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**Identifying Leadership Potential  
In Future International Executives:  
Developing A Concept**

**CEO Publication  
G 93-2 (222)**

**Morgan McCall  
University of Southern California**

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# IDENTIFYING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL IN FUTURE INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVES:<sup>1</sup> DEVELOPING A CONCEPT

## A FINAL REPORT ON PHASE 1

Morgan W. McCall, Jr.  
University of Southern California

### I. OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

What does it mean to have "potential" as an international executive? Of the seemingly endless list of attributes that might serve an executive well, which ones should you look for in a high potential manager? If we knew which attributes were most crucial at senior levels, would we expect to find them in a developing manager and, if so, would they exist full-blown or as miniatures? Indeed, might some other qualities altogether be the ones we should seek in developing, as opposed to mature, executives?

This research seeks a different path in route to understanding potential. Changing tacks is based on the assumption that the qualities one finds in the mature international executive are NOT necessarily the same qualities we should be looking for in high potentials. This assumption reflects a philosophy of development (that the skills of a mature manager will be or can be developed and therefore may not be present in the less-mature manager) rather than one of selection (that the skills needed by senior managers are latent and inherent and therefore can be found more or less in final form even in less mature managers). The "development" perspective leads to a mandate to develop the set of skills the international manager needs by providing an individual with a variety of developmentally powerful and relevant experiences. In this context, "potential" can be defined as the ability to take advantage of the experiences that will be offered.

This project explored the utility of assessing potential in these terms. The goal was to develop a framework for understanding the concept "potential to learn from experience" --and how it might be assessed-- as it applies to developing executive skills needed in a global corporation. Some predictive studies of executive performance already exist, notably the longitudinal studies conducted at the pre-divestiture AT&T (e.g., Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974; Howard & Bray, 1988), as do studies of the attributes of effective executives (for example Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kotter, 1990; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Sorcher, 1985). This paper begins by revisiting existing knowledge, searching for evidence that ability to learn, grow, and change is a relevant variable in predicting future success. Strong theoretical and conceptual arguments exist that these qualities are crucial (Bennis, 1989; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988), but empirical confirmation is harder to come by. In addition, this study tapped into the experience of corporate executives who have observed and assessed large numbers of high potential candidates, asking them to reflect on qualities that they have observed related to ability to learn. Of particular interest were executives who had served as assessors in formal ratings of potential or who participated in succession planning committees.

Using the published research and the interviews, this paper develops a conceptual framework

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for assessing international executive potential by examining ability to learn from experience. The attributes of early identification in this framework include curiosity about how people and things work, accepting responsibility for learning and change, seeking and using feedback, and five other dimensions.

## II. SOME BASIC QUESTIONS AND EXISTING EMPIRICAL ANSWERS

As mentioned above, most of the existing research on executive attributes has focused on identifying the assets of currently successful executives or on using dimensions identified as relevant for mature executives to measure managers earlier in their careers. Virtually no research has focused explicitly, as suggested here, on ability to learn from experience as a predictor of later acquisition of executive skills or of executive success. On the other hand, existing research, both concurrent and predictive, has included clearly relevant variables. Our goal in reviewing this research, then, was to answer questions critical to the viability of the proposed point of view, and not to summarize in detail the findings related to attributes of successful executives.

If a concept related to "ability to learn from experience" holds promise as a predictor of future executive development and success, encouraging clues should exist in the rather extensive research literature on executives. Our search for clues and the subsequent review centered on four questions that form the foundation of further conceptual development. The first question is whether or not there is any evidence that people who become managers or executives change in any significant way over time. If the attributes of successful senior executives are essentially stable over long periods of time, then learning new things from experience would not be a major factor in executives' ultimate success and a concept that predicted learning from experience would be equally insignificant. Our energy would be better directed at measuring the ultimate attributes in early-career.

If there is evidence that people do indeed change, a second question emerges. Perhaps everyone grows in approximately the same way, including both those who eventually succeed as executives and those who do not. In short, people may change, but those changes may not have anything to do with executive success. There would be little point in developing a concept to differentiate among people as they change over time if they all change in the same way. Does existing research provide us with any reason to believe that successful executives have changed or grown in ways that are different from their less successful counterparts?

If there is research support for the idea that people do change and that the changes occur differentially, we still haven't established that the differential change is in some way related to their ability to learn from experience. To be of predictive value, the concept "ability to learn from experience" would have to differentiate between people who change and those who do not, allowing us to conclude that those who are better at learning do in fact acquire more skills and attributes relevant to executive success than those who are not so blessed. The question: Is there any evidence that people who are "more able" at learning from experience are also more successful as executives?

