Administration in Social Work

Executive Entry:

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Executive Entry:
Multiple Perspectives
on the Process of Muddling Through

Michael J. Austin, PhD

INTRODUCTION

The organization and management literature reflects considerable attention to the issue of leadership (Burns, 1978; Fiedler, 1967; Sayles, 1979). The recent upsurge in interest in leadership is again found in the current literature (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Schein, 1985; Tichy & Devanna, 1986). However, very little attention has been given in the literature to the process of executive entry. This process refers to the period of time which can range from three months to two years in which an executive of an organization enters a new position.

Gilmore (1988) makes a significant contribution to our understanding of executive entry by placing it within the context of leadership succession. In so doing, he identifies the following key phases of the overall leadership change process:

- Understanding the problem or opportunity of leadership turnover
- Managing leadership transitions resulting from expected or unexpected resignations
- Identifying the organization's future leadership needs
- Developing a profile and set of expectations of a new leader
- Conducting an effective executive search
- Selecting and hiring the best candidate

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- Coping with interim leadership
- Managing the executive entry process
  - Dealing with the shadows of previous leaders
  - Connecting with existing staff
  - Building a new management team
  - Developing a new shared vision of the organization
  - Managing reorganization by linking structure to strategy and people to roles
  - Cultivating, rebuilding, and maintaining productive working alliances
- Managing the pace of organizational change
- Preparing the organization for future transitions

This paper describes the executive entry process in order to identify a set of principles to guide executive entry. Executive entry is defined as the personal process of managing oneself in order to lead others. It includes learning about self in the context of the executive role as well as learning about the process of providing leadership.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to assess the relationship between the process of executive entry and the way in which executives help to create a vision and to position an organization for the future. Since one of the key ingredients of the positioning process is building trust with people inside and outside the organization, it is helpful to assess executive learning and leadership in order to identify principles for developing trust and for guiding executive entry.

ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE-TAKING

The process of assuming the role of an executive reflects an important transition, frequently a mid-life transition. The opportunity does not usually appear "out of thin air" but rather emerges out of a convergence between an individual's readiness for managerial leadership and an organization's receptivity to new leadership. The convergence usually results from a long process in which the individual consciously and/or unconsciously anticipates the opportunity to assume the executive role. The anticipation is frequently reflected through the assumption of increasingly responsible roles in an organization whereby managerial competence can be exhibited. Over time, an individual uses observation and experience in order to en-

vision the prospect of assuming an executive role. Once the decision is made to take on the executive role, many factors converge to influence the performance of the executive role. The new executive is influenced by the expectations of superiors or board members as well as subordinates. These expectations are sent in the form of verbal and non-verbal messages which teach the executive the "do's and don'ts" associated with the top management position. The executive receives these role expectations which influence managerial behavior and serve as sources of motivation in carrying out the executive role.

Katz and Kahn (1966) identify the following four major concepts related to role-sending and role-receiving which have been applied to the executive:

- *role expectations* — evaluative standards applied to the behavior of the executive.
- *sent role* — communications stemming from role expectations and sent by members of the organization in order to influence the executive.
- *received role* — executives' perception of the role-sending of others as well as the roles they send to themselves.
- *role behavior* — response of the executive to the complex of information and influence received.

These four concepts comprise a role episode which provides an important framework for understanding what the executive experiences during the entry phase. The executive is expected to send role expectations to superiors, subordinates, and constituents inside and outside the organization while at the same time receiving role expectations to be acted upon. The role episodes are heavily influenced by organizational, interpersonal, and personal factors. Organizational factors include such issues as fiscal solvency, institutional history and memory, and public perceptions. Personal factors include such elements as tolerance for ambiguity and capacity for delayed gratification. Interpersonal factors represent a major overlay on each episode, such as the communication styles of immediate staff, staff morale throughout the organization, and the meaning of symbols and traditions buried deep in the organization's interpersonal culture. Symbols might include pictures of the found-

ing leaders in the organization's entry area and traditions might include a closely held organizational philosophy transmitted through an oral tradition. All of these concepts relate to organizational role-taking.

