Key Components in the Development of Senior Executives in Australia

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to provide an insight into the characteristics perceived to be most important to the management development of senior executives in a variety of Australian organisations. The study provides an update of previous research into the profiles of chief executive officers conducted by Mukhi (1982), and Sarros and Butchatsky (1996). In particular, this study extends the scope of Mukhi's research in two ways. Firstly, the focus has been broadened to incorporate chairmen, managing directors, general managers, and chief executives. Secondly, the study includes an examination of the perceived importance of the following discipline-based fields of knowledge; human resources management, marketing, law, accounting and computer technology. This paper identifies and assesses the relative importance of 28 items relating to the management development of senior executives.

METHOD

Mailed questionnaires designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data were sent to 101 senior executives throughout Australia over a two month period. The target sample was randomly selected through computer generation from a larger list of 404 senior executives whose names appeared in *The Australian* newspaper over a twelve month period. Because the perceptions of respondents are an important focus of this study, one of the sampling objectives was to secure responses from executives whose activities and/or comments have been considered newsworthy at the national level. This does not preclude the importance of achieving sufficient organisational diversity in the sample, an objective which was met in order to provide scope for variance analysis according to a range of factors including organisational size and business sector.

Each questionnaire was accompanied by a covering letter conveying the purpose of the study and an unconditional guarantee of absolute anonymity for respondents. The questionnaire provided the participants with a list of 28 items. Participants were asked to rate the relative importance of each item upon their managerial career development. The rating system used in this instance was a five-point Likert-type scale. Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each item as either *low, fair, moderate, substantial* or *great.* The questionnaire was pre-tested for validity on a group of 45 junior and middle managers (age range 24-54) in their first year of a Master of Business Administration program, and on a separate group of middle and senior managers (age range 30-60) at a two-day management development seminar. Analysis revealed positive correlations between specific items and the orientations to which they were attributed.

RESPONSES

A total of 54 completed responses were received within the three month period after the last survey was sent out. This response rate (53.4%) is quite favourable in comparison with similar mail surveys. Not surprisingly, given the method of sampling, approximately two thirds (67%) of responses came from executives in large organisations (over 1000 employees). A moderate representation of medium-sized firms (24%), and a smaller but significant representation of small organisations was achieved. The tertiary sector yielded 67% of total responses, with a moderate representation from primary and secondary sectors providing sufficient data for comparative purposes. A pleasingly well-balanced representation of executives according to position title was achieved in the sample; 39% of respondents were chief executives, 22% were chairmen, 20% were managing directors, and 11% were general managers. In terms of relative age range, almost half of the respondents (48%) were between the ages of 41 and 50, with a further 41% falling into the age range of 51-60. A smaller percentage (9%) of respondents were over 60.

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

Management and Leadership

A research study conducted by Mukhi (1982) into the most influential factors shaping the careers of Australia chief executives, revealed three important characteristics; a strong need for achievement, an ability to utilise interpersonal skills, and a capacity to negotiate and persuade others (Mukhi, 1982). A comparable survey conducted by a group of executive recruiters in the USA in 1986 found that the most sought-after managers had the following characteristics; an action-orientation, excellent communication skills, the willingness to take risks, and the ability to motivate others (Rowan, 1986). Taken together, these studies reveal the emergence of a pattern or profile of the successful senior executive, revolving around characteristics which have been more commonly identified with effective leadership than with effective management.

