated early, these evaluations generally concentrate on technical rather than leadership and management skills. Our suggestion involves applying more managerial and leadership factors in existing evaluation processes. CCL's research has produced such a list of the requisite leadership skills (Benchmarks®).

2. Ration Development Jobs Carefully

Because supervisory roles are key sources for learning leadership skills, and because they are scarcer in staff units (which are flatter than line units), these positions should be reserved for staff who are identified early as showing a potential for management.

3. Enrich (Provide More Variety in) the Leadership Experiences of Staff Managers

When reassigning staffers, think in terms of a stark transition from one type of challenge to another. Managers develop most when leadership demands change—for instance, when they have to work with new people or technologies or develop a new skill—and they must give up old ways to accomplish a task.

So organizations should ask such questions as, “What will this person have to learn quickly? What will the person have to unlearn, give up doing, or change?” In other words, when placing an individual in one of two possible staff assignments, choose the one that offers the most change, thereby providing diversity and variety for the developing individual. That strategy will provide the opportunity to develop resourcefulness and the capacity to learn on the run, two important leadership skills.

4. Think Small

There are a limited number of high-challenge jobs in any staff organization and they should be rationed carefully. In addition, many mini-opportunities exist: organizing an off-site meeting or developing a new training program (mini-start-ups); working with a problem subordinate (a mini-turnaround or fix-it); confronting morale problems, cutting costs, or streamlining operations; giving someone a stretch project assignment. These can all teach how to develop others and involve working with those not worked with before. Eventually such small experiences can add up to a big one.

5. Use the Principle of Progression

Those who are successful start-up managers at age 40 often had mini-versions of such work earlier in their careers. At age 23 they helped create a word-processing pool and selected the first people; at 28 they started up a small unit; at 33 they started up a new product; at 36 they were the number two person in a major start-up; and then at age 40 (an overnight success!), they handled a major start-up themselves. These chains of small but progressively more challenging opportunities are available in most staff organizations.

6. Provide Lots of Career Information and Feedback to All Staff Managers and Professionals

In order to take an active part in their own development, staff professionals need three things: an understanding of how the organization defines effectiveness and success (and ineffectiveness and derailment), a knowledge of what experiences (in terms of jobs and job challenges) can lead to the competencies that constitute effectiveness, and frequent and varied feedback on their progress in attaining these competencies. The first two are sometimes problematic. Too often, the success profiles of organizations are wish lists of desirable values and characteristics, with no indication of where and how one attains these. Orientation courses and sessions in which senior managers talk about their key experiences and learnings can help in this regard, but nothing can substitute for a clear definition by the organization of what constitutes effectiveness and how it can be attained. The third is crucial. Staffers should receive multiple-perspective, 360-degree, actionable feedback (that is, from bosses, subordinates, peers, colleagues, customers, and so on) on their strengths and weaknesses, and this feedback should be received on a regular basis.

7. Aggressively Help Staffers Learn from Each Experience

One of the main conclusions from the CCL studies is that successful people are active learners. For instance, they keep notes on interesting ideas, consolidate their learning through feedback or tutoring, or ask themselves probing questions: What am I learning? What do I need to do differently?

What habits have gotten too comfortable for me? What do I need to do from a leadership perspective? Such an orientation is not at all automatic. It's easy to go along, absorbed in one's job, without reflecting on how one is acting, what the impact of one's actions is, and whether one is developing into a versatile manager able to cope with any leadership challenge. Organizations can support and help managers structure their learning. CCL is just completing a study of active learners which should give us a better idea of how to help individuals increase their learning from experience. At a minimum, managers ought to debrief past experiences and review upcoming ones with developing subordinates.

8. Find Ways for Staffers to Work on Line Issues

There are numerous ways that staffers can be put to work on line issues. Assign staff to task forces working on line problems. Arrange periodic line-oriented issue and problem reviews. Assign staff to work on line projects. Require staff professionals to work regularly with line managers on urgent problems. The key point is not to allow staff to work isolated from the core business activity.

9. Urge Individual Staffers to Build Their Own Leadership Skills

Individual staff managers can take an active part in finding ways to promote their own development and can help carry out most of the recommendations we make here. They can be empowered to look for and volunteer for start-up or fix-it projects, define what constitutes effective leadership in their current positions and acquire feedback on how they are doing, seek out contacts with line colleagues, take field trips, or take part in task forces and committees on significant line issues and problems. In order to do this, of course, they need to know what leadership competencies to develop and what experiences promote those competencies.

10. Expose Staffers to Customers

Staffers do not have as much contact with outside customers (nor as much exposure to the basic business) as those working in the field and line.

