Harvey was just what the board had been looking for in a CEO. He had a strong track record in turning around failing businesses, he was a marvelous strategic thinker, and he understood the company's products and markets. There was only one problem with Harvey: He was a loner. Harvey got along poorly with just about everybody. He was by turns cold and distant or downright abusive. “That’s just me,” Harvey once said when someone found the courage to bring this up with him. “I’m not trying to win a popularity contest here, you know.” And so the company tolerated Harvey because they desperately needed his skills. He had inherited a vice-president who was good at working with others, and who began to act in Harvey's place at staff meetings and so forth. Eventually Harvey worked his managerial magic and the company turned around. A year later the board dismissed Harvey—his abrasive personality was no longer tolerable in the smoothly running organization—and he went off to save another company. It was too bad, as it turned out, because not long after Harvey left, the company got into trouble again. They really needed Harvey and what he could do for them. A board member said of him: “Damn Harvey! We couldn’t live with him and we can’t live without him.”

We tell this story to illustrate some of the issues of managerial development at the highest organizational levels. Perhaps the most important of these is why Harvey’s organization did not try to help him improve his interpersonal ability. In general, why is it that when performance problems arise in high-level managers, the solution organizations usually prefer is to transfer, demote, or fire the executive? In effect, a game of “musical chairs” is being played in corporate executive suites. Organizations may also try making up for an executive’s performance problems by hiring associates with compensating strengths, but either way the solution of choice is to move (or remove) the executive or to change those around the executive; in other words, to use selection instead of development. Much less frequently do organizations attempt to create, in a manner of speaking, movement within the executive—that is, to encourage the executive’s personal and managerial growth.

This paper is about self-development—the efforts of the executive to improve himself or herself, efforts that other people may well aid or hinder. By self-development we mean the conscious, deliberate effort to come to terms with one’s limitations. We do not mean the kind of development that springs almost automatically from the new experiences that bring out latent abilities in the executive. We are also not concerned here with the considerable development executives have undergone on their way up. Our interest is in self-aware, self-directed improvement once managers have reached the highest levels.

This paper explores the hypothesis that executives avoid coming to terms with their limitations and that the executive's organization and the people who work directly with the executive shy away from attempts to help. It is based on interviews we conducted with 40 individuals—22 executives and 18 experts on executives, including internal specialists in executive development and external consultants. The people interviewed came from a wide variety of organizations, large and small, public and private. The 40 interviews took from an hour to three hours each; this resulted in over 400 pages of interview transcripts, which we subjected to careful analysis. We were looking for patterns in what executives found problematic about their jobs, how likely it was that executives acknowledged these difficulties, and what conditions affected whether executives became aware of their problems or attempted to do something about them. For this study we defined an executive as an upper-level manager in a line position with general management responsibilities, or a high-level head of a function such as chief financial officer or vice-president of administration.

Self-development is important because no executive can escape having deficits and because deficits matter to executives and their organizations. These deficits run the gamut: difficulty in thinking strategically; trouble adjusting to a job with large scope; proclivity for viewing all problems through the lens of one’s specialty; discomfort with one’s role as public figure and organizational spokesman; an introverted personality that people lower in the hierarchy experience as aloofness; a susceptibility to let power, posi-
tion, and celebrity go to one’s head; or single-minded dedication to a demanding career to the point where marriage, children, or health suffer and undermine the individual’s effectiveness at work. These are the kinds of deficits we will be referring to, the deficits that can make the difference between success and failure.

Self-development is one route for dealing with an executive’s deficits. It is a difficult route, one that is underutilized not just by executives but by all humans. Based on our interviews and reading, however, we have come to the conclusion that when people become executives they cross an invisible dividing line that makes self-development significantly more difficult for them. In this paper we will attempt to show just how difficult self-development is, particularly for executives—and how some of those difficulties might be overcome.

