HIGH HURDLES
The Challenge of Executive Self-development

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> Normally man's attention is directed not towards himself but towards things which he wishes to manipulate, to change, and to form. He usually does not observe how he himself functions. He lives in immediate acts of experience; he is absorbed in them without ordinarily comprehending them. He reflects, and sees himself for the first time when he fails to carry through some projected action and, as a result of this failure, is thrown, so to speak, back upon himself. "Reflection," "self-observation," "taking account of one's own situation" assume, in such moments, the functions of self-reorganization. (Mannheim, 1940, p. 57)

Harvey was just what the board had been looking for in a CEO. He had a strong track record in turning failing businesses around, he was a marvelous strategic thinker, he understood the company's products and markets. There was only one problem with Harvey--he was a loner. Harvey got along poorly with just about everybody. He was cold and distant with his peers and downright abusive of his subordinates. "That's just me," Harvey would say whenever anyone found the courage to bring this up with him. "I'm not trying to win a popularity contest here, you know." And so the company struggled along with Harvey because they desperately needed his skills. He inherited a vice president who was good at working with others, and who began to act in Harvey's place in staff meetings and so forth. Eventually Harvey worked his managerial magic and the company turned around. A year later the board dismissed Harvey--his abrasive personality was no longer tolerable in the smoothly running organization--and he went off to save another company. It was too bad, as it turned out, because not long after Harvey left, the company got into trouble again. They really needed Harvey and what he could do for them. A board member said of him: "Damn Harvey! We couldn't live with him and we can't live without him."

We tell this story to illustrate some of the issues of managerial development at the highest organizational levels. Perhaps most important, why didn't Harvey's organization try to help him improve his interpersonal ability? In general, why is it that, when performance problems arise in high-level managers, the solution organizations usually prefer is to transfer, demote, or fire the executive? "Each year for the past six years, 15 to 25 percent of American executives have lost their jobs" (Reich, 1983, p. 160). In effect, a game of "musical chairs" is being played in corporate executive suites (O'Toole, 1984). Organizations may also try making up for an executive's performance problems by hiring associates with corresponding strengths, but either way the solution of choice is to move (or remove) the executive, or to change those around the executive--to use selection instead of development. Much less frequently do organizations attempt to create movement <u>within</u> the executive--that is, to encourage the executive's personal and managerial growth. Executives, for example, seldom attend management development programs (Digman, 1978), and, when they do, it is often at what one executive called "attractive watering holes" where the purpose does not include confronting the executive with himself.

This paper is about self-development--the efforts of the executive to improve himself or herself, efforts that other people may well aid or abet. By self-development we mean the conscious, deliberate effort to come to terms with one's limitations. We do not mean the kind of development that springs almost automatically from the new experiences that bring out latent abilities in the executive. This is conditioning, not self-development. We are also not concerned here with the considerable development executives have undergone on their way up (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974; Schein, 1978; Lombardo, McCall, Morrison, & White, 1983). Our interest is in self-aware, self-directed improvement once managers have reached the highest levels.

This paper explores the tendency for executives to avoid coming to terms with their limitations and the corresponding tendency for the executive's organization and the people who work with the executive to shy away from attempts to help. It is based on an exploratory study that we conducted by interviewing 40 people* in a position to throw light on this question. These included 22 executives and 18 experts on executives, including internal specialists in executive development and external consultants. The people interviewed came from a wide variety of organizations, large and small, public and private. The 40 interviews took from an hour to three hours each; this resulted in over 400 pages of interview transcripts, which we subjected to careful analysis. We were looking for patterns in what executives found problematic about their jobs, how likely it was that

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*All of the executives we interviewed, and all of the executives described in the interviews, were men. In generalizing from these interviews, we therefore limit our remarks to male executives and use the masculine pronouns exclusively.

executives acknowledged these difficulties, and what conditions affected whether executives became aware of their problems or attempted to do something about them. For this study we defined an executive as an upper-level manager in a line position with general management responsibilities, or a high-level head of a function such as chief financial officer or vice-president of administration.

Self-development is important because no executive can escape having deficits and because deficits matter to executives and their organizations. These deficits run the gamut: difficulty in thinking strategically; trouble adjusting to a job with huge scope; a proclivity for viewing all problems through the lens of one's specialty (Gabarro, in press); discomfort with one's role as public figure and organizational spokesman; an introverted personality that people below experience as aloofness; a susceptibility to let power, position, and even celebrity go to one's head; single-minded dedication to a demanding career to the point where marriage, children, or health suffer and undermine the individual's effectiveness at work. These are the kinds of deficits we will be referring to, the kind that can make the difference between success and failure.

Self-development is one route for dealing with an executive's deficits. It is a difficult route, underutilized by executives, but not just by executives. It is the human condition for people to harbor illusions about themselves, resist criticism, hold back criticism of others, feel ambivalent about change, feel (or be) too busy to reflect on themselves or to pursue self-improvement vigorously. Based on our interviews and reading, we have reason to believe that when people become executives they cross an invisible dividing line and ascend to a rarefied atmosphere that makes self-development difficult for them in some ways that are different from the difficulties everyone else has with self-improvement. In this paper we will attempt to show just how self-development is difficult for executives--and how some of those difficulties can be overcome.

An example will help illustrate what we mean when we say self-development is difficult for executives. Though the following portrait is a composite, we have drawn it to retain a realistic mix of the factors that seem to interfere with self-directed development at the executive level. We will call our composite executive Mr. Abel A.

Mr. A was the chairman and CEO of a $75-million-a-year, closely-held company of two hundred employees, consisting of a small regional chain of supermarkets. When he took over the business from his immigrant father, who died prematurely, it consisted of just one store. Through ambition and extraordinarily hard work, Mr. A had built the business to its present size. Now in his late fifties, he had two of his four children reporting directly to him and intended for one of them to succeed him. A major problem, however, hampered A's relationship with the two sons reporting to him. Having presided over the company personally for over 30 years, A, like many entrepreneurs, was accustomed to exercising near-total control over the important aspects of the business. His sons, who had accepted his dominant position at first, had grown restless and even a little resentful in recent years as they entered their thirties with several years of experience in the firm to their credit. Because Mr. A reserved all major decisions for himself, he had been deaf to one son's repeated entreaties that the company should expand in certain new directions. As a result, the company had begun to lose some of its vigor. There was a vague sense that things were not going as well as they could be.

Mr. A had no appreciation of the extent to which he monopolized control in the company. And his stature was such that no one in the company was about to call him on it. The company was synonymous with him. Too many people felt dependent on him and indebted to him. Challenging his autocracy was even more difficult because of the dashing figure he cut in his custom-tailored suits and imported silk ties. Besides, in his benignly paternalistic way, he had won a fierce loyalty and gratitude from his several hundred employees, so much so that people were almost reluctant to <u>think</u> critical thoughts about him. Because there was no board of directors, no one was in a strong position to question him about anything, least of all about his autocratic way of leading. (Once one of his sons blew up in anger at his father, but the high emotion of the moment clouded the issue; the father took away no self-insight and the son accused himself of ingratitude.) Only the executive's wife could see the issues with any clarity, but the executive brushed off her periodic advice as nagging. The result was that the one son was about to leave the business, and the other had adapted in a way that seriously limited his effectiveness.

