

Developing Executives Through Work Experience

Morgan W. McCall, Jr.

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Abstract

Executive development, often thought of solely in terms of educational programs, actually occurs primarily through on-the-job experiences. Surprisingly little research exists, however, on the kinds of experiences that make a difference, or what difference they make. This paper summarizes a series of studies of successful, high-potential executives that addressed these issues. It describes 16 developmental experiences, the elements that made them developmental, and the lessons executives said they learned from them. Making better use of experience is a significant challenge for organizations that are serious about the development of executive talent.

Developing Executives Through Work Experiences

I learned to take risks on people and to keep my cool as a leader. I learned the importance of a leader's ceremonial role to subordinates...how to manage a large team harmoniously, and the importance of a company "culture." (Lindsey, Homes, & McCall, 1987, p. 11)

I had to learn to work with two customer systems and sales forces almost overnight. I learned how to balance the needs of the company with risk to the project and to myself, how to manage upward effectively, and how to build and maintain a motivated team. (Lindsey et al., 1987, p. 12)

These two executives were describing what they'd learned from a job assignment, not from a management seminar or from reading the latest management text. Even though commitment to developing managerial talent is often measured by the size of a training budget, it's not clear what role the classroom plays in the development of executive skills. A recent article by Short (1987) reported that the "corporate classroom" is budgeted at over \$40 billion for its more than 8 million "students." Bennis and Nanus (1985) put the figure between \$30 and \$40 billion. Kotter (1988), in a recent study of 15 corporations well known for the quality of their executive cadre, concluded that "as important as formal training can be, it never seems to be the central ingredient in development at these firms. It may be rather obvious that if people spend 98-99% of their work time on the job, and only 1-2% (at most) in formal training, that most learning must occur on the job."

The two executives quoted above were actually describing what they had learned from starting an operation from scratch. Both they and their corporations, intentionally or not, took a substantial developmental risk in these assignments. But unlike the relatively tangible cost of educational programs, the expense of on-the-job development is difficult to calculate. That it can be astronomical is reflected by the following comment from a member of the executive committee of a major corporation:

I assigned him to that job because I thought he would learn from it. He clearly wasn't the most qualified candidate. I figured if he couldn't cut it, it would cost us two million. In a two billion dollar business, we could afford it.

While it may be obvious that executives learn on the job, relatively little is known about it. A recent review of this area "revealed no systematic body of research focused on what experiences or events may be important in managers' careers" (McCauley, 1986, p. 2). This review did identify several studies showing that early job challenge, early, broad responsibility, early leadership opportunities, and task force and staff assignments can have developmental significance.

In Kotter's study (1988), the better firms made use of a broad array of developmental experiences, "including adding responsibilities to jobs, creating special jobs, using inside and outside training, transferring people between functions and divisions, mentoring and coaching employees, giving those people feedback on progress, and giving them instruction in how to manage their own development."

What evidence there is leaves little doubt of the critical importance of work experiences for developing managerial talent. But some stubborn questions remain, including three that I can address here. To make effective use of work experiences, we must first understand what makes an experience developmental. Research to date suggests that job challenge is crucial to development, but what does that mean about the kinds of experiences that develop executives? Not all experiences are equally challenging: what makes the difference and what difference does it make?

Second, what can experience teach? It's one thing to talk about the importance of exposure, breadth, and visibility, but what specifically might someone learn from such developmental experiences?

Finally, even if we knew what makes an experience developmental and what a person might learn from it, how can we design systems to take advantage of our knowledge? Can we do a better job of strategically managing the careers of executives than simply providing periodic job rotations?

Job Challenge

Why is it that so many of the most successful corporations emphasize job challenge for developing managers (see, for example, Hall, 1976)? Kotter (1988) concludes that "challenging entry-level jobs help attract good people in the first place, and challenging promotion opportunities help firms hold onto those people.... The challenges, in turn, both stretch people, and allow them, often early in their careers, to exercise some leadership. And that, of course, is at the heart of development."

If good people want challenge, and if challenge is at the heart of development, then what is challenge? The answer is not as obvious as it seems. The longitudinal study at AT&T (cited in McCauley, 1986, p. 4), for example, used only four characteristics to examine the challenge in managerial jobs. A single index was created by combining measures of "job stimulation and challenge, supervisory responsibilities, degree of structure of assignments, and degree to which the boss was an achievement model." They found a significant relationship between early job challenge (as reflected by these characteristics) and subsequent managerial success. By implication, then, challenging jobs are those that require people to supervise others, are relatively less structured, and involve working for a good boss. This leaves me with the unsettling feeling that there must be more to challenge.