This isolation can be lessened by such measures as taking field trips, working in customer service for short periods of time, conducting market surveys, taking part in customer focus groups, and visiting customers. A number of hotels and fast-food organizations require managers and staff professionals from headquarters to spend a week or two every year doing jobs in the field in order to better understand customers and the business.

11. Look for Line-like Jobs in Staff Units

There are small line-like jobs in most staff areas. These have more direct measures of their effectiveness, tight repetitive time frames, and direct stand-alone decision making on a daily basis than the usual staff job, and they often involve managing larger groups of people. Examples are jobs in payroll, accounts payable, and accounts receivable in a finance unit; jobs in compensation and benefits processing in a human resource unit; or jobs managing the hardware and report generation in an MIS unit. It might be tough to get high-potential staffers to take such jobs, since they often would rather plan, think, strategize, and influence than manage, direct, and oversee production. Some gentle persuasion might be required. These mini-line jobs can help build leadership skills.

12. Look for Opportunities for Temporary Staff-to-line Switches

Staff-to-line switches are rare, but they should be used more frequently. They can be very beneficial because they provide staffers with a specific understanding of the leadership requirements of line work. In general, such a switch should take place early in a career rather than late. If a full switch cannot be provided, a halfway step could be considered. For instance, a staff person could be sent into a staff unit within a line unit—perhaps market research in marketing or sales planning in sales.

13. Look to Make Early Permanent Staff-to-line Transitions

Some staffers who show an early inclination toward management, leadership, and the line should be moved into the line permanently as soon as possible. This is especially important for women and minorities, who are bunched up in staff groups. Look for likely transition points. Some organizations, in order to persuade more to take the chance, offer a "round-trip ticket" in case the transition does not work out.

14. Look to Experiences in Addition to Jobs

Because staff jobs and careers offer impoverished leadership opportunities but the realities of business don't allow people to move around as much as is desirable, staffers can enhance their development by means of off-the-job projects and assignments—for instance, trips, projects, task forces, and special assignments.[6]

15. Look to Outside-of-work Experiences

There are leadership challenges in church groups, community projects, charitable activities, and professional associations, and the staffer should be encouraged to make use of these developmental opportunities.

16. Make Staff Services More Customer-focused by Using a Charge-back System

Some organizations have a system of internally charging for the products and services supplied by staff units. The practice is increasing as the implementation of total-quality programs, with their concern with internal and external customer requirements, increases. In advanced charge-back systems the line can make choices between inside and outside sources of staff services. They can also choose not to use the service at all. Although staff charge-back is not appropriate everywhere and not always desirable, it can make staff managers more sensitive to the nature of line work because the products and services they are responsible for must meet line (customer) needs; also, it provides a more direct measure of their effectiveness. And because the line can go elsewhere if staff costs are too high or products and services unsatisfactory, staff managers have to concentrate on competition, cost-effectiveness, and quality. Charge-back systems, then, can not only improve staff products and services but also increase the opportunities for development of staff managers.

17. Implement Total Management Quality in Staff Units

The total-quality management process has many leadership challenges embedded in it. Thus, managing a staff unit according to the idea that its products and services be cost-effective, have zero defects, and totally satisfy internal users can be beneficial to the manager's development: It has elements of both start-up and fix-it assignments; it involves fairly complex strategies of implementation; it has a heavy measurement and feedback component and necessitates full delegation practices; and it aligns staff and line more closely as both try to be more competitive in a global marketplace.

18. Mix Line and Staff in Training and Development Programs

Where possible, training and development programs, whether internal or external, should include the participation of both line and staff managers. Everyone would gain from this mixing strategy.

19. Use Line Executives on Temporary Staff Assignments as Special Mentors/Coaches for Staffers

Line executives who are temporarily assigned to staff positions can be used as a developmental resource. They can be asked to coach one or more staff colleagues in line experiences and perspectives. They can act as presenters or discussants in staff management development programs. They can attend meetings of staff units and provide a line outlook on the initiatives and program ideas under discussion.

20. Arrange for Staff Professionals to Attend Line Meetings and Off-sites

Often, line units hold off-site meetings that exclude staff units, and vice versa. It would be a very useful developmental experience for staff professionals to attend line off-sites and business meetings. Not only would the content of such programs be beneficial for staffers, but the chance to interact informally with line and field individuals would help decrease the isolation that many staffers experience.