A comprehensive report on leadership produced in 1992 by the Australian Management College at Mt Eliza and Monash University, identified the following list of leader attributes; communicating, negotiating, motivating, listening, involving others, counselling and delegating (Sarros, Jones and Miller, 1992). This report indicates personal leadership qualities to include enthusiasm, energy, resilience, commitment and motivation to succeed. The report contrasts these characteristics with what it terms managerial skills. These include financial and marketing skills, planning and information technology skills and analytical skills (Sarros, Jones and Miller, 1992, p.9). This contrast is in keeping with an established tendency in the international management literature to attempt to sharpen the distinction between the two most common systems of action in modern organisations; management and leadership. Perhaps the most well-know proponents of this distinction are J.P. Kotter and Warren Bennis. Both have claimed that a sizeable proportion of modern organisations are overmanaged and underled (Bennis and Nanus, 1985: p.21; Kotter, 1990, pp.103-4). Kotter's claim is founded upon his observation that management is concerned with planning, organising, controlling and problem-solving, whereas leadership is concerned with aligning people, and achieving a vision by motivating and inspiring others (Kotter, 1990, p.104). In a similar vein, Bennis suggests that to manage is to conduct, to accomplish, or to bring about, whereas leading is more concerned with guiding in action and opinion (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, p.21). This approach to the drawing of distinctions between managers and leaders can be traced back to Zaleznik's (1977) observations that leaders are more psychologically attuned to people than managers.

It is important to note that the dinstinction between the two systems of action only stands up if one adopts a narrow view of the term *management* in the first place. A careful analysis of the results of the questionnaires completed by the 54 senior executives in this study does not support the notion that leadership can so easily be distinguished from effective management practice. Leadership qualities and characteristics appear to be inextricable components of effective management practice in the perceptions of Australian senior executives. This observation supports Mintzberg's research which showed leadership to be one of ten sub-roles of effective management practice at senior levels of management (Mintzberg, 1975). It also lends weight to the conclusion reached by Sarros and Butchatsky (1996) that Australian management and leadership functions are more closely aligned that previously thought.

Administration, Management, Leadership and Entrepreneurship

Conventional wisdom seems to favour the concept of viewing leadership in behavioural terms whilst emphasizing that managers tend to adopt quite impersonal attitudes towards goals. Zaleznik (1977, 1992) suggests that leaders have more empathetic qualities than managers, while managers tend to maintain lower levels of emotional involvement with subordinates. This approach tends to place management as a system of action alongside its predecessor, administration.

The words management and administration have so frequently been used interchangeably that they have become known for their similarities rather than their differences. Early theories of organisation helped to muddy the semantic waters by referring to management practices as administrative functions (Katz, 1955, 1974). Further confusion emerges when the terms management and leadership are loosely used to refer to the same observable phenomenon. In this respect, contemporary attempts to distinguish management from leadership have proven useful, if not necessarily accurate. Such distinctions are largely reliant upon defining management in purely administrative terms, an approach which does little to solve the original dilemma of distinguishing between management and administration. In addition to the concepts of administration, management, and leadership, contemporary observers of organisations are also faced with the system of action known as entrepreneurship. Distinctive and observable entrepreneurial practices invite questions about the relative influence of management and

leadership in newly developed, informal, and small organisational settings. Arguably a wider frame of reference than any proposed to date is required to clearly identify the unique features as well as the common elements inherent in each of the four systems of action in modern organisations; administration, management, leadership, and entrepreneurship. **Diagram 1 about here**

Diagram 1 (above) provides a conceptual representation of the four systems of action in contemporary organisations, arranged along a continuum from administration (a system which emphasizes order and structure) to entrepreneurship (a system which operates according to flexibility and freedom). In between these two extremes lie management and leadership. Each of these four approaches to achieving organisational objectives has its own particular set of advantages and disadvantages, and each shares a number of elements or practices with the system (or systems) immediately beside it on the continuum.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of the characteristics of each system of action, apart from those which are indicated in the diagram. The diagram is presented here to clarify the notion of narrow and broad views concerning the definition of management. If we define management in narrow terms, we may easily distinguish it from the other systems of action. Management deals with the genesis and progress of change, whereas administration is predominantly concerned with preserving the existing system of order (Minkes, 1987, p.23). Zaleznik's suggestion that managers view themselves as conservators of an established order of affairs runs counter to contemporary perceptions of managers as agents of change (Zaleznik, 1977, p.74). Leadership by contrast may be conceived as the interpersonal dimension of management activity. If one accepts that modern management practice in its effective form encompasses elements of each of the four systems of action, it then becomes useful to incorporate leadership characteristics and qualities into the domain and managerial action. This broad view of management is strongly supported by the perceptions of the senior executives in this study.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The results of this study help to draw together a wide range of issues pertaining to management effectiveness. By drawing upon the perceptions of senior executives, it becomes possible to compare and contrast the variety of factors which are frequently advanced as significant contributors towards management development.