Our studies (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, in press; Lindsey, et al., 1987; McCall & Lombardo, 1983) looked a little deeper by examining 616 descriptions of experiences that made a lasting developmental difference to 191 successful executives from six major corporations. We were able to identify 16 types of experience or "key events" which included such things as challenging assignments, the role of significant other people, and hardships endured (see Figure 1).

These 16 key events can help us to understand what underlies the challenges which make work experiences developmental. The five kinds of assignments identified in Figure 1, for example, are not distinguished by title, pay points, function, business unit, status, salary, hierarchical level, or product line. Rather, they reflect dramatically different managerial challenges. In three of them--large scope jobs, turn-arounds, and start-ups--the manager is clearly in charge and has line responsibility. The other two, line-to-staff switches and project/task

Figure 1

16 Developmental Experiences*

Assignments

- o Starting From Scratch--building something from nothing
- o Fix It/Turn It Around--fixing/stabilizing a failing operation
- o Project/Task Force--discrete projects and temporary assignments done alone or as part of a team
- o Scope--increases in numbers of people, dollars, and functions to manage
- o Line To Staff Switch--moving from line operations to corporate staff roles

Other People

- o Role Models--superiors with exceptional (good or bad) attributes
- o Values Playing Out--"snap shots" of chain-of-command behavior that demonstrated individual or corporate values

Hardships

- o Business Failures and Mistakes--ideas that failed, deals that fell apart
- o Demotions/Missed Promotions/Lousy Jobs--not getting a coveted job, or being exiled
- o Subordinate Performance Problem--confronting a subordinate with serious performance problems
- o Breaking A Rut--taking on a new career in response to discontent with the current job
- o Personal Traumas--crises and traumas such as divorce, illness, and death

Other Events

- o Coursework--formal courses
- o Early Work Experiences--early non-managerial jobs
- o First Supervision--first time managing people
- o Purely Personal--experiences outside of work

*See Lindsey et al., 1987, for complete definitions.

force assignments, put a premium on persuasion--leading without formal authority or position power.

When "other people" were identified as the pivotal force in developmental experiences, their role was surprisingly narrow. Virtually all of the significant other people were bosses or hierarchical superiors (not subordinates, peers, friends, spouses, or gurus, as some might expect), with the primary variability coming in both how long the manager was exposed to the particular boss (from a few minutes to several years), and whether the boss was exceptionally good (about 2/3) or bad (about 1/3). Having a good boss seemed to matter most in a manager's first supervisory job and in big scope jobs. In other situations, for example in start-ups, it was often the absence of supervision, not the qualities of the boss, that allowed development to occur.

In addition to developmental work experiences based on assignments and other people, executives discussed five kinds of experience we categorized as hardships (see Figure 1). Set back by mistakes or distasteful jobs, forced into all-or-nothing career decisions, confronted with difficult personnel problems, or dealing with traumatic personal events, these were the experiences that forced their victims to dig deep and confront a level of self not usually dealt with in other kinds of situations.

The Elements of Job Challenge

The "elements" that make up these 16 kinds of developmental events write the encyclopedia of job challenge. Content analysis of the hundreds of experiences described by executives surfaced eight fundamental challenges: bosses, incompetent or resistant subordinates, dealing with new kinds of people, high status, business adversity, scope and scale, missing trumps, and degree of change.*

Bosses were a particular challenge when managers had to adapt to their bosses' ogreish qualities or stylistic

*Research is in progress to systematically measure these characteristics of experience. Preliminary support for the content analytic results can be found in McCall and McCauley, 1986.

differences. Bosses were also developmental if they modeled an exceptional skill or attribute, and in certain jobs where the manager needed and got the boss's advice and support. It was by learning to adapt to a variety of bosses that executives developed the ability to deal effectively with a diverse array of people in authority.

