

Chapter VIII

The Qualifications of an Executive

IMPORTANCE OF THE EXECUTIVE. Quite as diversified as the responsibilities and skills required of the captain of a ship are those of the executive secretary or director of the average social agency. Among the activities for which he is directly or indirectly responsible are the following: He must initiate plans for the effective development of the agency's human service. He must provide material, leadership, and secretarial service for the board and committees of the organization. He must conceive and execute an adequate public relations program. He must prepare and present a financial budget. He must control expenditures within that budget. He must devise and execute plans for the raising of funds unless the agency is a member of a community chest. If it is a chest member (as most reputable private agencies now are), he should aid the chest's financial and public relations activities. He is responsible for the equipment and arrangement of his agency's office or institutional plant. He is responsible for the employment and direction of the staff and, through the staff, for the professional care of the clients of the organization. He must participate effectively in the joint planning and action of a community council of social agencies. In sum, he must be professional leader, promoter, business manager, planner, supervisor, coordinator, and ambassador.

He can be certain that everything he has ever learned will come in handy at some time. Indeed, he will wish continually that he knew more than he does. Almost infinite are the demands made on the skill and capacities of the social agency executive. Equally great, however, are the satisfactions to be derived by the executive from the use of those skills and capacities in human service.

The executive is the keystone in the arch of the agency's service. On one side is the governing board with its committees; on the other, the employed staff. The executive is the medium through which the decisions of the board and its committees are transmitted

to the staff. Through him, conversely, the proposals of the staff are transmitted and its activities interpreted to the board.

But do not think that the executive stands alone in his administrative responsibilities. In most agencies, except the very smallest, he has one or more assistants to whom he delegates various degrees of administrative responsibility in one or more areas of agency operation. These assistants need, as far as possible, the same kinds of skill and capacity as does the executive. Generally, in fact, they are likely sometime to become executives in their own right. Although, for simplicity's sake, in this chapter and the three succeeding ones we shall speak particularly of the executive, we trust you will understand that usually we also mean the sub-executive or the supervisor. They, too, are administrators.

FULL AUTHORITY NECESSARY. To live up to his title, the executive must have complete authority for carrying out all policies. He must have undivided responsibility. No organization can succeed in the long run if it has two or three executives, each directly responsible to the board of directors. Such an organization is hardly more likely to survive than a two-headed calf or a three-legged chicken. The executive must be left free by his board to plan, to propose, and to execute as long as he holds the position.

DURATION OF AN EXECUTIVE'S SERVICE. Usually the executive has no contract with his organization for any definite period of service. Often constitutions or bylaws provide that the executive shall be employed during the pleasure of the board. Presumably that pleasure will endure so long as the board feels that the executive is doing the work better and at less cost than anyone else who could be employed, for the salary that is available or might be made available.

Granting the continued "pleasure" of the board, the executive presumably will remain in the position until some other opening develops in which his experience and ability will enable him to make a greater contribution to human welfare than in his present job. Usually, but not always, opportunity for greater usefulness carries with it a higher salary. Certainly, however, increased pay alone should not be the only reason for change.

The executive should not try to hang on to his job if he feels that his board is dissatisfied with him or if he gets into a rut in relation to the work of the organization and to the community. He may find it wise to leave after a few years, during which he has made his greatest possible contribution. From this point forward someone else with other skills and capacities may carry on the work better

than he would have done. Agencies and communities need different executive qualities at different phases in their development. Yesterday, perhaps, a rugged social pioneer was needed; now, a suave coordinator.

During the last two generations of rapid expansion of social work, executives have tended to change jobs frequently. Some personnel offices of the national agencies have refused to recommend for new positions local executives who have been less than three years in their old positions. This would seem the minimum time, ordinarily, in which an executive could get acquainted with the agency and the community and render a full measure of service; the minimum time, too, in which the executive could demonstrate his full capacity and be given a fair trial. Of course three years is much too short a term, generally, for executive service, though some terms, unhappily, should be ended much sooner because of mutual incompatibility.

