

Backgrounds Are the Foundation

DO YOU THINK about your background and how it has influenced who you are today and how your career has progressed? As the executives interviewed for this research told their stories, all of them described how lessons learned from parents, family members, and other significant people in their lives remain with them today. Although the starting places for their careers were different, these executives shared many similarities with regard to the importance of education and a strong work ethic. This chapter explains what I learned about the enduring impact of background and how it is the foundation of an executive career.

EARLY LESSONS MADE A DIFFERENCE

Parents and relatives played the most significant role in developing the executives' early values about education and work. In each case, high expectations were set for education and achievement. Some of the executives' parents did not have much education themselves, yet they emphasized the importance of learning. For example, in one case, the executive's mother had a seventh-grade education and his father had completed the fifth grade. In this instance, the executive talked about how he had received support

from his parents and learned from them the importance of education, the value of hard work, and the motivation to be better. Similarly, another executive's parents also had limited education, but his mother encouraged him to excel at school and gave him self-esteem. She did this by repeatedly telling him, "You can do it!" This is an example of how the early development of self-esteem and self-confidence can have an impact on an individual's career later in life.

Not every executive's parents had limited education. Some parents were educated and worked as professionals or business owners. In two cases, the entire family worked in healthcare and served as role models for attaining high levels of education and working in the healthcare field. Similarly, another executive's mother worked in healthcare. These parents inspired their children's early interest in the field.

Several executives came from families in which the parents were divorced, the father died, or there was a single-parent mother and an absent father. In a couple situations, grandmothers had a significant influence. For example, one executive talked endearingly about her grandmother, who encouraged her to go to college and to focus on a healthcare profession. She elaborated on how her grandmother taught her confidence and initiative to lead.

In addition to education, the executives learned valuable lessons about having a strong work ethic and doing their best. As one executive explained, her mother taught her to keep plugging along even during difficult times. The family was poor and lived in low-income housing. After her father died, her mother still managed to pay the bills and feed the family—an early lesson in perseverance. A key takeaway is that regardless of your family circumstances, it is possible to overcome them and learn positive values that will guide and sustain you throughout your life and career.

In one interview, a significant lesson emerged: "Being right . . . matters a lot less if you can't convince people of your position and if you can't figure out a middle ground with people that you disagree with." This executive learned an early lesson about finding

common ground that he still values today. In another case, an executive talked about how both of her parents worked hard and remained loyal to the organizations in which they worked. Because of their example and the values they instilled in her, she knew that she would always work hard to achieve her goals and that loyalty is imperative.

Another significant lesson that most of the executives in the study shared was religious faith. Many talked about how their faith had sustained and guided them on their executive path. These executives described their faith as a moral compass. For example, one CEO explained, “This is what I believe: Until He is done with me, wherever He wants me, that’s where I will be.” Another said, “My version of true north is my faith and family.” Still another executive said, “My view of this is all about a Higher Power ordering our steps and at times creating steps for us that we don’t realize.” For these leaders, faith was a source of strength and perseverance.

The lessons that these executives learned from their parents and family had a significant impact on their lives and careers. The roots of self-esteem and self-confidence began to take hold when they were young. Values such as loyalty, seeking common ground, perseverance, hard work, and doing their best developed as they pursued their careers. These values live on today as they carry out their executive roles. The high expectations that their families set led all of them to seek out graduate education.

GRADUATE EDUCATION WAS ESSENTIAL

The importance of education instilled by parents and family was evident in the fact that all the executives attained graduate degrees. All of them believed that graduate education played an essential role in their careers. It gave them a foundation of knowledge that proved valuable, especially at the beginning of their careers. Graduate education also helped them to be more competitive in the healthcare administration job market.

Among the executives studied, 6 out of 12 had earned a master of healthcare or health administration (MHA) degree. One executive earned a certificate in health services administration and a master of public administration degree. Another individual had both an MHA and a master of science in nursing. Three executives held a master of business administration (MBA) degree in addition to another graduate degree—a master’s degree in health administration, a medical degree, or a master’s degree in accountancy. One individual held a master of public health degree. Others held master of science and law degrees. While the MHA was predominant, based on the experience of these executives, other graduate degrees can be valuable for a healthcare administration career.

In most cases, the CEOs who had attained the MHA degree also participated in a postgraduate administrative fellowship or residency. These MHA programs linked top graduates to opportunities that would have been difficult to obtain on their own. The fellowships and residencies were essential stepping stones because they provided exposure to the executive level and valuable practical experiences in hospitals and health systems. After completion, the executives were offered positions with the host organizations. In these cases, fellowships and residencies accelerated advancement on the executive path. Those who did not have fellowships gained practical experience by attaining positions with the help of sponsors.

Graduate education was clearly necessary for career advancement in these cases. The combination of graduate education and early job experiences, which allowed the executives to demonstrate high performance and achievements, gave them an excellent start, although everyone did not come from the same functional background.