While both good and bad bosses could create a developmental work context, managing competent subordinates was seldom mentioned as a developmental experience. The challenge came in overcoming incompetence and resistance from subordinates, or in having to build an effective team from scratch. There were also developmental challenges in learning to manage former peers or bosses, or older or more experienced employees. These kinds of situations led to the realization that no "one way" of leading would work all the time. These experiences forced the development of alternative approaches to fit various situations. As one executive learned, "You can't fire everybody."

One's boss and subordinates are obviously important to executive development, but learning potential was increased every time managers worked with types of people they had not dealt with before. Frequently mentioned new relationships that had to be developed were with higher level executives, clients, suppliers, unions, vendors, governments, people from other cultures, and joint venture partners.

Simply dealing with these people could be challenging, but the developmental ante was further raised when managers had to do the dealing without any formal authority over them, and when there was no requirement to cooperate. As was true with bosses and subordinates, encounters with these different kinds of relationships led managers to develop different kinds of skills to deal with different situations. Negotiating with a union and working with a joint venture partner are not the same thing.

Yet another developmental aspect of experience was playing for high stakes: being out on a limb with a project highly visible to top management, up against a tight deadline, taking a huge financial risk, and maybe having to go against one's bosses' preferences or advice. Managers had to learn to cope with the pressures, handle the risks, and take effective action in the face of enormous consequences.

Managers are responsible for the performance of the business, consequently job challenge increases along with business adversity. The developmental demands described by executives increased as markets went sour, suppliers or customers went out of business, competitors seized the moment, unions went on strike, the economy changed unpredictably, natural resources ran short, technology changed, or equipment failed. Responding to these kinds of situations taught critical lessons: the need for taking action quickly, coping with ambiguous problems, making choices without sufficient information, and how to play for big stakes.

As one takes on responsibility for more people, dollars, functions, products, markets, or sites, scope and scale emerge as a major challenge. Particularly for managers who have developed personal leadership skills, changes in scope present countless demands to learn to "lead by remote control," to find ways to run things when it's impossible to keep one's arms around them.

In many of their significant learning experiences, managers came into the situation with at least one missing trump. They routinely faced unfamiliar functions, businesses, products, or technologies. Sometimes they were too young, had the "wrong" background, or had to master computerese or financialese or legalese. Some found themselves in foreign countries, unable to speak the language or communicate with the people they managed. In all these cases the challenge was not to let the missing trumps do them in; the development was in learning how to work around a significant disadvantage.

Not surprisingly, challenge also seemed proportional to the degree of change a new situation presented to the individual. People were promoted two or more levels at once, moved into new businesses, or plucked from years on the line into some technical staff assignment with no subordinates and no clear bottom line. Hot shots found themselves exiled to less significant jobs, free-wheelers got bridled by a hands-on boss, fix-it managers were sent to start something up. In these situations, managers had to find ways to deal with huge and usually unexpected change, and from the feeling of being overwhelmed develop the ability to adapt.

Making Use of Job Challenge

The message is simple. These are identifiable and categorizable things that executives say challenged them. Meeting these challenges left them little choice but to learn and to develop new abilities. In that respect, development came from inside of them, from their individual desire to succeed. This leads us to our first rule of development: It is not something you can do to or for someone. Development is something people do for themselves. On the other hand, a lot can be done to provide talented people with the kinds of challenges that will give them the opportunity to develop new skills. This leads to our second rule: The developmental potential of a work experience is driven by the challenges it presents; exposure to a different function, product, division, or the like is not enough. While the exposure can be useful, even enriching, what matters is what one is doing while being exposed.

What Work Experiences Can Teach

There is no simple formula, no cookbook that leads inexorably to successful leadership. ... Learning to be a leader is somewhat like learning to be a parent or lover; your childhood and adolescence provide you with basic values and role models. Books can help you understand what's going on, but for those who are ready, most of the learning takes place during the experience itself. (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 223)

To say an experience is developmental begs the question of "developmental of what?" As we studied what executives said they had learned from their most developmental experiences, we found many examples of "exposure" learning--gains in cognitive knowledge of technical or business issues. But such lessons are just the beginning, representing only two of what turned out in our content analysis to be 34 categories. Just as experience is highly differentiated, its lessons pertain to a broad spectrum of skills, abilities, attitudes, philosophies, perspectives, knowledge, and values. This overwhelming array of bits and pieces, the puzzle-pieces of managing, can be arrayed into the five clusters shown in Figure 2: setting agendas, handling relationships, basic values, executive temperament, and personal awareness.