Many factors affecting self-development are present or become more pronounced as a manager moves into the executive ranks. First, executives possess power. They command formal authority, resources, access to other powerful individuals, and control over the fates of many people. Second, executives are successful. In achieving high position, most have succeeded marvelously in their careers, either by climbing the hierarchy of an existing organization or by building an organization around themselves. High-level people have also acquired expertise. They learn the business, they come to know the organization and the people in it, they become experts in managing people, solving problems, creating change, and dealing with the extraordinary demands of their jobs. There are many other factors that contribute to this special condition of being an executive, such as age, wealth, and perquisites. In addition to these elements, two personality factors were frequently mentioned during our interviews in connection with executives. One was that most executives are ambitious; they are driven to excel. The other was tied to the power and importance of the executive’s role: Because doing the job involves making important decisions and affecting the lives and fortunes of others, many executives are keenly aware of a need to be highly competent and to be seen as being so.

Because our analysis showed that these elements—power, success, expertise, ambition, competence, and so forth—consistently work together to affect the executive’s prospects for self-development, we shall include them all in this paper under a common descriptive term: elevation. The interrelated features of elevation are present in varying degrees in different executives and different situations. Executives are elevated to different degrees and therefore the degree to which their opportunity for self-development is impeded may vary according to the degree of elevation.

From the many interrelated features of elevation just discussed, four stand out as especially affecting the executive’s prospects for self-development. For the sake of exposition, we will be treating these features separately, though in reality they act in profound concert. First, we will discuss how the exercise of power keeps executives from getting personal criticism that could lead to the awareness of deficits. Second, we examine how another route to self-awareness—introspection—is blocked by the very nature of the executive job. Third, we'll look at how the ability to accept criticism is limited by the executive's high need to be—and to appear to be—exceptionally competent. Finally, we will discuss how a history of success makes change difficult for executives. Along the way, we will also consider how some executives overcome the tendency for elevation to interfere with self-directed growth.

Power and Getting Criticism

LBJ’s biographer, Doris Kearns, described the experience of being in the same room with President Johnson. “One could sense his extraordinary power,” Kearns writes, “the moment he entered a room. There was a strange texture to the mere act of standing next to him; it seemed as if he were violating the physical space of those around him . . . .” (p. 92)

Imagine confronting such a person with his human foibles. Not very likely. We tend not to criticize the personal behavior of powerful people. Witness the following observations made by people we interviewed:

When you’re a manager, you develop a set of people you can get feedback from—a web, a grapevine. But as you rise in the hierarchy, it withers and by the time you get to the top, it’s dead.

The higher you go, the more constricted the feedback channels become.

In most corporate organizations senior executives don’t get much feedback on their weaknesses. There is not that candor in executive suites.

These are a few of many such comments that lead us to recognize the fairly widespread notion that executives do not get much feedback from those around them in the organization.

We are not speaking here of the inevitable and frequent criticisms made of the decisions and policies of an executive. These appear regularly in the press and are leveled at executives from many outside interest groups. We are talking about feedback aimed not at what an executive does—the decisions he makes, the
The Executive's Demeanor

We found that the executive's bearing, his way of behaving around others, can inhibit feedback. This demeanor may stem from his mental acuity, his command of the issues, his history of success, or all three. Whatever its source, the demeanor of people in charge serves a useful—probably indispensable—function. A certain air of authority is no doubt necessary for executives to do their jobs. Yet no matter how necessary it is, an exaggerated, dominating presence often chokes off criticism. Clearly this is not the case with every executive. Some executives openly encourage feedback, though when this is done, the executive may still have problems convincing others of his sincerity.

In general, we found an implicit attitude in the executive's bearing that can discourage others from challenging him—especially about his management style. One executive development specialist put this attitude into words: "It's as if the executive is saying, 'I've made it to the top and one of the characteristics of being here is that the door opens one way; people don't swing my door open and tell me how to do my job.'" In other words, the executive's achievement entitles him to an exemption from advice and criticism.

In extreme cases, an executive's demeanor can cut off information brutally. Although any superior can do this to his or her subordinates, high-level managers have more power and perhaps also a greater need to exercise it. One executive we heard about would

... brook no deviation from what he perceived to be the right way to do it, which was his way. Underneath that [attitude] was an extreme temper. And he almost talked in riddles so that not only did he want to control, to do it his way, but often he didn't communicate clearly to subordinates. "I don't understand what you want" was difficult for subordinates to say and even more difficult to repeat.

