

Comments/Action Items from Small Group Discussions *Thought Leader Forum, April 10, 2007*

The following are items of particular interest culled from the seven small breakout groups, made up of participants at the OPM Thought Leader Forum on April 10, 2007. This is just a sampling of specific comments and suggestions made by the participants, as taken down by the recorders assigned to each group. They are intended to provide context and background for the summary presentations made by the seven groups at the end of the day, and captured separately in the PowerPoint slides prepared by each group.

Current State of Executive Development

- Once you've gone to SES, there's the perspective that there's no more need for training, mentoring. This is especially true for more experienced SES.
- Tasks vs. Relationships – there seems to be a disconnect between these, i.e., lack of recognition of the role of people in getting tasks done; HR thinks about relationships, but line management thinks about tasks – one person offered an alternative view – line management thinks about people, but HR thinks about systems
- When you start to look outside (to recruit) that says a lot about what is broken.
- Subject of Gen X paper: workforce now lives by completely different values than older SES. There's a tension between new SES and older because of this. There needs to be some emphasis on this in development.

Principles for Executive Development

- SES jobs should become increasingly corporate and require development, rotations, provide opportunity to develop a corporate perspective, e.g., volunteering to support PMF program, serving on PRB, other activities.
- The focus of development needs to be more future oriented, not how to function in current role.
- An attendee noted that while the purpose of the forum was to consider how the existing cadre of SES employees might be further developed, the overriding issue may be about corporate management of executive assets and the core question may then be how/whether SES assets may be better leveraged government-wide.

Conceptual/Legal Framework for the SES

- Revitalize the sense of purpose for SES:
 - Executive development must support and align with that purpose.
 - Development and acculturation needs to start early and continue throughout SES career.
- The highest levels of government must redefine and articulate the principles behind SES and establish an overarching strategic management framework for SES ED. Then the other concerns such as mobility, mentoring and coaching fall under this umbrella.
- The SES structure may be required to change by law before it will actually change.

- Demonstration project on SES and executive roles (review IRS demo proposal on senior civil service in early 90s); need a project that can demonstrate how ideal SES program, corporate, mobile SES, is developed and works, with evaluation results to be shared Governmentwide.
- Back to idea of a central SES core – central to government, not to the agency. Downside: roughly 8000 SES and this would be unwieldy to manage together (centralized). No private sector organization would try to manage that. Maybe we should rethink this – hard to manage idea of central SES. It would be hard to sell to President and agencies, but maybe we should look to agencies that already do some centralization within one organization. Should start small.

Leadership Support of Executive Development

- CHCOs need to carry forward ideas from today.
- Senior leadership should own executive cadre.
- OPM Director is senior advisor on human capital, should have a list of 100 top SES that can be called upon in crisis situations.
- Leaders above the SES level need to be involved in executive development planning so it flows from the agencies' strategic goals.
- Issues about “mandatory” training/development: often it ends up with SES checking the box, but not really developing. If it's strongly encouraged, expected and rewarded, leadership should set the example -- that's more powerful.
- Incentivize agencies to manage their SES programs. Should look at overall management of Executive programs, not just SES performance – to include training, position management, etc.
- SES development programs need to be owned by the line (top management), not the HR community; need to link development programs to strategy and results in improved behaviors
- Need to pay attention to where responsibility for executive development sits in the organization. It needs to be highly placed.
- Another issue raised this morning was the lack of alignment between HQ and the field. It's an acculturation issue. Fights over strategic priorities can stem from the lack of alignment. It affects everything Dr. Leland talked about. Must develop a strong executive team.
- For top managers, there is no long-term reward for alignment. No one's going to volunteer to give up resources for the greater good. You'll just be a loser in the eyes of your colleagues if you do that.
- We should ensure that executive development is addressed in agencies' strategic goals, so it can be properly resourced.
- Better yet, tie development to agency strategy. In that way it becomes mandatory, but it's all in identifying where management wants to go. Where are we going? Has to be decided for each agency.
- Leverage ERBs to play a more important role; there is no longer any central guidance on what a good ERB is supposed to do, so it's left to agencies; agencies should update their charters.

