

# Executive Behavior: An Examination of Selected Studies for Three Decades of Administrative Work Across Organizational Settings, Industries, and Contexts

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*This study examined administrative work in business, schools, and universities, by using tabular review to compare the findings of selected studies on patterns of behavior. Results of analysis show in spite of differences in organizations and goals, there is considerable similarity in the daily work realities of these executives studied. However, when differences did emerge, they were largely due to the executive's proximity to the operational core. Executives who were closer to the operational core, were less likely to have flexibility and control over their work, than executives who had layers embedded in their organization to shield them from the intensity of the operational core.*

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Administrative work<sup>1</sup> has been a key area of research for decades; since the 1950s

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<sup>1</sup>The authors acknowledge that the terms administrator and manager do not convey the same meaning to multiple fields that study these positions. In the context of this paper, the term administrator denotes a decision-maker. For example, in the field of management, a manager makes decisions, an administrator carries out others' decisions.

researchers have been attempting to understand and describe the work performed by administrators (Burns, 1954; Carlson, 1951; Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001; Dubin & Spray, 1964; Horne & Lupton, 1965; Stewart, 1967; Zaccarro & Klimoski, 2001). This line of inquiry was initiated in the business sector and later explored in other organizational settings. However, one limitation of the literature on administrative work is that data were often gathered exclusively in one organizational setting, industry, or context. Little effort has been expended to explore the landscape of administrative work across these domains, with the notable exception of Mintzberg's (1973) landmark study that included a school superintendent in addition to chief executive officers in business. In the context of this paper, executive behavior is the ways in which executives behave or act, their conduct and decorum. As such, the sum of administrative work performed by executives is referred to as executive behavior.

Early studies of executive behavior offered descriptions of the work performed, so that incumbents and future incumbents would have a knowledge base to use in their daily activities (Carlson, 1951; Fayol, 1949; Mintzberg, 1973). Executive behavior has become increasingly complex, particularly since the 1950s (Charan,

Drotter, & Noel, 2001; Luthans, Hodgetts, & Rosenkrantz, 1988; Zaccarro & Klimoski, 2001). Clearly, it is time to establish relationships between leadership practice with the business sector and within the broader field of educational administration. The objective of this paper was to examine the executive behavior of educational administrators in schools and universities and to compare it with that of business executives. Specifically, this paper compared findings as it relates to patterns of behavior for the following selected studies: Mintzberg (1973); Peterson (1978); Helgesen (1990); and Jackson (2000).

### **Educational Administration and Executive Behavior**

Selected research that focused on the behavior of administrators in educational administration (i.e., academic deans and principals) appropriately defines the context for this paper. The goal was to situate educational administrators in the larger study of executive behavior. First, relevant literature for each position is discussed independently. Second, the results of both reviews are synthesized and compared.

#### **Academic Deans**

The academic deanship is a unique position within the university, it has been called the "first among equals" and the "lynch pin" for university administration (Bright & Richards, 2001; Martin, Samuels, Associates, 1997; Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, & Nies, 2001). Equally as unique are the people who fill the position and the administrative behavior required of them. The work demands on deans are bifurcated in nature: (1) they carry out the mission of the administration; and (2) champion the beliefs and values of their faculty (Dibden, 1968; Dill, 1980; Martin & Samels, 1997). The work of deans is extremely complex; for example, one study suggested that deans should be participant observers while performing their daily activities (Bernier, 1987). "The role of a dean requires ethnographic skills in monitoring organizational realities such as changing symbolic systems, managing cultural conflicts, and dealing with conflicting expectations

generated by organizational and professional affiliation" (Bernier, 1987, p. 17).

In order to manage their work, deans have been advised to use participatory observational tactics examining the demands of their everyday work situation as opportunities for critical reflection while providing leadership (Ehrlich, 1997). The ability to survey the landscape of both their school and university helps deans to provide broad based management. Furthermore, reflecting on the challenges of the workday is important to self-appraisal and improvement of one's work (Bowen, 1995; Newsome, 1997).

Deans are encouraged to be collaborative leaders who cultivate input and harmony within the college, university, and professional organizations (Gieger, 1989). Similarly, McCarthy and Reyes (1987) believe that academic deans' ability to guide a college effectively seems to be enhanced with the use of a collegial model. The collegial model emphasizes shared power, consensus, common commitments and aspirations, by promoting leadership through consultation and collective responsibilities (Birnbaum, 1988). Although not a comprehensive review, this initial review provides insights into the challenges of administrative behavior for academic deans.