Despite persistent claims that senior executives in Australian organisations have a strong leaning towards hard-edged management issues and a particular affinity with quantifiable management information, there is mounting evidence to suggest a growing recognition of the importance of human resources issues. It is often assumed that a concern for corporate profitability on the part of senior managers manifests itself in the form of a preoccupation with the bottom line, and a corresponding reluctance to recognise the importance of such elements as interpersonal skills. The results of this study provide compelling evidence to suggest that collectively, Australian senior executives perceive interpersonal skills (including a well-developed appreciation of interpersonal differences, the ability to work with a wide variety of people, and the ability to persuade and influence others) to be of paramount importance in their own management development. Moreover, these executives rate a sound knowledge of human resources practices above any other disciplinary knowledge (including accounting, marketing, law and computing) in terms of its impact upon and importance in their own management development.

The aggregate scores and rankings derived from the responses provided by the senior executives in this study are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 provides a summary of 23 pertinent items. Table 2 provides a separate summary of 5 items, all of which refer to specific discipline-based knowledge. The standard deviation for each item is also shown in Tables 1 and 2 to provide an indication of the spread of results. Of the 28 items, thirteen emerged with scores of 4.04 or higher, indicating their scale of importance as being substantial to great. In particular, the five highest rated items emerging from the analysis of results provide strong evidence of a discrete set of characteristics and qualities which are widely perceived as essential to the development of managers destined for senior executive positions. The tight standard deviation scores in each instance further highlight the high degree of consensus among respondents with respect to the perceived importance of the top ranking items. **Tables 1 and 2 about here**

The Need for Achievement

The single most important item impacting upon the management development of the senior executives in this study was the need to achieve results. In this respect, the study provides contemporary support for Mukhi's 1982 finding that the need for achievement was the number one influencing factor in the management development

of chief executives. Achievement-orientation is concerned with meeting high standards of performance, achieving excellence, and exceeding prior performance. All are factors which have the potential to significantly enhance career progression. Achievement orientation has been linked to growth need strength and has been shown to manifest itself in a variety of ways. In the organisational arena, perhaps the clearest indicator of an achievement orientation is the need for advancement.

A number of studies conducted into the predictive validity of achievement motivation on career success have called into question the usefulness of measuring this aspect of an individual's orientation in isolation. McClelland (1985) and Miner (1980) have found that a high need for achievement is predictive of managerial effectiveness in small entrepreneurial firms but not in large bureaucratic organisations.

An analysis of the variations in responses from the present study, according to organisational size, indicates that senior executives presiding over firms with less than 100 employees actually rated the need to achieve results as less important to their career development than the ability to see the big picture. By contrast, those executives presiding over organisations with more than 1,000 employees collectively rated the need to achieve results as the most important influencing factor in their management development. Table 3, below, illustrates this point. **Table 3 about here**

Senior executives from large organisations clearly place a premium on achievement-orientation as a key component in their management development. Table 3 shows that, taken collectively, managers from large firms view the need to achieve results and the possession of high internal work standards to be of paramount importance. Both of these items are strong indicators of a high grown-need strength in the organisational arena.

Insofar as the perceptions of senior executives are acknowledged as affording valuable insights into the factors impacting upon their management development, the above findings appear to present themselves as counter-arguments to the conclusions drawn by McClelland and Miner. This study provides a strong indication that the need to achieve results is an important component in the management development of senior executives in small, medium, and large organisations.