FIGURE 2
EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES AND THE EXPERIENCES ASSOCIATED WITH THEM

LEARNING CONTENT: LEADERSHIP QUALITIES		LEARNING EXPERIENCES: DEVELOPMENTAL EVENTS																	
		Assignments			Hardships				Other People		Other Events								
		Scratch	Fix It	Project/ Task Forces	Scope	Line to Staff	Business Failures	Lousy Jobs	Subordinate Performance Problem	Breaking a Rule	Personal Trauma	Role Models	Values	Playing Out	Course Work	Early Work	First Supervision	Personal	
Implementing and	1. Specific technical knowledge																		
	2. How the business works																		
	3. Standing alone, being decisive																		
	4. Seeing organizations as systems																		
	5. Solving and framing problems																		
	6. Building/using structure and control systems																		
	7. Doing, not talking about it																		
	8. Directing and motivating others																		
	9. Dealing with people's perspectives																		
	10. Politics is part of organizational life																		
Relationships	11. Getting cooperation, non-authority relationships																		
	12. Working with executives																		
	13. Strategies for negotiating																		
	14. Confront subordinate work performance problems																		
	15. What executives (and managers) are like																		
	16. Management vs. technical work																		
	17. Developing your people																		
	18. Managing people with more experience than you (former bosses, etc.)																		
	19. Dealing with conflict																		
	20. Management models and theories																		
Basic Values	21. Basic values: trust, integrity, credibility																		
	22. Human values: sensitivity to needs																		
	23. Can't manage it all by yourself																		
Executive Temperament	24. Self-confidence in skills and judgment																		
	25. Comfort with ambiguity, stress, uncertainty																		
	26. Persevering under adverse conditions																		
	27. Learning to be tough																		
Personal Awareness	28. Coming with situations beyond your control																		
	29. Using, and not abusing, power																		
	30. Recognizing personal limits and weaknesses																		
	31. Learning which jobs are and aren't enjoyable																		
	32. Taking control of own actions: career																		
	33. Perspective on life and work																		
	34. Being prepared for opportunities																		

Note: From *Key Events in Executives' Lives* by Lindsey et al., in press. Reprinted by permission.

The six lessons in the first cluster contain the knowledge and skills needed to set agendas. John Kotter (1982) observed that effective general managers were able to set agendas for themselves and their business that consisted of "loosely connected goals and plans" addressing a range of time frames, covering a broad range of business issues, and including both "vague and specific goals." These agendas were not usually written and were only loosely related to formal plans (Kotter, 1982). The basic lessons that enable them to form agendas rest on business and technical knowledge, organizational design skills, thinking broadly and accepting responsibility for direction, and finding alternative ways to accomplish one's ends.

The second cluster of lessons, important to implementing agendas but also critical to almost every managerial activity, involves handling relationships. The kinds of relationships an executive must deal with are quite diverse. While all the lessons in this cluster require the ability to understand the other person's point of view, there is no such thing as a "man for all interpersonal seasons." The ability to work effectively with one group does not guarantee that a manager is equally adept with other constituencies.

Basic values, the third cluster of lessons, contains moral and philosophical perspectives on the ways people should be treated and the standards of conduct appropriate in a leadership role. They represent the honing and shaping of fundamental individual values by the experiences of the work place and executive jobs.

"What executives are made of" describes the fourth constellation of lessons. Coping with ambiguity, persevering through adversity, rolling with the punches, and making tough decisions are part of the daily menu of executive life, abilities which may spring from the common root of self-confidence.

Finally, five lessons form a personal insight theme. At various points in their careers, many of the executives we studied came to grips with what they really liked to do, what they were going to do with their careers, and the sacrifices they were willing to make in their personal lives to achieve their ambitions. Some aspects of development, of course, are dependent on self-awareness: the recognition and acceptance of blind spots and weaknesses that allows people to direct their own development and realistically assess their aspirations.

There is not space here to fully define each of these 34 lessons and explore the subtleties within and among them (for that, the reader is referred to Lindsey et al., 1987). There seem to be a number of conclusions, however, that have implications for using experience as a way of strategically developing executive talent. Among them are the following:

1) Different kinds of experience can provide opportunities to learn quite different things (these are summarized in Figure 2). While there may be a technical or business knowledge component to almost any assignment, it is seldom the primary learning from a truly developmental experience. It is crucial, therefore, to think seriously about what a person might learn from a particular experience and not to stop at the "exposure" level.