This composite illustrates many of the characteristics that appear, or that become more pronounced, as a manager moves into the executive ranks. First, executives possess power. Executives command formal authority, resources, access to other powerful individuals, and control over the fates of many people. Second, executives are successful. In achieving high position, most executives have succeeded marvelously in their careers, either by climbing the hierarchy of an existing organization or by building an organization around themselves. High-level people have also acquired expertise. They learn the business, they come to know the organization and the people in it, they become experts in managing people and solving problems and creating change. Another element in the executive's position is the demanding nature of the executive job. There are many other factors that contribute to this special condition of being an executive, such as age, wealth, perquisites. In addition to these elements of the condition itself, two personality factors were frequently mentioned during our interviews in connection with executives. One was that most executives are ambitious, they are driven to excel. The other was tied to the power and importance of the executive's role: Because doing the job involves making important decisions and affecting the lives and fortunes of others, many executives are keenly aware of a need to be highly competent and to be seen as being so.

Because our analysis showed that these elements--power, success, expertise, ambition, competence, and so forth--consistently work together to affect the executive's prospects for self-development, we shall include them all in this paper under a common descriptive term: elevation. In grouping the elements together, we are asserting that they act in concert to restrict the executive's opportunities to pursue self-directed growth.

Of course, any phenomenon as complex as that which we call elevation manifests itself in varying degrees in different individuals and different situations. In the illustration just given, the wealthy owner and builder of his company was a sharply elevated individual. This sharp differentiation between him and others in the organization was accentuated by the absence of a board, by the presence at the next level down of his own sons--over whom he exercised parental as well as organizational authority--by his long tenure that made him as much a patriarch as a chief executive, and even by the way he flaunted his wealth. Not all executives are so clearly elevated. Most executives have superiors to whom they must report. Many executives are still relatively young and still willing to learn. Some executives have not yet become unquestioned experts in their business. Executives are elevated to different degrees, and therefore the degree to which their opportunity for self-development is impeded, if indeed it is, may vary according to the degree of elevation.

From the many interrelated features of elevation just discussed, four stand out as especially affecting the executive's prospects for self-development. For the sake of exposition, we will be treating these features separately, though in reality they act in profound concert. First, we will discuss how the exercise of power keeps executives from getting personal criticism that could lead to the awareness of deficits. Second, we will discuss how another route to self-awareness--introspection--is blocked by the very nature of the executive job. Next, we will discuss how the ability to accept criticism is limited by the executive's high need to be--and to appear to be--exceptionally competent and worthy. Finally, we will discuss how a history of success makes change difficult for executives. In discussing each of these four relationships between elements of elevation and the prospects for self-development, we will also consider how some executives overcome the tendency for elevation to interfere with their efforts at self-directed growth.

Power and Getting Criticism

LBJ's biographer, Doris Kearns (1979), has described the imposing experience of being in the same room with President Johnson. "One could sense his extraordinary power," Kearns writes, "the moment he entered a room. There was a strange texture to the mere act of standing next to him; it seemed as if he were violating the physical space of those around him. . . ." (p. 92).

Imagine confronting such a person with his human foibles. Not very likely. We tend not to criticize the personal behavior of powerful people. Witness the following observations made by people we interviewed:

- "There's a tendency for the environment at executive levels to be feedback-poor."
- "When you're a manager, you develop a set of people you can get feedback from--a web, a grapevine. But as you rise in the hierarchy, it withers and by the time you get to the top, it's dead."
- "The higher you go, the more constricted the feedback channels become."
- "In most corporate organizations senior executives don't get much feedback on their weaknesses. There is not that candor in executive suites."

These are a few of many such comments that lead us to recognize the notion--fairly widespread--that executives do not get much feedback from those around them in the organization.

We are not speaking here of the inevitable and frequent criticisms made of the decisions and policies of an executive. These appear regularly in the press and are levelled at executives from many outside interest groups. As one CEO remarked wryly, "In this job you're not going to go home at night with a warm feeling." This criticism of executives is not the kind of feedback we are discussing here. We are talking about feedback aimed not at <u>what</u> an executive does--the decisions he makes, the policies he formulates--but feedback aimed at <u>how</u> he does his job--his process of making a decision, his way of relating to others, his manner, style, behavior. In short, we are here discussing feedback aimed at the executive's <u>modus operandi</u>, at his managerial character. This is the kind of feedback, we found, that is impeded at the executive level, not to mention at other levels. Power limits the flow of criticism to the executive (McClelland, 1975; Kanter, 1977; Read, 1962). Our interviews revealed four factors--related to the exercise of power--restricting feedback on executive behavior. These interrelated factors are: the executive's demeanor, his exaggerated impact, his isolation, and his relative autonomy.

The Executive's Demeanor

We found that the executive's bearing, his way of being with other people, can inhibit feedback. This demeanor may stem from his mental acuity, his command of the issues, his history of success, or all three. It may be related to what Livingston called the "will to power" (1976). Whatever its source, the demeanor of people in charge serves a useful--probably indispensable--function. A certain air of authority is no doubt necessary for executives to do their jobs. Yet, no matter how necessary it is, an exaggerated, dominating presence often chokes off criticism. We heard about the president of a $100 million organization who "did not receive a lot of feedback because he is a very dapper, proper, good-looking person who has a magnetism about him . . . ." People did not feel comfortable criticizing someone with such an air about him. Another executive, we learned, "acts dumb, is anti-intellectual. He swears at you, shortcuts things, doesn't want to hear things. You can see him using power. He's physically strong, intimidating. I've seen very few people talk back to him or kid him." Clearly, this is not the case with every executive. Some executives openly encourage feedback, though when this is done, the executive may still have problems convincing others of his sincerity.

In general, we found that an attitude implicit in the executive's bearing can discourage others from challenging him--especially about his management style. One executive development specialist put this attitude into words: "I've made it to the top and one of the characteristics of being here is that the door opens one way; people don't swing my door open and tell me how to do my job." In other words, the executive's achievement entitles him to an exemption from advice and criticism. Commenting on a related phenomenon, Coles (1977) noted that the wealthy enjoy an "entitlement" that affords them privacy and protects them from criticism (pp. 51, 365-368). Along this line one CEO commented about a group of CEOs of which he was a member: "It's like having twelve bulls in the room. They don't listen, but they expect you to listen to them."

Another aspect of demeanor that we noticed in some of our interviews with executives was their tendency to monopolize the conversation with us. Once they understood our purpose, they took over the conversation in a way that made it a challenge for us to regain control. The tendency to deliver monologues, which some executive development specialists we interviewed also noted, discourages criticism for the sheer physical reason that others have trouble getting into the conversation.

In extreme cases, an executive's demeanor can cut off information brutally. Although any superior can do this to his or her subordinates, high-level managers have more weight to throw around and perhaps also a greater need for power. For their trouble in speaking up, subordinates can be handed their heads on a platter. We heard one story about an executive who would "brook no deviation from what he perceived to be the right way to do it, which was <u>his</u> way. Underneath that [attitude] was an extreme temper. And he almost talked in riddles so that not only did you have somebody who wanted to control, do it his way, but often didn't communicate clearly to subordinates. 'I don't understand what you want' was a very difficult phrase for somebody who said that to him once, because they never wanted to say it again." Such an extreme case illustrates the power of the executive's demeanor. But even in much less obvious cases, there can be in the executive's demeanor an implied threat of using his position to a subordinate's disadvantage, which adds fear and resentment to the reasons that lead people to withhold criticism.

Plain abrasiveness can also get the executive in trouble. According to one of our sources, half of the executives identified in his corporation as being "problems" were also considered "abrasive." In a recent study, abrasiveness was the most common reason for executives to derail (McCall & Lombardo, 1983). "Zinging," as one respondent called it, usually destroys any instinct on the part of other people to help the executive with his problems, to give him constructive criticism, or to be a confidante. If anything, the abrasive executive inspires vengeful feelings in the people he attacks.