Such an extreme case illustrates the power of the executive's demeanor, but even in much less obvious cases there can be in the executive's demeanor an implied threat of using his position to a subordinate's disadvantage, which adds fear and resentment to the reasons that lead people to withhold criticism.

Ordinary abrasiveness can also block feedback. According to one of our sources, half the executives identified in his corporation as being "problems" were also considered "abrasive." "Zinging," as one respondent called it, usually destroys any instinct on the part of other people to help the executive with his problems, to give him constructive criticism, or to be a confidante.

To one degree or another, then, the executive's demeanor, which derives from who he is and what he does, affects the willingness of people around the executive to criticize his managerial behavior and character.

The Executive's Impact

One theme we heard again and again in our interviews centered on the executive's extraordinary impact on those around him. Many of the executives themselves brought this up as a matter of concern, especially in the area of exercising their influence. A university president told us, "If you're chief executive, people not only take what you say seriously, but they spread things around that you have simply sent up as a trial." This is characteristic of the increased sensitivity people have to the executive's words. A casual comment can reverberate with significance. An executive told us the story of seeing a picture on a subordinate's office wall. He said casually to the subordinate, "Why do you have that picture?" He was only making conversation, or so he thought. The next day when he returned to the subordinate's office he noticed that the picture had been taken away. People hang (or unhang) on every word. Comments become commands; statements become injunctions. This effect can become so pronounced that some executives must guard even the expression on their faces. "If I don't smile," one told us, "people think business is bad."

The problem with this exaggerated impact is that it makes some executives reluctant to speak out at all until they are ready to make a firm decision. They become reluctant to hold casual conversations that may, they fear, turn out later not to have been so casual after all. This tends to add distance to the relationships between an executive and those around him. Keeping one's own counsel, whatever its advantages, has the effect of excluding others from involvement in, say, a decision-making process. This makes for a cooler relationship in which people feel less free to offer criticism—and in which they have less personal contact to use as a basis for criticism.
But what about "insiders," those people with whom the executive feels free to discuss issues openly, with as much speculation and "running things up the flagpole" as he wants? Are they not a valuable source of feedback? For some executives they undoubtedly are. Yet to the extent that these insiders act as "cheerleaders" for the executive, the flow of behavioral information is likely to be retarded. This can happen to any executive, even one who tries to resist it, for the simple reason that such cheerleaders are often acting in their self-interest. They tell the executive what he wants to hear and omit what they do not want him to hear, including news of problems that might reflect badly on them.

As potentially serious as this cheerleading can be, perhaps the most serious form of cheerleading is the unconscious kind, when subordinates don't withhold criticism but instead become blind to any faults in their highly placed superior. This is a form of collusion. Because of their dependency on him, subordinates cooperate with their superior in supporting the image of himself he wishes others to see. By seeing the superior as he wishes to be seen, these subordinates cooperate with their superior in creating a "delusionary system." Such a "delusionary system" is not likely to be fertile ground on which executives can learn and grow.

The Executive's Isolation

If the executive's demeanor cuts down on criticism and the reactions of those around the executive reduce the flow of developmentally important information, the organization also plays a part, often by its very nature. As executives move up the hierarchy, they tend to have contact with fewer and fewer people inside the organization. From his research with top executives, Burns found a "uniform segregation of three or four persons" at the top of organizations (p. 60). Of the time one general manager spent with people in his firm, half was spent with the other two members of his management team. As one human resources director we interviewed put it:

I think too many top executives stay cloistered and sequestered. The people they see and the people they interact with gets narrower and narrower as they get up the pyramid.

Besides this more or less structural isolation of executives, there is an isolation that comes from insulation—the tendency of the organization to protect its executives from the indignities and problems of everyday life. Such insulation can cause the executive to lose touch with the levels below and to become increasingly unaware of much of what is going on in the company.