Locus of Control

Individuals with a high achievement orientation frequently perceive successful performance to be a direct result of their own abilities and efforts. They are less likely to attribute their successes to the nature of the task, developmental opportunities, or sheer luck. Table 1 demonstrates this perceptual pattern rather pointedly. Items relating to achievement orientation are ranked (1) and (5) on the list of influential factors impacting upon senior management development, whereas items relating to early developmental opportunities are ranked (11), (14), (15), (17), (20) and (21). Of the items pertaining to early developmental opportunities, those most indicative of an external locus of control orientation, are ranked (17) and (21) respectively. The higher ranking of items relating to achievement motivation provides evidence of a predominant internal locus of control. A number of studies have shown that managers with an internal locus of control tend to exhibit higher levels of job-involvement, demonstrate greater degrees of career satisfaction, are able to cope more effectively with the pressures and stresses of work, and rise to leadership positions more frequently than those with an external locus of control (Anderson, 1977; Lefcourt, 1982; Sandler & Lakey, 1982; Lefcourt, Martin & Saleh, 1984).

ANALYSIS OF ITEM GROUPINGS

The 28 items in Tables 1 and 2 have been grouped into 8 clusters for analytical purposes. In an attempt to establish some broad patterns from the long list of items, similar factors were grouped together, and an average score was calculated for each grouping. This affords a useful overview of the survey results, and points to a hierarchy of senior management competency clusters. Table 4 provides a synthesis of these clusters. **Table 4 about here**

The top three item clusters clearly stand out as holding a high degree of importance in the career progression and management development of senior executives. The next two clusters, ranking 4 and 5 in order of perceived importance, are also viewed by senior executives as being influential in their managerial development; though less so than the first three clusters. The bottom three clusters are perceived as having little more than a moderate impact on senior executive development.

The Need for Achievement

Having a need to achieve results (4.70), and possessing high internal work standards (4.44), both rated very highly as individual items in this survey. As noted previously, these results indicate the high degree of importance attributed to the need for achievement on the part of senior executives with respect to their management development.

Conceptual Skills

Considered to be of almost equal importance to the need for achievement is the mastering of a series of conceptual skills. These include the ability to see the big picture (4.63), sound overall business sense (4.37), and well-developed analytical-reasoning skills (4.33). These findings provide support for Katz's (1955, 1974) observation that the importance of conceptual skills increases at senior managerial levels.

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills such as the ability to persuade and influence others (4.47), and the ability to work with a wide variety of people (4.31) both rated highly as individual items on the list of factors impacting upon senior management development. A well-developed appreciation of individual differences (4.33) was also widely perceived to be of significant importance in the career progression of the executives surveyed. These items, together with items 10 and 12 from Table 1, combine to form an important cluster of interpersonal skills. This interpersonal element in management development and practice points to the realisation that leadership qualities are highly relevant to the careers of contemporary senior executives. One respondent reinforced this view by volunteering the comment that "engendering in people a sense that you really care about them" had been instrumental in his own development as a senior manager.

Entrepreneurial Vs. Administrative Orientations

Cluster items 4 and 6 in Table 4 are of interest in affording us with an insight into the managerial orientations of senior executives. A number of contemporary management commentators have suggested that executives of today are still too control-oriented and overly concerned with administrative matters. Other more optimistic observers highlight a shift towards a more creative, flexible, entrepreneurial approach to the practice of management at senior executive levels. In terms of the continuum of organisational systems of action, presented in Diagram 1, the survey results from this study indicate a general orientation away from administrative practice and towards entrepreneurial tendencies. Elements indicative of an entrepreneurial orientation include the ability to exercise initiative (4.50), a desire to seek new opportunities (4.04), and a willingness to take risks (3.76). As is evident from Table 1, each of these items rates more highly than either having an eye for detail (3.63) or possessing a knowledge of organisational procedures (3.32), both of which are indicative of an administrative orientation. It appears that contemporary management practice in Australian organisations, at least at senior levels, is less influenced by traditional approaches than many observers would have us believe.