The analysis in this paper seeks to explore more fully the personal factors which emerge as the executive enters a new role. Some view the executive role as a "two-way medium" between the external or community expectations of the organization and the internal expectations of staff (Weick, 1978). Others perceive the executive as a leader whose credibility is constantly being tested in a context where management is viewed as a performing art (Vaill, 1978). The most useful approach to understanding the personal factors affecting the process of executive role-taking appears to be the learning style of the executive. The executive entry process can be described as a time of rapid and intense learning about the organization, its staff, and its environment. For many, the experience has been described as scaling a "steep learning curve." Mitroff (1978) describes the learning executive as one who: (1) innovates by reflecting and then creating original response patterns, (2) views the variables and dimensions of a situation from at least two independent frames of reference, (3) tests several alternatives within multiple frames of reference, (4) demonstrates a willingness to modify, even to destroy, some central aspects of the organization's boundaries and patterns of relations so new ones can be constructed, (5) engages in controlled activity, experiments, and otherwise pursues data that are meaningful within multiple frames of reference and can be used to construct new and useful relationships, and (6) innovates by use of the unconscious (the irrational and, even less understood, the non-rational) and the humorous to gain new meaning and perspective (pp. 141-142). The concepts of the learning executive and organizational role-taking provide the framework for exploring the process of executive entry.

THE PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE— UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF AND LEADING OTHERS

This section of the analysis is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the process of learning required upon entry into an executive position. The second part refers to the process of leading

during the entry phase. While the distinctions between learning and leading are blurred throughout the entry process, they have been divided into two areas for analysis in order to identify some of the major characteristics of the entry process and the potential principles to guide day-to-day managerial behaviors.

Learning About Self and the Executive Role

In the earliest phase of the entry process, the executive enters the new position and is *confronted immediately by a wide variety of demands*. These demands range from planning budgets to handling the varying pent-up needs of both staff and significant others in the organization's environment. In this learning phase, the executive is not only focusing on the management of paperwork and the setting-up of office procedures, but is also involved in learning about the demands of the executive role. Throughout this process, it is common for the executive to engage in constant questioning about the wisdom of having agreed to serve in the position as well as lingering self-doubts about one's own ability to manage all the demands of the position. Irrespective of how much personal planning took place prior to executive entry (e.g., reading reports, interviewing key actors, buying and selling homes, settling the family, etc.) the immediacy of job demands can feel overwhelming.

In the process of learning a new position, the executive is also in the process of *unlearning his or her previous role*. For example, if one moves from a middle management position to a top management position or from a top management position in one organization to a similar position in another organization, there is the constant shifting of roles and expectations. Usually the chaos surrounding the exit from a previous job is compounded by the frantic pace of learning a new job. This shifting can produce considerable confusion as the executive acquires a new "sense of self" based upon the expectations of people inside and outside the organization. During the honeymoon period, executives may continuously reassess their own leadership style depending upon the interaction between the executive as a person and the organization as the significant environment. The executive can be primarily proactive or reactive. Such a style may vary if the executive inherits an organization (moves in from the outside) or inherits a job (moves up from

within). Despite the previous role of the executive, skillful execu-
tives can clearly articulate a leadership style (e.g., emphasis on
planning with few surprises, promoting participation but specifying
an agenda, making a conscious effort to meet the needs of the orga-
nization as well as reflecting the use of compromise as essential for
organizational survival, etc.). Leadership style is also greatly af-
fected by the size of the organization, the previous definition of the
job, and the executive's prior managerial experience.

In contrast to unlearning the expectations of the previous role, the
new executive is also engaged in a *continuing assessment of his or
her personal agenda* in taking on the new administrative role. As is
common in accepting a new position, most executives bring with
them a set of hopes and dreams for managing the organization. In
the early days of executive entry, these hopes and dreams are con-
tinuously challenged by the nature of the organization's past and the
feasibility of how much can be accomplished in the months and
years ahead. If the expectations for change and the development of
new directions for the organization are too high, the executive im-
mediately encounters a beginning set of frustrations and fears about
the prospects of success and the potentials for failure.