Finally, the bulk of the research on executives has been done with U.S. corporations and U.S. managers. Given the multitude of documented differences across cultures (see, for example, Adler, 1986; Tung, 1984, 1988), is it reasonable to assume that relationships between ability to learn and executive development or success might hold in other countries?

Answers to these questions in existing research are not definitive, but the evidence is suggestive. What has been learned so far strongly supports the idea that capacity to learn from

experience is an important variable in the early identification of international executives. This evidence is summarized briefly below.

***1. Is there any evidence that managers/executives learn, grow, or change at all (or very much) over the course of their careers?***

The fundamental premise of a number of theories of human development as well as numerous studies of "life stages" is that people do change over time, often predictably as a result of maturation and associated life experiences (Levinson, 1978). Even so, the answer to the question of whether and how people change on the way to executive ranks is not as obvious as it first appears. There is considerable evidence that certain personality traits and some measures of intelligence are quite stable over time (Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970). Even though some things are remarkably stable, the evidence seems convincing that managers/executives do indeed change over time, and sometimes dramatically. At the individual manager-in-a-specific-job level, Gabarro (1987) fully documents the learning process as new general managers take charge, and Hill (1992) does the same for first-time managers. Both studies leave little doubt that the managers learned. More general evidence of learning through experience is documented in Bennis (1989), Davies & Easterby-Smith (1984), Gardner (1987), and McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison (1988). The most compelling and empirically sound evidence of change is the 20-year longitudinal study of AT&T managers reported in Howard & Bray (1988) which documents both stability and change for a multitude of carefully measured attributes. Additional data documenting change shaped by various experiences, perspectives, and context is collected in Hall's book on career development (Hall & Associates, 1986). On the international scene, a large-scale longitudinal study done in England (Nicholson & West, 1988) "found unequivocal evidence that job mobility does change managers as people." This conclusion was echoed in another study also conducted in Great Britain, this time by Barham and Oates (1991) at Ashridge Management Centre. They concluded that the "international manager must know how to learn."

The answer to our first query, then, seems well documented by existing research. While some aspects of people-- most notably personality traits and intellectual ability-- are quite stable over time, there is ample evidence that people do change in a variety of ways, and, specifically, people who become managers and executives change as a result of both specific experiences and accumulated experience.

***2. Given that managers/executives change, is there any evidence that some people learn, grow, or change more than others (or does everyone change in the same way)?***

It is possible that all people, if exposed to similar stimuli, would change in the same ways. In fact, theories of life stages postulate a certain regularity in development driven by common life events. Thus, while we have evidence that managers/executives do indeed change over time, do we know that some change more than others?

All indicators seem to say yes. Even Howard & Bray (1988), who found main-effect changes over time, reluctantly admit that some managers seemed more likely to learn than others (especially as reflected in the "ego-functional life theme"). Other researchers make stronger statements: Gabarro (1987) for example found differences in success and failure of new general managers hinged in large part on their ability to learn how to relate to their new bosses-- some did and some didn't.

A dramatic demonstration of differential change comes from research on successful executives who derailed (McCall & Lombardo, 1983). This work identified three patterns of derailment, each of

which involved change or failure to change. Those who did not derail-- who lived up to their potential-- were more likely to develop new skills over time rather than remain dependent on the ones that worked well early in their careers.

In sum, the evidence to date suggests that people do learn, grow, and change over time as they ascend to executive ranks, and that there are meaningful differences among people in how and to what degree change takes place. It would appear, then, that "ability to learn from experience" is a viable variable for understanding these differences.

***3. Even if people grow differentially, is there any evidence that their ability to learn or some learning related characteristic is related to eventual success?***

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus studied a large number of successful leaders and concluded that "nearly all leaders are highly proficient in learning from experience.... Very simply, those who do not learn do not long survive as leaders.... Leaders have discovered not just how to learn but how to learn in an organizational context. They are able to concentrate on what matters most to the organization and to use the organization as a learning environment" (1985, pp. 188-9). As implied in the study of derailment and the Bennis and Nanus research, learning does seem directly connected with effectiveness and failure in the executive ranks. Various abilities related to learning separate the learners from the non-learners, as suggested by the prominence of the "ego-functional" theme in AT&T's longitudinal studies of managers (Howard & Bray, 1988). The primary thesis of Bennis's (1989) study of how leaders get to be leaders is that they develop themselves, which clearly implies an ability to do so. Bentz's (1984) study of Sears executives identified "quickness of learning" as an important correlate of success, as did Sorcher's work in predicting executive success (1985). Linda Hill (1992) studied individual contributors as they moved into and learned managerial jobs, concluding that people chosen for management "should display the attributes critical for getting the most from on-the-job learning: self-insight and a penchant for learning."

