

Executive Functions

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The concept of leadership has become bloated and unfocused, preventing executives from allocating their time and energy as strategically as they should do. It is also too closely identified with *position* thereby discouraging non-managers from showing leadership. But if all employees can show leadership, what complementary roles do senior executives play? Splitting the executive function into discrete roles, only one of which is leadership, is not a new idea but the model offered here has some unique features and benefits.

Executive Functions

Strategic self
management

LEADING

Content leader – champion new products, services, strategies, markets, change WHAT is done.

Process leader – champion new processes, cultures, ways of working, improve HOW things are done.

MANAGING

Resource investor – allocate and monitor resources for maximum return, drive execution, motivate performance.

Catalyst – facilitate decision making, be a broker, bring right people together, resolve conflict, foster cross functional working.

Coach – actively develop staff, promote learning, be a mentor, ask questions to enhance confidence in others.

Steward - maintain consistent culture and values, figurehead, manage anxiety, foster best place to work

DOING

Architect – build or shape organizational capability, initiate judicious partnerships or acquisitions.

Promoter – represent and sell the organization to external stakeholders, negotiate deals with major customers.

Expert – act as expert in a core competence, be an internal consultant, apply technical expertise.

Features of this model of executive roles

1. The advantage of the higher order role, Strategic self management, is to underline the fact that executives should make a conscious, strategic choice regarding which role they want to emphasise at a particular time rather than operating on an exclusively reactive, hence less efficient basis.
2. Leadership is a specific, focused role rather than an overarching label, synonymous with being an executive. Leadership is something that executives *occasionally* do, as needed, not something they *are* by virtue of their personalities or positions. At present, ownership of direction is too top-heavy. Leadership, on this view, influences people to change. It has nothing to do with managing them.
3. The role of Catalyst is close to what Jim Collins has called 'Level 5 leadership' in his recent book *Good to Great*. Level 5 leaders don't offer their own strategic ideas. They draw them out of their teams by asking provocative questions – a facilitative activity. But being a facilitator does not amount to showing leadership except in the obvious sense that it is the person in charge of the group who is doing the facilitating. Calling such behaviour leadership masks the fact that leadership is really about championing new ideas – new products or new processes, something employees at all levels can and should be doing.
4. Similarly coaching is coaching, not a way of showing leadership. It is a tool that some executives use as required and, like being a catalyst or facilitator, coaching is a completely different activity from showing leadership. The contemporary trend towards assimilating all of these activities into leadership has created a concept that is too diffuse and unfocused to be of much real use. It is time to reverse this trend.
5. Management is an essential role to execute today's objectives and deliver value in line with stakeholder expectations. It is not a mechanistic, controlling function. Effective managers can be just as inspiring, empowering and transformational as any leader. They differ from leaders only in their function – delivering today's results as opposed to generating the future. This way of looking at management separates ends and means. The end of management is efficient execution. The means do not have to be mechanistic control. The 1980's reaction against management confused ends and means and threw the baby out with the bath water.
6. The roles of Catalyst, Coach and Steward are broadly managerial but are usefully broken out as separate roles to keep management from being as bloated as leadership has become. When managing change, executives are likely to wear all of these three hats simultaneously, showing some leadership if and when required. The stronger Catalysts, however, will foster change leadership in others rather than trying to be the only source of such leadership.
7. The Steward plays a culture-maintaining role. *Initiating new cultures* falls under the process leadership umbrella. The Steward also performs the function of the traditional leader by being a focal point during times of high anxiety brought about by chaotic change or uncertainty.
8. The roles of Architect, Promoter and Expert capture the executive's need and talent for *doing* things. These roles allocate a legitimate place for such doing while highlighting the fact that performing these roles should be a conscious choice that could be at the expense of adding value in other ways,

Practical Implications of this Model of Executive Roles

- Clearer focus for senior executives, enabling them to add more value.
- Greater engagement of all employees by fostering leadership throughout the organisation.
- Wider ownership of the organisation's mission and plans, less dependency on top-down leadership.
- More widespread creativity and innovation fuelled by broader engagement.
- Training for executives on how to foster and receive more upward challenges, bottom up leadership.
- Training for employees on how to lead and challenge upward constructively.
- More emphasis by executives on Catalyst and Coach roles, with appropriate training.
- More teamwork across the executive functions rather than too much emphasis on one "leader".
- Re-focused executive development initiatives – assessment for self-insight into preferred roles, how best to deploy their strengths, when to switch from one role to another and how to engage effectively in the Strategic self management role.