Early Developmental Opportunities

Early developmental opportunities is the fifth-ranking cluster of the eight clusters shown in Table 4. Consisting of 5 items, this cluster indicates the level of recognition given to situational factors which to some degree are influenced by superiors rather than the managers themselves. There is some measure of internal variation within this cluster. The items range from; early overall responsibility (4.09), leadership experience early in one's career (3.87), and breadth of experience prior to age 35 (3.87) at the upper end of the spectrum, to; being stretched by immediate superiors (3.76), and having a mentor or role-model early in one's career (3.39), at the lower end of the spectrum. The overall score for this cluster is 3.77 indicating a moderate level of importance attributed to early developmental opportunities. Interestingly, the two lowest ranking items from this cluster are the most explicit in acknowledging the influence of superiors in individual managerial progression. That these items are afforded less importance than the others gives further indication of an internal locus of control on the part of senior executives in this study.

Disciplinary Knowledge

The relatively low ranking of the cluster entitled disciplinary knowledge is hardly surprising. Katz's research (1955, 1974) afforded us with the insight that technical skills are of most importance at junior levels of management careers. Senior managers are more likely to draw upon the specialist expertise and advice of technical experts where necessary, leaving themselves more time to concentrate on the strategic concerns of their organisation.

This particular cluster, however, does contain a considerable variation of scores across individual items. Table 2 shows this variance. A detailed knowledge of computer technology for example is perceived to hold only slight significance for today's senior executives. The score of 2.28 bears this out. A sound knowledge of human resources practices, on the other hand, is afforded considerable importance with a score of 3.59. In terms of disciplinary knowledge, this study provides evidence that human resources management as a discipline and as a managerial concern is clearly recognised for its important impact upon individual development and career progression among Australian senior executives.

International Experience

Perhaps the most surprising finding of this research study is the relatively low level of importance attributed to international experience on the part of Australia's most senior executives. Australia has experienced rapid growth in its awareness of international approaches to management and business practices over the past twenty-five years. This has resulted partly from a series of Federal government initiatives including the floating of the Australian dollar, the deregulation of financial markets, the abolition of exchange controls, and more recently, an emphasis on benchmarking and international best practice along with the establishment of a more flexible approach to employment relations. These initiatives have been propelled by two important factors. Firstly, Australia has witnessed the emergence of a robust management training industry and the rapid growth of management consultancy firms providing international specialist expertise to a wide range of organisations. Secondly, the development and distribution of knowledge-based products via the internet has significantly enhanced the transfer and interchange of current information across the international management training and development network. These developments, taken collectively, seem to indicate the growing importance of international initiatives in the areas of management practice and business-related activities.

That international experience is not rated highly by senior executives as an influential factor in their management development is perhaps indicative of the relatively few opportunities that Australian organisations have provided for junior and middle managers in the past to travel internationally and take up foreign postings on expatriate status.

International awareness of management practices, techniques and approaches has come to Australia largely as a result of US, Asian and European firms increasing their presence in Australian capital cities over the past two decades. It is not unreasonable to assume that this presence, together with a well-developed nation-wide management consultancy industry, have combined to provide a level of international awareness which considerably diminishes the need for executives to acquire management experience through foreign assignments and international travel. Balanced against this assessment is the view that Australian managers are still too insular in their approaches to the adoption of modern management practices (Clark, 1994; Rees, Rodley & Stilwell, 1993). Despite a range of national government initiatives, an active business consultancy industry, and a notable international business presence, claims persist from some quarters that Australian managers lack cultural awareness, have poor cross-cultural diplomacy skills, and have made few inroads into the mastering of foreign language skills. All this suggests that the question of international experience with respect to senior management development is a complex one. The advantages and significance of international experience are likely to be debated for some time insofar as they apply to the Australian organisational arena.

PROFILE VARIATIONS

Whilst Tables 1 and 2 provide a definitive insight into the characteristics perceived to be most important to the management development of senior executives in this study, it is worth observing the variations in responses according to organisational size, business sector, and individual age grouping.

Variations According to Business Sector

Senior executives in the primary sector rated analytical-reasoning skills (4.66) and having more ideas than colleagues (4.0) more highly than the overall sample ratings attained for these items (see Table 1). By contrast, conflict resolution skills (3.8) were rated as less important. This suggests that primary sector executives place a premium on higher order cognitive skills and slightly less emphasis on resolving interpersonal differences. Secondary sector managers rated international experience (3.75) and a knowledge of marketing and sales practices (3.8) significantly above the ratings given to these items in the overall sample. This is indicative of a market-oriented, international strategic focus on the part of secondary sector executives. No significant variations from the overall sample ratings were noted for senior executives in the tertiary sector.