There is also a literature on the darker side (some of it referred to earlier)-- the failure to change and grow. Faced with changes in context, some people seem unable to adapt or to deal with setbacks and therefore do themselves in (e.g., Gabarro, 1987; Kets de Vries, 1989; McCall & Lombardo, 1983). The international literature is replete with references to failure as a result of some people's inability to adapt to different cultures (Adler, 1986; Barham & Oates, 1991; and Tung, 1984).

The linkage between learning and change and success as an executive seems clearly established by research both in the U.S. and England. This linkage seems to apply both to long-term change (development over a career) and to short-term change (adapting to a specific job or boss). It is therefore likely that abilities associated with learning from experience would prove valuable in predicting executive success, especially to the extent that such abilities are visible early in a career.

***4. Is there any evidence that ability to learn from experience might have different dynamics in an international context?***

This question has several angles. There is no doubt that countries can differ dramatically from one another on many dimensions, including attitudes toward management development, how leaders are chosen, underlying philosophies, etc. In spite of all the differences, however, is it reasonable that how people learn (a fundamental ability) varies across cultures? There is little doubt that learning styles vary across countries (e.g., Hayes & Allinson, 1988; Pun, 1990), that developmental practices vary substantially (e.g. Tung, 1984, 1988), or that many other differences exist that might affect the

ways people learn in different environments. In fact, many factors outside of the individual come into play in international development, especially the family's ability to adjust to the foreign culture. But, the bottom line seems to be that context is at the heart of it-- what needs to be learned, how it can be learned, and the obstacles to learning vary in the international context. It is not clear, however, that basic "ability to learn" or the basic ways people learn executive skills (primarily through on-the-job experiences) will vary by nationality. Developmental practices in Japan and Europe as documented in a variety of sources (Barham & Oates, 1991; Barham & Rassam, 1989; Shaeffer, 1985; Tung, 1984, 1988) have many common features, implying that the underlying mechanisms of learning managerial skills may be similar even though the contexts vary widely. Ultimately, however, this question is not answered in the existing research literature, suggesting a need to put any new concept to the international test early in its development.

In summary, the existing research is far more encouraging than discouraging. The weight of the evidence regarding people who become successful executives is a) that they do change in significant ways, some good, some bad, over the course of their careers, even though basic personality and cognitive abilities may not; b) that there are individual differences in the kinds of learning and growth that occur, with some people changing more than others, in different ways, and at different times; c) that positive learning and change is associated with success at the executive ranks; and d) that there is no apriori reason to believe that the underlying processes of learning and growth vary by country, although evidence is scant and the contexts in which learning occurs can vary dramatically by country. We conclude, therefore, that developing a framework for understanding "ability to learn from experience" holds promise as a tool for the early identification of international executive potential. At its most basic level, the framework suggests that ability to learn from experience when coupled with an appropriate experience creates an opportunity to learn some executive skill. If this opportunity is converted to actual learning, a person can go on to the next lesson and opportunity for experience. This results in an ongoing cycle where success generates future opportunities and where learning accumulates (see Figure 1).

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FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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### III. EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVES: THE THINGS THAT EXPERIENCED EXECUTIVES LOOK FOR

To define the concept "ability to learn from experience" we began by interviewing experienced corporate executives who had been involved in identifying people with international executive potential, promoting them into managerial and executive positions, and following their careers. In this preliminary phase of the project we selected a convenience sample of people who were willing to share their time and insights. When all was said and done, the sample consisted of executives from four international U.S. Corporations (one consumer products, one manufacturing, and two service), each with sales in excess of \$5 billion. Approximately 46 individuals were interviewed, including hand-picked "leaders of the future" from one company, the division presidents and the highest ranking human resource people from another, a smattering of chief executives, and a standing committee responsible for an executive talent pool (its membership included foreign nationals and U.S. expatriates). All people in the sample were actively involved in early identification of executive potential, and many of them served on formal talent review or succession planning committees in their companies. Most were U.S. managers, but many of them had had expatriate assignments, chosen executives for foreign



**FIGURE 1**

**THE ROLE OF "ABILITY TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE" IN  
EXECUTIVE SUCCESS**

**Ability to Learn from Experience**

**+**

**Exposure to Appropriate Experiences**

**->**

**Opportunities to Learn Executive Skills**

**->**

**Acquisition of Executive Skills (if conversion is made)**

**=**

**Next Level of Success**

assignments, or currently headed-up international operations. Also in the sample were some non-U.S. executives working for a U.S. multinational firm (including people from Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and Australia), and U.S. expatriates on assignment abroad.

