



RESEARCH STUDY

Journey to the Top

Developing African American Executives

WHAT WE THINK

There is no doubt that there is still much to be done in regards to increasing diversity within the workplace in general and especially within senior executive ranks.

The dearth of African Americans in the uppermost corporate leadership roles is especially stark.

There is no doubt that U.S. corporations have become more diverse over the last 50 years. U.S. employment data suggests that access to employment within organizations for nonwhites has improved significantly during this time frame. It has also been suggested that this increased diversity has a significant and net-positive impact on the organizational bottom line.

The reasons given for this impact range from more efficient problem solving developed through the input from multiple perspectives to an improved capacity to recognize and address the specific concerns of a wider variety of customer communities.

Anecdotal and objective evidence indicates that ethnic minorities and women continue to be underrepresented in the ranks of senior executives. According to a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational employment study (2012), women, African Americans, and Hispanics were all underrepresented in management roles compared to

their population representation. The discrepancy between the percentage of employed minorities in the labor pool compared to the percentage of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians occupying the executive roles within corporations suggests that there is still a glass ceiling for nonwhite executives.

According to a U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission survey in 2011, African American executives made up only 2.8 percent of CEOs. This number is lowest among the four major ethnic groups (Asian, African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian) in the United States. The discrepancy becomes even bleaker when you consider that African Americans occupy approximately 10 percent of management, business, and financial occupations. In contrast, white executives made up 93 percent of the CEOs, which was over 20 percent greater than their percentage in the labor force.

These numbers clearly indicate that African Americans are struggling to gain a foothold on the highest

rungs of the corporate ladder, hitting their glass ceiling around the mid-management level.

The purpose of this white paper is to create a deeper understanding of the nuances inherent in the developmental journey of African Americans as they strive to attain positions in the C-suite as well as other senior executive roles.

In a series of in-depth qualitative interviews, RHR International asked a select group of African American executives (in vice president or higher roles within primarily Fortune 200 corporations or nonprofit organizations) how they developed the business knowledge, leadership skills, and organizational behaviors needed to advance and succeed as senior leaders within their organizations.

Their answers provide groundbreaking insights on many levels: (1) how they viewed themselves at the time, (2) their struggle to advance, (3) the organizational hurdles they overcame, (4) the internal and external support they required to develop, and (5) the

impact of the organization's cultural climate on their ability to succeed. These five factors play critical roles in determining career success or derailment for minority executives. They also have significant implications for an organization's ability to hire and retain high-performing executives of color.

We will discuss the value and impact of improving the development of minority high potentials for roles as C-suite executives, human resource professionals, and board directors.

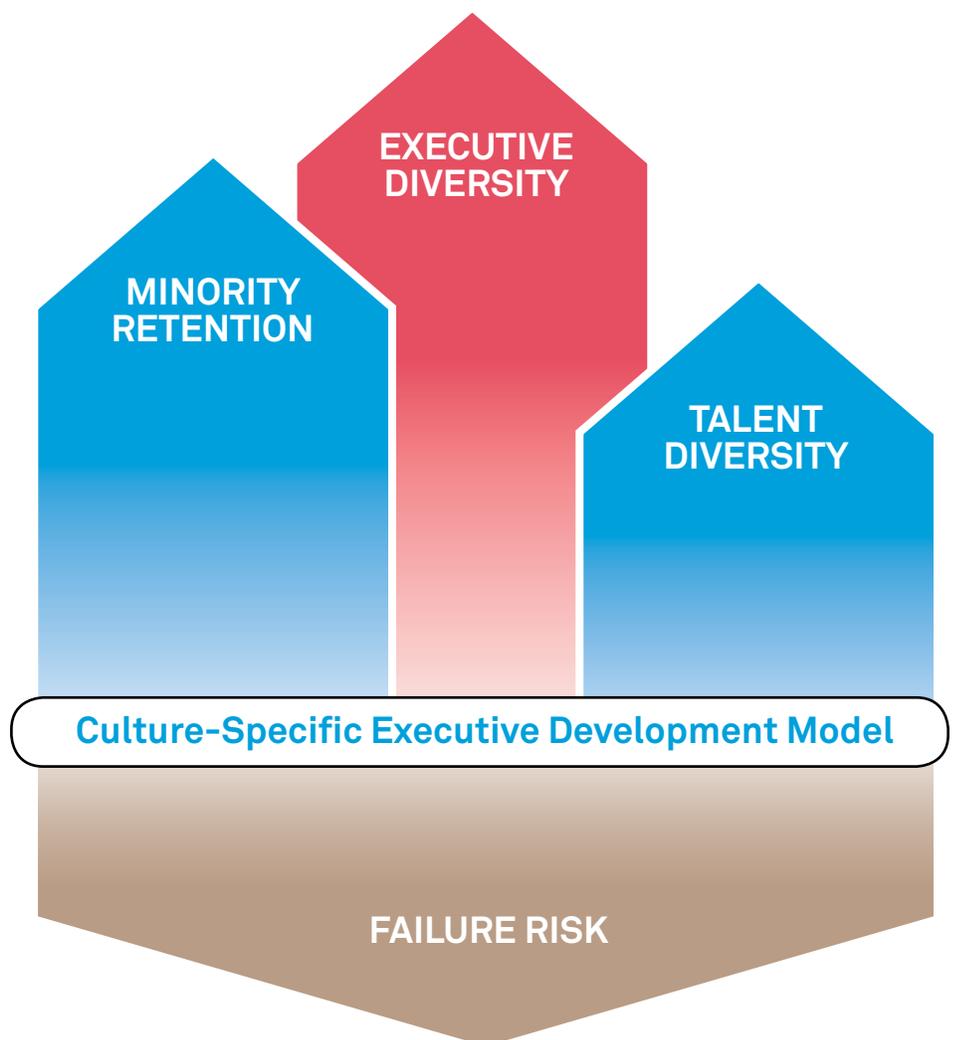
Based on our analysis of external data and our executive interviews, executive development processes and procedures, as practiced today by most organizations, fail to improve the chances of African American executives to move up the corporate ladder. We will discuss these implications from the perspective of the individual executive, the organization, and the professionals providing coaching and development services to these executives. To generate maximum impact, interventions should be targeted with the specific cultural needs of the African American executive in mind. In order to accomplish this, the professional may need to adopt a new mindset regarding the executive development process. This may involve gaining new skills to develop the appropriate tactics to be employed with the individual and the organization.