To one degree or another, then, the executive's demeanor, which derives from who he is and what he does, affects the willingness of people around the executive to criticize his managerial behavior and character. For executives whose demeanor is plainly hostile or abrasive, personal feedback is nearly impossible to get. For executives who welcome and encourage such feedback--and we heard of several in our interviews--there is still the problem of actually getting the feedback.

The Executive's Impact

One theme we heard again and again in our interviews centered on the executive's extraordinary impact on those around him. Many of the executives themselves brought this up as a matter of concern, especially in the area of exercising their influence. A university president told us, "If you're chief executive, people not only take seriously but spread things around that you have simply sent up as a trial balloon. You're really saying, 'I want to talk about this,' and BANGO it's all over the lot." This is characteristic of the increased sensitivity people have to the executive's words. A casual comment can reverberate with significance. An executive told us the story of seeing a picture on a subordinate's office wall. He said casually to the subordinate, "Why do you have that picture?" He was only making conversation, or so he thought. The next day when he returned to the subordinate's office he noticed that the picture had been taken away. People hang (or unhang) on every word. Comments become commands; statements become injunctions (Laing, 1967). This effect can become so pronounced that some executives must guard even the expression on their faces. "If I don't smile," one told us, "people think the business is going bad."

The problem with this exaggerated impact is that it makes some executives reluctant to speak out at all until they are ready to make a firm decision. They become reluctant to hold casual conversations that may, they fear, turn out later--much to their chagrin--not to have been so casual after all. This tends to add distance to the relationships between an executive and those around him. Keeping one's own counsel, for whatever other good and valuable services it may render, has the effect of excluding others from involvement in, say, a decision-making process. This makes for a cooler relationship in which people feel less free to offer criticism--and in which they have less personal contact to use as a basis for criticism. The executive's frequently exaggerated impact thus acts to limit performance-based feedback.

But what about "insiders," those people with whom the executive feels free to discuss issues openly, with as much speculation and "running things up the flagpole" as he wants? Are they not a valuable source of feedback? For some executives they undoubtedly are. Yet to the extent that these insiders act as "cheerleaders" for the executive, the flow of behavioral information is likely to be retarded. This can happen to any executive, even one who tries to resist it, for the simple reason that such cheerleaders are often acting in their own self-interest. They tell the executive what he wants to hear and omit what they do not want him to hear, including news of problems that might reflect badly on them (Read, 1962; Burns & Stalker, 1961). Often these subordinates have their own interest at heart when, as Burns and Stalker put it, they "display to [the executive] the precise responses, hints and clues which will give him the kind of assurance about himself and his conduct which they think he needs at the moment" (p. 212). King Lear's daughters, Goneril and Regan, were classic cases of the highly manipulative variety of cheerleader. Lear disregarded the Duke of Kent's warning of the danger "when power to flattery bows." Explaining Lear's susceptibility to flattery, one of these daughters later said: "He hath ever but slenderly known himself." Cheerleaders are thus performing a disservice to the executive when they respond to his willingness to be open with them with what is an essentially defensive posture, saying in effect, "when I deal with you I better protect my flank." This robs the executive of an important source of learning about himself. The top person, in particular, loses the opportunity to learn about himself when "all responses to his actions and to himself are filtered through the knowledge that he is in supreme command and in a position to control careers and occupational lives [so that others must be] circumspect in their dealings with him" (Burns & Stalker, 1961, p. 212).

As potentially serious as this cheerleading can be, perhaps the most serious form of cheerleading is the unconscious kind, when subordinates don't withhold criticism, but instead become blind to any faults in their highly-placed superior. This is a form of collusion. Because of their dependency on him, subordinates cooperate with their superior in supporting the image of himself he wishes others to see (Goffman, 1959). Together, the subordinates and the superior create a "delusionary system" (Kets de Vries, 1979). These subordinates see the executive as he wishes to be seen, not as he is. One person we interviewed described such a dynamic in his company: "There is a kind of pact of admiration. . . . You only say good things about this guy. . . . It's kind of like being in a king's court. . . . There's a kind of conspiracy that way." Such a "delusionary system" is not likely to be fertile ground on which the executive can learn and grow.

One final note of interest on the subject of the executive's impact on others. We found evidence to suggest that it is not only an executive's subordinates who hold back criticism; fellow executives may also play hands off. As we have noted, executives with abrasive styles turn off peers as well as subordinates. But even the easy-to-take executive is not likely to receive constructive criticism on the way he manages from the people with whom he is locked in competition for advancement and resources. One person said that the highest-ranking executives in his international bank each inhabited "protective cocoons"; they "danced around" each other. The chief executive, of course, has no peers internal to the organization and is probably unlikely to enter into developmentally oriented conversations with the external peers with whom he does business.

The Executive's Isolation

If the executive's demeanor cuts down on criticism and the reactions of those around the executive reduce the flow of developmentally important information, the organization also plays a part, often by its very nature.

The structure of the hierarchy tends to bring executives into contact with fewer and fewer people inside the organization. This is especially true of top executives, located on a separate floor or in a separate building. Only through extraordinary effort can top executives make contact with a significant portion of the rest of the organization, and then the act is usually more symbolic than substantive. From his research on top executives, Burns (1957) found a "uniform segregation of three or four persons" at the top of organizations (p. 60). Of the time one general manager spent with people in his firm, half was spent with the other two members of his management team. As one human resources director we interviewed put it: "I think too many top executives stay cloistered and sequestered. The people they see and the people they interact with gets narrower and narrower as they get up the pyramid." The director of human resource development of another major corporation made a similar comment: "Most executives have very few people they have contact with--twenty or thirty people in a 20,000 person organization--and those people tend to be high-level executives who also tend to be isolated."

Besides this more or less structural isolation of executives, there is an isolation that comes from insulation--the tendency of the organization to protect its executives from the indignities and problems of everyday life. Robert Townsend, former president of Avis, caricatures how organizations can isolate corporate executives by insulating them.

> Let's say you've just become the Big Guy. You arrive at work in a limo, you climb out of the car in the company garage and get into your private elevator, which takes you to your suite of offices. Your three secretaries are waiting to protect you from any unpleasantness. In your private dining room for lunch, you meet with satisfied customers and senior officers only. Anything controversial has to be written up, predigested, and sugar-coated before it gets to you. Your calendar is loaded with outside board and committee meetings and social engagements with your powerful new friends outside the company. After a few months of this, you've lost touch with all the colleagues who helped you get the top job and you have no idea what's going on in the company. (Townsend, 1984, pp. 6-11)

Isolation takes a toll on communication and criticism upward because the absence of contact guarantees the absence of communication, especially of sensitive information. Moreover, the scant communication that does occur usually takes place on the executive's turf, complete with the trappings of power and the symbols of isolation (such as an office on the top floor), all of which can make subordinates uneasy and less comfortable about speaking up (Steele, 1983).

Executives may need to be somewhat removed to make their jobs feasible. Were an executive left prey to the thousands of irrelevant, and relevant, interruptions that are waiting to obtrude, he would never be able to carry out his role. Yet there is the counterbalancing problem: Isolation restricts criticism that an executive could use in an effort to develop and to perform his role even more effectively.

The Executive's Autonomy

Just as an executive cannot function without some isolation, so an executive cannot function without some autonomy. But executives are granted autonomy along a fairly wide spectrum, from the extreme of the executive who is only a functionary of the board or of the board chairman, to the top person who has no board of directors or whose board "rubber stamps" the executive's decisions. These are the extremes from practically no autonomy to almost complete autonomy. We found evidence that autonomy--especially when it approaches being total--is an important factor in screening criticism of the executive's *modus operandi*.