#### **School Principals**

Principals are the primary administrator for most schools. They are key to managing resources, developing and evaluating staff, coordinating curricular programs, leading and managing change and improvement, interacting with parents and community, and shaping the school culture (Deal & Peterson, 1994). The role of principals has remained central to establishing and maintaining effective schooling (Manasse, 1985). An important finding emerging from recent research and study of the role of principals is that the basic daily realities of principals' work appear to have not significantly changed in spite of new approaches to teaching, learning, and governance (Peterson, 1998). This appears to be the case in whatever school they lead: urban, suburban, small-town, or rural. These daily realities have not changed significantly even as principals incorporated new approaches, new structures, and new challenges. Good principals must find ways to lead in the constant welter of activities, problems, and

interactions that fill their days (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Like academic deans, the work of principals is challenging and complex. Many principals employ participatory management approaches, supporting and nurturing teacher leaders. Additionally, they seek to build school cultures into "professional communities" where there is a shared mission, vision and values, ongoing collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and experimentation, continuous improvement, a results orientation and collective responsibility for student learning (DuFour, 1998; Lambert, 1998). Principals work both internally (in the school and the district), and externally with parents and the community. Like deans, principals face a flurry of problems on a daily basis and cannot defer or ignore them.

### **Conceptual Framework and Methodology**

This paper examined administrative work from two major sociological perspectives. First, we applied one aspect of role theory to the cross sector analysis of the selected studies on administrative work. Second, we examined variation in the work of administrators from an organizational perspective. This paper re-examined data collected in four studies on the nature of the work performed by corporate chief executive officers, university academic deans, and school principals. The focus of this paper was the commonalities and differences in the patterns of behavior enacted by business and educational administrators. This paper used concepts of role theory and tabular review to analyze the patterns of behavior exhibited by educational administrators (Jackson, 2000; Peterson, 1978) and their business executive counterparts (Helgesen, 1990; Mintzberg, 1973).

Role theory is an approach concerned with the study of behaviors that are characteristics of persons within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviors (Biddle & Thomas, 1966; Biddle, 1979). More specifically, roles in the context of this paper are based on two propositions: (1) some behaviors are patterned and are characteristic of persons within contexts (i.e., roles); and (2) roles are often associated with sets of persons who share a

common identity (i.e., social position) (Biddle, 1979; Merton, 1957; Sarbin, 1954; Turner & Colomy, 1988; Turner, 1962). There are many aspects of role theory; in this paper we are comparing behaviors of three different organizational roles (i.e., chief executive officers, academic deans, and school principals).

Researchers can review the results of multiple studies with a number of methods. Two main types of reviews can proceed with the information commonly reported in research studies: (1) tabular review; and (2) meta-analytic review (Dooley, 2001).

Since the data for this paper was qualitative in nature, the meta-analytic review was not deemed appropriate. Therefore, the second form of analysis employed in this paper is that of tabular review (Dooley, 2001). Tabular review is appropriate as a holistic method for analyzing and summarizing the results from numerous studies. "Each line of such a table describes one study with data about its findings and selected aspects of design, such as type and number of subjects" (Dooley, 2001, p. 275). In this analysis, tabular review was applied to the comparison of six common patterns of behavior observed for four similar studies of executive behavior selected from three sectors (i.e., business, schools, and universities).

### **Data**

A brief summary of each study used to perform the tabular review is provided in this section. Studies of executives by Mintzberg (1973) and Helgesen (1990) formed the foundation for comparison with educational administrators. In his classic study, Mintzberg (1973) conducted a structured observational study of five male executives (four chief executive officers and one school superintendent). He employed structured and "anecdotal" (unstructured) data. The structured data consisted of: chronology, mail, and contact records. The chronology record was designed to provide basic data on the design of the workday, and to provide a reference to the other two records. The mail record detailed the nature of the mail received and generated by the executives. The contact record provides detail on meetings, telephone calls, and tours. The anecdotal data were field notes data that helped

to facilitate coding, development of theory, and provided examples to support the choices of categories.