Doubtless in the past the turnover would have been less if some agencies had had a more liberal policy toward executive salaries. Agencies often have taken their executives for granted and failed to reward devoted and skilled service by increases in compensation proportionate to the individual executive's increased value to his agency and to the community. Then, when the disappointed executive has been lured away to a larger agency and a bigger salary, the bereaved organization has discovered it had to pay more for a newcomer, who has had to learn the agency and the community all over again, than it would have had to pay to keep the departed veteran.

On the other hand an executive may stay a lifetime, continually refreshing his point of view and enhancing his skills by all possible means and becoming the increasingly trusted leader of agency service and of community thought and action. Through study, conference, and observation, he will add to his skills as the needs of the agency and the community change and as new techniques and philosophies are developed in social work. Increasingly a part of the community, he will not become narrowly parochial. Rather, aware of all that is pertinent in the social thought and practice of the nation and the world, he will grow steadily in usefulness. Through the executive's farsighted and long-continued services, his own agency and community may become examples from which agencies and communities far removed may learn how better to conduct their affairs. The executive thus lengthily and alertly serving may become a great servant and citizen not only of his community but of the na-

tion and of the world. There have been, and are, such. There will be more. Humanity needs them.

The conscientious executive may regard himself as a keen-cutting, non-rusting, well-tempered, self-sharpening tool for human service. He will lend himself to each specific use as long as that service is the best to which he as a human instrumentality may be put.

QUALITIES OF AN EXECUTIVE. Great responsibilities and opportunities wait upon the social work executive. To carry out and fulfill them, unusual personal qualities are required. Some of these are inherent. Many others can be acquired through persistent striving and practice. If you doubt that desirable qualities may be developed by practice, read in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* how that eventually distinguished citizen labored to acquire the virtues he wished to possess. He made himself a fit tool for the achievement he desired and attained.

(a) *Leadership*. Leadership is perhaps first among the necessary qualities of the executive. If he has everything else except leadership, he falls short of the highest requirements of his position. Yet, possessing this quality, he may lack other presumably essential qualities and still be successful. Leadership is individual, unstandardized, and close to genius. It is that quality which makes both lay and professional workers labor enthusiastically under the guidance of the leader. His spirit will be like a dancing flame. It will never fail—it is a vital force! The executive must be daring and venturesome when new areas of service are to be explored, yet safe and sane in the conservation of the agency's reputation and funds. Leadership takes many forms. It is intangible—but essential.

(b) *Intelligence*. The executive should have many other qualities which will help to make his leadership effective. Intelligence of a high order is fundamental. The tasks of the executive are too varied and too complex to be handled by a "dumbbell." You have to be smart if you are to administer!

(c) *Competence*. Professional competence also is required. The executive must know his job—both what to do and how to do it. Preferably he should have come up from the ranks in his organization or in a similar one. Thus he will understand by actual experience the problems his staff has to handle. He should know, better than any one else in the organization, at least one phase of its work, and he should know other aspects of the organization passably well. Neither board nor staff has any respect for the person who is not

professionally competent. As a recent Lenten speaker said, "Do the ordinary in an extraordinary way!"

(d) *Industry.* Industry is necessary in a successful executive. A lazy administrator produces a lazy staff. There is too much to be done in social work to make it anything short of disastrous for an agency to employ a languid executive or worker. The leader should be the hardest worker on the staff. He should set an example for all others to follow. He should never ask them to do anything in the way of exertion or expenditure of time that he himself is unwilling to do. Extra performance is one of the penalties of leadership.

(e) *Originality.* Industry, however, is not enough. It must be illumined by originality in thought and action. The executive must not be bound by conventional ways of doing things or accomplishing the work of his organization. He must be seeking continually for better methods and for improved combinations of procedures. An experimenter and pioneer, always!

(f) *Breadth and Length of Vision.* But originality can only be effective if the executive sees his job as a whole. He must know the connection of each phase of his organization's work with every other phase. He must see the relationship of his agency to other agencies and to the needs of the whole community. Looking beyond the obvious current activities of his organization, he must plan their development in terms of long-time policy and in relation to a continuous program of service to the community. He must sometimes sacrifice immediate, superficial gains for later, permanent benefits. Always, possible personal or petty organization advantage must give way to the well-being of social service generally and of the community as a whole. The executive must visualize the needs that are likely to develop and the measures which will be necessary to meet them.