Isolation takes a toll on communications and criticism upward because the absence of contact guarantees the absence of communication, especially of sensitive information. Moreover, the scant communication that does occur usually takes place on the executive's turf, complete with the trappings of power and the symbols of isolation, all of which can make subordinates uneasy and less comfortable about speaking up.

Executives may need to be somewhat removed to make their jobs feasible. Yet there is the counterbalancing problem: Isolation restricts criticism that an executive could use in an effort to develop and to perform his role even more effectively.

The Executive's Autonomy

Just as an executive cannot function without some isolation, neither can he function without some autonomy. We found evidence that autonomy—especially when it approaches being total, as it does in some cases—is an important factor in screening criticism of the executive's modus operandi.

Executives who have the autonomy to hire whomever they please can—and some do—often use that autonomy to hire people in their own image, people whose backgrounds, gender, and education make them compatible. Executives who do this are likely to end up with the cheerleaders we mentioned earlier, subordinates who tell them only what they want to hear.

From our interviews, here is a sample of comments along this line:

Some executives are afraid to hire people with different strengths. It's a failure to trust.

I see executives surrounding themselves with compatible people, people who fit in.

If you rely too much on strengths, it hurts your effectiveness, and you end up hiring mirror images.

Executives are not likely to get criticism on their behavior by turning to such "mirrors." Performance appraisal is another means by which critical information can be delivered, an institutionalized way in which organizations overcome the disinclination to give feedback about performance. But as DeVries et al. have found in their review of appraisal practices in organizations, formal appraisals thin out at high levels. One consultant described the attitude of executives toward appraisal this way: "You talk about performance appraisal at the executive level? Unh-uh. That's for you
folks down there." Executives can, in effect, use their autonomy to exempt themselves from having their performance assessed in this way. When executives put themselves outside the appraisal system, who but the top person is to say otherwise? The personnel executive in charge of the system ordinarily lacks the clout to define it as including the top levels, or to enforce it if the top levels merely go through the motions of participating. In granting such autonomy to its executives, an organization is allowing its executives to grant themselves an immunity to being appraised.

**Getting Criticism to the Executive**

Though we found that power can and often does impede criticism of the executive's managerial character, we also learned about channels that create a healthier situation for the executive, one in which he receives the critical information he needs to pursue self-development. The solutions can be grouped into those things the organization can do, those things that people around the executive can do, and those things that the executive himself can do.

Organizations can, for example, do a lot to de-emphasize power differences. Organizations can reduce the gap between executives and others by making executive offices less impressive and locating those offices closer to those of others. Intel, for example, deliberately avoids separating senior and junior people with perks such as limousines, plush offices, private dining rooms, and other status symbols. If organizations segregate executives less and take away some of the trappings of power, then executives may become more accessible.

Another thing organizations can do is to create mechanisms that generate constructive criticism of executives. Standard practices such as performance appraisal are available; the issue is whether they are applied to executives. Probably the key to whether executives receive appraisals is the top executive and the extent to which that person takes the system seriously and uses it personally.

From our interviews we also learned of other mechanisms the organization can use to encourage constructive criticism. One international financial organization conducts inspections of each major unit of the organization. A member of the board of directors heads a team of three, which goes into a division and conducts confidential interviews, the results of which are channeled to the division's top management. The report includes perceptions of the CEO and the top management team. Another corporation used an outside consultant, who knew the organization and had the respect of many people in it, as a kind of ombudsman. He kept his ear to the ground and regularly fed criticism of top management back to those concerned.

People around the executive also play an important role in freeing the channels for feedback. Although they are in a distinct minority, certain individuals in the executive's world do have the inclination and courage to tell the executive about his shortcomings. One executive talked about

\[\ldots\] the constructive critics who care enough about the organization and the person to help him and tell that person how his behavior is impacting on the organization. Those people in my executive experience are few and far between. But there are a few, and those few helped me to understand myself better.