To facilitate this process, we are introducing a Culture-Specific Executive Development Model. Organizational

advantages gained from the adoption of this model include the following:

- A deeper and more diverse talent bench
- A larger and more diverse cadre of executives capable of increasing their organizational contribution and impact
- Higher retention rates for talented minorities
- Lowered risk of in-role failure for executives of color when moving to roles with greater scope

With these improvements, organizations can decrease SG&A costs by eliminating expensive searches for replacements and losses in productivity caused by departing talent. In addition, by having a clearer picture of the organization's talent base, strategic initiatives can be implemented to address current and future talent needs especially related to executive selection and development.



PART I **Organizational Culture:** **A Matter of Perspective**

One institutional factor that may be impacting the career progress of minorities is the structure and expression of the organizational culture.

Failure to know and understand the underlying cultural ethos of an organization is a major derailer for any executive. Like DNA, this philosophy makes up the corporate fiber and impacts everything from the strategic direction to assigned parking. More to the point, it shapes the organization's thought process on desired leadership characteristics, promotion procedures, people orientation, and succession practices.

Knowing and understanding the cultural ethos and effectively leveraging this information impacts any individual's ability to succeed and move up within the organization—perhaps even more than individual talent and performance.

While all employees need to learn the organizational culture and how to navigate it, this is particularly important for the minority executive. However, essential as this is, it is only the first step in the African American executive's journey to success.

Minorities know and intimately understand their own particular ethnic culture, but may have limited

knowledge of the majority ethos that almost certainly is at the heart of their organization's culture. This is true even when they are raised in multiracial environments. To truly succeed in the workplace, these minority employees must acquire a bicultural identity that enables them to differentiate the essential differences between their "home" and "work" personas. Once this is done, they can seamlessly navigate the "work" culture based upon its values and rules, which are the foundation for understanding when and how each value system should be applied.

Decision making and behaviors that are natural "at home" may be incongruent (and possibly evaluated as wrong) when seen through the lens of the work culture.

Perception Bias

To members of the majority culture, perception bias, discrimination, and prejudice are relics of another age. Unfortunately, while invisible to the majority eye, they are still pervasive and highly detrimental to the careers of minority executives.

Eagly and Chin (2010) noted a variety of research studies in which women and minorities are depicted as possessing characteristics unsuited to leadership.

This phenomenon contributes to lower levels of representation of women and minority executives in leadership roles. Any woman or executive of color must understand the perception biases that may exist in the organizational culture and how to effectively combat them in order to grow his/her career. [See Part III, "Overcoming Basic Obstacles"].

For example, people perceive women as not particularly agentic (adept at imposing their will on others), but as communal (possessing traits such as kindness, warmth, and gentleness), which seem especially tailored for subordinate and service roles (Kite, Deaux, and Haines, 2008; Newport, 2001).

In addition, a variety of racial stereotypes are disadvantageous for leadership. African Americans are stereotyped as antagonistic and lacking competence. Hispanics are uneducated and unambitious. Asians are quiet and unassertive (Madon et al., 2001). These stereotypical views don't necessarily have to be negative. However, their impact is to diminish perceptions of leadership capacity or perfunctorily disqualify individuals from consideration for leadership roles. With these perceived and often covert views of minority leadership potential, the net effect is less access to, and placement in, leadership roles.

Additional Cultural Hazards

Other factors may also impede the ability of ethnic minority individuals to move up the corporate ladder. In a meta-analysis (contrasting and combining results from different studies), Brooks and Clunis (2007) cited the Palmer and Johnson-Bailey (2005) study which indicated that African Americans' careers were hampered by structural factors in their workplaces such as the existence of a "good-old-boy" network and the lack of diversity, mentoring, and adequate succession planning, as well as personal and cultural factors such as prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. A study by Kanter (1977) also noted that

majority group members tend to have heightened expectations of, and more intensely scrutinize, the work-related behavior of the minority group.

Coping with the Culture

These structural factors can also impede the progress of women and other minority groups up the corporate ladder. For example, research conducted by the Center for Hispanic Leadership indicates that Hispanic professionals only realize 40 percent of their talent potential in the workplace because they don't confidently believe they can be themselves.

This is similar to RHR International's findings on the experiences of female leaders. This study, "Why Women Leaders Can and Should be Authentic," showed that for women, authenticity is the catalyst that enables them to express their positive leadership attributes and bring them to bear more quickly and effectively in the organization.

Based on these studies, it would appear that authenticity is a luxury that minorities often feel they cannot afford. To a certain extent, almost every executive (regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation) filters his/her speech and behavior when engaged in business activities. While this is an adaptation to fit in to the normative culture of the organization, for minority employees and executives it is also a choice which, if employed too stridently, can diminish their authenticity in the workplace.

For minority executives who work in a business environment that does not naturally align with their personal identities or cultural values, the

THE MYTH OF THE "ANGRY BLACK EXECUTIVE"

Ironically, when the mask slips, usually due to extreme stress or fatigue, the African American executive may become more authentic (truer to their unfiltered persona), leading to behaviors that seem out of place or unusual to their majority-culture colleagues. Typically, African American culture is considered to be more demonstrative than white culture. As the energy usually held in reserve for the mask wanes, African American executives may become louder, more passionate, and use increased body movements and hand gestures to make their point. This can freak out colleagues who do not normally associate these types of behaviors with this individual. As a result, they may describe their animated and passionate colleague to a supervisor or HR professional as an "Angry Black Man" or "Angry Black Woman" and request help in managing the "problem."

These African American executives are decidedly not angry. It is more likely they are totally absorbed in the moment and the situation, to the detriment of their usual workday persona, but to the benefit of their personal authenticity and the organization.

process of fitting in requires a daily, conscious effort to sustain a mask or business persona. The mask works to keep in reserve behaviors that these executives and their majority culture peers believe to be detrimental to their career progression. To the degree that this process is inauthentic, it can take a toll on these executives because of the tremendous energy demands needed to conform to a stereotypic or normative view of a corporate executive that is incongruent with their "true selves." This energy drain goes above and beyond the adaptations that their majority culture peers make to perform within the same cultural environment.

Unfortunately, candid discussions centered around developing minority executives and its organizational implications are greatly needed, yet rarely occur. As a society, when it comes to executive development, we are more comfortable talking about thought diversity than specifics like race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or geographic origin.