Variations According to Organisational Size

Variations according to organisational size are of considerable interest, notably for the differences evident between executives presiding over firms with less than 100 employees and those in senior positions in organisations with 1,000 or more employees. Managers of smaller organisations rated entrepreneurial characteristics more highly than their counterparts in larger organisations. The desire to seek new opportunities, a willingness to take risks, and having more ideas than colleagues, all received high ratings from this sub-group. Executives in larger organisations, by contrast, perceived the ability to negotiate, and conflict resolution skills, as having an influence greater than that reflected in the overall sample ratings displayed in Table 1. These executives also placed significant emphasis upon early developmental opportunities; being stretched by one's immediate superior, being visible to senior management before age 30, and having a role-model or mentor early in one's career all received ratings above those yielded from the overall sample.

Variations According to Age-grouping

Some minor variations to the overall rankings of the survey results in Table 1 emerged from an analysis of item-ratings according to age-grouping. Executives in the 41-50 age range rated international experience more highly than the rating given to this item in the overall sample. They also perceived a knowledge of marketing and sales practices to be of substantial importance in their management development. The emergent profile of the senior executive in the 41-50 age range is one characterised by a market-oriented international awareness. A high regard for interpersonal skills and a strong need for achievement are additional characteristics of the profile of this sub-group.

The 51-60 age-grouping rated international experience as being of only moderate significance with respect to management development. By contrast, the need for achievement and interpersonal skills were rated as having substantial impact upon career development and progression. The relatively high score of 3.95 attributed to a knowledge of human resources practices, is also noteworthy. It implies a heightened recognition on the part of this sub-group, of the importance of issues relating to the management of people in organisations.

The over-60 age grouping rated the need for achievement (4.8) and interpersonal skills (4.46) more highly than the ratings attributed to these clusters in the overall sample (see Table 4). The need to achieve results (4.8), possessing high internal work standards (4.8), and the ability to persuade and influence others (4.8) all received individual item scores significantly above those obtained from the overall sample (see Table 1). By contrast, the entrepreneurial orientation was seen to hold slightly less importance in terms of its influence on the management development of this sub-group. A knowledge of human resources practices received a comparatively high score (3.8), indicating an awareness of its impact upon and perceived importance in the management development of these executives. The emergent profile of the executive in the over 60 age-grouping is not significantly dissimilar to the profile indicated in the overall ranking of items from this sample (see Table 1).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It is clear from the above analysis of the 28 individual items in this survey, that senior executives acknowledge a wide variety of factors as holding some level of importance in contributing to their development and ascendancy as top managers. The results of this survey indicate that these executives perceive their management development to be influenced by at least eight major factors. Of these, the three most important factors are; the need for achievement (a personal-value orientation), conceptual ability (a cognitive competency), and interpersonal skills (comprising a series of interpersonal competencies). The next two most important factors are an entrepreneurial orientation and early developmental opportunities. The three least important of the eight major factors revealed in the analysis of responses are administrative abilities, international experience and disciplinary knowledge.

Notwithstanding the variations observed according to sample sub-groupings, there is considerable consensus as to the relative importance of individual items and items clusters. The emergent profile of Australian senior executives today is as follows;

- They are predominantly male;
- They are in their (late) 40's or (early) 50's;
- They have a high achievement orientation;
- They place a premium on conceptual and interpersonal skills;
- They regard a knowledge of HRM to be more important than any other discipline (including accounting and law);
- They have a moderate entrepreneurial orientation;