In addition to corporate executives, we also interviewed a handful of "experts" who, during their careers, had substantial involvement with early identification and assessment of executive talent.

No pretense is made that the sample in anyway approximates a scientific random sample or even a representative sample of international executives. The only thing we can say with some assurance is that these folks are experienced enough to know what they are talking about.

The questions asked of these people varied across situations. In some cases the interviews were simply extended conversations about potential, early identification, development, and ability to learn from experience. In most cases, specific questions about early identification were included in much longer interviews on other topics. In one case a group interview was conducted during an actual executive assessment committee meeting. Examples of the questions asked appear in Figure 2.

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FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

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The interview data were analyzed from two different perspectives pertinent to developing the framework in this paper. In this section of the paper we report data from executives on the kinds of things they look for when trying to identify people with executive potential. For this analysis all interview data were used. In the next section we report on an analysis of data dealing specifically with ability to learn from experience, using only those data from the interviews that fit into that concept and supplementing it with results from other empirical research.

#### The Dimensions of International Executive Potential

An "eyeball factor analysis" of the interview data was conducted. Across this rather large and diverse sample of executives, there appeared to be 11 dimensions describing what executives look for when they assess executive potential in up-and-coming managers. These dimensions, described in detail in Figure 3, describe people who:

- have a strong sense of adventure,
- are courageous,
- are action oriented,
- are analytically agile,
- have a special talent with people,
- are broadly respected,
- know the business,
- are passionate,
- are resourceful,
- learn from mistakes, and
- are open to learning.

**FIGURE 2**

**EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Can you tell when an up-and-coming manager has the ability to learn new managerial skills and/or change in response to a changing environment? If yes, what specific clues do you pick up?

Focusing on the younger managers who will be leaders of the future, what clues do you look for in identifying those with leadership potential? How do you test your hunches about people's potential?

What are the clues you look for that tell you when someone might have "what it takes"?

As you consider the talented managers you have identified early, can you think of anything you noticed about them that would suggest that they were more able than others to learn from their experiences?

Have you noticed anything unusual about the learning ability of those who make effective international executives?

(Note: Different questions were asked in different parts of the research.)

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FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

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At first glance there does not seem to be much that is new here. Even though this study asked specific questions about "early identification," the resulting dimensions are similar to those generated by generic studies of "successful senior executives" (see, as examples, Barham & Oates, 1991; Gardner, 1987; Howard & Bray, 1988; Kotter, 1982 & 1988; McCall, in press; McCall et al., 1988; and Shaeffer, 1985). A partial comparative list of the dimensions from this and other studies appears in Figure 4. This similarity seems to confirm the suspicion that executives tend to think in terms of "end states" rather than "beginning states" or "in-process states" when considering potential. Even when they look for talent early, they are implicitly looking for miniature versions of successful senior executives. Such an approach obviously contradicts the core assumption of development-- that these attributes would be learned over time and might not be present "early" in a career. Or, if they are present early, the attributes might be visible only in primitive form or they might be visible in a very imbalanced way (with some striking strengths evident but most of the other qualities still unknowns).

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FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

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In spite of the fact that many of the interviews contained specific questions about early identification of ability to learn, only two of the eleven dimensions can be described as specific "learning" categories: "learn from mistakes" and "open to learning." It may be, however, that many relevant aspects of ability to learn are embedded within the other nine attributes. For example "resourceful" is described with "will find out who has the answer and get it." Without straining credulity, this activity could be seen as one aspect of learning from experience or as an indicator of a person who is an active learner. Perhaps the results orientation of the executives interviewed results in a dimensionalized perspective driven by what it takes to achieve outcomes rather than by what it takes to acquire those skills. We will want to reconfigure the same data from a learning point of view, assuming that BOTH perspectives can correctly describe the same data. If our goal is to select people who will learn more or more effectively from the developmental experiences they will have, a framework for assessment that is based on learning might prove more valuable in the long run.