Executives who have the autonomy to hire whomever they please can--and some do--use that autonomy to hire people in their own image, people whose backgrounds, gender, and education make them compatible. Executives who do this are likely to end up with the cheerleaders we mentioned earlier, subordinates who tell them only what they want to hear (Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1975; Bennis, 1976; Kanter, 1977). From our interviews, here is a sample of comments along this line:

- "Some executives are afraid to hire people with different strengths. It's a failure to trust."
- "I see executives surrounding themselves with compatible people, people who fit in."
- "If you rely too much on strengths, it hurts your effectiveness, and you can end up hiring mirror images."

Executives are not likely to get criticism on their behavior by turning to such "mirrors."

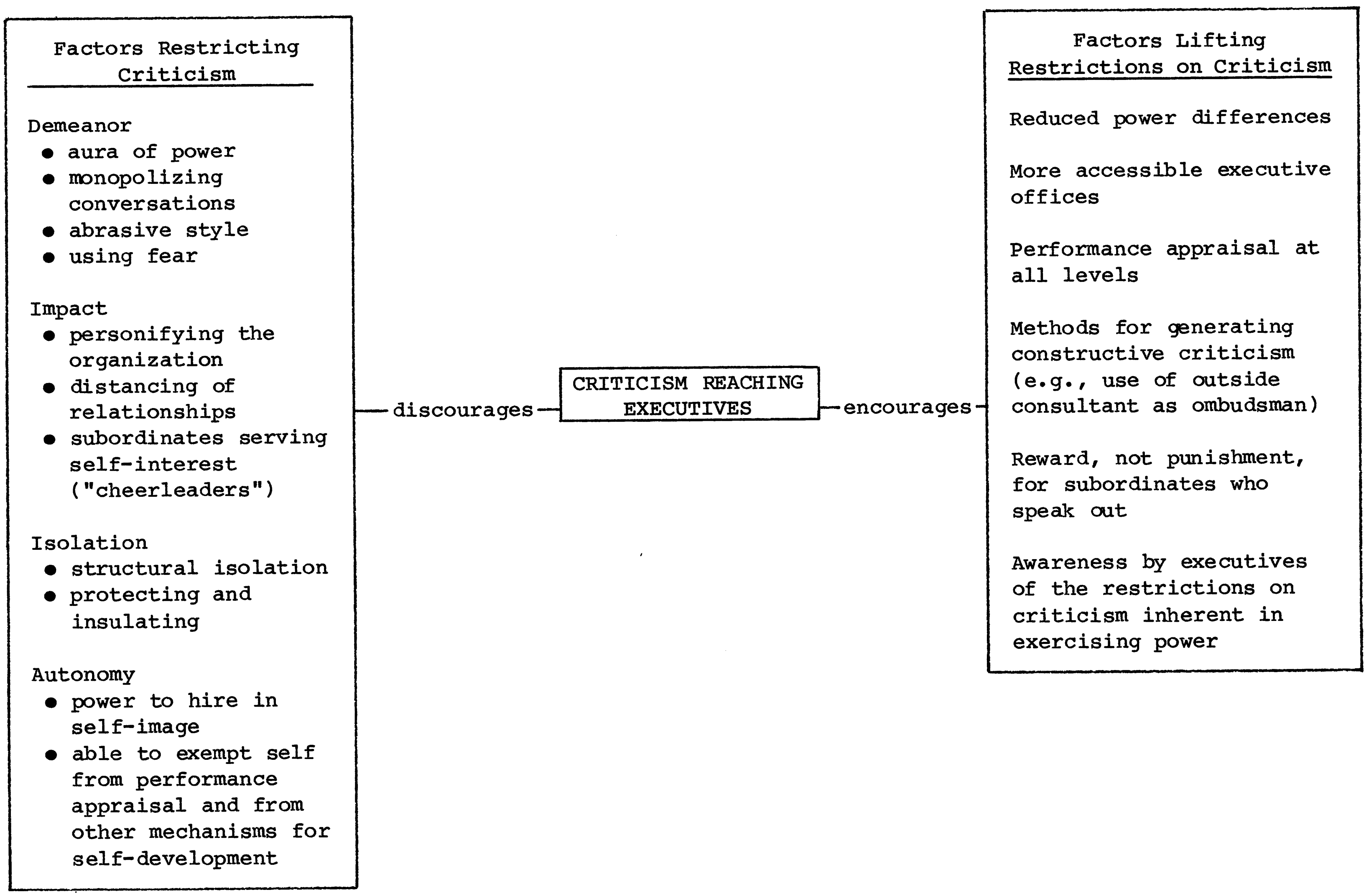
Performance appraisal is another means by which critical information can be delivered, an institutionalized way in which organizations overcome the disinclination to give feedback about performance. But as DeVries et al. (1981) have found in their review of appraisal practices in organizations, formal appraisals thin out at high levels. One consultant described the attitude of executives toward appraisal this way: "You talk about performance appraisal at the executive level? Unh-uh. That's for you folks down there." Executives can, in effect, use their autonomy to exempt themselves from having their performance assessed in this way. An executive who reported directly to the CEO of a major U.S. corporation explained why formal appraisals did not happen at high levels in his corporation.

> We have a pretty good performance appraisal system, but there aren't appraisals for the top people. And, come to think of it, it's because of the chairman--he doesn't like to do them. He <u>thinks</u> he does them. I've had performance reviews, but they've always been at bars after a game of tennis. And the next day neither one of us remembers what was said.

Executives often have the autonomy to put themselves outside the appraisal system, and who but the top person is to say otherwise? The personnel executive in charge of the system ordinarily lacks the clout to define it as including the top levels, or to enforce it if the top levels merely go through the motions of participating. In granting such autonomy to its executives, an organization is allowing its executives to grant <u>themselves</u> an immunity to being appraised.

Figure 1

POWER AND GETTING CRITICISM



Organizations often allow executives to sidestep other mechanisms for self-development--self-assessment programs, for example. In one case the top management team of a major institution decided to go through a week-long program that included getting structured feedback from subordinates. Everyone participated, <u>except the chairman</u>, who had never made a practice of receiving personal criticism and apparently was not about to start.

Getting Criticism to the Executive

Though we found that power can and often does impede criticism of the executive's managerial character--his method of doing his job--we also learned about channels that create a healthier situation for the executive, one in which he receives the critical information he needs to pursue self-development. The solutions can be grouped into those things the organization can do, those things that people around the executive can do, and those things that the executive himself can do.

Organizations can, for example, do a lot to de-emphasize power differences. Organizations can reduce the gap between executives and others by making executive offices less impressive and locating those offices closer to those of others (Steele, 1983). Intel, for example, deliberately avoids separating senior and junior people with perks such as limousines, plush offices, private dining rooms and other status symbols (Grove, 1983). If organizations segregate executives less and take away some of the trappings of power, then the executive becomes more accessible.

Another thing organizations can do is to create mechanisms that generate constructive criticism of executives. Standard practices such as performance appraisal are available; the issue is whether they are applied to executives. Probably the key to whether executives receive appraisals is the top executive and the extent to which that person takes the system seriously and uses it personally. For example, Jean Riboud, who has been CEO for almost twenty years at the French corporation Schlumberger, meets once a year with each of his top executives to assess their performance. One of these men, Carl Buchholz, described one such meeting: "[The CEO] said, 'Let's talk about the Buchholz problem.' He talked about my relations with other people, and how I ought to improve them. He talked about what he wanted done that wasn't being done. He was quite specific" (Auletta, 1983, p. 98).

