

**UNIVERSITY SPONSORED  
EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS:  
THREE CONTROLLABLE VARIABLES**

By Don R. Sheriff and Jude P. West



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# University Sponsored Executive Development Programs: Three Controllable Variables

By Don R. Sheriff and Jude P. West

During the past half-century collegiate schools of business have enjoyed an enviable rise in the field of higher education. So rapid has been this growth that scant attention has been given, particularly by the academician, to a vigorous offshoot of this branch of learning, the executive development program. Some authorities refer to this program as the most important single development in the field of adult education, and a dean of one of the leading graduate schools of business administration recently stated that in the next twenty years, the executive development program will become the most significant factor in business education.

The origin of this movement is difficult to trace, but probably the first recognizable executive development program was offered by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the early 1930's. From this beginning, executive development programs have mushroomed; in 1963, approximately 3,500 executives attended university-sponsored programs in over thirty-five institutions of higher learning.

Recently many articles have been written explaining the multiplicity of factors which contribute to successful executive development programs. One combination of factors, however, has been given little space in the literature and scant attention in practice. This combination includes the activities and responsibilities of the company and the executive before and after his sojourn in a university's executive development program. This article will examine these responsibilities and activities of the firm and the executive in the following areas:

1. Selection of the executive and the program.
2. Preparation of the executive for his educational leave of absence.
3. Reassimilation of the executive into his job, his work group and his firm.

To consider the activities of the company alone in these three areas assumes that the executive is pliable and anxious to change. Examining the executive solely ignores the importance of the work group, the managerial climate and the everyday facts of business life. Therefore, the role of each will be reviewed in terms of current practices and recommended procedures.

## Selection of Executives and Programs

Selection is the raw material of the development process, whether for employment, promotion, executive development program participation, or specification of the program.

A perusal of company policies and practices in this area reveals that no two firms follow the same procedure for candidate nomination and selection or program selection. Very few have policy statements covering these areas, and



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where such statements have been prepared, they are usually general in scope and flexible in application. If based on the assumption that executive development is a highly individual matter, such latitude and flexibility works to the benefit of the company and its executives; if based on a commitment to the use of the university-sponsored executive development programs without having a clear understanding of what they are, what they can and cannot do, and how they should be used within the company's total framework for management development, serious problems invariably arise. A university-sponsored executive development program is not executive development per se; it is only one tool or approach among several.

While there is little general agreement among companies as to whether the participant and program selection decision should be left to the candidate, a nomination and selection committee, or a single individual such as the candidate's superior, in practice it is common to find that several executives have

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been active in the nomination and selection of any given candidate or program. A study of over 6,000 executives who attended executive development programs between 1949 and 1958 indicates that in eighty-seven percent of the cases, the idea for attendance originated with the company, and in all but six percent of the cases, the nominee readily accepted.<sup>1</sup>

It is rare to find an executive who has nominated himself as a candidate. In fact, the authors are familiar with several cases where the program candidates played no part in their nomination and selection or in the selection of the program. In one case the executive knew nothing of his selection until he received a notice from the sponsoring university that his application had been processed and accepted.

Where executives have been selected for participation without being personally involved in the decision, the predominant mood is either one of being the recipient of a prize for past services rendered or one of resentment. As McGregor has pointed out, if the executive "is simply a passive agent being rotated or sent to school or promoted, or otherwise manipulated, he is less likely to be motivated to develop himself."<sup>2</sup> Concurring on this point, Chowdhry adds, "if managements select and send executives within an administrative framework that leaves them no choice or voice in their own career development, then the executives are less likely to be involved in the learning and development process."<sup>3</sup>

Firms that do not permit the individual to play an active role in the selection of the methods and tools for his own development apparently assume that through some osmosis-like process the individual is intellectually able and emotionally willing to learn. Learning requires change, and at the human and conceptual skill levels it is difficult for change to take place unless the individual is motivated and ready to change. Edgar Schein suggests that executive development can be viewed as a process of in-

fluence; "the individual must perceive some need for change in himself, must be able to change, and must perceive the influencing agent as one who can facilitate such change in a direction acceptable to the individual."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is appropriate to include the executive in the design of his own development plan and in the selection of his own executive development program. This does not mean that the executive's superior, with brochure in hand, approaches the candidate and says, "I know you will accept this opportunity to attend an executive development program." The result is a nominal acceptance analogous to some firms' "promotion" policies. In theory the executive has a chance to refuse the promotion; in practice he must accept or be black-listed within the organization.

If the executive is to have a part in his own development plan, he should be afforded the opportunity to decline selection and enrollment in a given program. This decision, if based on serious reflection, should not preclude his being offered a similar opportunity at another university or, at a later date, at the same university. To permit an executive to make decisions about his department, his subordinates, and his budget, and not permit him to decline participation in a university-sponsored executive development program is inconsistent. If motivation and readiness to change are vital factors in the development process, then the firm should allow the executive some say in his selection, as well as in the selection of the program. These matters should at least be subject to negotiation.

