

THOUGHT LEADER FORUM:
Developing Federal Executives in the 21st Century
April 10, 2007

Background

On April 10, 2007, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) convened a Thought Leader Forum in Washington, DC. The Forum was co-sponsored by the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. It brought together approximately 100 leaders on the topic of executive development from Government, the military, academia, good-government organizations, and the private sector.

The purpose of the Forum was to develop actionable ideas for improving the development of Senior Executives. By broadening their perspective through the establishment of enterprise-wide, cross-agency competencies, we hope to build for the long term a results-oriented, sustainable high-performance culture across Government, with Senior Executives as leaders and role models. In keeping with the emphasis on action, much of the day was set aside for small group discussion among the participants – seven groups in all with a trained facilitator to channel and focus the conversation, and a recorder to ensure that the ideas were captured for reporting out at the end of the day. The major action items captured by the facilitators and supported by the recorder notes form the basis for this report.

In order to set the stage for the group discussions, OPM Director Linda M. Springer opened the Forum with brief remarks about the importance of leadership in an era of unprecedented challenges for Government. She was followed by two plenary sessions. The first session was a panel discussion entitled *Executive Development Across Sectors*, moderated by Mark Abramson of the IBM Center for the Business of Government. The panelists included:

- Eric Braverman, Associate Principal, McKinsey & Company;
- Robert Mallett, Senior Vice President for Worldwide Policy and Public Affairs, Pfizer, and President of the Pfizer Foundation;
- Vice Admiral Robert Papp, Jr., Chief of Staff, U.S. Coast Guard; and
- Ruth Whiteside, Director, Foreign Service Institute, Department of State.

The panel provided a wide range of views on executive development as it is practiced – and sometimes neglected – across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. These views are summarized in the attached notes from the panel session. The panel was followed by keynote speaker Dr. Carole A. Leland, Honorary Senior Fellow, Center for Creative Leadership, and noted authority in the field. Her address on “What We Have Learned in Executive Development” is summarized by Dr. Leland herself in the attachment entitled, *A Baker’s Dozen of Things That Are Increasingly Self-evident About Executive Development*.

Further background for the Forum was provided by a set of four brief “read-ahead” papers sent out in advance to participants:

- *Developing 21st Century Department of Defense Senior Executive Service Leaders*
- *Getting the “X” Into Senior Executive Service: Thoughts on Generation X and the Future of the SES*
- *Snapshot of Executive Development In the Federal Government*
- *2006 Federal Human Capital Survey Executive Views*

These papers are also included in the attachments.

Report Out from the Thought Leader Small Group Discussions

The ideas and proposed actions from the group discussions covered the entire spectrum from those dealing with Governmentwide concepts and policies to those which are actionable at the agency or even the individual level. This brief summary captures the high points across this spectrum and attempts to organize the many thoughts to create a more coherent whole. (The summary bullets presented by each of the seven breakout groups at the closing session are also attached.) The many ideas generated will be presented to OPM Director Springer for her consideration, and are available to agencies across Government and all interested stakeholders as a source of possible action in support of more effective executive development.

There was widespread agreement across discussion groups that the conceptual framework for the Senior Executive Service needs to be reexamined, since the original concept of a mobile, interchangeable cadre of leaders has not been realized. Can that concept be made viable today and in the future? Does the SES need to be broken down into component groups, acknowledging the need for technical specialization in some leadership positions. Is it desirable for all SES members to have enterprise-wide careers, and how can that be balanced with the need for continuity in organizations where political and/or military leadership is changing constantly?

The discussion groups were nearly unanimous in asserting that, once greater unanimity has been achieved around the proper role of the Senior Executive in today’s Government, a clear mandate must be established to support the type and level of executive development required for SES members to play that role. To be successful, agency leaders, not just the Human Resources Management staff, must then embrace the importance of executive development, by providing the necessary resources and creating the expectation, through executive development plans, individual performance plans or other means, that executives will be continuously developed. It was even suggested by some of the groups that agencies be required to have their executive development programs certified by OPM, similar to what is already done with SES performance appraisal systems.

For their part, the executives themselves must understand they must be part of a learning culture requiring continuous development, and role models for it in their own

organizations. They must recognize that to be successful as SES members and fully support the enterprise, they need to acquire a progressively broad, diverse, and complex portfolio, undertaking whatever development activities are necessary to perform at an ever-higher level.