21. Move Key Staffers at Headquarters to Field Staff Jobs

If temporary line assignments or special assignments with line content and exposure can't be arranged, move key future staff leaders to field locations before their salaries are too high or they are too senior in the chain of command for such a move. Doing a staff job at a plant, regional office, sales location, warehouse, or other field location is at least half of the way closer to the line, the business, and the customer.

22. Manage the Careers of Key Staff Talent More Aggressively

This is our most important general recommendation. It is harder to develop a staff professional into an outstanding leader who can serve as either a staff or line executive than it is to develop a line professional for this purpose. Because developmental opportunities are fewer, there is less time and less room for error, as well as a higher cost if a key job or special assignment is missed. Consequently, special education is necessary for staff executives responsible for the development of staff professionals. In addition, human resource departments may need to provide special resources for developing staffers. Finally, top management needs to be aware of the special nature of developmental life for staff professionals, and should support the extra efforts that are required to improve it.

Conclusion

In thinking about the difference in leadership competencies between the staff and line managers, we naturally considered whether there might be explanations other than the differences in their experiences. Maybe the difference in managers could be traced to differences in people when they enter the organization. Perhaps people self-select into staff or line careers based upon the precursors to leadership skills, with the more technically oriented going into staff and the leaders into line. We could find no meaningful evidence of that. We believe they start with the same foundation, or threshold of characteristics for leadership competencies, although they may differ in their beginning interests.

Maybe staff and line jobs are different at the top. Perhaps staff jobs require less personal leadership and more technical expertise. If that were the case, developmental life for staff professionals would be all right because staff careers do build technical competence. Is it possible that staff executives don't need as much leadership competence? We find only differences in degree between line and staff roles, responsibilities, and jobs. The top jobs in both staff and line have the same requirement for personal leadership; they are more similar than different.

We are convinced, therefore, that staff development must be improved. And there are real impediments, many of them structural, standing in the way of staff professionals who might develop into senior executives. The good news, however, is that this doesn't necessarily have to be the case. If we move in an aggressive yet disciplined way to add diverse leadership challenges to the work of staff professionals, and if we introduce these early in their careers, we can change this situation. The benefits of doing this are great: an increased pool of leaders for both line and staff functions, better leadership in staff units, and an increase in the number of women and other minorities making it into senior management positions.

Notes

[1]As we define it, in general you are in the line if you make, sell, move, or market the products and services of the organization to outside customers; you have the direct authority to make final decisions; and you have a direct way to measure how you are doing with some form of revenue and costs. The most usual line functions are sales, manufacturing, distribution, operations, transportation, general management, and sometimes marketing and customer service, if they are responsible for a direct income stream and profit and loss. You are in staff if you count, track, design, write about, minister to, litigate over, strategize about, test, publicize, train for, promote, package, plan for, survey about, or in any other way service those line units which make, sell, move, or market the products and services of the organization. Staff units generally do not directly interact with the outside customers in exchange for revenue and they do not have the revenue portion of the financial equation to track and measure their performance. They also have to generally use indirect influence to get things done; they do not have direct authority over any decision which affects the line. Staff units generally only have budgets against which to track performance. Typical staff units are finance and accounting, human resources, public relations and corporate affairs, legal, research and development, MIS, engineering, purchasing, office services, travel, and sometimes marketing. There are also staff units within line units, such as sales promotion within sales and market research within marketing.

[2]For a more complete discussion of the types of assignments (and lessons) that executives require in order to be successful, see McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison (1988).

[3]It should be noted that the organization in this study relied far more on job assignments for development than other organizations studied by CCL. If one looks at the data for six corporations, including this one, start-ups, fix-its, and leaps in scope and scale accounted for 33% of total events—meaning that staff managers in this one company in a sense had it better than many line managers elsewhere.

[4]This development value checklist is taken from the program, “Tools for Developing Successful Executives,” designed by the authors and offered at CCL in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was developed from CCL research on executive learning. Executives were asked to explain why any event they

reported as developmental was valuable as a source of learning the key lessons of leadership. The checklist is a summary of their answers, presented according to frequency, beginning with the one mentioned most often.

[5]See, for example, Howard and Bray (1988) for a complete discussion of work values, which also vary with age. Young people are quite concerned with advancement, but this declines precipitously by middle age, while achievement, motivation, and need for autonomy increase.

[6]For a more complete discussion of using off-the-job assignments to enrich leadership development, see Lombardo and Eichinger (1989).

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Twenty-Two Ways to Develop Leadership in Staff Managers

A person who works exclusively in staff jobs throughout a career is less likely to develop important leadership competencies than a person who works exclusively in line jobs. This report shows why and offers several specific ways to increase the leadership potential of staff managers.

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