Issues/Strategies for Executive Development

- This seems like a very good model: 45 days in 3 years does not seem to be too much training. Benchmark best practices across agencies and make those widely known.
- Action: Create succession plans within the SES ranks.
- Need a systemic/holistic approach to executive development. It should be integrated into the work, not something people go off and do.
- Executive development must be addressed in performance appraisals.
- People should have to say in their performance appraisals what they've done to improve the organization's long-term capacity, not just whether they met quantitative measures.
- Training and development for SES – we have many programs where we train SES potential employees to prepare to come into the service. But when we get to be SES, we're so busy that we don't have the time to polish skills. It's hard to carve out that time. If it were mandatory, if we were to collaborate with other agencies, then would help encourage this change. And would learn from other SES, agencies.
- The size of an organization also has to be considered in thinking about developing SES – small organizations just won't have the resources to do much. Many organizations can't afford it. If we can't afford to send executives to training or development courses, we should ask: how can communities of practice regarding executive development and other low cost opportunities be leveraged.
- Greatest hurdle to collaboration across agencies in SES development: Agencies do believe they are unique. We need to find a way to show there are shared assumptions, etc., to show how we might be able to contribute to another agency – this is critical.
- What actions would we take to create or challenge those in SES to continue to develop themselves as leaders? This is really where we fall down. It's not provided or encouraged. It's learning that invigorates people, so how do we encourage continuous learning? There are a few models for this – in professions that have continuing education requirements (e.g., lawyers, doctors). Also, one agency has yearly “advancement accounts” and this could be adopted to encourage development among SES.
- Need to have a public forum for recognizing any awards SES have gotten, and a public forum for discussions about how to succeed as SES. One agency did this and had a thought forum on “what they wished they had known when joined the SES.” Developed a checklist for what they need to do to be successful SES. (When you come in at the top of the food chain, mistakes are not easily forgiven.)
- Shorter sessions over a period of time work better if the goal is behavior change (as opposed to knowledge acquisition). I think at SES level we're talking about develop as leaders = behavior change. “I am an A, but maybe I could be more effective as B or C. If I get chunks of exposure and I try it in work place and then go back to refresh and share experiences with group, then the behavior sticks.” Also can explore why new behavior didn't or did work. Recommend shorter bursts of training/development over extended period of time.

- Need to focus early on developing ability to integrate and synthesize the massive amounts of data/information executives receive

Mobility

- Action: build the case for mobility/rotational assignments.
- People who are savvy have seen that it's a career-killer to be away when there's a change in political leadership.
- "Return rights" is a big deal when it comes to *inter-agency* mobility.
- Identify a re-entry plan for those who want to come back to their agency.
- Another perspective: mobility should not be an objective but a technique. Need to move executives around so they can learn new skills. It's a way to get something productive done.
- In one agency there is a recognition that there are different groups of SES, frequent movers and those who stay to maintain continuity.
- Identify the skill sets that are necessary based on the government's and/or individual executives' needs to be gained in rotational assignments.
- It was suggested that agencies of like mission form strategic alliances that allow for executive interchange.
- Rotations are too often seen as a way to get rid of problem employees. In the UK, rotations are prestigious. People usually come back from rotations to higher positions than the ones they left. How to change the mindset?
- Truly tie pay per performance to where we want to go. Should distinguish who is truly excelling. If it is important for SES to be more mobile they should be recognized and rewarded.
- There needs to be standards set for minimum mobility, and maybe a maximum standard too – once you've moved 3 times that's enough.
- Technical qualifications for SES keep SES from moving. You won't make the Best Qualified list of SES candidates if you don't have the technical background. Technical qualifications are weighted higher than ECQs in hiring SES.
- Due to the somewhat special developmental needs of new SESers who were recruited from scientific occupations, develop a special rotational/executive development program to help them gain "soft skills" which are often lacking.
- One agency started a "baseball card" basic stat sheet on employees with basic skills, education, etc. Also asked to list 3 jobs they would like to take if ever moved. This was in one group in the agency, but they thought about making it agency-wide. We need a central file for talent. There is not a very methodical approach to identifying and attracting talent to SES.
- Did a pilot to identify SES level positions that agency would be willing to have as a development assignment for an SES. Selected SES into those. Leadership defined the position and then identified the top notch candidates for these. It was highly successful and SES went on to new jobs. It was a good development assignment.
- Don't send people on detail without indicators of success to determine next placement; specify objectives and results.
- Create a template, guidance for individuals on detail to avoid losing out on awards, bonuses; need to eliminate penalty for details.

- Can SES achieve virtual mobility through technology?

Mentoring/Peer Interaction

- In the private sector senior leaders develop junior leaders;
- We get the development to find the SES job opportunity. When we enter the SES, the mentoring and coaching is not there. Sort of “sink or swim” approach unless we make the effort to get an informal mentor in a new agency. There is no formal, structured way to do this. No support from agency to learn the new culture.
- Executive acculturation was identified as an issue. Few organizations have a process for it. In some places, organization heads are taking on the role of instructor/mentor. I’ve never seen this happen in government. It should be cascaded downward into the field.
- Coaching/inspiring: there’s a lot of support through networks in private sector, not in SES; need to keep networks alive among SES in an organization, build esprit de corps.
- We can engage OPM and SEA to select a group of 12-15 SESers to design peer interaction forums. This should involve executives who are leaders and not policy wonks or doctors.
- Building on experiential learning, get SES members to work together to address issues that are of multi-agency concern or interest. This may lead to more rotational assignments and create the opportunity for action learning within their own organizations.
- Easy to implement idea for across agency learning—an SES book club; a different agency could pick the book and host the discussion every few months. Or, someone could pick the books for the year, and different agencies host the discussion. Or, the discussion could be online.
- The importance of peer interaction. It is so hard to find the time. People tend to think of development as training; informal modes of learning are less valued.
- Community of practice – exchange information about common problems. But also read and reflect and talk about issues too. There is much already to read about leadership. So many executives do it on their own and would probably find it stimulating. “Too busy” is the usual excuse. What would lead people to make different choices so they could make time for a reflecting/learning forum?
- Development often loses out in budgetary resources. We need free options: self-development, networking, mentoring, lunches, a room to discuss things, clearinghouse for executive resource boards.