Adding confusion to the area of course selection are the "57 varieties" of programs available. Many companies report difficulty in making sound judgments on the basis of the information in university announcements, brochures and fliers. Though there does seem to be some preference for four-to six-week courses, and while this information, as well as information on distance and cost, is readily available, most companies do not

select programs on this basis. Their main interest and concern is in course content and methodology.

It is the rare firm that does not make some attempt to evaluate the program content and methodology prior to the enrollment of an executive. While most firms maintain current listings of courses as well as a central file deposit of program brochures, other companies go to great lengths to acquire a more accurate picture of those executive development programs which have "face appeal" to them. Companies interested in receiving a dollar's value for every dollar spent in this area do not place sole reliance on the program brochure, but use one or more of the following measures:

1. Correspondence with the university program director.
2. Program and university visitation.
3. Correspondence with companies that have sent executives to the program.
4. Correspondence with executives from other firms that have participated in the program.
5. Check of the university's reputation and program staff.

Obviously, the university under consideration has a shared responsibility in the process of executive and program selection. Most schools have an "image" of the type of participant they desire to attend their program, and welcome correspondence and visitations. Additionally, it is a rare program director who does not maintain participant, faculty and company evaluation records of former programs. Much of this information is available on request. Unfortunately, there are a few universities who are not as effective in sharing this responsibility as they should be because they desire to fill vacancies, have company pressure on them to enroll certain candidates, or there is a general lack of interest within the university.

The proper selection of candidates and programs represents a major task often taken too lightly.

No single program can be all things to all executives or all things to all companies. Too many companies have a hazy idea about the objectives of participation in university-sponsored executive development programs. If they defined their own goals more accurately, a better job of both executive and course selection would result. In other words, to effectively accomplish this end, accurate information is needed about available programs, as well as an effective diagnosis of the goals of the company and the needs of each executive. Here the interrelationship between company objectives and goals and managerial performance standards and appraisals is obvious. A particular program is only "right" if it assists in meeting both company objectives and the needs of the participating executive.

### Preparing the Executive for His Departure

Most observers and researchers agree that it is not enough to involve the executive in a decision to attend a university program. Certain additional steps should be taken to insure that both the candidate and the organization will gain as much as possible from his participation in the course. It is not uncommon for an executive without proper preparation to be preoccupied with what happens in his position while he is attending the program. MacCullough suggests that the executive's "duties be so completely absorbed by others, preferably of his own choosing, that he will be able to concentrate on his own participation. Anything less than complete freedom for the participant would limit the return on the company investment."<sup>5</sup>

Occasionally, an executive will enter a program with peace of mind about his job and ready to give complete attention to the course only to be interrupted by daily telephone calls from his subordinates, peers, and superiors. Companies concerned about this pitfall usually issue strong policy statements advising everyone that

the executive is not to be disturbed while he is away at school.

Additionally, the executive should adequately prepare himself for his leave of absence. Normally he will know from one to two months in advance the departure date for the university program. Within this time period, he should brief his assistant or the person designated to temporarily assume his responsibilities. This briefing should include writing target dates for key departmental projects and staff designation of assigned responsibilities. If the executive has a project which will be due while he is attending the program, the due date should be rescheduled, if possible, or the project should be given to an assistant after a thorough briefing. Sometimes the executive considers himself so indispensable to the organization that he cannot be detached from it. In these cases the executive's superior would do well to insist on a visible responsibility outline of the type described. Obviously, no executive can completely forget his job and responsibilities, but every step should be taken to relieve him from as much pressure and tension as possible.

Orientation for the executive development program can be accomplished by a variety of procedures. The National Industrial Conference Board reports from a study of thirty-two companies that twenty-nine of them counseled with their executives on either a formal or informal basis. This was done through a personal interview between the executive and his immediate superior or by the director of management development or both.<sup>6</sup> Topics discussed included:

1. The value of the program to the candidate and the company.
2. Company expectations as to what the candidate should derive from the program.
3. Why the company is investing a considerable amount of time and money in management development per se and in the candidate's development.

4. What report or evaluation of the program the company desires.
5. Specific answers to the candidate's questions concerning the program and his participation in it.

It is also advisable to have the candidate briefed about what to expect by a former program participant, or if one is not available, a participant from a similar program. While some companies take the position that their candidates have had years of executive experience and therefore know what to expect, evidence suggests that this is the exception to the rule. The properly prepared and oriented executive receives more benefit to himself and his company.