Before describing the alternative framework, the international dimension needs further consideration. Is it reasonable to conclude that these data apply to the international context, especially given that the corporations involved were U.S.-based? A sample of the respondents containing those who were non-U.S. plus those with a great deal of international experience was analyzed separately. In addition, data were looked at from those interview questions that focused specifically on the uniqueness of international management. It does not appear that the basic nature of the dimensions changes very much. Foreign-sensitive executives place somewhat more emphasis on three of the dimensions: sense of adventure, special talent with people, and open to learning. This is entirely consistent with the demands of international assignments, but in itself does not negate the overall set of dimensions. More interesting, however, was their description of the context of foreign assignments and its implications for how these particular dimensions might play out differently. For example, "action oriented" has a very different meaning to a manager in a new and different environment (like a foreign country, where taking action before understanding the social context might be folly) or in

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FIGURE 3

**CLUES IN EARLY IDENTIFICATION**

***Sense of Adventure\****

Willing to change; know how to operate in a foreign environment; open to new things; want to experience different cultures; like to try new things; thrive on change; have adventuresome lives; opportunistic; take on more and more difficult challenges

***Courageous***

Willing to take a stand; persevere through adversity; tell the truth all the time; self-confident; take responsibility; take stands on tough issues; assume the risk; high sense of self-esteem; believe what they are doing is right

***Action Oriented***

Passionate about success; assume more responsibility; expand their current job; want to make a difference; drive for results; interested in more than what they are doing; know what they want to achieve; own the business; will take it and do it; solve problems rather than worrying themselves to death; take initiative

***Analytically Agile***

Select key issues; sort through ideas for the best ones; uncommonly bright; think outside the dots; synthesize complexity; tackle problems creatively; add spin; get out of one mode of thinking; question the way things are; improve things a bit; try another way; global mindset; take responsibility for learning how things work; add value to new environments; understand financial side

***Special Talent with People\****

Can align others behind them; gain consensus; develop rapport; flexible in dealing with others; like others to succeed; can sell ideas; able to listen; collaborators (vs. islands); able to mobilize a team; interact well in a small group; able to pull people together; get things done with others

***Broadly Respected***

Have respect of peers; others say good things about them; admired by peers; seen as honest; positive impact on peers; able to work for a variety of people

(Figure 3 Continues on the Next Page)

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(Figure 3, Concluded)

***Know the Business***

Have strong technical base; understand how the business works; are curious about the business; understand the customers (or products or services); understand how the parts fit

***Passionate***

Dedicated; committed; enthusiastic; positive; willing to make sacrifices; passionate about winning; eager

***Resourceful***

Resourceful; adaptable; flexible; able to change; find a way to get things done; will find out who has the answer and get it

***Learn from Mistakes***

Deal effectively with mistakes; recognize mistakes, accept them and learn from them; deal well with failure; don't blame others

***Open to Learning\****

Think about how they do things, ask why; react to feedback; know their strengths and weaknesses; learn from their experiences; learn quickly; not afraid to ask others what they think; ask clarifying questions; willing to discuss anything; think about how they can do things differently; able to change

(\* indicates a dimension considered especially important for managers who will have international careers)