Success Within the Culture

Reaching the Top

In our current study of African-American executives, the responses of the participants (who reached success without a Culture-Specific Development Model) indicate that there are two challenges that African-American executives must overcome to maximize the value they bring to their organizations.

The first challenge was in the area of relationship building/networking, which 60 percent of respondents believed was vital to their success.

The second challenge related to a capacity for strategic thinking. Forty percent of respondents indicated that this ability was also critical for an executive wanting to move up in the corporate ranks.

While these findings are similar to what might be expected with any sample of corporate leaders, these two success factors were considered closely related by the study participants

because of their perceptions of them as impediments to career success.

Successful African American executives indicated that relationship building was more complex for them and required special effort to connect with their majority culture peers. This was particularly evident when discussing activities outside of work hours such as business dinners with colleagues, attending corporate events, and the like. Many African American executives eschew these events, preferring to spend these off hours at home with their families or other close connections where they can take off their mask and recharge for the next day.

Being a strong analytic thinker with the capacity to deliver strategic value to the organization was also deemed to be important, but difficult to demonstrate to superiors without proper attention to relationship building. These executives believed that many personnel decisions

were based on affiliation and rapport with others in the organization in addition to competence and job skill. Without connections to the right people, leading or even participating in showcase projects vital for upward mobility would not materialize.

WHAT AFRICAN AMERICAN EXECUTIVES NEED TO REACH THE TOP



Business acumen and political savvy were skills endorsed by slightly fewer respondents in the survey, but were still thought to be necessary to reach the top of an organization.

Many respondents believed that lacking an in-depth comprehension of how their company made money (top-line revenue) and difficulty interpreting financials also hurt the prospects of many of their African American peers when it came to moving up in the organization.

Political savvy has been characterized as the ability to maneuver within the organizational structure to get things done. This skill is also critical for one's

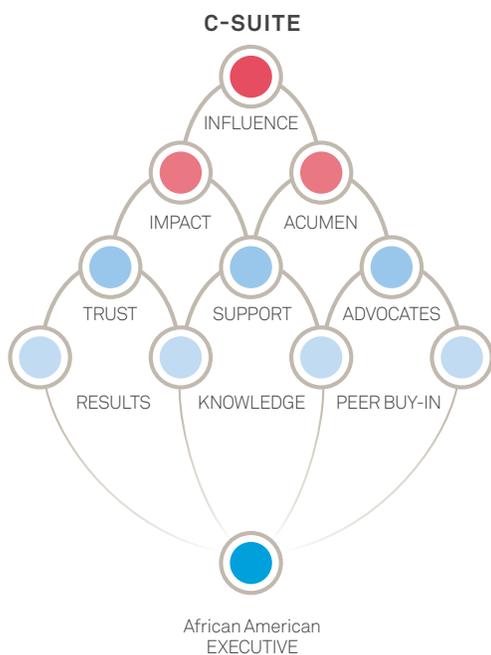
ability to tap into unofficial information channels and make appropriate career course corrections as circumstances change within the enterprise.

It is noteworthy that 40 percent of study respondents believed that self-insight and self-awareness were important factors for getting to the top of an organization. To the degree that wearing the mask is a conscious decision, executives possessing this insight have a much greater chance of utilizing the mask flexibly moment-to-moment. This enables the individual to navigate a variety of circumstances in more or less authentic ways while still enhancing connectivity to the majority culture. Those lacking this consciousness will wear the mask at all times and live in what W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) described as “double consciousness.”

Performing at the Top

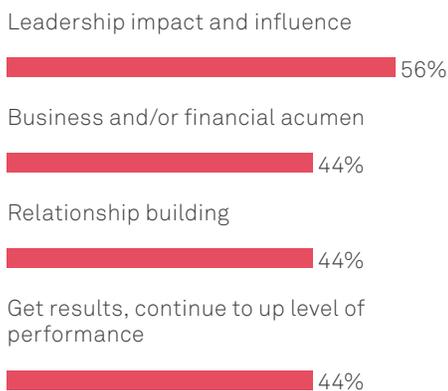
Simply reaching the top levels of an organization is the first hurdle. Once there, the second obstacle is performing to maximum efficiency and productivity.

Responses from our study indicate that once in place at the top of an organization, African American executives believe that the ability to influence others is one of the most critical characteristics needed to be successful in the C-suite. In addition, knowing and understanding how the business works and what drives business growth were also deemed essential, along with maintaining strong relationships and successful in-role performance (delivering results above expectations).



It is not surprising that African American executives might rate impact and influence as being at the top of their list of skills or characteristics once in a top job in the organization. First, delivering value in a C-suite role is largely predicated on the ability of individuals to drive the organization they lead and get results through their team. Second, the ability to impact organizational direction is predicated not only on having good ideas, but also on being able to get buy-in from peers and other stakeholders (the CEO or board) to the concepts put forth. Intimately knowing the business and what drives both the top line and bottom line add credibility to any executive as well as increasing the power and impact of his/her plans.

WHAT AFRICAN AMERICAN EXECUTIVES NEED TO PERFORM AT THE TOP



How They Did It

During our interviews, several themes emerged as these leaders related what helped them personally as they moved up the corporate ladder, often without development support at the organizational level.

“I was 54 years old with 30-plus years of experience compared to my white colleagues who were 45 years or younger when they were first exposed to a senior leadership role.”

While many of these themes are similar to what might be expected for any senior executive population, our African American leaders indicated that these self-insights and experiences were more difficult to obtain on their own (without organizational support or an advocate helping to facilitate the developmental experience).

Once acquired, this hard-won knowledge remained profoundly impactful to their career development given the dearth of role models of color, lack of organizational support, negative stereotypes, and racial barriers that they had to overcome to reach their senior executive roles.

Finally, our research shows that African American executives reach senior leadership roles later in life than their white colleagues. As a result, they have less time at the top to make substantive organizational changes or exert influence over the future strategic direction of the enterprise.