### Reassimilation of the Executive

Two questions are raised concerning reassimilation of the executive:

1. Does the returning executive need assistance in readjusting to his job?
2. How does the company maximize its use of the additional knowledge, skills or ideas acquired by the returning executive?

To the first question, the National Industrial Conference Board says that most of the companies interviewed in their study were "almost unanimous in stating that there are no problems of readjustment—or at least there is nothing sufficiently serious to require special attention. In fact, some management development people are quite vehement in saying that it is an insult to think that mature, sensible managers would have serious problems of this kind."<sup>7</sup>

Despite testimony to the contrary, there is some reason to suspect that the returning executive may experience some difficulty in reassimilating if he does not have his expectations and those of the company clearly in mind. MacCullough comments that the executive "has reason to feel that some obvious return on the com-

pany investment is expected and he is aware, too, that his associates, especially his subordinates, are quietly watching for significant changes in his methods, organization or attitude. . . . This feeling of being in the spotlight, combined with the pressure of picking up the reins of the job, frequently results in permanent dilution of his good intention of being a better executive."<sup>8</sup> It is the rare individual who can "go it alone". Executive development should lead to personal growth and organizational change. It is the firm's responsibility to create a climate that will make possible the development of new ideas, attitudes and approaches. Schein states that if innovation is lacking in a firm, "It may be that the climate of the organization and its methods of management development do not foster innovation, not that its human resources are inadequate."<sup>9</sup>

The company must be tolerant of new ideas, attitudes, and procedures. The returning executive's superior should realize that unless his subordinate is given the opportunity to innovate, the value of the program will be significantly reduced, if not totally negated. With such experimentation comes the possibility of error, but if errors of commission are denied, the errors of omission that follow will be more costly to the firm and the individual.

Schein further states, "Genuine support can come only from others who have themselves been influenced, which argues strongly that at least several members of a given department must be given the same training before such training can be expected to have effect".<sup>10</sup> While not accepting this position in total, the authors do suggest that more than one executive be sent to any given university-sponsored executive development program. This can provide the necessary support for each participant. Further support can be provided if the executive's superior has attended the program.

It is also suggested that the returning executive be given additional time off to review all aspects

of his program experience before plunging into his job duties. Some companies believe that this is done (or should be done) during the executive's stay at the university. Yet a realistic perusal of most program schedules reveals little free time; the executive's days and nights are absorbed in lectures, group discussions, reading and written assignments.

Finally, the returning executive should be prepared to face what will be one of his most important problems—resistance to change on the part of his staff. He may be viewed with suspicion because of comments originating from his newly acquired knowledge. Unless he is aware of any misgivings on their part, the executive will meet with resistance in his attempts to implement new methods or procedures. Not only should he communicate to his staff all changes he hopes to accomplish, but also seek their participation in working out details of any plan.

The importance of the executive's role in his own reassimilation cannot be overstressed. If he is of the opinion that everyone should listen to him because he attended a particular program or he prefaces his remarks with, "At the executive development program we learned that . . .," he is bringing trouble on himself. Also, there is evidence to indicate that some executives have returned with the idea that they should be promoted, that a job change is in order, or they are entitled to some form of special recognition. On all counts they are wrong.

While it is true that some of these problem areas can be anticipated by the company and covered in preparing the executive for his educational leave of absence, the returning executive does need more than a routine briefing on company happenings which occurred while he was away.

### Summary

This article is a cursory examination of current practices and recommended procedures in the use of university-sponsored executive development programs as they

pertain to the selection of participants, programs, and the preparation of the executive for courses and reassimilation into the firm. No attempt has been made to offer a comprehensive treatment of all the problems involved in these areas. There are no oversimplified answers to the questions raised. Some readers will view certain suggestions as unnecessary, just as the authors view certain existing practices as inadequate and others as unbelievable.

Finally, the goal of executive development, no matter what approaches are used, is not to prove quantitatively what contribution they make to the profitability of the firm. This is not to say that the ultimate test and the guideline for management development are not profits. The point is that quantitative analysis, at the present time is not possible, may never be possible, and may even be irrelevant. The problem of management development, in its broadest context, is one of providing a proper climate for growth. After all, as the manager gains in competence and is more effectively able to achieve company goals, the profitability of the firm will be assured.

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Why Businessmen Go Back To School", *Business Week*, April 27, 1963, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1960, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> Kamla Chowdhry, "Management Development Programs", *Industrial Management Review*, Spring, 1963, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Edgar H. Schein, "Management Development as a Process of Influence", *Industrial Management Review*, May, 1961, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Allen V. MacCullough, "Critical Views of Advanced Management Programs", *Advanced Management*, January, 1957, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> "Executive Development Course in Universities", *Studies in Personnel Policy*, No. 160, National Industrial Conference Board, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> "Executive Development Course in Universities", *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> MacCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Schein, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> Schein, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

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