From our interviews we also learned of other mechanisms the organization can use to encourage constructive criticism. One international financial organization conducts inspections of each major unit of the organization. A member of the board of directors heads a team of three, which goes into a division and conducts confidential interviews, the results of which are channelled to the division's top management. The report includes perceptions of the CEO and the top management team. Another corporation used an outside consultant who knew the organization and had the respect of many people in it as a kind of ombudsman. He kept his ear to the ground and regularly fed criticisms of top management back to those concerned.

People around the executive also play an important role in freeing the channels for feedback. Although in a distinct minority, certain individuals in the executive's world do have the inclination and courage to tell the executive about his shortcomings. One executive talked about "the constructive critics who care enough about the organization and the person to help him and tell that person how his behavior is impacting on the organization. Those people in my executive experience were few and far between. But there were a few, and those few helped me to understand myself better." Another executive, who was described by his subordinates as "not a typical executive" because he didn't elevate himself especially, received pointed criticism from one outspoken subordinate who became unhappy with the cavalier attitude the executive sometimes took toward subordinates in staff meetings. In addition to associates at work, wives are in a position to know and advise the executive on a personal basis, if he is willing to listen.

Perhaps the most important factor is the attitude of the executive himself toward being criticized on his managerial behavior. Some executives make it a point to avoid becoming isolated and to solicit reactions to their work. More effective general managers build larger networks and make better, more skillful use of their relationships (Kotter, 1982). One human resources executive we interviewed commented that "the less secure [executives] really hide, but the more secure ones will step out of their offices or go down to the departments, make it a point to stay in touch." Another staff executive reported to us that people two or more levels below would never be open with him in his office, only if he went to them. We also heard from executives that they can learn what their subordinates think of them by paying close attention to cues. As one CEO put it, "You've got to learn how to read very subtle complaints." Furthermore, executives get explicit information about themselves only if they convince others of their desire for it by word and action. A

CEO said: "People have to make sure they're being asked honestly, and what they are going to get back is not a 'Louisville slugger.'" Finally, executives have to appreciate how difficult it is to get reactions to themselves and their work (Kets de Vries, 1979). It is easy for them to labor under the illusion that they know where they stand with others. Argyris (1964) once made a practice of asking executives whether they knew what their subordinates thought of them. They would say yes, they did know. Then he would ask them whether their own superiors knew what they, the executives, thought of _them_. And the executives would say no. The point had been made. Executives only get this kind of information if they go after it.

The exercise of power impedes the flow of constructive criticism, yet power must be exercised if executives are to do their jobs. So the issue is not how to reduce the power the executive needs, but how to manage those aspects of its exercise that impede criticism. If development is seen as important for executives, then getting criticism to them becomes a proportionally important problem.

The Nature of the Job and Introspection

Another way for executives to get criticism is from themselves, through introspection. Given the problems just discussed in getting criticism from others, executives may in fact need to rely on introspection more than lower-ranking managers. Introspection is the process of looking inward, of examining or monitoring ourselves, of trying to understand our behavior, our feelings, our defenses, our effect on others. Introspection is a necessary step in the process of self-development, whether we introspect to gain new insight about ourselves, or whether we introspect to make sense of criticism from others. Assessing oneself is the first step towards self-improvement. Yet the likelihood that executives will spend time and energy in introspection must be considered in light of the extraordinary demands of their work and the degree to which introspection is immediately relevant to their day-to-day performance.

Many executives are faced with staggering, unremitting demands on their time. Many of these demands rise up suddenly and urgently from sources outside the executive and beyond his control. He must respond, deal with these demands. This can use up enormous amounts of time. The former CEO of BankAmerica wrote that his job was virtually four full-time jobs in one: desk work, meetings with employees, meetings with customers, civic and other public affairs--each could take 100% of his time (Lundborg, 1981, p. 6). Although some executives--especially those at the very top--may relate to sharply reduced numbers of people within the organization, the numbers of people outside increase (Dubin & Spray, 1964). (Executives at the lower end of the range, however, are sometimes besieged by internal contacts. A general manager Kotter (1982) studied said that he could spend 24 hours a day fielding requests from people within the organization alone.) With so much else to do, how can an executive find time to look inward? One CEO described himself as being "at the center of a heaving circle," the top half of which was the outside world pressing down on him so urgently that he had little time to attend to the bottom half--internal management (Barmash, 1978).

Henry Kissinger (1979) reported that despite his investigative background as a researcher, he was so busy as Secretary of State that he found virtually no time for reflection of any kind. Similarly, a survey of brigadier generals concluded that they were "too busy to have time to do any reflection; [instead, they were] putting out brush fires and reacting rather than thinking or planning ahead" (USARI, 1978, p. 8).

But lack of time is not the whole story. As busy as executives are, their work lives are less hectic and unmanageable than those of some first-line supervisors, whose average day is crammed with as many as 500 discrete episodes (McCall, Morrison, & Hannan, 1978). So despite the considerable demands, executives probably enjoy greater latitude than some lower-level managers over how they spend their time.

In part, the issue comes down to attitude. As Jenks (1984) pointed out, the lack of time is also a matter of perception of time. Executives may not find the time because introspection is not a high priority. Executives do not value introspection because it is not immediately relevant to the performance of the executive's work. The results an executive is concerned with are external and tangible--turning a plant around, improving profits, boosting productivity. Such results do not manifestly require self-understanding, and therefore do not seem to require introspection. In contrast, the work of a poet, for example, does obviously require self-understanding and introspection, and poets, because they recognize the benefits, do spend much of their energy in introspection. Executives, who do not see a connection between introspection and performance, are understandably unwilling to put the time and energy that looking inward requires. When we asked a CEO of a small company how he looked at his performance, he said: "I look at the bottom line." Another executive observed that executives "talk only in the language of externalities." Another person commented that, because their commitment to the job is so high, many executives operate on a narrow sector of their personalities--one that excludes concern with self. In the same vein, Jennings (1965) asserted that executives get satisfaction from doing rather than contemplating; "dreamers seldom make it to the top."

One CEO we interviewed spoke eloquently of his orientation toward action and away from self-reflection. ". . . I am not conscious of doing that kind of in-depth reflecting. . . . there are always so many things to do. I never sat down and asked whether there was some pattern to my life . . . everything just seemed to keep tumbling out. It was like running ahead of an avalanche. . . . [I] don't have a lot of time to sit back and dream about where I'm going and why." Many executives share this sense of being always immersed in action. They are men of action, not reflection--and certainly not self-reflection (Mintzberg, 1973; Sayles, 1979).

Because introspection is not immediately relevant to their performance and because they tend not to be introspective, executives have not developed an appreciation of introspection that might allow them to be self-reflective in spite of the heavy demands of their job. Several of the people we interviewed commented that executives learn from performance, not from reflection or introspection.

To be effective executives must be action-oriented. The issue, then, is not how to turn executives into navel-gazers, but how to help them use introspection as a tool to become more effective, as a way of getting information about themselves--their behavior, their strengths and weaknesses--that will help them pursue self-development.