Confronting the fear of failure can be one of the most trying
aspects of the executive entry process. This is particularly true if the
individual has come from a position where he or she had maximum
control in guiding personal plans and creativity. In the executive
position where control over one's life is affected by multiple factors
inside and outside the organization, the potential paralysis that can
come from a fear of failure can be significant. For example, if the
organization's services are poorly marketed, the budget deficit is
significant, the staff has low morale, and the organization has nega-
tive press in the community, where does the executive begin? Simi-
larly, the fear of success comes when the executive takes specific
steps to secure new funding for innovative programs and the staff
resists becoming involved in implementing the new program. It is at
this point that the executive begins to truly understand the process
of muddling through and the slow and incremental steps which are
inherent in the organizational change process.

Another aspect of the learning process relates to the degree to
which the executive is *open to receiving and understanding feed-*

back and observations from other members of the organization. This degree of openness is critical in the early phase of the entry process. Since non-verbal behavior is difficult to read when the executive is beginning relationships with staff, it is necessary to find informal opportunities (e.g., walking the halls) to gather and process staff feedback. For example, a brief meeting in a staff member's office yields feedback to the executive that the phrase "this organization" used in staff meetings can be interpreted negatively by staff. The phrase connotes distance between the staff and the new executive who still may not feel "a part of" the organization. This piece of communication, after considerable self-assessment, was corrected with the phrase "our organization." This example can be multiplied a hundred times during the executive's honeymoon period. As a result, it is necessary to maintain as much openness to staff feedback as possible and to sort the information through a self-assessment process.

Staff expectations of the executive relate very closely to the issue of soliciting and understanding feedback. Most interactions with members of the organization relate to the *role* of the executive as distinct from the person who happens to fill that role, and as a result, many interactions carry a set of expectations about the power and influence of the executive. At the same time, it is clear that the role of staff prerogatives becomes a central feature in the balance of power and any attempts to step across the invisible boundary demarcating staff turf will be met by both resistance as well as the demonstration of a collective will on the part of the staff. Similarly, the executive's immediate administrative staff have a set of expectations with respect to how their administrative roles will be supported by the new executive. At the same time, the executive is assessing the capacities of staff and developing his or her expectations of staff. When these expectations are higher than staffs' apparent capacities, the executive may need to engage in further self-assessment to determine if the discrepancy should be owned by the executive and thereby adjusted downward or should be owned by staff with further support and training needed. Termination may also need to be considered.

In addition to developing and adjusting expectations about style, the executive also needs to demonstrate the capacity to self-disclose

his/her own adjustments. Since learning involves making mistakes, the executive has the added responsibility of sharing his or her uncertainty about the future while maintaining a continuing posture of optimism and a "can do" philosophy. This may help to allay staff anxieties about the shape of the new organizational directions emerging under the direction of the new executive. Since mistakes are part of risk-taking, it is almost a certainty that there will be misunderstandings when the executive seeks to delegate assignments to staff or communicates with people outside the organization. The executive needs to publicly own his or her mistakes which are inevitable during the entry phase.

It is possible at this point to begin to speculate on principles which might guide the early phase of learning about self. The following four principles reflect the combining of assessment and communication skills related to blending one's own data about self with the feedback from others. These principles could be viewed as hunches or hypotheses since they currently lack sufficient empirical research to generalize to executives across organizational settings or across differences in age, gender, race, or span of control.

Principle 1 — Being Open to Acquiring Knowledge About Self
This continuous inquiry process involves the daily and weekly activity of self-assessment, such as keeping a personal journal, and provides an opportunity to reflect on the frustrations as well as the exhilaration of the initial "roller coaster" experience.

Principle 2 — Using Assessment Skills and Intuition
During the "honeymoon period" the executive assesses information about the organization as well as gathers information and insights from various members inside and outside the organization. The executive relies heavily on intuition in making quick decisions. Staff members are expecting to see the signs of leadership in one form or another as a demonstration of commitment to the organization along with a sense of action and momentum.