Why the disparity? Why do African American executives mark time while their white colleagues move forward? While factors such as racism and racial stereotyping play significant roles that cannot be ignored, our research indicates that the development path of the African American executive has unique challenges, many of which

KEY DEVELOPMENTAL EVENTS

1. Learning to trust in self
Belief in ideas
2. Running my own line of business
Helps build general business knowledge
3. Working with a variety of leaders
Helps learn different leadership styles
4. Feeling trust (and given autonomy)
Impacts growth as a leader
5. Exposure to senior leaders
Helps teach how they work and lead
6. Learning to survive (resilience)
Builds resilience for difficult circumstances
7. Breadth of experiences (developmental roles)
Informs and confirms intuition

are unacknowledged and therefore unaddressed by traditional models of executive development. Further, by not addressing these differences in a systematic manner, high-potential African Americans are held back and, as a result, struggle to reach the career heights that their natural talents should enable them to achieve.

This deprives these executives (as well as their organizations) of the chance to fully realize their potential and may predispose them to being a retention risk.

PART II The Culture-Specific Development Model

The Need

In the course of RHR International's development efforts with African American business leaders, it became evident from anecdotal evidence that the journey of these executives to senior-level positions was different than their white counterparts. A significant part of the developmental process for these executives was their ability to make meaning of their workplace experiences (e.g., gain insight) and utilize that knowledge to help them grow and develop in their careers (Pennington, RHR International, 2001). However, Avolio and Hannah (2008) noted that the ability to grow is closely related to [one's] existing self-beliefs as well as the individual's readiness to be receptive and extract meaning from these experiences.

The purpose of any executive development process is to identify gaps that can derail individuals as they move up to broader roles in their careers, as well as to discover skills and strengths that can be leveraged to increase leadership impact and economic return for the organization.

Our research has identified several important elements that need to be addressed within an executive development process to support and maximize African Americans' efforts to reach their potential.

By addressing these specific developmental opportunities (where they are applicable), consultants, HR and O/D professionals can better position African American executives to reach the heights of their talents rather than succumb to toiling in roles that underleverage their true capabilities and deprive their organizations of the true breadth of their skills and, potentially, their discretionary effort.

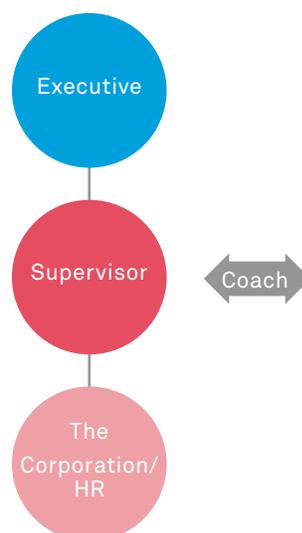
The onus for clearing these obstacles lies not only with the individuals, but also with their organizations. The individual must help him or herself by continuously seeking to grow and develop new skills and capabilities. The organization must diminish institutional obstacles that can limit or deter the best talent from reaching his/her highest potential and cause preventable turnover.

In both cases, to do less interferes with the ability of the organization to appropriately leverage its human talent to grow its business and deliver institutional value.

Traditional Development Models

Before outlining the nuances of executive development for African-American executives, it is important to understand the basis for traditional models of executive development and review generally acknowledged best practices. This serves as a starting point for understanding the necessary alterations in focus for developing and advancing the careers of minority talent.

Traditional models of executive development primarily focus on the individual and their need to gain a variety of leadership experiences and exposure to a breadth of roles that deepen their understanding of the business. The totality of these experiences is believed to prepare the individual for broader, more complex future roles in the organization. Peterson (2011) considered the following as foundational factors that predict leadership effectiveness: self-confidence, emotional control, sense of responsibility, and consideration of others. In addition, increasingly important elements as leaders advance up the corporate



OBJECTIVES

- Exposure to a wide breadth of experiences
- Deeper understanding of the business drivers
- Increased level of impact and influence throughout the organization
- Deepen understanding of how to get things done
- Increased self-awareness through feedback
- Effective navigation of organizational pitfalls

This leads to a paradigm shift for HR and consulting professionals who have been taught *never* to bring up race. The new model calls for a transition from *Race Blindness* to *Race Sensitivity*.

ladder are energy level, influence, risk taking, and thought focus. Increasingly negative characteristics for leadership effectiveness include micromanaging and an unwillingness to confront others.

Traditional models of development focus on individual development through formal or informal experiences. In addition, these models stress the importance of the individual's motivation and openness to learning as critical for successful development.

Race: A Defining Development Factor

Omi and Winant (1994, p. 55) stated, "...the concept of race continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world." For many individuals, gender and sexual orientation can be defining elements. So can religious affiliation or country of origin. Clearly, some characteristics like race and gender are overt, while sexual orientation or religious affiliation is covert. Covert characteristics are only revealed if the individual chooses to reveal them.

According to a study conducted by Dr. Greg Pennington at RHR International ("Coaching African American Executives") and presented at the 2001 Midwinter Conference for the Society of Consulting Psychology, "You cannot look at a person of color or a woman and NOT see the color of their skin or their gender. While a person of color may not emphasize their race over

other characteristics, their self-identity will...include race as a component (Pennington, RHR International 2001)."

The study cuts to the point when it indicates that "race matters." Further, it states that "It matters on a conscious and unconscious level. In this regard, the race card is present even if face down. Collectively, we are more likely to understand its impact if we find ways to discuss it openly and honestly whether as a peer, boss, or external consultant in a coaching relationship. It is too costly for the executive and the organization to not address it. However, most African American executives will not voluntarily initiate the conversation (Pennington, RHR International 2001)."

The development of African American leaders needs to grow from a foundation of trust and transparency. Without these vital elements, developmental efforts will largely fail. To the degree that it is a construct utilized in HR departments, Race Blindness has not and will not move the needle on diversifying the pool of senior-executive talent or facilitate the development of minority executives. HR and consulting professionals must find a way to the race discussion if they hope to improve diversity in the organization's leadership ranks. To do so facilitates more open dialogue, a deeper understanding of our commonalities and differences, and establishes a platform upon which greater cohesion can be built.

For the individual and the organization, understanding how behaviors can be interpreted differently by individuals (and as a result have different impact

SOCIETAL ORIGINS OF CORPORATE CULTURE

Little, if any, research has been done on the effect geographic societal norms have on the culture of a business founded within their sphere of influence. In addition to the founder's personal vision and values, these collective standards form the foundation of what the company is and what it isn't. These national and regional hues are important to understand with regard to how things work at the company, how it relates to its employees, and what it values (Jones, 2009).

Even in the world of multinational conglomerates, the cultural ethos and values of an organization have been informed by the societal values found in its country of origin. At their roots, U.S. companies espouse values congruent with an American cultural ethos. Japanese, German, and Indian corporations promote principles that are equally consistent with their own cultural traditions and values.