Perhaps the most important factor is the attitude of the executive himself toward being criticized on his managerial behavior. Some executives make it a point to avoid becoming isolated and to solicit reactions to their work. More effective general managers build larger networks and make better, more skillful use of their relationships. One human resources executive we interviewed commented that "the less secure [executives] really hide, but the more secure ones will step out of their offices or go down to the departments, make it a point to stay in touch." Another staff executive reported to us that people two or more levels below would never be open with him in his office, only if he went to them. We also heard from executives that they can learn what their subordinates think of them by paying close attention to cues. As one CEO put it, "You've got to learn how to read very subtle complaints." Furthermore, executives get explicit information about themselves only if they convince others of their desire for it by word and action. A CEO said: "People have to make sure they're being asked honestly, and what they are going to get back is not a 'Louisville slugger.'"

The exercise of power impedes the flow of constructive criticism, yet power must be exercised if executives are to do their jobs. So the issue is not how to reduce the power the executive needs, but how to manage those aspects of its exercise that impede criticism.

**The Nature of the Job and Introspection**

Another way for executives to get criticism is from themselves, through introspection. Given the problems just discussed in getting criticism from others, executives may in fact need to rely on introspection more than lower-ranking managers. Introspection is the process of looking inward, of examining
or monitoring ourselves, of trying to understand our behavior, our feelings, our defenses, our effect on others. Introspection is a necessary step in the process of self-development, whether we introspect to gain new insight about ourselves or to make sense of criticism from others. Yet the likelihood that executives will spend time and energy in introspection must be considered in light of the extraordinary demands of their work and the degree to which introspection is immediately relevant to their day-to-day performance.

Most executives are faced with staggering, unremitting demands on their time. Many of these demands rise up suddenly and urgently from sources outside the executive and beyond his control. He must respond, and can use up enormous amounts of time dealing with these demands. Although some executives—especially those at the very top—may relate to sharply reduced numbers of people within the organization, the numbers of outsiders they must relate to increases. All of these demands on their time make introspection increasingly difficult.

But lack of time is not the whole story. As busy as executives are, their work lives are less hectic and unmanageable than those of some first-line supervisors, whose average day is crammed with as many as 500 discrete episodes. Despite the considerable demands, executives probably enjoy greater latitude than some lower-level managers over how they spend their time.

In part the issue comes down to attitude. Executives may not find the time because introspection is not a high priority. Executives do not value introspection because it is not immediately relevant to the performance of his work. The results an executive is concerned with are external and tangible—turning a plant around, improving profits, boosting productivity. Such results do not manifestly require self-understanding, and therefore do not seem to require introspection. Executives who do not see a connection between introspection and performance are understandably unwilling to give the time and energy that looking inward requires. When we asked a CEO of a small company how he looked at his performance, he said: "I look at the bottom line." Another person commented that because their commitment to the job is so high, many executives operate on a narrow sector of their personalities—one that excludes concern with self. In the same vein, Jennings asserted that executives get satisfaction from doing rather than contemplating; "Dreamers seldom make it to the top." Many executives share this sense of being always immersed in action. The issue, then, is not to turn executives into navel gazers, but to help them use introspection to gain information about themselves—their behaviors, their strengths and weaknesses—so that they may develop yet more effective managerial behavior.

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**The Need to Be Competent and the Ability to Accept Criticism**

In spite of the problems with getting criticism from others through feedback, and from themselves through introspection, executives do get criticism at times. To develop, however, we must do more than simply hear valid criticism; we must be able to accept its validity and, if only to ourselves, admit shortfalls in performance. As we will see, our interviews indicate a reluctance—sometimes an adamant refusal—on the part of executives to admit weakness or acknowledge any need for improvement.

We suggest that there is a relationship between the executive's reluctance to accept criticism and the executive's need to be competent. By need to be competent we mean a complex of attributes, including the need to be equal to the demands of the job, to live up to the expectations that come with high positions, and to have a sense of self-worth. A number of the people we interviewed called it "ego," by which they seem to mean pride in one's abilities and position. The need to be competent—to feel good about oneself—is something that all people have. If the executive is different, it is because he carries on this struggle on a larger stage and for higher stakes.