Principle 3 — Demonstrating a Capacity to Be Open to New Learning
The executive who enters the organization is very much dependent upon learning about the history of the organization as well as the interests of its members.

Principle 4 — Actively Soliciting Feedback from Others
Asking individuals for their advice and guidance in the early phase of executive entry serves to empower individuals and to begin the long and slow process of relationship-building and trust-building. This process is as critical for relationships inside the organization as it is for developing relationships outside the organization.

(Adapted from W. Bennis & B. Nanus, *Leaders: The strategies for taking charge.* New York: Harper & Row, 1985)

A second set of principles are noted later in relationship to providing leadership.

Learning About Leading the Members of the Organization

The second major phase of managing oneself and leading others is the process of organizational leading. Organizational leading during the entry phase includes picking up the reins of one's predecessor in order to develop followership, involving informal leaders, and charting new directions for the organization. There are a number of challenges to learning the leadership role, namely *the process of succeeding your predecessor and envisioning one's own legacy*.

With respect to one's predecessor, it becomes important to understand the previous management style utilized in the organization in terms of its strengths as well as weaknesses. This analysis clearly takes time during the entry phase and is frequently identified when members of the staff relate to the executive in what appears to be the same manner as they did with the predecessor. Staff may also be transferring their own worries and/or limitations on to the role assumed by the new executive. Similarly, relying on the counsel of one's predecessor can be problematic. While organizational history may be effectively transmitted through such counsel, the very difficulties that the organization experienced may be related to the management style of your predecessor.

At the same time that the new executive is dealing with the legacy of one's predecessor, the new executive is also challenged to identify and envision the legacy with which to be known and remembered. In this case, the identification of a vision and its various

components are the essential ingredients of the new executive's legacy. Dealing with the predecessor and envisioning one's own legacy are clearly aspects of the uncertain time in which a new management structure and direction is being put in place.

During the entry phase, the learning process can also be confounded by a continuous series of unanticipated events. Such events might include staff resignations, the hiring of new staff members, staff retirements and/or the unexpected termination of staff members. Unanticipated events may also include the breakdown of equipment, the malfunctioning of heating and air conditioning, or leaks in the roof of the building. While dealing with the unanticipated is part of the ongoing management responsibility of an executive, the emergence of unanticipated events during the entry phase creates one more challenge during the executive entry process.

The second aspect of learning about leading involves *charting new territory and setting of directions for the organization*. This process can be exhilarating for the executive and frustrating for members of the organization. The frustration that members can experience relates to their own perceptions that change may not be necessary or that only small changes may be necessary. As a result, the executive immediately confronts resistance from members of the organization in a wide variety of initiatives. The resistance may be related to the demoralized nature of organizational members based on their experience with the previous executive, or it may relate to a lack of clarity about the future directions of the organization and a fear that change will somehow affect their own areas of concern in a negative way. Charting new territory also relies heavily upon the support of informal leaders in the organization. If these leaders have not been consulted in what is seen as an appropriate manner or if these leaders had at one time envisioned themselves as being the executive of the organization, it becomes increasingly clear that the new executive must engage in relationship-building and empowerment. The empowerment refers to the recognition of the role of informal leaders and proper deference to their seniority and longevity in the organization.

Setting new directions also relies heavily on the informal and formal socializing among members of the organization. It becomes critical for the new executive to locate situations and informal envi-

ronments in which to share views and observations that may not lend themselves to an official memo or scheduled appointment. The process of getting to know members of the organization beyond their organizational role in terms of their personal interests and fam-·ily concerns needs to be balanced by the executive's own efforts to self-disclose about his or her interests, worries, and family concerns. This exchange process provides the executive with important information about staff views and behaviors. This information is useful in empowering staff members to give their best to the organization.