FUNCTIONAL BACKGROUNDS BROUGHT DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The CEOs interviewed started from different functional backgrounds. They did not all begin in healthcare administration. Five

had clinical backgrounds that included nursing, medicine, physical therapy, a physical therapy–related specialty, and medical technology. These individuals moved into leadership positions in their clinical areas and then progressed to hospital administration positions. As we will discuss in chapter 5, all of them had sponsors.

One executive worked as an attorney, and in that capacity he represented a hospital client. As a result of that relationship, he was offered a position as vice president of legal services for the hospital. This opportunity initiated his executive journey to CEO.

Another study participant began his career in industrial engineering and facilities management for a hospital. With additional graduate education, he worked his way into other operational positions. These experiences put him on the executive path, and later he was sponsored for a chief operating officer (COO) leadership development program. This program was the platform for his progression to his first hospital COO position.

As a result of their diversity of backgrounds, the executives brought different perspectives to the executive leadership role. It was not any easier for the executives with clinical and healthcare administration backgrounds to move along the executive path to CEO than it was for those who did not have such backgrounds. The key factor was sponsorship for positions that gave them experience, exposure, and opportunities to develop and to demonstrate their leadership capabilities. And, most importantly, they performed.

RESULTS WERE ACHIEVED THROUGH HIGH PERFORMANCE

The values that these executives learned from their parents and family led them to become high performers in school and during the early stages of their careers. In every case, the executives interviewed talked about the importance of making a difference. They all indicated that performance and results get noticed. As one said, “It is important to know what makes you stand out.” He went

on to say that it is important to ask, “What is going to make you significantly different than the other 100 résumés that are going to be submitted for the position you want?” Another said, “You have to perform and do the work; it’s about people thinking that you’re true to the mission and goals of the organization.”

Many of the CEOs described how they had to work harder. One explained, “I had to earn my way in. If somebody gives 70 percent to be successful, I have to give 120 percent to be successful.” He went on to say, “More is expected of me to earn where I am.” Another revealed that he was willing to take on responsibility and challenges: “It was my work ethic.”

The women interviewed made similar comments about their willingness to take on challenging assignments. They talked about how hard they had worked and how they had to do more than was expected of them. One said, “I worked a lot of nights. I got to see a whole different side of the hospital and how it operates.” She attributed her success to her willingness to work hard and do more to learn. Another executive indicated that she always worked hard to achieve financial and quality outcome targets. Another talked about how she told her boss that she had the capacity to do more. She said, “Don’t say yes to everything, and when you say yes, you must turn it in on time.” Achieving phenomenal results and knowing the business, as one executive indicated, are essential to progression on the executive path, and that proved true for all these executives.

Additional examples of achieving high results included completing assignments ahead of schedule and on budget, implementing major capital projects such as building new hospitals, and turning organizations around to improve quality and financial results. As one of the women indicated, it is also important to communicate your results and achievements: You cannot assume that everyone in the organization, particularly the people who count, know what you are doing. You have to find ways to communicate your achievements and demonstrate how you are contributing to the organization’s mission and shared goals. This needs to be done

without arrogance and with humility, she went on to say. This important point represents the collective wisdom of all the executives interviewed.

BACKGROUNDS MATTER

For these executives, their backgrounds mattered because the lessons they learned well before their careers began provided a foundation for their executive path journeys. Self-esteem and self-confidence were instilled early. Values such as a keen work ethic, perseverance, loyalty, seeking common ground, education and learning, and faith made a difference in their lives and careers. Diverse functional qualifications and early job experiences in which they demonstrated high performance and achieved significant results were a foundation on which they built successful careers.

KEY LESSONS

- Values instilled early in life make a difference throughout your career and life journey.
- Graduate education is essential.
- Early experiences in fellowships, residencies, and internships can help launch your career.
- There is more than one way to get on the executive path.
- Where you start is important, but how you start—that is, living your positive values—is even more important.
 - Jobs and assignments that give you experience, exposure, and opportunities for leadership are imperative.
 - High performance, achieving results, and communicating achievements make a significant difference in how your potential is viewed.

EXECUTIVE COMMENTARY

“I think the influence about doing your best and believing in yourself comes from not only parents but also grandparents. My father taught me the power of positive thinking.”

—Rick L. Stevens, FACHE, President,
Christian Hospital

“My mom was an environmental service cleaning lady at a hospital. I would visit her at work. She encouraged me to work there after graduating high school. I did the same job, cleaning rooms, and enjoyed connecting with the patients. Later I became a nurse technician. This is where my passion for patient care and helping others began. I wanted to see better care than my mom received. These early experiences are the foundation for my career in healthcare.”

—Eddie Cruz, MBA, FACHE, Vice President of Operations,
Access Community Health Network

Reflection and Action

As you reflect on your own background,

- What is most significant for you?
- What gifts from your past can help you in your career today?
- What values were you taught that guide your life and work today?
- What are the roots of your self-esteem and self-confidence? What do you need to do to maintain them?
- What actions will you take to use the lessons and insights from your background to guide your career journey?