(g) *Initiative.* Vision without action accomplishes little. To be a leader the executive must be a self-starter. He dare not wait for "something to turn up." He must have the "gumption" and the ingenuity to discover what needs to be done, as well as the courage to do it or to get it done. This means creative ability. The executive should always be discontented, seeking further effectiveness for his organization and for himself.

(h) *Imagination.* With initiative goes imagination. The executive must see the point of view of the client, of the board member, of the staff member, of other social agencies, and of the community.

He must make his decisions by putting himself in the other fellows' places and imagining how the proposed decision would affect them.

(i) *Realism.* Although the executive's perpetually discontented head is to be above the clouds of immediate necessity, seeing the stars of the future and the universality of human needs, at the same time he must keep his feet on the ground and walk in the reality of the present. He must possess common sense. His leadership must be practical. His vision must be clear, not fuzzy. Mental astigmatism is more dangerous than the ocular variety. Properly ground eyeglasses can rectify the visual error, but nothing can be done for the executive who consistently "sees double" in organizational or community relations.

(j) *Courage.* It is hardly necessary to say that the executive must have the courage to carry out the promptings of vision and the dictates of common sense. The ethics of the social work profession and the commands of conscience alike enjoin the executive "first to be sure that he is right and then to go ahead."

(k) *Objectivity.* To make decisions to which he can adhere, the executive must be objective in his attitudes. His heart, though warm, must be ruled by a cool head.

(l) *Knowledge.* Then, too, the executive must have vast and accurate knowledge. He must know himself, his job, his board and committee members (including their hobbies and their likes and dislikes as the means of an effective approach to their interests), his staff, the people served by his agency, the other agencies that work in the community, social conditions in his community, and the attitude of the public toward the work of his agency. If he does not know the many pertinent facts in any situation that touches his work he must at least know where he can learn about them.

(m) *Capacity for Growth.* The executive must continually grow in understanding and capacity through a study of himself, of others, and of literature in his areas of responsibility and other fields, as well as through the application of this increasing knowledge to the problems which he faces. He must keep up to date through attendance at conferences, institutes, and refresher courses and through visiting agencies like his own in other communities. You cannot be a leader unless you keep ahead of the crowd!

(n) *Loyalty.* Obviously the executive must be loyal to his organization and to his job. He should never criticize his organization publicly or express dissatisfaction with his job, unless he is ready to resign. Loyalty, too, means doing his best all the time, in every pos-

sible way, for the organization which employs him. Loyalty to the organization in word and deed are fundamental in an executive who expects the same quality from his board, his committees, and his staff.

The executive should also be loyal to other competent social agencies in the community. All are essential threads in the fabric of community service. Ill that is spoken of one will adversely affect all.

(o) *Evenness of Disposition.* The executive must keep his temper, for if he loses it he loses control over himself, and if he loses his self-control he loses control over others. An executive should at all times endeavor to control the situation in which he finds himself.

The executive will not "bawl out" an offender or throw in his face the more subtle but deep-burning acid of sarcasm. Bursts of anger create an antagonism that has to be overcome. Indeed, the leader will be slow to blame. If he really understands human nature, he will restrain his condemnation of what he considers misconduct. On the contrary, he will be interested in finding out why the offender acts as he does. Then the "boss" will try to help the culprit to control the causes of such conduct with a view to modifying them.

(p) *Other Desirable Qualities.* Here are further qualities needed in this field, as suggested by a variety of executives: analytical capacity; impartiality; courtesy; tact; modesty; humor; accuracy; promptness; ability to learn through criticism; openness to suggestion; diversity of interests; helpfulness to staff; ease and informality; adaptability; serenity; capacity for concentration; open-mindedness; frankness; honesty; sincerity; simplicity; conscientiousness; kindness; accessibility; fairness to all; avoidance of worry; no buck-passing; reservation of judgment; tolerance; reliability; resourcefulness; healthfulness; pleasingness of appearance; ability to delegate authority; capacity for quick, sound decision; capacity for group leadership; builder of staff morale; patience; persistence; skill in presenting proposals; and here is a final one:—

Intuition, a quality which can hardly be consciously cultivated. Intuition is a sense of the ripening of events for action. Probably it is a combination of an integrated philosophy of personal life with a knowledge of the flow of existence in one's own community and time, backed by the mysterious operations of the subconscious mind. Perhaps it is the Spirit of the Universe at work within you. At any rate—to those who have learned to listen—a still, small voice will sometimes whisper "Wait!" and sometimes the voice will whisper "Go ahead!" And the voice will be right!