This has implications for the types of leadership characteristics that may be deemed essential for an organization. According to the results of the "Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness" (GLOBE) Research Program (House et al., 2004), the leadership characteristics most preferred vary across nations and regions. House et al. noted that certain leadership characteristics (ability to build a team, decisiveness, intelligence, communicating, and coordinating) appeared to be universal, but how they were applied appeared to vary in different cultural contexts.

Cultural variability also emerged in the value placed on other characteristics of leadership such as emotional control, domineering or egalitarian leadership, and risk taking.

and implications), will benefit the whole organization. The new key to success is to always ask and answer: “Where and how will race be perceived as an obstacle? (Pennington, RHR International 2001).” An additional key for success will be taking the next step to consider how the individual and the organization will address the situation.

Building a Culture-Specific Development Model

Traditional models of development focus on gathering a breadth of developmental experiences through stretch assignments and other personal and business growth opportunities. Our study of African American executives suggests that the most fundamentally important developmental experiences for persons of color will vary from this majority culture model.

Many studies provide examples of the traditional (majority) culture model. According to the Conference Board survey (Barrett and Beeson,

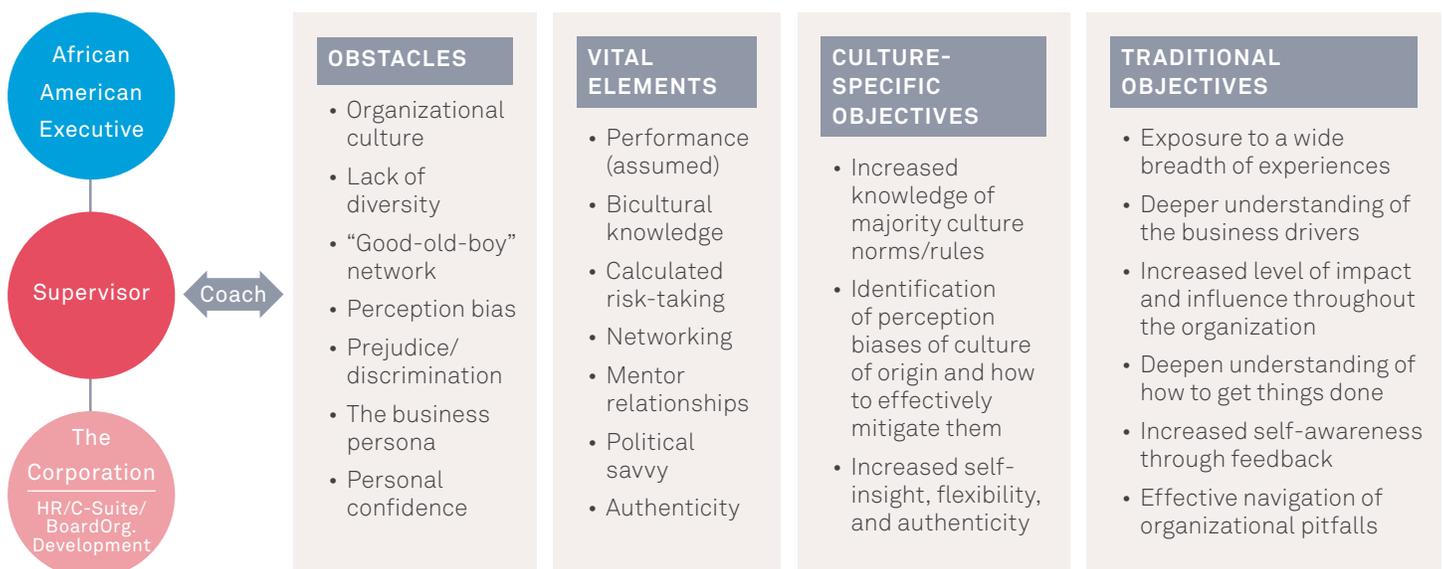
2002), the skills needed to be a successful leader in the future include intellectual horsepower and mental agility, strategic thinking skills, analytic ability, capacity to make sound decisions, personal and organizational communication skills, ability to influence and persuade, and the ability to manage in a diverse global workplace. Potential derailers for senior executives would include risk aversion, arrogance, and insensitivity, (a) controlling leadership style, and reluctance to deal with difficult personnel issues.

The development areas explored in the study may be similar for executives regardless of race. However, cultural differences and perceptual biases make the value proposition different for African American executives. For example, some of the characteristics espoused for a successful leader may be less valued within the African American community, while others may be more valued (such as trust and loyalty). Several elements may

represent knowledge gaps that need to be filled. As such, cultural factors must be considered in any attempt to facilitate or develop the leadership skills of an individual.

In addition to these traditional developmental experiences, three other critical areas of development for African American executives are demonstrable strategic thinking capacity, calculated risk-taking behaviors (within their career as well as within role behavior) and the need to develop a bicultural knowledge of white/majority U.S. culture norms. (Anecdotally, white executives working in non-U.S. based corporations such as Toyota and Honda would also need to undergo similar bicultural immersion to enhance their effectiveness in those organizational cultures.)

As previously discussed, networking/relationship building and political savvy are both vital skills that often need special attention in the developmental experience of minority executives.



The Executive Leadership Council (2008) also advocates a “New Leadership Framework” for executive women of color to get a sense of their developmental strengths and opportunities. Its study of African American female executives found that five leadership dimensions related to successfully scaling the corporate ladder—(1) Interpersonal, (2) Career activation, (3) Organizational politics, (4) Personal experience, and (5) C-Suite experience—can trump no-control dimensions such as race or gender bias.

A Culture-Specific Development Model

Taking into account all of the elements discussed so far in this report, a Culture-Specific Development Model begins to take shape. It is much more robust than the traditional model of development, having two additional components that demand attention before the more traditional developmental objectives can even be addressed. These additions provide a solid foundation that gives the culture-specific model its unique power to boost the career attainment of the African American executive. While our study did not specifically interview non-African American executives, other research suggests that a similar model could be applicable to enhance the development of other minorities.

PART III

The New Model in Practice

In this section, we will present an overview of how to address some of the obstacles that bar African American executives from reaching higher positions as well as the vital elements they need to enable their promotion. While each organization and individual are unique and a comprehensive assessment would be required to apply specific interventions, this outline will serve as a general guideline on how the Culture-Specific Executive Development Model can be applied.