2) A job that is incredibly developmental for one person can be largely redundant in the growth of another. However obvious that is, it is still tempting to think of development in absolutes--that through this experience a person learns "x," regardless of the person who goes through it. Our data show two things bearing on this issue. First, executives with repeat experiences (e.g., two turn-arounds) learned fewer, and usually similar, lessons the second time. Second, executives who became "specialists" by virtue of successful repetition (e.g., "start-up" managers) sometimes derailed later in their careers because they failed to develop the broader array of skills required to handle other kinds of situations.

3) There can be no guarantee that an individual will learn the lessons that an experience offers. Even companies that make extensive use of developmental assignments often fail to consider what they might do to help individuals learn what they could. It's as if the sink or swim approach we associate with selection has been applied to development, too: throw them in and leave the learning outcome up for grabs. Even if development is ultimately up to the individual, we think a great deal could be done to help people make more of the job experiences they have. At the simplest level it might mean giving managers time between assignments to reflect on what they've just been through (as opposed to showing up on Monday to take over New Guinea operations). It could also mean providing a structured experience after a significant assignment to help a person make systematic sense of it. A great deal of thought and effort goes into designing classroom experiences, and it will probably require at least as much effort to take advantage of key work experiences: sometimes executives do not stay in important

assignments long enough to learn much from them at all (Gabarro, 1987)!

Implications for Career Management

It is clear that effective use of work experience for development will be difficult unless the culture of the corporation supports the practice. A supportive culture is more than a statement of mission and values that endorses development. It is an environment in which at least the following four concrete things happen.

1) Executives risk a portion of the bottom line to put talented people in jobs for which they may not be fully qualified. Such decisions are common, and the developmental choice is made on purpose. Placement decisions are a behavioral reflection of management's recognition that a person fully qualified for a job is the least likely to develop in it.

2) Managers are allowed--encouraged--to take risks and make mistakes. Mistakes aren't fatal as long as they aren't repeated, they result from real effort to do something new and beneficial, and they teach the manager something useful. Managers take responsibility for their mistakes, the organization uses temporary punishments ("penalty boxes"), and there are many examples of people taking reasonable risks both in business decisions and in career moves. Interestingly, this propensity toward taking reasonable risks and tolerating failure is a characteristic of the "excellent" firms described by Peters and Waterman (1982).

3) Movement across organizational boundaries occurs regularly and easily. There are formal or informal mechanisms for identifying talented managers in other parts of the organization and for keeping them challenged even when that means crossing barriers. Because they identify with the larger corporate entity, managers do not have to protect their turf, and they do not tolerate games of "pass the turkey."

4) Developing executive talent is accepted as a line responsibility--commitment is demonstrated by the amount of time executives devote to it. Sometimes very serious incentives (such as a percentage of the bonus) are attached to achieving developmental goals.

One could list other characteristics of a culture that supports development, but the main point is that the behavior of executives is a clear demonstration of their commitment. People do not have to search to find examples of significant developmental moves, action (not just verbiage or philosophy) signifies their commitment--rewards and reprimands are consistent with developmental moves. In organizations where contrary patterns exist--where the folklore, for example, is replete with examples of fatal mistakes--the more practical human resource approach might be to emphasize selection and leave development to the occasional unsung hero. Nothing short of a significant cultural shift, usually requiring several years of intense senior management effort, will make it work well.

If the organizational culture is at least partially supportive of development, the next step is doing something. While there is no "right" answer, effective development begins with the basic business strategy of the company. Take, as an example, whether or not to have a high potential pool. In a conglomerate that has opted to be a holding company driven by financial criteria, the idea of developing executive talent for the corporate staff is moot. Any decisions on talent pools would best be left to the business units. A company, however, that wants or has a strong corporate identity, but has numerous business units, needs some way to identify corporate resources across its many parts.