Additional personal qualities, selected from "We Want an Executive," recently prepared by the Advisory Committee on Chest-Council Personnel of Community Chests and Councils, Inc., follow:—

A philosophy of life compatible with the duties to be performed.

Pleasure in service in the true sense of the word, in leadership rather than in vested authority.

An interest in seeking out and getting acquainted with the leaders in all fields of work in the community, in meeting and dealing with people from all walks of life, in enlisting the co-operation of fellow citizens.

Ability to work harmoniously with all types of people in all kinds of situations.

A personality that will attract the liking, respect, and confidence of all fellow citizens.

Ability to distinguish the "woods from the trees" in the mass of detail and not get lost in it.

Ability to carry on a variety of programs simultaneously.

Emotional stability.

It is hardly to be expected that any executive or prospective executive will have in superlative degree all the qualities which have been mentioned. Their number and strength will vary from person to person. Experience shows, however, that each of these qualities is worth striving for. The best executive is one who not only is strong in a few of these qualities but also endeavors persistently and earnestly to excel in each one of them.

If you would like to develop your abilities as an executive or sub-executive, you might find it worth while to make a list of those of the qualities described above which you think are important. Add any others you think desirable. Then check the list over every month or so to see what progress you are making. Just thinking about the qualities you desire will help in development.

TRAINING. Personal qualities must be backed up by training and experience.

As far as possible, the executive should possess education and experience, both wide and deep. He should be specially trained by competent schooling and experience in his general field of work. He should have had specific experience which, as already noted, will make him a specialist in at least one phase of that work. Social work now is a ranking profession and this will be increasingly so in the future. As a profession it will provide ample opportunity for executive placement and advancement for people with training and experience. Accredited professional schools of social work are produc-

ing technically trained people in sufficient numbers, and qualified social agencies are providing administrative experience to a sufficient number of executives and sub-executives, to make it unnecessary for a board of directors to employ an executive who is not reasonably well qualified. Too much time would have to be taken by him in learning the agency's work and acquiring the skill which should be at the mental fingertips of a capable executive, to justify the employment of a person untrained and inexperienced in the agency's field of work.

On the other hand, technical skill as a practitioner of social work alone is not sufficient for the executive. Case workers and group workers too often are plunged into executive work without knowing the essentials of managing a social agency. There is no more reason for a boys' club leader, as such, to make a good executive for a settlement, than there is for a doctor to make a good hospital superintendent or for a professor, considered merely as a teacher, to make a good university president. The person chosen for an executive position should at least have had managerial or supervisory experience as assistant to an executive in a well-managed social agency. In addition he should have had, if possible, specific administrative training in a recognized professional school of social work. The task of the executive as a leader of boards, committees, and staff, and as administrative officer of an organization, is entirely different from that of a social technician who deals with individuals or with groups—the clients, patients, or constituents of the social agency. Management requires as much training and experience as any other phase of social work.

BROAD BACKGROUND. More than that, the executive should have education and experience in many fields. He should be a person of broad culture and diversified interests. He should know the principles and practices of other kinds of social work in addition to those of his own agency. He ought to keep abreast of the trends and developments in sociology, individual and social psychology, economics, and political science. He should be familiar with world events and the currents of world opinion. He must be a "man among men" or a "woman among women," able to meet the most cultured and refined people (as well as the most ignorant and least cultured) on their own ground. All that he may learn in school, college, university, and graduate courses, in special training, and in continuous later study will be repaid to him through satisfaction in life and through usefulness on his job.

QUESTIONS

1. List the activities for which the executive is responsible in some typical social agency.
2. What authority does he have for the execution of policies?
3. What is his attitude toward the duration of his service?
4. Does he regard his work as professional?
5. What qualities has he acquired by practice, and how?
6. What other qualities has he?
7. What qualities for successful executive work does he lack?
8. What education has he?
9. What more should he have?
10. What is his professional training and experience?
11. What more should he have?
12. What is his specific experience for this job?
13. How could all the above be improved?