- They do not regard administrative skills as particularly important;
- They do not consider international experience to have greatly influenced their management development or career progression.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Research into the most important features impacting upon the management development of senior executives in Australia has revealed a high achievement orientation to be a key component in their career progression. A high achievement orientation is evident in individuals who demonstrate a persistent concern for meeting self-imposed standards of performance and is commensurate with high levels of goal attainment. The need to achieve results and the possession of high internal work standards are strong indicators of high growth-need strength. These are all factors which have the potential to significantly impact upon managerial career progression across a wide variety of settings. That the senior executives in this survey consistently rated achievement motivation and growth need strength indicators more highly than external influences upon their management development, suggests a definitive internal locus of control orientation. Enjoying work, seizing opportunities, possessing high levels of stamina and energy, having the ability to tolerate stress, and communicating ambitions to superiors, were regularly advanced as important determinants of managerial development. By contrast, acknowledgments that external influences had a role to play in the career development of the executives surveyed were less consistent. Previous research into this aspect of management development has provided evidence that managers with an internal locus of control rise to leadership positions more frequently than those with an external locus of control (Lefcourt, Martina and Saleh, 1984).

Notwithstanding the inevitable limitations associated with self-report questionnaires, and insofar as the perceptions of senior executives are acknowledged as affording valuable insights into the factors impacting upon their management development, the following profile emerges from this study; Australian senior executives today are predominantly male, in their late forties or early fifties; they have a high achievement orientation, and place a premium upon conceptual and interpersonal skills; they regard a knowledge of human resources management to be more important than a knowledge of any other discipline, they have a moderate entrepreneurial orientation, they do not regard administrative skills as particularly important; and they do not consider international experience to have greatly influenced their management development.

The implications of these findings for human resources managers, management educations, and indeed anyone charged with the responsibility of senior executive development are twofold. Firstly, the findings identify a hierarchy of factors perceived to have influenced the management development of today's senior executives, and in this respect they may represent a useful framework for future executive development initiatives. The likelihood, however that international experience will remain low on the list of priorities for Australian managers must be called into question. At a time when in many countries around the globe there is a strong emphasis on developing skills for international operations, including off-shore study tours and fully-subsidised overseas assignments, there is a danger that Australian managers may be tempted to rely too heavily on second-hand knowledge of international initiatives and developments. In this respect, human resources practitioners have an important role to play; the perceived importance of international experience among senior executives ten or twenty years from now may be far greater than is apparent today. Executive development programs need to take this into consideration when planning for the future.

The second implication arising out of the findings from this study relates to the impact that leadership approaches may have upon employee commitment and organisational performance. The results of this study indicate a tendency to embrace and value contemporary human resources practices on the part of Australian senior executives, rather than more formal and conservative administrative approaches. Previous research into this area has provided abundant evidence that participative human resources approaches to management tend to give rise to positive organisational cultures and increased levels of employee commitment (O'Reilly, 1989; Johnson and Luthans, 1990; Zeffane, 1994). The impact that this approach to leadership is likely to have on organisational culture and employee commitment will be of substantial interest to human resources managers involved in the strategic planning of recruitment and selection policies. Increased levels of organisational commitment are likely to produce greater levels of stability, reduced labour turnover, lower recruitment costs, and greater efficiency in training programs resulting from increased continuity in employee development (Simms, Hales and Riley, 1988).

The findings of this study are indicative of the perceptions of some of the most senior executives in Australia today. In this respect they afford a valuable insight into the factors which have shaped and influenced the

management development and leadership preferences of these executives. There is encouraging evidence that Australian senior executives are more aware of the importance of interpersonal aspects of management than is commonly recognised.

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Senior Executive Leadership Profiles: An Analysis of 54 Australian Top Managers

Research into the most important features impacting upon the management development of senior executives in Australia has revealed a distinctive profile which varies only slightly according to organisational size, business sector, and individual age grouping. Australian senior executives are shown to have a very high need for achievement, well-developed conceptual and interpersonal skills, and a moderate entrepreneurial orientation. Their positive perception of the importance of human resources management practices is particularly pronounced. This profile emerged out of a study in which 54 senior executives participated, and provides a contrast to claims from the management consultancy industry that Australian CEOs lack the proactive inclinations of their US counterparts.