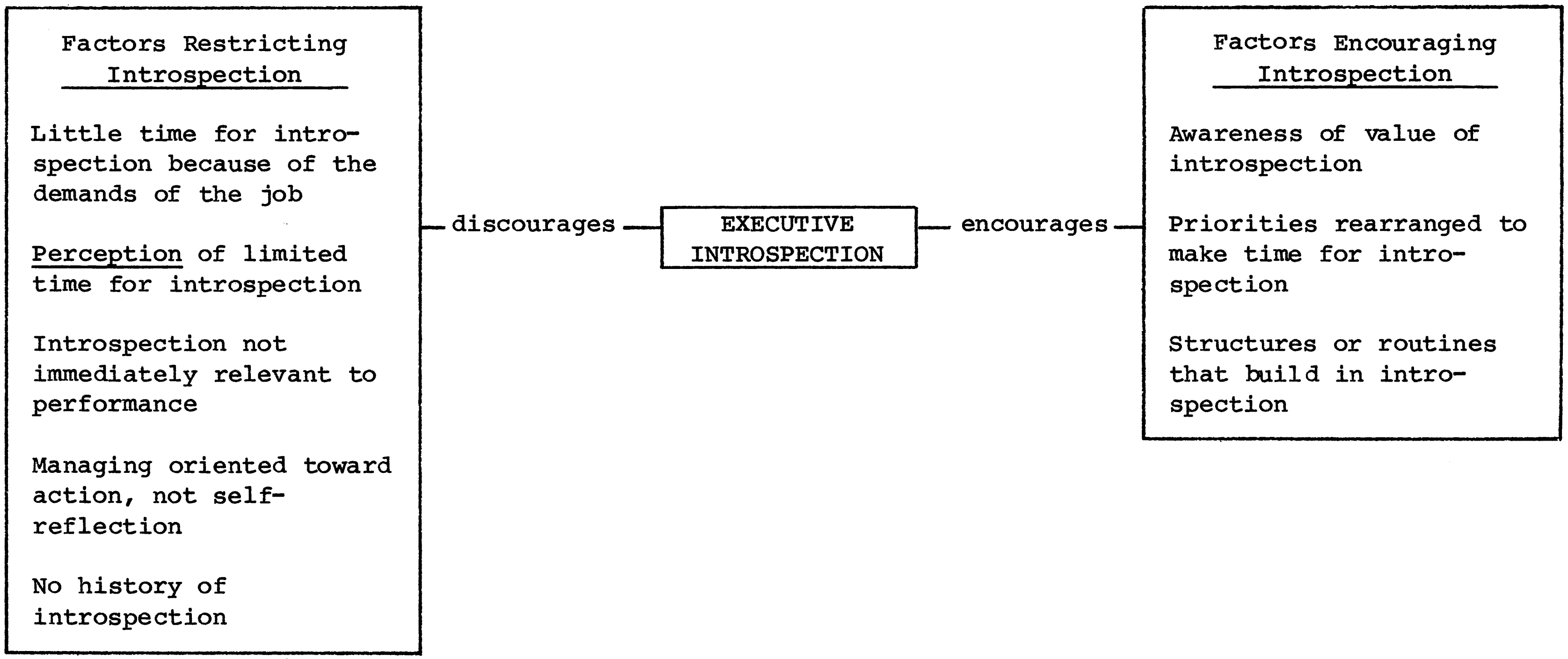
From our research it seems that executives can introspect but only by special effort, or with ingenuity in planning their time, or through close relationships, or by a change in attitude. Recognizing the contribution that introspection can make to their self-development and thus to their enhanced effectiveness is the first step. Next, executives need to develop structures or routines that not only allow for introspection but provide for rewards in the form of self-learning. Sometimes these can be quite simple. One executive we talked to reflected on the events of the day and his role in them while walking his dog late in the evening. Mario Cuomo, governor of New York, faithfully keeps a diary, a habit that may have sprung from his years as a law school professor (Auletta, 1984), but which nonetheless provides him with an opportunity to contemplate his daily actions. If job demands preclude introspection, then another strategy can be to fight the problem at the source--control the workload. Lundborg (1981), the retired CEO of BankAmerica mentioned earlier, tried to do this by focusing only on those items that he thought would be important looking back five years later. Perhaps by weeding out less important demands, time and energy can be gained for the introspection needed periodically to monitor and modify one's performance.

Introspection need not be a solitary activity. Conversations with friends, wives, confidantes, or trusted counselors can help the individual to think out loud. One executive told Studs Terkel (1972), p. 406: "I have only a wife to talk to. . . . [With her] I [am] able to talk out loud and hear myself. . . ."

A high-technology route by which the executive can exchange private thoughts and feelings with other executives is asynchronous computer conferencing (Jenks, 1984). Using this technique a group of executives working with a consultant for the purpose of learning about themselves can log

Figure 2

NATURE OF THE JOB AND INTROSPECTION



onto computers at any convenient time, at work or at home, and communicate with others in the group. The computer allows the others to respond whenever they can.

Finally, opportunities for introspection can be had in performance appraisal--if it is practiced at executive levels --or in the self-appraisal and self-assessment components of training programs (DeVries et al., 1981; Digman, 1978).

The Need to be Competent and the Ability to Accept Criticism

In spite of the problems with getting criticism from others through feedback, and from themselves through introspection, executives do get criticism at times, some executives more than others. Even then, however, the executive's elevated position continues to limit his opportunities for self-development. For though criticism is necessary, in itself it is not enough. To develop, we must do more than simply hear valid criticism; we must be able to accept its validity and, if only to ourselves, admit failure or weakness or shortfalls in performance. As we will see, our interviews indicate a reluctance--sometimes an adamant refusal--on the part of executives to admit weakness or acknowledge any need for improvement.

We suggest that there is a relationship between the executive's reluctance to accept criticism and the executive's need to be competent. By need to be competent we mean a complex of attributes, including the need to be equal to the demands of the job, to live up to the expectations that come with high positions, and to have a sense of self-worth. A number of the people we interviewed called it "ego," by which they seem to mean pride--in one's abilities and position.

The need to be competent--to feel good about oneself--is something that all people of course have. As Horney (1950) has shown, everyone struggles at some level for a feeling of self-worth and fends off lurking feelings of worthlessness. If the executive is different, it is because he carries on this struggle on a larger stage and for higher stakes.

Several factors contribute to the executive's need to be competent. One factor is the set of expectations that come with the territory, a sense that the executive must almost be larger than life. A highly placed manager who reported to the CEO of a major corporation told us, "[The CEO] needs to be above everybody. He needs to be smarter than everybody, never wrong. . . . He has to act [as if he were] perfect." An internal consultant explained it this way: "Executives in general are not supposed to have problems. They're supposed to be strong and competent and adequate to most situations."

Another factor, implied by the last quotation, is that, as holders of great responsibility, executives incur high risks. The high stakes make competent performance vitally important. Millions may be lost, lawsuits may be engendered, careers may be ruined and jobs lost through the incompetence of a highly-placed person.

Also feeding into the need to be competent is the fishbowl in which the executive operates. The opinions he renders and the policies he adopts are often highly visible and come under close scrutiny. Executives want to build and maintain their reputations as people who know what they are doing. The need to save face is therefore considerable. If executives make a habit of being wrong, they erode their confidence in themselves as well as the confidence of others in them. Another aspect of visibility is that because people in high positions continually draw fire, they learn to be "thick-skinned," according to CEOs we interviewed. They learn to protect themselves from criticism. The hitch is they may learn this lesson too well.

The executive's personality can also contribute to the need to be competent. Executives are ambitious people who strive for many things, not the least of which is a strong sense of efficacy and worth. It has been suggested that in some people ambition springs from a need to ward off underlying feelings of inadequacy (Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1975).

The organization may cap all this by communicating its expectations of competence to the executive in powerful ways. One of the most powerful may be the special treatment that executives are accorded. Executives receive high--even exorbitantly high--salaries, are ensconced in opulent settings, and are afforded every convenience. The executive corridor typically stands as a monument to its occupants' importance (Steele, 1983). As one executive said, "They sort of handle you like a precious egg" (New York Times, November 7, 1982). The implicit message in all of this may be that the executive had better live up to the high expectations of the organization as symbolized by the special treatment. The executive is likely to expect himself to be, and know that others also expect him to be, more than ordinarily competent.