Working with the Model

Organizational Level

Organizational support is a key factor in an individual’s rise to the top. Support can take many forms including selection for participation in a high-potential program, mentoring, and most importantly, sponsorship/advocacy by a senior-level executive. However, organizational practices can have a significant and adverse impact on hiring practices as well as the development of women and executives of color (Kmec, 2006). For example, benign practices such as pairing African Americans in a mentor-mentee relationship can be less impactful when the mentor is of lower status and influence in the organization (Eagly and Chin, 2010).

The ability of corporations to change organizational practices to engage in the kind of support necessary to have a positive impact on executive development appears limited (even for majority culture executives). For example, the Conference Board survey (2002) indicated that less than half of its survey respondents reported that developing future

leaders was a major priority for their senior leaders. This does not bode well for getting any organizational support for development.

The increasing diversity of the workforce, combined with the prevailing perception that organizations are de-emphasizing development programs, means that corporations could be left with limited line of sight into, or understanding of, what good leadership skills look like. This is true for all of its executives, but especially for leaders outside the majority culture. Institutional barriers must be eliminated to ensure that the organization can proactively address its leadership needs moving forward.

Consultant Level

HR professionals and third-party consultants must take time to consider and understand the differences that exist when advising African American and other minority executives and make the appropriate adjustments to help facilitate a productive engagement. Whether working as an external consultant or as an internal HR/OD professional,

consulting with African American executives is different. Cultural gaps on both sides of the conversation must be explored to ensure that the engagement adequately addresses the developmental needs of the minority executive. The basic question is, “What race-based perceptions does the consultant bring to the encounter?” and how do they impact the formulation of the relationship as well as the interventions proposed? The ability to answer these questions and develop a trusted advisor relationship is a key element to the success of the engagement.

Consultant self-exploration is critical to better understanding the biases that are being brought consciously or unconsciously to the table and how they may impact the working relationship or, indeed, even if a working relationship can even be achieved. Being upfront and addressing these biases directly are the responsibilities of the consultant and keys to deepening the consultant-executive relationship. In this regard, Rogers (1998) notes that race-sensitive communication is better than race-blind communication. In some respects, one can argue that race-sensitive communication is more transparent and acknowledges what is obvious, but largely unspoken.

The differences between race-sensitive and race-blind communication are significant enough that they must be kept top of mind throughout the engagement in order for the consultation to be truly effective in helping the African American executive maximize performance in the role and reach his/her full potential.

To begin the dialogue, the HR professional or consultant needs a strong working knowledge of African American culture. In addition, it requires a willingness to explore the internal conversations that these leaders are having with themselves about what it takes to succeed as a person of color in the organization and at the senior-executive level. Perceptions of their treatment and the acknowledgement of possible barriers to success including race are essential to building a sustainable relationship over time.

Building trust in the relationship is critical if it is going to be successful. It may be hard won and some distance may always exist. However, the willingness to break through these relationship barriers, in itself, can often provide the level of trust necessary to deliver developmental support and good counsel as an advisor.

Individual/Executive Level

To gain maximum value out of the new Culture-Specific Development Model, many African American executives will have to make significant adjustments in their approach to career development and advancement. This may include changes in how they view their own self-image and how they navigate the majority-culture business environment. It may also include increasing their personal comfort levels in the workplace—for trusting others, transparency, relationships, and authenticity.

Overcoming Basic Obstacles

Earlier we discussed perception biases. It may be shocking to some majority-culture readers that prejudicial

viewpoints still exist and are given credence in career advancement decision making. Acknowledgment of this reality must be made so that these beliefs can be rooted out, brought to the surface, examined, and addressed as the first step in applying the new model.

One of the most injurious biases for African American executives is the rumor of intellectual inferiority. The perception that some people are born smart and some are not is still predominant in many companies and in people. For African American executives, it is often the start and end point for discussions of their capabilities. With questions abounding regarding their intellectual capacity, senior leaders are often surprised when African American executives are found to be capable in their roles. An insistence on objectively defining behavioral performance indicators can be a tool to help curb some of the intelligence bias. Also, pushing for clear definitions of strategic thinking capability can limit the use of this term as a substitute for questioning innate intellectual ability (Pennington, RHR International, 2001).

A second bias that often exists is that African Americans don't fit the accepted profile of a senior leader. This expected profile prescribes whiteness for the prototypical leader. As such, it automatically reduces the fit between blackness and leadership (Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips, 2008). At an organizational level, ensuring that the slate of candidates is diverse can help when selection decisions are made. Having clear and explicit leadership competencies can also

help to level the playing field for everyone. While early identification of high-potential minorities is essential, providing opportunities to gain needed experiences in leadership roles or cross-functional projects enables these individuals to show their existing capabilities and develop new skills.

A third bias that often exists is that African Americans are antagonistic, which can be interpreted as not being team players (Madon et al., 2001; Niemann, Jennings, Rozelle, Baxter, and Sullivan, 1994; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, and Stone, 2004). Cultural misalignment can often play a significant role in promoting this perception. This can be addressed organizationally or in a coaching relationship by deepening the cross-cultural knowledge of the executives involved. This will help the African American executive to understand the impact of his/her culturally congruent (for him/her) behavior in the workplace and its impact on others' perceptions as well as assist majority executives to acknowledge and embrace their colleague's true authentic self without demonizing them in the process. [See "The Myth of the 'Angry Black Executive'"].

Addressing this bias has to be a two-way street. The diverse executive has to learn things about the organizational culture that will help him/her manage it better, but the organization must also do more to understand the cultural underpinnings of the diverse executives' behaviors.

Developing the Vital Elements Performance

It should be noted that the participants in our study had already attained a high

degree of career success prior to being interviewed. They believed the baseline for African American executives to be considered for career-advancing roles was having demonstrated an extremely high level of performance in their roles as leaders combined with consistently outstanding results. Without this level of achievement, these executives believed they would have gone unnoticed and unpromoted.

Many African American executives believe that the performance bar for them is still higher than their white colleagues to achieve a management role let alone a senior executive role. It was their belief that above-average performance was insufficient to open the doors to advancement for them.

KEY: African American executives must deliver outstanding results and impact within their role and demonstrate the ability to think strategically (this is highly valued in a manager and more so in a senior executive). Being a team player is important as well as demonstrating the ability to take charge and lead even when not given a formal leadership role.