Several factors contribute to the executive's need to be competent. One factor is the set of expectations that come with the territory, a sense that the executive must be almost larger than life. As a highly placed manager who reported to the CEO of a major corporation told us,

"[The CEO] needs to be above everybody. He needs to be smarter than everybody, never wrong. . . . He has to act [as if he were] perfect."

An internal consultant explained it this way:

Executives in general are not supposed to have problems. They're supposed to be strong and competent and adequate to most situations.

Another factor, implied by the last quotation, is that, as holders of great responsibility, executives incur high risks. The high stakes make competent performance vitally important. Millions may be lost, lawsuits
may be engendered, careers may be ruined, and jobs lost through the incompetence of a highly placed person.

Executives want to build and maintain their reputations as people who know what they are doing. The opinions they render and the policies they adopt are often highly visible and come under close scrutiny. The need to save face is therefore considerable. If executives make mistakes too often, they erode their confidence in themselves as well as the confidence of others in them. Because of this, some executives learn to be “thick skinned,” they learn to protect themselves from criticism. The hitch is that they may learn this lesson too well.

The organization may cap all this by communicating its expectations of competence to the executive in powerful ways. One of the most powerful may be the special treatment that executives are accorded. Executives receive high—even exorbitantly high—salaries, are enshrined in opulent settings, and are afforded every convenience. The executive corridor typically stands as a monument to its occupants’ importance.20

As one executive said, “They sort of handle you like a precious egg.” (New York Times, November 7, 1982) The implicit message in all of this may be that the executive had better live up to the high expectations of the organization as symbolized by the special treatment. The executive is likely to expect himself to be, and know that others also expect him to be, more than ordinarily competent.

Thus, the executive’s expectations of himself and others’ expectations of him can subtly—or not so subtly—nudge the executive into an unrealistic sense of his capability and importance—which in turn makes it difficult for him to hear and accept criticism. To the extent that the executive’s ambition compensates for underlying doubts about himself, criticism may be unwelcome because it touches off an unconscious feeling of insecurity.

Our interviews provide support for this tendency for some executives to become unduly impressed with their competence and importance and therefore to reject criticism. A staff executive said, “Executives are susceptible to believing in their own infallibility. They think they can do no wrong.” And a line executive said,

As you grow in authority and responsibility, your confidence increases, and that can be good or bad—you can become fatuous and think you don’t make mistakes.

As Hague pointed out,

[The executive] may get conceited about his successes and blame his failure on external circumstances, but worst of all, he will cease to be self-critical and to learn from his experiences.22

Taken to the extreme, this can lead executives to become hypo-critical, and this can be perilous. Thus, confidence turned to arrogance can be the executive’s downfall.23

What Can Be Done?

We have talked about the tendency for executives to be tempted by an exaggerated sense of their abilities and importance, but there is nothing that says an executive must succumb. Many executives resist this temptation. In fact, their need for competence prompts them to sit tight for criticism precisely because they want to be competent. They realize they must continue learning if they are to remain competent. One executive who made a practice of examining his management style reported that at the end of the day, “I go home to my wife and say, ‘I can’t be that smart, I can’t do everything . . .’”

With regard to avoiding arrogance, one executive offered this advice:

. . . absolutely most important of all for a top manager: Don’t take yourself too seriously . . . . It took a lot of luck to get you the top job. You’re good, but so are the people around you. Be able to laugh at yourself.24

By taking himself less seriously, the executive can go a long way toward reducing the loss of confidence that may come with accepting criticism. Yet we should not expect the executive to take himself lightly; he is likely always to feel the sting of criticism especially keenly. As Drucker points out, speaking of political and military leaders, “To be more [than mediocre] requires a man who is conceited enough to believe that the world . . . really needs him and depends on his getting into power.”25

Good relations with one or more key people can help an executive overcome the temptation to reject
criticism. A trusted colleague can help an executive accept negative information because there is an atmosphere of mutual respect. One executive we interviewed said,

*I'm blessed with having a very good relationship with a guy I like working with and for... A key thing is mutual respect... He keeps me up to date all the time on how I'm doing.*

Finally, if executives are to accept criticism more readily, organizations will probably need to open the way by reducing the link between making mistakes and being judged incompetent. Too often a single mistake, if large enough, brands a manager as being unequal to the task. Yet McCall and Lombardo have shown that successful managers often make many big mistakes, and that the lessons they learn from such mistakes may be critical to their success. Organizations must understand—and encourage their executives to understand—that admitting weakness or ineffectiveness can be the beginning of further development and increased competence.