Thus, the executive's expectations of himself and others' expectations of him can subtly--or not so subtly--nudge the executive into a heightened sense of his capability and importance--which in turn makes it difficult for him to hear and accept criticism. Executives can begin to believe that they are infallible. As the Society for Personnel Administration points out (1965, p. 24), "At heart we are all egotists and we are--to ourselves--important individuals. As important individuals, we don't feel that we have many faults." As people who are *in fact* important, executives are perhaps even more susceptible to this way of thinking. To the extent that the executive's ambition compensates for underlying doubts about himself, criticism may be unwelcome because it touches off this unconscious feeling of insecurity.

Our interviews provide support for this tendency for some executives to become unduly impressed with their competence and importance and therefore to reject criticism. A line executive told us, "I don't think most people in elevated positions really like to hear that they're something less than perfect. . . ." A staff executive said, "Executives are susceptible to believing in their own infallibility. They think they can do no wrong." And another line executive said, "As you grow in authority and responsibility, your confidence increases, and that can be good or bad--you can become fatuous and think you don't make mistakes." These comments indicate that executives are at least perceived as being reluctant to admit weakness to themselves or others.

In extreme cases, executives succumb to an exalted view of themselves--what our respondents called a "big ego"--that virtually closes down their ability to accept criticism. Jung (1963) referred to this exaltation of self as "inflation" or the "expansion of the personality beyond its proper limits. . . . It produces an exaggerated sense of one's self-importance." This tendency toward inflation is what the Greeks called hubris, or pride--the tendency to attribute god-like qualities to oneself. In relation to the wealthy, Coles (1977) used the term "narcissistic entitlement" to refer to a tendency of some well-to-do people to let their great wealth go to their heads. Coles saw people thus afflicted as "sitting on a throne" underneath which lay a "strain of gnawing worthlessness" (p. 366). Kotter (1982) found a more mundane instance of inflation. The highly successful track records of the general managers he studied lulled them into what Kotter called an "I-can-do-anything" syndrome.

As Hague (1974, p. 93) pointed out, "[The executive] may get conceited about his successes and blame his failure on external circumstances, but worst of all, he will cease to be self-critical and to learn from his experiences. Taken to the extreme, then, "inflation" can lead executives to become <u>hypo</u>-critical, and this can be perilous. Confidence turned to arrogance can be the executive's downfall (McCall & Lombardo, 1983). A false sense of superiority is one major cause of a power-holder's decline.

A big ego hurts the executive because it keeps him from learning, including from formal programs. A high-ranking woman executive in a bank told us: "Executives have enormous egos and they'd have trouble believing they could get anything out of a program." It may be that executives avoid formal programs because to put themselves in a learning mode --to cast themselves as students--is a come-down. They may prefer to avoid placing themselves in a learning situation, where they may look incompetent or foolish as they fumble to learn something new. They may prefer not to de-elevate themselves. Many top managers, for example, avoid training out of concern that they would look bad compared to people junior to them (Hague, 1974).

We should note that one factor that feeds the tendency for executives to sidestep criticism is their power. If the question of how to account for performance problems arises, their power makes it possible for them to attribute those problems to others, especially subordinates. We heard of an executive who went so far as to send his subordinate to a fix-it service to correct deficiencies that were largely the executive's own.

What Can Be Done?

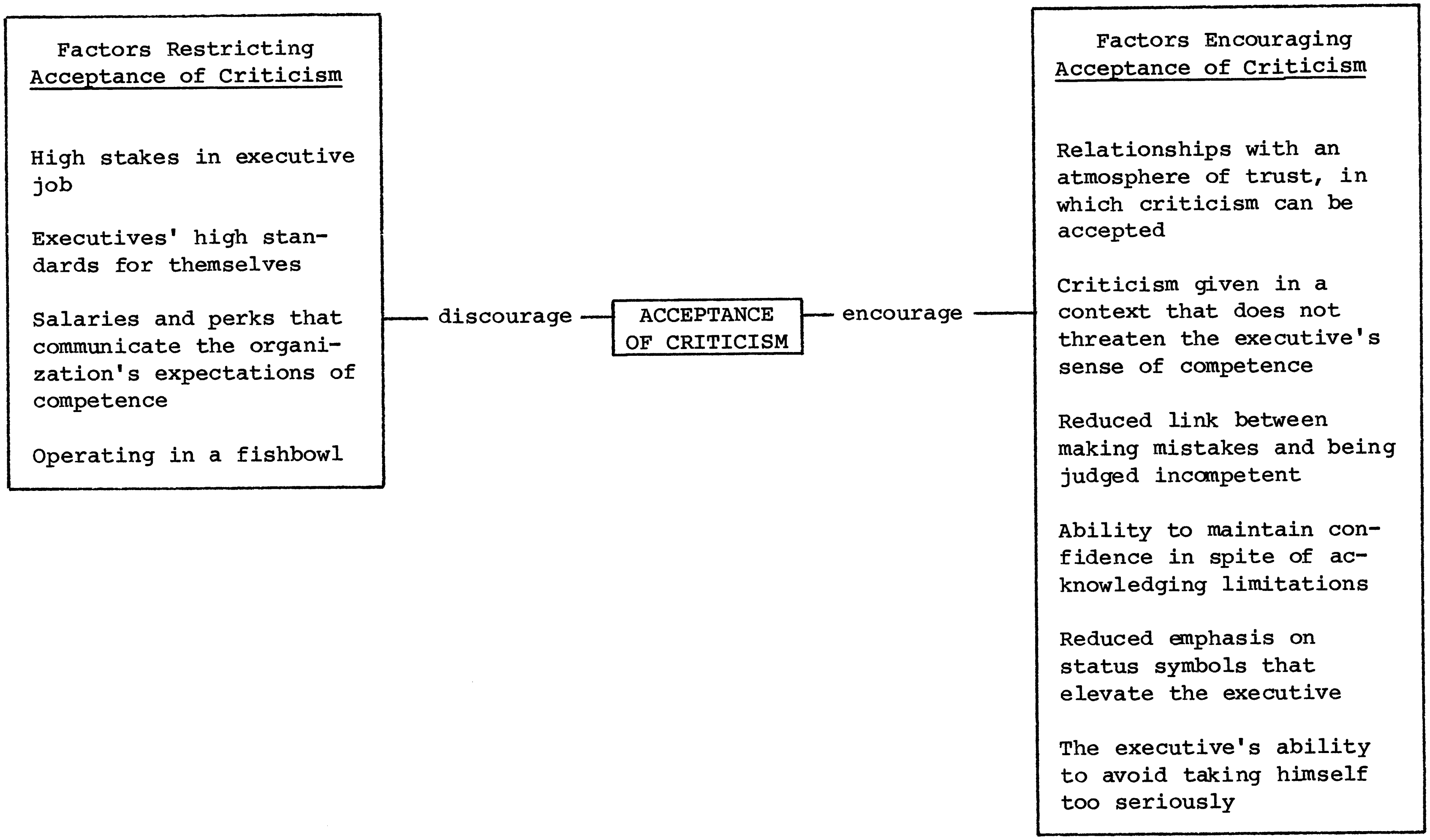
We have talked about the tendency for executives to be tempted by an exaggerated sense of their abilities and importance, but there is nothing that says an executive must succumb. Many executives resist this temptation. In fact, their need for competence prompts them to sit tight for criticism precisely because they want to be competent. They realize they must continue learning if they are to remain competent. One executive who made a practice of examining his management style reported that at the end of the day "I go home to my wife and say, 'I can't be that smart, I can't do everything. . . .'"