As a result of his analysis, Mintzberg identified eight common patterns of behavior exhibited by these executives. These common patterns included: (1) they worked at an unrelenting pace, with no breaks in activity during the day; (2) their days were characterized by interruption, discontinuity, and fragmentation; (3) they spared little time for activities not directly related to their work; (4) they exhibited a preference for live action encounters; (5) they maintained a complex network of relationships with people outside their organizations; (6) because they were immersed in the day-to-day need to keep the organization going, they lack time for reflection; (7) they identified themselves with their jobs; and (8) they had difficulty sharing information. Not enough data were available for comparisons of patterns seven and eight; therefore, the first six will be used for this paper.

Almost two decades later, Helgesen (1990) replicated Mintzberg's study by examining four female chief executive officers in business, attempting to find differences by gender. Several differences in these studies must be noted. Helgesen did not attempt to delineate executive roles, as did Mintzberg. While Mintzberg presented his findings in the forms of records: chronology, mail, and contacts; Helgesen opted to present each executive as a narrative, written descriptively. However, Helgesen did generate patterns of behavior in response to Mintzberg's set.

A third study by Jackson (2000) used similar methodology focused on academic deans. This study gathered data to develop: (1) an understanding of the daily administrative activities of the college of education deans at large research institutions; and (2) a model of executive behavior based on the roles of the dean during the workday. Two male and two female deans were the focus of this study. Mintzberg's methodological approach was employed to collect data with some modifications. The only record employed in this study was the chronology record. The researcher believed that collecting data with the two other records would impede the workday of the academic deans and ultimately the study.

A final study examined the work of school principals using a similar analysis for patterns of activities and time-use (Peterson, 1978). Data were collected through direct observation of two principals' work lives and analyzed descriptively. This study provided a rich description of the work of principals and the roles they performed. The findings of this study were supported in follow-up studies of several dozen school principals (Manasse, 1985). While few contemporary studies have been conducted, these early studies still provide a picture of the behaviors of principals' work and are consistent with many contemporary descriptions.

### **Similarities and Differences in Patterns of Behavior**

The following section identifies patterns of behavior of educational administrators compared to business administrators. The comparison provides additional insight into which patterns of behavior are generic to administration, regardless of sector of employment, and which ones are unique and specific to education and business. Thus, providing a better understanding relative to what extent is leadership embedded in context. Six patterns of behavior in these four organizational positions are compared across these four studies; a brief description and explanation is provided (see Table 1).

#### **Pace**

The pace of managerial work is quite intense. The depiction of the work performed by male executives suggests that this set of executives worked continuously throughout the day without any breaks (Mintzberg, 1973). Helgesen (1990) observed that her female executives performed a large volume of work as well, but metered their pace by scheduling breaks during the workday. While university executives were able to slow their work pace, it was done using unscheduled breaks mostly for providing nourishment and relief for their bodies (Jackson, 2000). Likewise, the school executives observed took few breaks during the workday in order to manage their pace (Peterson, 1978). While the work for all of the executives were performed at an unrelenting pace, the female business executives and university executives attempted to exercise some control over their

pace by infusing breaks within the workday. The female business executives actually scheduled these breaks as a part of their work, and school

and university executives took small breaks when time was available.

Table 1. A Comparison of Patterns of Executive Behavior Across Organizational Settings, Industries, and Contexts

	Mintzberg (1973) 5 Male CEOs	Peterson (1978) 2 Male Principals	Helgesen (1990) 4 Female CEOs	Jackson (2000) 4 College of Education Deans 2 Males and 2 Female
Pace	The executives worked at an unrelenting pace, with no breaks in activity during the day.	The principals worked at an unrelenting pace, with few breaks in activity during the day.	The executives worked at a steady pace, but with small breaks scheduled in throughout the day.	The deans worked at a brisk pace, but took small unscheduled breaks throughout the day.
Fragmentation	Their days were characterized by interruption, discontinuity, and fragmentation.	The principals' days were filled with constant interruption and fragmentation.	They did not view unscheduled tasks and encounters as interruptions.	The deans viewed the unscheduled tasks and encounters as part of their job.
Personal Tasks	They spared little time for activities not directly related to their work.	The principals had little time for personal tasks.	They made time for activities not directly related to their work.	The deans made modest efforts to incorporate non-business related activities into their workday.
Preference of Interactions	They exhibited a preference for live action encounters.	The principals had a clear preference for live action.	They preferred live action encounters, but scheduled time to attend to mail.	The deans preferred live action encounters, scheduled time to attend to mail, and increasingly used electronic mail.
Networking	They maintained a complex network of relationships with people outside their organization.	The principals' maintained complex relationships throughout their district.	They maintained a complex network of relationships with people outside their organization.	They maintained a complex network of relationships with people outside their organization.
Reflection	Immersed in the day-to-day need to keep the company going, they lacked time for reflection.	The principals spent little time on reflection.	They focused on the ecology of leadership.	Immersed in the daily activities of the deanship, they lacked time for reflection.

