

Executive Success and the Information Management Imperative:

Lessons on Never Shooting the Messenger

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Our research into executive success strongly suggests that success in the executive suite rises or falls on the effectiveness with which executives manage the flow of information in the enterprise. Our research published in the *Harvard Business Review* (see “The Seasoned Executive’s Decision Making Style,” *Harvard Business Review*, February, 2006), based on a study of over 120,000 managers and executives, shows clearly that executives who themselves reap the greatest financial rewards are highly engaging and interactive with others. They don’t pound the desk, smoke big cigars, or bludgeon others with their own ideas and points of view. They don’t freeze the hearts of subordinates with ice-queen-like stares when presented with unpleasant facts. Rather, they go out of their way to welcome input, respond with interest to others’ viewpoints and suggestions and, generally, put people at ease where information comes forth willingly.

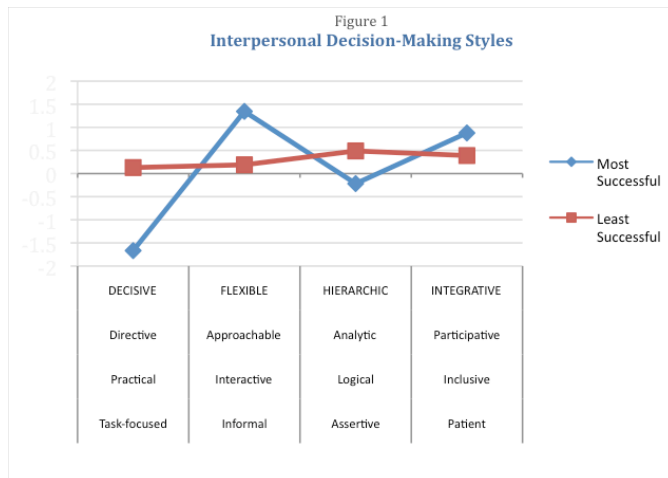
These findings are reflected in the contrasts between the interpersonal, decision-making style profiles of the many thousands of top-level executives we studied. That is, we looked specifically at profiles of four decision styles that executives use when making decisions with others. The contrasts between the most successful and least successful can be seen clearly in the chart in Figure 1. This chart focuses specifically and only on C-suite executives - CEO’s CFO’s, and CIOs, etc. The horizontal centerline shows scores on the four styles for the average of all 120,000 managers and executives. So, you can see easily at a glance where the two groups of executives deviate from average in their use of each style.

You don’t have to know anything about decision styles to see that these two groups have radically different profiles. Clearly, the most successful executives use much less of the practical, task-focused and direct, Decisive style, and much more of the outgoing, approachable and interactive Flexible style. Note: these are the styles that executives use when dealing with others when, according to their own predispositions, they feel it important to put their “best foot forward.” You can see that they must have very different views of what the “best foot” is! The best group represents those executives who comprise the top 20% compared to their peers in income attainment. The least successful group represents the corresponding bottom 20%. Keep in my mind that we are talking about thousands of C-suite executives. Consequently, effectively, there is zero doubt that these two groups differ as shown.

So, as we were saying, the most successful executives welcome input and go out of the way to make people feel at ease. This is a good thing: good for business and it's good for personal success. Executives must make critical decisions - often about complex issues and ill-defined circumstances - whose impact can reach far into the future. To make decisions such as these, and to make them well, requires information in large quantity and of good quality. Moreover, particularly in the C-Suite, executives must have the sort of thinking style profiles needed to comfortably sort through large amounts of information to generate good, long-range decisions for the enterprise.

Please keep in mind that Figure 1 shows the *interpersonal* decision-styles of the executives. So, the graphs portray the ways these executives present themselves in public. How they actually think, in making decisions when not in the public eye, can and does differ. That’s true for most people, not just executives. In the case, of the 20% most successful, C-Suite executives, however, their actual, operating, decision styles put much more emphasis on the more analytic and complex Hierarchic and Integrative styles of thinking than one might guess from looking only at their interpersonal decision style profiles. This, probably, is a reflection of the complex, long-range decisions they must make, as we have just mentioned.

So, where does this highly effective executive acquire all of the valuable information needed for complex decision-making? This is the central issue around which the Information



Management Imperative revolves. At the lower reaches of management, it isn't any particular mystery where one gets information needed for decision-making. If one needs information for the kinds of decisions typically made at entry-level management, for example, one has only to look, relatively speaking. That is, the pertinent information is likely to be readily available, immediate and unambiguous. However, this is less and less true as one marches up the corporate ladder.

At the higher reaches of the ladder, information needed for decisions is

more dispersed, less obviously available and increasingly vague or ambiguous, more subject to interpretation. One cannot just reach out and grab a handful of this information. Instead, one must *reach out to others* to gather the information needed. Better yet, one will already have relationships with peers and subordinates that encourage people to come forth with unadulterated information, including even subjective estimates of how things are going and might yet go. This is why one must never frighten others. Frightening others, shooting the messenger, is the surest way to scare information into the nooks and crannies, far from the light of day. The Information Management Imperative *requires that the information pipeline to an executive decision-maker be jammed in the wide-open position*. Otherwise, one may make critical decisions based on a field of information shot full of holes, parts of which might even have been doctored to suit what others' perceive as desired.

The surest way to keep oneself well stocked with timely, pertinent and accurate information is to welcome all information. Those bearing information ideally will arrive on the scene expecting a very welcome reception, with reasonable hopes that information they wish to contribute will be received openly, taken fully into account, and will help shape things to come. That's what it means to feel engaged. The Information Management Imperative requires very high degrees of employee engagement, throughout the enterprise.

In reflecting on these ideas, we invite you to consider your own decision style profile. How well does it fit with the decision-making situations and information management requirements of your situation? Are you a taskmaster who makes sure that your subordinates stick to their immediate jobs? Are you a logician capable of impressing others with your own ideas and your command of facts and detail? If so, your best fit might be at a middle or lower level of management. Or, instead, are you an engaging and interested thinker with an open-door policy? Do you put people at ease? When people approach you bearing information, what sort of reception do they expect? Do they think you will welcome their input? Do they believe they may actually influence your decisions and have an impact on the enterprise themselves? If these are the expectations that others have developed from their experiences dealing with you, you most likely already are a master of the Information Management Imperative and you very likely fit C-executive position requirements quite comfortably?

To look into these questions with the assistance of our StyleView™ Decision Style Profiler, please contact: support@decynamics.com.

We highly recommend a reading of our research published in the *Harvard Business Review*. You can purchase a copy of the article from *Harvard Business Review* at: <http://hbr.org/2006/02/the-seasoned-executives-decision-making-style/ar/1>