The salience of business strategy for executive development is even more pronounced in the case of cross-boundary movement. Our findings strongly suggest that variety in assignments over time is very important to development. Such variety is often attainable only through moves that cross functional, product, or business boundaries--leaps that sometimes defy past practice and almost always entail great risk to those who leap and sometimes to the business itself. Such moves should not be made lightly or because "it seems like a good idea." Rather we suggest that the business strategy dictates the need for such moves and the degree of acceptable risk associated with them. One company we've worked with has a strategic plan that calls for a new product line that will require the particular expertise held by two traditionally separate parts of the business. Success will depend on finding managers for the new enterprise who are hybrids of these two parts, and that seems to justify the risk of developmental boundary spanning. Another company anticipates strategic realignment that will place a premium on skills most readily developed in a small part of the business historically considered a dead-end. Once again,

the strategy dictates breaking boundaries for the sake of developing people for the future.

Business strategy affects development in more subtle ways as well. Research suggests that "growing" a general manager takes 10 to 20 years (Kotter, 1982), and that there are no shortcuts. Confidence in most business plans erodes in at best five year projections, and obviously one cannot expect better accuracy with human resource strategy than with the business plan itself. Given the uncertainty of the future, it makes sense to insure that a variety of managerial styles and abilities are in the corporate pool. Business strategies can work against this if they result in the reduction of opportunities for people to:

- have responsibility for multiple functions and a bottom line at a relatively early age (e.g., to run small business units).
- roll-out or start up operations. Bechtel reportedly takes on small, uneconomic projects just to give high-potential managers a whole job early (Peters & Waterman, 1982).
- take responsibility for solving significant organizational problems that require reaching beyond their particular technical or functional specialty.

In our vernacular, we are suggesting that a developmentally oriented company will find ways to keep start-ups, turn-arounds, big scope assignments, and meaningful projects and staff jobs available for its high-potential people, even if short-term business objectives suggest that it is inefficient to do so. And that is the crux of the argument--having managerial talent to run the business is just as significant as making optimal business and financial choices. Whether a corporation chooses to develop its own talent, or to refine its selection procedures to choose talent as needed, is itself a crucial strategic business decision.

Given that developing executive talent through on-the-job experience must make sense in the context of a particular organization's culture and business strategy, we can only identify elements that might be present in a career management system. The conclusions we have drawn from our research and from working with corporations on executive development issues suggest that a solid system will have many of the components described below:

- a means for identifying and tracking high-potential people across the corporation and all levels of the hierarchy. Whatever system is used, it will be characterized by frequent updating and fluid membership;
- a mechanism for assessing (and facilitating self-assessment of) the accomplishments, career experiences, and demonstrated learning of people over time;
- a means of identifying the developmental jobs across the company, keeping track of them and what they might teach, and procedures for unblocking key assignments without losing solid performers in the process;
- a way to insure that placement decisions are made in light of developmental as well as business interests, and that line managers take reasonable risks for developmental purposes;
- a way of keeping the managers who make placement decisions informed of available candidates from other parts of the business, and provision for keeping track of the high-potentials as they move to new assignments, particularly when they go overseas;
- a tangible reward system for executives who identify and develop their people and who allow good people to move across boundaries in the interest of the corporation;
- a program geared to helping talented managers get the most out of the work experiences they have, possibly including such things as coaching or training interventions at crucial times, or readily available training and educational opportunities that support and help to synthesize what is learned on the job;
- a human resources staff intimately knowledgeable about the business of the corporation, the demands of the executive jobs, and the pool of managerial and executive talent needed; who are able to work effectively as resources to line management.

The presence of elegant formal systems is no indicator of effective executive development practice. Rigid career paths, forced mentoring and coaching programs, lock-step rotation plans, catalogs of training programs, and

elaborate succession planning tables are no guarantee and actually can be counterproductive. Our studies suggest that the development of executive talent is highly individualized. While no one would suggest that the processes should be random or devil-may-care, rigidity is not the answer either. Much as the successful executive is pragmatic, flexible, and action oriented, we believe a system to develop such people should have those same characteristics.

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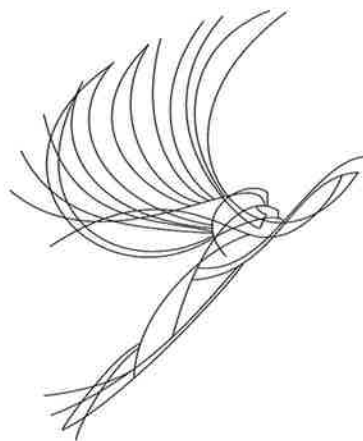
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