### Fragmentation

The discussion of fragmentation looked at two elements: (1) actual fragmentation of the workday; and (2) whether the executives perceived it as part of their job.

Fragmentation comes from every direction for executives: staff needs, questions, unexpected (or expected) conflicts, demands, and impromptu problems. Leading and managing organizations must go on while being interrupted, jumping to solve other problems, and attending to unexpected duties. These

interruptions do not go away; they are part of the fabric of these roles. Fragmentation of the workday is a confirmed pattern of behavior across all studies of executives used for this paper, all were regularly interrupted. Differences occurred when considering whether the executives view fragmentation as part of the job. The male executives felt that the constant interruptions and fragmentation of activities were impediments embedded in the job that negatively affected their work (Mintzberg, 1973). School executives seemed to share the

same sentiments as the male executives (Peterson, 1978). The group of female business executives concurred that the work is fragmented and discontinuous, but they did not view the unscheduled encounters and tasks as interruptions (Helgesen, 1990). In contrast, university executives viewed the interruption, discontinuity, and fragmentation as part of their jobs (Jackson, 2000).

### **Personal Tasks**

As with other professionals, these executives spared little time addressing personal tasks while working. The male and school executives concentrated on work related activities during the workday, sparingly receiving or placing phone calls personal in nature (Mintzberg, 1973; Peterson, 1978). In contrast, female business and university executives consciously made efforts to incorporate non-business related activities during the day (Helgesen, 1990; Jackson, 2000). There are two possible reasons for this contrast. First, the latter executives spent a significant portion of their time in the evenings and weekends performing business related activities. Therefore, for these executives the line between personal and professional life was blurred. So just as they needed to perform professional activities at home, they also needed to perform personal activities in the office in order to manage and balance their lives. Second, contemporary executives are constantly being advised to be conscious of stress and health issues related to their job. This suggestion may have developed into programs that include breaks during the workday and infused time that does not relate to work to help minimize the possibility of being negatively affected by stress and health issues.

### **Preference of Interactions**

The findings on preference of interactions had two elements: (1) preference for interactions; and (2) individual assumptions about work. There was a pattern across executives suggesting that live action encounters were preferred. Included in the discussion on preference of interaction was the handling of mail. Mintzberg (1973) observed from his male business executives that they viewed mail management as meticulous, time-consuming,

and a nuisance. Counter to this assumption about work, Helgesen (1990) found her female business executives simply scheduled time to manage mail. Jackson's (2000) university executives also schedule time to attend to mail, but with the advancements of technology, they increasingly used electronic mail as a form of interaction. Peterson's (1978) observations of school executives did not directly collect data regarding preference of interactions, though their pattern of work suggested a similar preference.

### **Networking**

All executives worked in complex systems of management that required them to foster and develop relationships with various constituents. The one area of non-consensus was whether the network was external or internal. Most of the executives maintained a complex network of relationships with people outside of their organization, with the exception of the school executives who primarily formed and maintained relationship inside the school and district.

### **Reflection**

These executives for the most part spent the majority of their time at work and at home immersed in the daily activities of running their company, school district, college, or school building. Therefore, none of them had time to adequately reflect on the work they had performed. For the most part, they kept activities going, without time to determine if what they did or how they did it was effective or efficient. Helgesen (1990) found her female business executives did not have this problem; they focused on the ecology of leadership. The ecology of leadership: "...encompasses a vision of society - they relate decisions to their larger effect upon the role of the family, the American educational system, the environment, even world peace" (Helgesen, 1990, p. 25).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The findings from this tabular review of these four studies suggest similarities of time use across organizations notwithstanding the for-profit and not-for-profit elements. In spite of differences in organizations and goals, there is

considerable similarity in the daily work realities of these executives. The pace, interruption, and preference for live action are similar across these studies. However, they differed in their approach to personal tasks. While we cannot determine exactly why these varied executives were so similar (and occasionally different), let us suggest some insights about these comparisons.