A third aspect of learning about leading relates to the *management of the executive's calendar*. The degree to which organizational members feel that they have access to the executive is found in their ability to get on the calendar. The appointment setting process involves not only the issue of timing, but also the issue of initiative. For some organizational members, the securing of an appointment is seen as a major activity, while for others it is as routine as waking up in the morning. The new executive must be sensitive to this difference and recognize that when certain organizational members do not appear on the calendar, it becomes important to seek them out. From the executive's perspective, the calendar can also be an opportunity to learn from others as well as an opportunity to manage daily affairs. For example, if inadequate free time is not scheduled on the calendar, the executive can experience information overload from one appointment after another on any given day. The executive may also become a captive of the calendar and un-able to engage in informal communications and relationship-building by moving around the organization. It is clear that the calendar can trap an executive in the office and prevent the process of leadership development from unfolding during the entry phase. Setting priorities for the organization also involves setting personal priorities. Therefore, leaving open-space on the calendar may be critical for both the executive and those who want to drop in.

And finally, in addition to providing leadership inside the organization, the executive also must pay attention to the *development of relationships outside the organization*. This becomes particularly crucial in the early days of executive entry where the credibility of the organization directly links to the credibility of the top executive.

For example, the public's perception of the organization is greatly influenced by what the executive says and how he or she acts. Judgments are formed quickly. The issues of funding, informal and formal resources, and goodwill become the major ingredients of external relationship-building. If the organization has a long history of being well received, these efforts in the early phase of executive entry will be limited. However, if the organization has had an uneven history of relationships with significant others outside the organization, the relationship-building process with external constituencies will demand considerable time and energy on the part of the executive. For example, if key agency executives in the community had a negative experience with your organization in the past, and it could be as much as 15 to 20 years ago, slow and steady patience may be needed in the process of informing them of the positive changes which have taken place in your organization over the past several years.

Conceptualizing one's own legacy, charting new territory, managing the calendar, and developing relationships outside of the organization represent a leadership challenge for any executive. Building on the first set of principles related to learning about self, the second set of principles focuses on the processes of providing leadership for those inside and outside the organization. The following principles highlight some of these leadership challenges:

Principle 5 — Sharing Uncertainty While Maintaining Momentum
The sharing of uncertainty involves the presentation of self in such a way as to let others in the organization know that the learning process is continuing and is an integral part of the leading process, especially the uncertainty about the directions that the organization will take as a result of new managerial leadership.

Principle 6 — Owning Mistakes as an Essential Part of Risk-Taking
Errors or mistakes can range from unknowingly insulting a significant outside supporter of the organization to creating misunderstandings due to lack of clarity in delegating staff activities or assignments. Mistakes are often made in the entry phase and it is important to publicly affirm that mistakes are part of risk-taking.

Principle 7—Becoming Interpersonally Competent in Order to Empower Others

> This principle relates to the exchange that emerges between the executive and members of the organization and the degree of trust that develops from such exchanges. If members of the organization feel that they have access to the executive and feel comfortable in sharing their views, then they may be more empowered to take new initiatives, suggest new directions, and engage with others in pursuit of the organization's mission.

Principle 8—Helping to Set Goals While Questioning Current Operating Assumptions and Priorities

> The process of questioning involves probing to understand why things are the way they are and provides further data for analyzing the current status of the organization as well as the potential for change in charting new directions.

(Adapted from W. Bennis & B. Nanus, *Leaders: The strategies for taking charge*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985)

FROM LEARNING AND LEADING
TO POSITIONING AND VISIONING

It is clear that learning about self and learning about leading the organization are two processes that are often intertwined during executive entry. These processes provide a foundation for building trust, positioning the organization, and developing a vision.

Building Trust and Positioning
the Organization

The development of trust and managing the trust level in the organization is an important by-product of learning about self and leading others. Helping to position the organization in order to maximize its strengths, both internally and externally, requires the development of significant levels of trust among all organizational members. Trust is the emotional glue that binds the followers and leaders of any organization. Trust requires predictability about the behaviors of both the executive and the members of the organiza-

tion. Leaders are trusted when followers know where the leader stands in relationship to the organization and its environment.