Bicultural Knowledge

An interesting and unexpected phenomenon in our data set revealed that approximately 75 percent of

study participants had an "early exposure" to the majority culture prior to college. This early exposure occurred through living conditions (neighbors), educational institutions (grade or high school) or specialty programs (INROADS).

Exposure to and knowledge of majority-culture norms early in life appear to be an enabling factor for later success in an individual's business career. Research by Ligon, Hunter, and Mumford (2008) lends support to the observed phenomenon in our study. They reported that more positive and constructive leaders had experienced originating events that had firmly established positive personal beliefs and values early in their life span. Conversely, more destructive or selfish leaders experienced more debilitating events early in life, resulting in negative life narratives.

If true, the implications of early exposure for career achievement are significant. It suggests the need to assess for it in selection and development situations, the need to develop formal or informal plans to address it, and clear discussion of the potential impact of early exposure on the executive's career trajectory.

Conversely, for those who may not have these early exposure experiences to build on, training to mitigate the negative implications associated with a lack of such exposure should be undertaken. To address this situation, it is essential to create an environment conducive to frank discussion about cultural variances including utilization of an outside consultant as a thought partner and confidante.

DISARMING MECHANISMS

Prior research suggests that achieving a “very high” performance rating for African Americans may be related to other factors in addition to actual performance in role. Race appears to be a mitigating factor. Kraiger and Ford (1985), after reviewing 74 studies, found that race had an impact on performance ratings in real-world settings. Further, Cox and Nkomo (1986) showed that social behavior factors were more highly correlated with job performance ratings for African Americans than for majority culture ratees. This suggests that how African Americans behave in the workplace or in their roles has a significant impact on others’ views of their performance.

In a study of CEOs, Livingston and Pearce (2009) suggest that having certain disarming mechanisms can aid the rise up the corporate ladder for African Americans. In their study, successful African American executives exhibited physical, psychological, or behavioral traits that attenuate perceptions of threat by the dominant group. Examples include manner of speech, dress, cultural erudition, and mixed racial ancestry. Executives who possess such qualities would appear to have an advantage over those deemed equally talented but without these special attributes.

The goal of the Culture-Specific Development Model is to maximize the opportunities for advancement available to all African American executives.

Risk Taking

Many participants in our study noted the need for more calculated risk taking among African Americans. They believe that an openness to take the path less traveled leads to increased exposure to a wide breadth of experiences and roles outside of areas of technical competence. It also manifests in a willingness to take risks in decision making in their leadership role.

A key finding of our research was the feeling among African American executives that they didn’t have the freedom to fail. Participants noted that middle-aged or older African American executives may not feel that they can take the same kinds of career risks as their white peers. The concern is that they won’t get a second chance if things go poorly—that it is better to remain employed and not jeopardize their hard-won job. This is a learned cultural phenomenon, based in a legacy of workplace discrimination. The belief is that if you keep your head down

and don’t make any waves, you can preserve your job over the long haul. Make waves and you may end up in the unemployment line.

While their white counterparts make career moves that look like real leaps of faith—such as moving into roles outside of their area of technical expertise—an African American executive may be more conservative in seeking roles only within his/her functional expertise area.

In Their Own Words

“I think some minorities can stifle themselves by not having an open mind or being risk averse.”

“You have to have courage. You have to branch out and try to do different things. You have to grow, outreach, [and] find a bigger and better client—risk taking. It may not be necessary to do this as you move up, but once you are there [in an executive role] you have to produce revenue so this courage is a necessity.”

Making It Happen

In our study, African American executives who did venture out and took career risks matriculated to the top. In effect, they were engaging in behavior that was more closely aligned with the white cultural norm for risk-taking behavior. However, this step was not taken lightly. For those who did move outside of their comfort zone, it was often after long consideration and a true sense that the risk of failure was almost zero. When they were successful, they were rewarded similarly to their white counterparts.

Organizational backing becomes very important at this point. If there is visible support for taking risks and the executive feels that someone is saying, “I have your back,” he/she might be much more willing to take the leap, knowing failure would not necessarily be career ending.

Development Actions

- Lead or co-chair a project or initiative in your department
- Volunteer for participation in a strategic project/initiative
- Author a white paper on process improvements for your role/department
- Complete a developmental assessment
- Take a leadership role in designing and facilitating a department offsite meeting
- Take a leadership role to turn around an underperforming area of the business

Networking

According to our study participants, African American executives tend to be slower and less open to building their relationship networks and leveraging them at work.

While acknowledging its importance, our respondents were often still hesitant to network. A variety of reasons were given for this reluctance. For many of these executives, any gathering of leaders and peers, even if labeled as a social event, was perceived to be an extension of their work day and not a fun or social activity.

For the reasons previously outlined, participation in these events demands engaging the business persona rather than the authentic self. In fact, informal gatherings can generate even higher levels of discomfort and stress due to (1) the dearth of safe work-related conversation and (2) the emphasis on “letting your hair down.”

Energy reserves depleted from sustaining the mask during work hours can be drained even further in these informal settings.

In Their Own Words

“I didn’t know the social aspects of relationship building and how that supported [career] growth and networking opportunities. It took a while before I had the right person to help me move along.”

“I don’t know that we [African Americans] are as receptive as other ethnic groups. I would say we are not as receptive. We need to do more (to nurture

receptiveness) and refine our skills (in networking).”

Eventually, most executives in our study learned and accepted the networking facts—that proactively connecting with key stakeholders increased their level of impact and influence throughout the organization and raised their level of exposure to leaders higher up in the reporting structure.

“It’s political suicide if you don’t [network]; you need people to help you move your agenda forward. That network can help others remember who you are and what you have done. My network is wide and [extends] outside of my [ethnic] group. I make a conscious effort to connect with these people.”

Making It Happen

Gradually build the skills and internal comfort level required to proactively connect with key stakeholders. Constructing a broad network and continuously nurturing it is critical. A truly effective network should contain colleagues and peers as well as current and future decision makers. Work with an advisor to prepare a personal relationship development map and monitor the milestones, including opportunities to connect with key decision makers.