First, executives across the organizations all faced fast paced days. In part, this may be due to the fact that they are not only responsible for their own work, but also the complex work of many subordinates, a large number of whom are either professionals or other managers. While some executives were able to slow their pace with interventions, it is hypothesized that this flexibility is due to the executive's proximity to the operational core of the organization. Executives further from the operational core had more flexibility to slow down the pace of their daily activities. The operational core for organizations encompass those members who perform the basic work related directly to the services offered (Mintzberg, 1983; Thompson, 1967). The operational core is the heart of every organization; it is the part that produces the essential outputs that keep it running. It is the direct link to instructional leadership (teacher and classroom teaching). Executives closer to the operational core were less likely to slow their pace. Second, all had highly fragmented work schedules. Dealing with unscheduled events and problems may have occurred because difficulties migrate upward unexpectedly. These unanticipated challenges must be addressed immediately; this transforms planned days into a quilt of fragmented activities.

The difference in personal tasks may be due to the historical context (dates of studies). The studies performed in the 1990s and beyond seemed to emphasize and be more sensitive to personal time and needs. Additionally, the use of time or lack of it for personal tasks may be influenced by the executive's proximity to the operational core as well. Executives closer to the operational core seemed to dedicate their entire time at work making sure that the organization is functioning properly. Overall work demands are more active than passive and may attract those who have a preference for action. Individuals who like to be active will be more inclined to aspire to executive positions. This also may be

the same as it relates to reflection. When one shares a passion for live interaction, taking individual time to reflect on his or her actions may be quite difficult.

Finally, these executives were responsible for the effective functioning of numerous systems and subsystems (e.g., budget, personnel, and planning). These no doubt required extensive connections and networks with other units and individuals. Without this networking, overall system functioning would be compromised. The following are implications for this paper.

### **Operational Core**

An implication from this analysis is the need to develop an understanding of the executive's relative proximity to the operational core. Specifically, pace and fragmentation are intensified as the executive is located closer to the operational core. Executives who are in close proximity to the day-to-day operations of the organization may have less flexibility to exercise control over their time use. Therefore, executives who are in close proximity of the operational core should be aware that they may have to address lower levels of flexibility in their jobs. In turn, this may provide realistic expectations for executives who do not have layers embedded in their organization to shield them from the intensity of the operational core. Additionally, knowledge of the impact of the operational core on work permits executives to develop strategies to minimize their pace and fragmentation, just as the female executive did in Helgesen's (1990) study.

### **Affinity for Live Action**

The potential of highly active individuals being attracted to executive positions has implications for selection and training. How candidates are selected and trained in administrative and management graduate programs should perhaps be reconsidered. Programs must infuse methods to help students be adaptive, versatile, and flexible. Additionally, programs should help individuals with a demonstrated preference for live interaction to learn how to reflect in practice. When considering candidates for program admission and for employment, attention should be placed on identifying high energy incumbents. For

example, since the training of academic deans is experiential in nature, attention should be placed on the selection process. Providing an accurate picture of the nature of the work, and the need for a person with high energy will help to lower the "reality shock" for deans as well.

### Not Much has Changed

After reviewing 30 years of administrative work across organizational setting, industries, and contexts, we find little changed in the work behavior of executives. The same complex work demands plague present day executives as they did earlier executives who had to blaze the way without the many volumes of research presently available. The research available today allows executives to work smarter, but it does not provide methods to escape the "work realities." These findings have important implications regarding the similarities and differences of executives work across organizational setting, industries, and contexts. The implications were predicated on creating knowledge about crosscutting issues of administrative behavior and context specific findings. To the extent that this comparison can help administrators develop an operational framework for enhancing their work, this paper will have served its purpose as a heuristic tool. But, this cross organization comparison also suggests a continuing need to use data from multiple disciplines to enhance our understanding of executive behavior.

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