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Table 1: Perceived Relative Importance of Twenty Three Items Upon The Management Development of Fifty Four Senior Executives

Items	Score	S.D.	Rank Order
• Having a need to achieve results	4.70	0.46	1
• Ability to see the big picture	4.63	0.52	2
• Ability to exercise initiative	4.50	0.54	3
• Ability to persuade and influence others	4.47	0.61	4
• Possessing high internal work standards	4.44	0.66	5
• Sound overall business sense	4.37	0.59	6
• Well developed analytical – reasoning skills	4.33	0.61	7
• A well developed appreciation of interpersonal differences	4.33	0.75	8
• Ability to work with a wide variety of people	4.31	0.63	9
• Ability to negotiate	4.19	0.73	10
• Early overall responsibility	4.09	0.90	11
• Ability to resolve conflict	4.06	0.76	12
• Desire to seek new opportunities	4.04	0.97	13
• Leadership experience early in career	3.87	0.78	14
• Breadth of experience prior to age 35	3.87	0.78	15
• Willingness to take risks	3.76	0.67	16
• Being stretched by immediate superiors	3.76	0.93	17
• Having more ideas than colleagues	3.63	0.68	18
• An eye for detail	3.63	0.96	19
• Visible to senior management before age 30	3.61	1.11	20
• Having a mentor or role model early in career	3.39	1.09	21
• Knowledge of organisational procedures	3.32	0.85	22
• International experience	3.19	1.13	23

Scale of Importance:	1	2	3	4	5
	Low	Fair	Average	Substantial	Great

Table 2: Perceived Relative Importance of Five Discipline Areas Upon the Management Development of Fifty Four Senior Executives

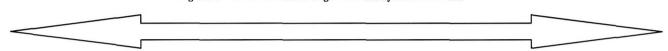| Items	Score	S.D.	Rank Order
• A sound knowledge of human resources practices	3.59	0.96	1
• A professional understanding of marketing and sales practices	3.46	1.11	2
• A well-developed understanding of accounting practices	3.41	0.98	3
• A sound grasp of legal issues relating to business	3.06	0.88	4
• A detailed knowledge of computer technology	2.28	1.00	5

Table 3: A Comparison of the Top Three Influential Factors on the Careers of Senior Executives from Large and Small Organisations

Small Organisations (1-100 Employees)			Large Organisations (Over 1000 employees)		
Rank Order	Item	Score	Rank Order	Item	Score
1.	Ability to See the Big Picture	4.8	1.	Need to Achieve Results	4.77
2.	Need to Achieve Results	4.6	2.	Ability to See the Big Picture	4.61
3.	Analytical – Reasoning	4.6	3.	Possessing High Internal Work Standards	4.55

Table 4: A Summary of Item Clusters and their Relative Importance In the Management Development of Senior Executives

Rank Order	Item Cluster	Score
1.	Need for Achievement	4.57
2.	Conceptual Skills	4.44
3.	Interpersonal Skills	4.27
4.	Entrepreneurial Orientation	3.98
5.	Early Developmental Opportunities	3.77
6.	Administrative Abilities	3.48
7.	International Experience	3.19
8.	Disciplinary Knowledge	3.16

Diagram 1   A Continuum of Organisational Systems of Action

Order and Structure
Formal Planning and Control

Flexibility and Freedom
Informality and Intuitive Actions

Administration	**Management**	**Leadership**	**Entrepreneurship**
• Rule-driven • Adherence to Parameters • Constraints-oriented Mindset • Status –Quo Preservation • Formalization of Procedures	• Change oriented • Balancing of Options • Conceptual Skills • Interpersonal Skills • Technical Skills • Ability to Delegate	• Vision • Communication Skills • Motivation • Inspiration • Team-Participation • Figurehead • Role-model	• Moderate Risk-taking Propensity • Search for Opportunities • Dislike of Rules and Regulations • Tendency Not to Delegate

Modern Management Practice
• Vision and Creativity • Interpersonal Skills and the Ability to Delegate • Understanding of Systems and the Ability to Plan • Ability to Handle Change and the Ability to Perfect Procedures