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**Success and the Motivation to Change**

To become an executive one must succeed, must make the most of ability, connections, and opportunities. Managers who eventually rise to become executives are often highly regarded from the beginning and therefore well situated in the "opportunity structure." These managers usually receive choice assignments in which they distinguish themselves, which leads to further opportunity to advance. This string of success followed by opportunity, opportunity followed by success, stretching over a manager's career, is what Kotter called the "success syndrome." Such a career history may leave a manager well acquainted with his strengths but relatively unacquainted with his weaknesses. More important, the highly successful executive may (with some justification) feel that changing his way of managing, even a little, could hurt his chances for future success.

We found that successful managers instinctively play hands off with their style of managing. It is a conservative, sometimes even superstitious attitude that is nicely encapsulated in the statement of an executive who, by changing organizations, had recently ascended to the second level of a major corporation and more than doubled his salary in the process: "Fundamentally, my management style is cast, and I'm not about to risk changing it and jeopardize the success I've achieved." Successful people see no reason to tamper with a winning formula. As a staff executive said, "[Successful executives] adapt as little as possible. What's gotten them there has been successful, so why change it?"

Many successful executives may be worried, perhaps rightly so, about losing their effectiveness if they change. This anxiety may be coupled with a general fear of failure that researchers such as Jennings have noted in executives—an anxiety that they will not accomplish what they want. A consultant we interviewed described an executive who was afraid of losing effectiveness:

*The person is cautious about changing, saying that he knows his organization talks about a more humanistic approach, a greater emphasis on human relationship skills, but "if I lose some of my toughness, am I really going to be successful?"*

Rather than correcting deficiencies, successful executives seem more interested in building on strengths. We interviewed a rising young executive who, for example, as was obvious from the way he expressed himself, excelled at conceptualizing and communicating. But when we asked him whether he tried to develop himself as a manager, the two things he mentioned as developmental targets were analytical ability and communication, just those things he already did well. Although building on strengths can be an effective developmental approach, if it becomes a substitute for correcting deficiencies, if an executive is developmentally satisfied merely to get better at what he or she is already good at, then weaknesses will remain, and they may eventually outweigh the strengths. Building on strengths is the kind of change people generally find comfortable; correcting weaknesses is risky and painful.

Is it success itself that makes change difficult for executives? Isn't the reluctance to change just human nature? Our interviews suggest that success is indeed a significant factor. As one management consultant observed:

*I've worked with people on a lower management rung all the way up to the people at high levels and certainly the people who are lower are much more willing to look at themselves. They're still trying to find their leadership style, define what's going to lead to success in their organizations.*

As these managers become more successful, their motivation to change can diminish. An executive with many years of experience said of people on the fast track that
There's a certain crown prince image they're conscious of. So I'd say, in a number of cases, they feel that they've made it and all they have to do is to continue to do the things they've done in the past and they will rise to even greater heights.

How Do Executives Change?

Executives change for the same reasons that anyone changes—because they want to or have to. The motivation to perform well impels executives to pursue their own development. Said one CEO: "I know I must keep growing. What worked yesterday might not work tomorrow." So executives whose urge to be effective is strong enough to offset the forces that exert a drag on executive self-development will cultivate their own development. One group vice-president we heard about started each year by giving his immediate subordinates his agenda for personal change for the coming year. By making his plans public, he committed himself to change.