Several of the groups further asserted that, as the Government's Human Resources Management leader, OPM could serve as a catalyst for helping Government rethink and revitalize the major concepts, establish a mandate for development throughout the SES life cycle, create the broad policy framework, and work to coordinate and support developmental opportunities for executives across Government. This will involve soliciting input and winning support from stakeholders at the highest levels, including the agency Chief Human Capital Officers and Executive Resources Boards, and possibly the President's Management Council.

In particular, the discussion groups saw a need for some sort of central coordination of developmental opportunities, especially for executives with transferable, enterprise-wide skills and competencies. While much developmental activity will of necessity take place at the agency or even individual level, there may be a place for centralized, Governmentwide action to leverage opportunities and coordinate agency activities.

Many specific ideas were put forth to provide impetus and structure for enhanced executive development in the Federal Government. As will be noted below, most of these ideas would be actionable at the agency or even individual level, but in some cases they may benefit from more centralized support. An example of the latter would be regulatory action by OPM to require each member of the SES to have a multi-year Executive Development Plan (EDP). It was also suggested that agencies might wish to establish an agreement or contract for each individual to sign at the time of entry into the SES for ongoing development and mobility, and that a standardized template could be developed for them to use for such agreements.

In general, the thought leaders kept coming back to the idea of mobility, and how it could be promoted. Several of the groups noted that, while geographical mobility gets perhaps the most attention and generates the most controversy, mobility for purposes of executive development need not involve moves out of the commuting area or even their current work address. Managing mobility is never easy, but there was a sense that current authorities to support it may be under-used, such as the information technology exchange authority, which unlike the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) mobility program allows for exchange of personnel with the private sector. IPA assignments at the executive level could also be used more frequently for development opportunities for Federal executives in the academic or not-for-profit arenas. An even less used authority, that for sabbaticals, could also be a much more effective vehicle for placing executives in development assignments outside the outside the Federal sphere, including the private sector.

It was further suggested that OPM remove one of the practical impediments for development by providing a temporary allocation space to the "losing" agency when one

of its executives goes to another agency on a developmental detail. (OPM Director Springer recently issued a policy statement expressing OPM's willingness to approve spaces on a case-by-case basis for agencies making such a request.) Another suggestion was that the exchange of executives across agencies or outside of Government be supported through a central database of developmental opportunities. (OPM already has an inventory of developmental assignments known as Fed LDP (Leadership Development Programs) which if further publicized should go a long way toward meeting this need.) It was even suggested that a central pool of current SES members seeking such opportunities be established.

One particularly intriguing notion to emerge was that of a centralized career path for a small subset of executives with particularly crosscutting skills and competencies who would be designated as "enterprise-wide" executives. This could establish for the first time in actual practice a prototype for the concept of the Senior Executive as Governmentwide asset, and if adopted more widely could move the SES toward the original concept of breadth and interchangeability. At least one of the groups suggested that OPM use its demonstration project authority to test this or similar ideas, to the extent that current law might conflict with or lack explicit authority to proceed with the desired actions.

The thought leaders also came up with several variations on the theme that new members to the SES are not initiated or acculturated into their new role in a meaningful way. Typically, new members of the SES are immediately thrust into an all-consuming job, with little fanfare, and whatever incipient sense they may have of belonging to a broader corps of Federal executives is lost. Something as simple as a formal induction ceremony might heighten the executives' sense of belonging to something far bigger than their current jobs.

Several additional ideas were expressed to strengthen the bond among Senior Executives and promote a sense of a broader community. These included initiatives to promote peer-to-peer idea exchange, communities of practice, and networking, within and across agencies, and opportunities to participate in action learning teams. These ideas show much promise as a way to continue and build on the relationships established among the executives at the time of and immediate following their induction. Action learning, in particular, can also be incorporated as a rigorous developmental component.

Much interest was also expressed in mentoring, coaching and role modeling programs (formal or informal) by and for Senior Executives. Each agency must tailor such programs to meet its own particular circumstances needs, with support as necessary from OPM. Through interagency communities of practice, agencies can compare notes and refine their programs to better serve the needs of their executives. The key is to strike a healthy balance between making these programs mandatory to give them "teeth," without turning them into rigid, rote requirements.

All of these possible activities, not to mention those additional ideas documented in the attached notes, generally support the concept of the SES as a distinct cadre, with a unique

role to play in the Federal Government. In this sense they directly support the original notion of the SES as something separate and apart, and not just an upward extension of the General Schedule classification and pay scheme. While realizing and sustaining this vision will require a major commitment to executive development in the broadest sense, there was a large degree of consensus among the thought leaders that this is an investment worth making – for the executives themselves and for the Government and the Nation they serve now and in the future.