With the development of trust, the executive is capable of helping to position the organization. This is a process by which the organization designs, establishes, and sustains a viable niche in its external environments. Organizational positioning can be accomplished by leaders who are either reactive to the internal and external demands on the organization, proactive in terms of changing both internal and external environments, or are brokers who establish new linkages between the external and internal environments. Any or all of these approaches are involved when an executive engages in helping to position an organization. Some of the challenges of organizational positioning include: (1) overcoming resistance to change by seeking the voluntary commitment of organizational members to common or shared values; (2) brokering between the needs of constituencies both within the organization and outside the organization; and (3) assuming responsibility for the norms that govern the behavior of people in the organization.

Developing a Vision

Executives must be both effective listeners and effective question-askers in an attempt to construct a viable and credible vision which all members can understand. Organizational leadership requires the selecting, organizing, structuring, and interpreting of information about the organization's past, present, and future. The vision of the organization must be simple, easily understood, clearly desirable, and energizing. The goal of a vision for an organization is to fire the imagination and emotions of others and to empower others to make decisions that address the needs of the organization.

The actions and symbols of leadership help to frame and mobilize the underlying meaning of a vision. The executive is called upon to define and articulate selected aspects of the organization's future as well as to invent images and metaphors to characterize the nature of that future. The process of vision-building includes: (1) creating a new and compelling vision which is capable of bringing members of the organization to a new place; (2) developing a commitment on

the part of all members to the new vision; and (3) institutionalizing the vision through the development of administrative policies, procedures, and cultural supports. In order to develop the vision, the executive must continuously assess the strong undertow of cultural forces at play in the organization at all times. The executive therefore is "a social architect" who must understand the organization and help to shape the way it works.

It is not clear how long it takes to build and articulate the vision. While some may be able to do it in six months, it will most likely require the entire first year of the executive entry process. Similarly, it is difficult to assess the speed with which members of the organization can identify with the vision. It is also difficult for the executive to know how to "take the pulse" on the rate of progress towards reaching the vision. It is clear that the top management team needs to understand the vision and yet it is not clear how the development of the management team, composed of new and old members, coincides with the development of the vision.

Organizational Role-Taking Revisited

Learning about self and learning about leadership have been central themes in this analysis of executive role-taking. The constant flow of information related to role-sending and role-receiving shapes the way in which a new executive deals with the strong staff expectations for leadership as well as the personal fear of failure and self-doubt. Similarly, the numerous role episodes are influenced by the interpersonal dynamics of staff relations, the pattern of communications with various internal and external constituencies, and the multiple perceptions of the organization's past, present, and future.

The conceptual framework of organizational role-taking also provides a basis for developing a research agenda on the executive entry process. For example, how can we develop a better understanding of role readiness or anticipatory socialization for those aspiring to the executive role and for those who have accepted a new position and seek to ready themselves for the transition? How do other staff members of an organization view the executive entry process? To what extent is insight into one's own experiences dur-

ing the entry phase a help or a hindrance in building trust and developing a vision of the organization's future? How much self-disclosure is enough to solidify a position of leadership and trust? What is the relationship between acquiring an in-depth understanding of self during the executive entry phase and the capacity of the individual to take care of self in terms of one's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being? What is the role of humor and a philosophical posture in handling the crazy and unexpected realities of the executive entry process?

Further study is needed to identify how internal and external organizational factors impact on the executive entry process. Such research should help to inform administrative practice about the executive's "two-way medium" between external and internal phenomena, the extent to which credibility is constantly being tested, the degree to which management is a performing art, and the extent to which reactive executives and proactive executives differ during the executive entry process. While a comprehensive list of questions is beyond the scope of this analysis, it is clear that we need to learn more from those who have survived the entry phase of executive leadership.

In conclusion, it has been noted that there is a distinction between an executive who is a manager and an executive who is a leader (Zaleznik, 1977). The managers focus on efficiency by "doing things right." The leaders focus on effectiveness by "doing the right things." Effective leaders appear to know the process of seeking to "know why" ahead of "knowing how" as they engage in both problem-finding as well as problem-solving.

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