When the individual executive will not pursue needed change on his own, then an option is for other people to step in and press for change. Alcoholics represent a classic case of executives who have problems that they usually don't solve voluntarily. The task of penetrating these layers of rationalization with which alcoholics surround themselves may require as drastic a step as surprise confrontation. A Richardson-Vicks Inc. executive found himself confronted by the company medical director and colleagues critical of his performance who told him to attend a treatment program or lose his job. He went to the program. 31 This type of confrontation precipitates the crisis to which the executive is inevitably headed. It motivates the executive by threatening him with the loss of his job if not his career.

To overcome stiff resistance to change, it takes manufactured crises like these—or the naturally occurring ones, like actual career failure or life crises, which in one fell swoop can penetrate consciousness, command acceptance, and touch off an effort to change. A personal crisis, such as divorce or death of a loved one, can provoke an executive to question himself and his priorities: "Sometimes there's a precipitating event . . . that makes executives in retrospect look at the whole trip they've been on." Even someone else's trouble, when it hits close to home, can encourage learning. One consultant to executives describes a typical reaction to a co-worker being fired: "I thought he was safe and he just got shot down. Am I next? Maybe I'd better not have those blind spots."

Conclusion

In a study related to ours, McCall and Lombardo found that one of the things that seems to make the difference between success and failure at the top is a capability to overcome the obstacles we have been discussing and engage in self-directed growth. 32 In that study, both the executives who remained successful after reaching the top and those who derailed had flaws; part of what distinguished the two groups was how individuals dealt with their flaws. Drawing on the original data of this study, we found, for example, a derailed executive who "would never believe he had interpersonal problems." He took the attitude that: "After 28 years no one can question my performance." In contrast to such a posture, the successful executives in that study remained sufficiently courageous to acknowledge their faults and do something about them.

To recognize a problem of one’s own making corresponds closely to the flexible defense-and-adaptation mechanisms used by the successful cases in George Vaillant’s longitudinal study of 100 Harvard graduates. In the face of duress or crisis, the successes—well adapted and mentally healthy people—responded neither by denying the problem nor by fighting it. Rather, they managed by themselves and with the help of their friends to absorb the shock of the difficulty and work it through. 33 Zaleznik reported that how creative people manage disappointment is a key to the evolution of their careers. If they face a catalytic psychological event, then they grow as people and professionals. If they deny it, then growth is retarded because the unresolved conflicts remain. 34 The best use of self-analysis and self-redirection is in response to a specific need: a setback at work, repeated difficulties at one’s job, a career impasse, a transition to radically different responsibilities, a crisis at home, or a build-up of health-threatening stress. Self-development is one effective way to come to terms with transitions, crises, setbacks, or persistent tension from any source. People with a sense of well-being “take time for critical self-reflection only when approaching a tough transition or after making one." 35 Intrusiveness peaks at times of transition and drops to low levels at other times. Executives who react to being plateaued, demoted, or terminated by immediately finding another job and scrupulously avoiding any self-scrutiny are setting themselves up for a repetition of the same problem in their next job.

There is an irony in all of this. The executive whose power, impact, access to resources, experience and skill, and wealth, social position, and success all work to set him above most of his fellow humans and grant him the means to influence and accomplish great
things may find more difficulty than most in knowing himself, and he is constrained by his condition from the fullest development of his capabilities. In human, organizational, and societal terms, and despite the obstacles that impede it, self-development for executives is a frontier worth exploring.

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ENDNOTES


3. All the executives we interviewed and described in the interviews were men. In generalizing from these interviews, we therefore limit our remarks to male executives and use the masculine pronouns exclusively. Also for information regarding this study, a longer version is available from the Center for Creative Leadership, 500 Laurinda Drive, P.O. Box P-1, Greensboro, NC 27402-1660.


11. For a brief discussion of this "losing touch" behavior, see R. Townsend, "Further Up the Organization." New Management 1984, 1(4), 6-11.


15. See Steele, Endnote 12.


21. See, again, Steele, Endnote 12.


27. See McCall and Lombardo, Endnote 23.


29. See Kotter, Endnote 17.

30. See Jennings, Endnote 20.


32. See McCall and Lombardo, Endnote 23.