With regard to avoiding arrogance, one executive offered this advice: ". . . absolutely most important of all for a top manager: Don't take yourself too seriously . . . it took a lot of luck to get you the top job. You're good, but so are the people around you. Be able to laugh at yourself" (Cattabiani & White, 1983, p. 6). By taking himself less seriously, the executive can go a long way toward reducing the loss of confidence that may come with accepting criticism. Yet we should not expect the executive to take himself lightly; he is likely always to feel the sting of criticism especially keenly. As Drucker points out, speaking of political and military leaders, "To be more [than mediocre] requires a man who is conceited enough to believe that the world . . . really needs him and depends on his getting into power" (Drucker, 1966, p. 87).

Good relations with one or more key people can help an executive overcome the temptation to reject criticism. A

Figure 3

COMPETENCE AND ACCEPTING CRITICISM



trusted colleague can help an executive accept negative information because there is an atmosphere of mutual respect. One executive we interviewed said, "I'm blessed with having a very good relationship with a guy I like working with and for. . . . A key thing is mutual respect. . . . He keeps me up to date all the time on how I'm doing." A trusted consultant can sometimes play this role. One CEO confided to us that, despite the discomfort involved, a consultant had managed to deliver a message that no one in the organization had dared bring up with him--that his autocratic style was a major deterrent to his organization's ability to use participative management.

Another way to help executives accept critical information is to meet them on their own terms. If an executive shows a need to be treated as a special person, then recommend a self-assessment program at a prestigious institution. Similarly, if the executive is reluctant to make it public knowledge that he is getting help of some kind, respect his need for privacy. The only drawback here is that in meeting an executive on his own terms one may simply be playing into his hands. If one does too good a job of catering to the executive's need for status, for example, the executive may never put these needs aside long enough to open himself to learning and self-examination.

Finally, though, if executives are to accept criticism more readily, organizations will probably need to open the way by reducing the link between making mistakes and being judged incompetent (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Too often a single mistake, if large enough, brands a manager as being unequal to the task. Yet McCall and Lombardo (1983) have shown that successful managers often make many big mistakes, and that the lessons they learn from such mistakes may be critical to their success. Organizations must understand--and encourage their executives to understand--that admitting weakness or ineffectiveness can be the beginning of further development and increased competence.

In this regard, organizations might help by moderating the display of executives' rank and privilege. Remember that when the Romans treated conquering heros to a parade and celebration, they helped the hero keep things in perspective by stationing a slave who whispered in the hero's ear, among other things, "Respice post te, hominem te esse memento (Look behind you, remember you are a man)."

Success and the Motivation to Change

To become an executive one must succeed, must make the most of ability, connections, and opportunities. Managers who eventually rise to become executives are often highly regarded from the beginning and therefore well situated in the "opportunity structure" (Kanter, 1977). These managers usually receive choice assignments in which they distinguish themselves, which leads to further opportunity to advance. This string of success followed by opportunity, opportunity followed by success, stretching over a manager's career, is what Kotter (1982) called the "success syndrome." Such a career history may leave a manager well acquainted with his strengths but relatively unacquainted with his weaknesses. More important, the highly successful executive may (with some justification) feel that changing his way of managing, even a little, could hurt his chances for future success.

We found that successful managers instinctively play hands off with their style of managing. It is a conservative, sometimes even superstitious, attitude that is nicely encapsulated in the statement of an executive who, by changing organizations, had recently ascended to the second level of a major corporation and more than doubled his salary in the process: "Fundamentally, my management style is cast, and I'm not about to risk changing it and jeopardize the success I've achieved." Successful people see no reason to tamper with a winning formula. As two staff executives said:

- "[Successful executives] adapt as little as possible. What's gotten them there has been successful so why change it."

- Referring to a senior vice-president: "He has been successful all his life, a great achiever. He's reached his position because of the way he is."

Many successful executives may be worried, perhaps rightly so, about losing their effectiveness if they change. This anxiety may be coupled with a general fear of failure that researchers such as Jennings (1965) have noted in executives--an anxiety that they will not accomplish what they want. A consultant we interviewed described an executive who was afraid of losing effectiveness: "The person is . . . cautious about changing, saying that he knows his organization talks about a more humanistic approach, a greater emphasis on human relationship skills, but 'if I lose some of my toughness, am I really going to be successful?'" Even when they recognize the problem and its costs, executives may hesitate to change for fear of pulling the keystone out of the arch of their managerial effectiveness. From an executive development specialist we heard about an executive on a collision course with a heart attack.

> He just charges to work. Comes in at 6 in the morning and leaves at 8 every night every day and works weekends. I'm trying to work with him, and I've got all the health people here working on a strategy with the guy, and he's recognizing it. He knows what he is doing, but getting him out of that hole is very difficult because he's a high-status guy. He wants to get to the top and he doesn't want to back off. And he thinks reducing stress means backing off.

Executives are not alone in this attitude; the people with a stake in the executive may feel the same, as the following statements show:

- To try changing an executive is "playing with dynamite."
- "Is the potential improvement worth the risk of losing a reasonably effective executive?"
- "I'm impressed with the danger of changing people. I've seen executives try to change and get lost because they get away from their management style--the way they grew up and manage best."
- A CEO on the possibility of asking his executives' subordinates how they view their bosses: "It's too dangerous!"

Rather than correcting deficiencies, successful executives seem more interested in building on strengths. We interviewed a young rising executive for example, who, it was obvious from the way he expressed himself, excelled at conceptualizing and communicating. But when we asked him whether he tried to develop himself as a manager, the two things he mentioned as developmental targets were analytical ability and communication, just those things he already did well. If building on strengths becomes a substitute for correcting deficiencies, if an executive is developmentally satisfied merely to get better at what he or she is already good at, then weaknesses will remain. Building on strengths is the kind of change people generally find comfortable; correcting weaknesses is risky and painful.

Is it success itself that makes change difficult for executives? Isn't the reluctance to change just human nature? Our interviews suggest that success is indeed a significant factor. A management consultant observed: "I've worked with people on a lower management rung all the way up to the people at high levels and certainly the people who are lower are much more willing to look at themselves. They're still trying to find their leadership style, define what's going to lead to success in their organizations." As these managers become more successful, their motivation to change can diminish. An executive with many years of experience said of people on the fast track that "there's a certain crown prince image which they're conscious of. So I'd say, in a number of cases, they feel that they've made it and all they have to do is to continue to do the things they've done in the past and they will rise to even greater heights."

How Do Executives Change?

Executives change for the same reasons that anyone changes--because they want to or have to. The motivation to perform well is a powerful want-to that impels executives to pursue their own development. Said one CEO: "I know I must keep growing. What worked yesterday might not work tomorrow." So executives whose urge to be effective is strong enough to offset the forces that exert a drag on executive self-development will cultivate their own development. Of the examples of such executives we came across, one group executive started each year by telling his immediate subordinates what his personal agenda for change was for the coming year. By making his plans public, he committed himself to change. Other factors that boost the prospects for change include a top executive who encourages change and a culture at executive levels that supports self-development by legitimizing it and by providing resources, inside and outside the organization, to make it possible.

When the individual executive will not pursue needed change on his own, then an option is for other people to step in and press for change. Alcoholics are a classic case of executives with problems that they are not usually going to solve voluntarily. The task of penetrating these layers of rationalization with which alcoholics surround themselves may require as drastic a step as surprise confrontation. A Richardson-Vicks Inc. executive found himself confronted by the company medical director and colleagues critical of his performance who told him to attend a treatment program or lose his job. He went to the program (Greenberger, 1983). This type of confrontation precipitates the crisis to which the executive is inevitably headed. It motivates the executive by threatening him with the loss of his job if not his career.

Figure 4

SUCCESS AND CHANGE