Development Actions

- Proactively engage in peer-to-peer networking within the department
- Extend the relationship by inviting a peer to lunch
- Attend a meeting with an external stakeholder group

- Lunch with a peer or colleague from another department
- Schedule informal meetings with your boss to discuss your development
- Lunch with your boss and your mentor
- Lunch with your boss and his/her boss
- Meet at least quarterly with your mentor(s) and advisor
- Periodically review the original relationship development map with advisor
- Revise program as progress warrants

Mentors

In order to deepen their understanding of how to get things done and increase their self-awareness through feedback, our participants learned to be open to formal and informal mentoring. They reached out to a variety of internal and external resources to help them gain perspective about themselves, their careers, and how to be more effective in their organizational roles.

In Their Own Words

“I don’t think it is important for African American executives to have African American role models, but having mentorship and being open to it wherever you can get it is important.”

“I had a good mentor who was excited about me being successful. He helped to cover my back and became a great friend. He sought me out and asked me to join the firm. I owe a lot to him; he facilitated the opportunities [for me]—I didn’t do it myself. He has taught me to do this for others.”

"I can't overstate the significance of mentoring for me. I would recommend you establish your own personal board of directors. The people you turn to who will challenge you and make you even stronger."

Making It Happen

For African American executives (and other minority groups), mentors with different points of view may prove to be invaluable. A non-African American mentor can provide valuable data and insights on how things get done in the majority-culture business environment. In addition, an African American mentor can provide further context based on his/her experience in the organization.

This combination of feedback can give the African American executive a much clearer picture of the behaviors and skillsets required to succeed in the majority-culture business environment.

Development Actions

- Identify the skills and characteristics you are seeking in a mentor and how they can help you grow and develop
- Be open to mentoring relationships that are both formal and informal in structure
- Leverage your network to help identify and obtain needed mentors and mentorship
- Obtain a mentor from an African American affinity group if one exists at your organization and meet with them at least quarterly
- Source a non-African American mentor

- Meet with mentor(s) to learn how decisions are made at senior leadership levels in your organization

Politics

Building and using political savvy is vital for effective navigation of the organization. It enables the executive to avoid organizational pitfalls, build alliances, smooth the road for ideas and plans, and execute flawlessly on directives.

It requires taking time to study and understand the unique political climate of the organization. How do things get done? How are ideas and plans socialized? How is decision-making authority authorized? Are decisions made through formal or informal processes? These are but a few of the things that must be known and understood to be politically savvy and deftly navigate within an organization.

Understanding these processes is step one. The application of the knowledge is step two and the potentially harder step. It requires a deft touch; a subtlety and nuance in its application for the individual to truly be politically skilled.

In Their Own Words

"In order to be successful, you must develop the insight to navigate the internal politics of the organization. Some of it is instinct, but it can be learned."

"You need to know how to function in a corporate environment and how to perform in it. Take the time you need to understand the broader agenda of others in the organization."

Making It Happen

Many people take a dim view of politics whether in government or organizations. Cast in a more positive light, politics means determining the needs of others in the organization, using communication and negotiating skills to reach consensus on strategic goals, and devising the tactics required to achieve them. It can get messy, but it doesn't necessarily have to.

It takes self-confidence, a willingness to take risks, and allies built through networking and relationships to prevail. For this reason, it is particularly vital that development of the African-American executive include the ways and means of successfully engaging in the political process as defined by his/her unique business environment.

Development Actions

- Create a reading list with mentor(s) and/or advisor to increase political acumen
- Complete selected readings on leadership strategies and influence
- Complete assigned readings and activities on power dynamics in corporate settings
- Review insights from reading assignments with mentors(s) and solicit feedback
- Conduct a review of the talent development and retention strategy/plan for your team and present it to your boss with recommendations
- Provide mentorship and specific development activity for high potentials within your team

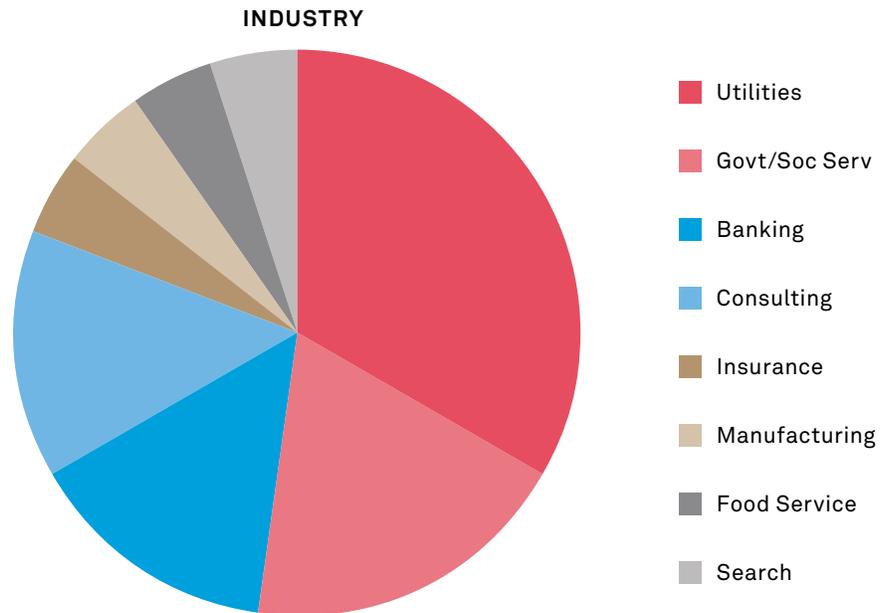
Summary

If there were one word that could summarize this report, it would be **authenticity**. For it is the freedom to be truly authentic that maximizes every executive's organizational impact and contribution to the bottom line. In an ideal world, the business persona or mask would be neither prevalent nor necessary. All individuals would be provided the opportunity to reach the highest level of success through a purposeful development process fueled by their own personal efforts and aided by the vision, strategic leadership, and backing of the C-suite and board of directors and implemented by HR/OD and individual managers as well as trusted outside advisors.

It is up to organizations to recognize the presence of the business persona and its impact on the development of its African American employees. They must then have the wisdom to implement executive-development and high-potential programs that are more congruent with the needs of its diverse workforce. Only then can every executive's personal authenticity be aligned with the business needs of the organization and the mask finally removed.

Methodology

The research consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews with 21 participants from 21 different organizations in the United States and Canada. Multiple industries and functions were represented. All participants were at least a vice president in their organization. Sixty-two percent of the participants were male; 38 percent were female. RHR International clients composed 38 percent of the participant sample. Ages ranged from 36 to 54 with a mean of 49 years.



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