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FIGURE 4  
A COMPARISON OF ATTRIBUTES OF EFFECTIVE EXECUTIVES

THIS STUDY	BARHAM & OATES, 1991	GARDNER, 1987	KOTTER, 1988	STERNBERG, 1986	KOUZES & POSNER, 1987	BENNIS & NANUS, 1985
ANALYTICALLY AGILE	STRATEGIC AWARENESS	INTELLIGENCE AND JUDGMENT IN ACTION  UNDERSTANDING OF FOLLOWERS/ CONSTITUENTS AND THEIR NEEDS	KEEN MIND	PLANNING/ CAUSAL THINKING  DIAGNOSTIC INFORMATION SEEKING  CONCEPTUALIZATION/ SYNTHETIC THINKING	ENVISION THE FUTURE	COMPELLING VISION
SPECIAL TALENT WITH PEOPLE	RELATIONSHIP SKILLS  ABILITY TO WORK IN INTERNATIONAL TEAMS  SENSITIVITY TO DIFFERENT CULTURES	SKILL IN DEALING WITH PEOPLE  CAPACITY TO MOTIVATE	STRONG INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	COLLABORATIVE INFLUENCE	ENLIST OTHERS  FOSTER COLLABORATION  BUILD COMMITMENT	ALIGNMENT  CREATION OF MEANING
KNOW THE BUSINESS	UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL MARKETING	TASK COMPETENCE	BROAD KNOWLEDGE OF INDUSTRY  BROAD KNOWLEDGE OF THE COMPANY  BROAD SET OF RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FIRM AND INDUSTRY		LINKING REWARDS WITH PERFORMANCE	
BROADLY RESPECTED		CAPACITY TO WIN AND HOLD TRUST	EXCELLENT REPUTATION AND TRACK RECORD  HIGH INTEGRITY	SYMBOLIC INFLUENCE	STRENGTHENS OTHERS	
ACTION ORIENTED		PHYSICAL VITALITY AND STAMINA  WILLINGNESS (EAGERNESS) TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY	HIGH ENERGY LEVEL  STRONG DRIVE TO LEAD	CONCERN FOR INFLUENCE  DIRECTIVE INFLUENCE	CONFRONTING AND CHANGING THE STATUS QUO  SETS THE EXAMPLE	
RESOURCEFUL	ADAPTABLE IN NEW SITUATIONS	ADAPTABILITY, FLEXIBILITY OF APPROACH				
LEARN FROM MISTAKES					EXPERIMENT AND TAKE RISKS: LEARNING FROM MISTAKES AND SUCCESSSES	LEARNS FROM MISTAKES
COURAGEOUS		COURAGE, RESOLUTION, STEADINESS  CONFIDENCE		SELF-CONFIDENCE		
SENSE OF ADVENTURE						
PASSIONATE					CELEBRATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS	DEDICATION
OPEN TO LEARNING	LANGUAGE SKILLS					KNOW ONE'S SELF

(Note: Empty cells do not necessarily imply that the particular work does not include a similar concept. Concepts frequently overlap with several others, similar ideas.)

specific cultures (such as Japan where taking action based on group consensus is particularly important). As we develop the framework, then, the international component will be reflected primarily in the kinds of experiences from which the talented manager must learn (i.e., assignments involving expatriation or requiring global perspectives) and in the relative emphasis on the various skills desired as an outcome of development (an effective international executive will need more sophisticated talents in some respects, especially when it comes to cultural sensitivity and dealing with people different from oneself).

#### **IV. EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVES: FACTORS THAT MAY INDICATE THE ABILITY TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE**

We need to look for people who are willing and able to learn from the experiences we give them. The ability to learn-- and learn quickly-- may be the single most important attribute in high potential people.

-Senior Executive

Having established what executives look for in a general sense, we then looked at the data from a learning perspective. Because executives are focused on performance rather than growth, and because some of the factors that lead to performance can prevent learning (Lombardo, Bunker, & Webb, in preparation), it seemed important to recast and extend what we had already identified. Using both the empirical literature and the interview data, another attempt to cluster the material into meaningful categories was undertaken. This time, the intent of the analysis was to focus on characteristics that might identify people with the talent and motivation to learn from the experiences they would be given. For the first iteration, the data were clustered by the researcher according to apparent similarity, and nine categories emerged. As a second iteration, members attending a meeting of the International Consortium for Executive Development Research were broken into several subgroups, given the raw data, and asked to report on the dimensions they thought captured the data. The final iteration, reported in Figure 5, incorporated both analyses.

Talented people who appear best able to learn from experience:

Show curiosity about how things work,  
Have a sense of adventure,  
Demonstrate readiness/hardiness about learning,  
Are biased toward action,  
Accept responsibility for learning and change,  
Respect differences among people,  
Seek and use feedback, and  
Have shown consistent growth over time.

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FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

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The eight dimensions described in Figure 5 are obviously arbitrary, but represent one way of describing the available data. Empirical verification is necessary, but the overall thrust of the data is



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FIGURE 5

ABILITY TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE

**I. CURIOSITY ABOUT HOW THINGS WORK**

Shows insatiable curiosity about how things work, why things are how they are, what makes people tick, how what he/she does fits into a larger scheme of things, why people do what they do. Actively seeks comparison points, benchmarks, role models. Is a careful observer of events and context.

Is curious about things other than technology, products, and markets: is curious about the behavior of people and groups, wants to know what makes them effective or ineffective. Is intrigued by how his/her behavior affects the behavior and performance of others.

**II. SENSE OF ADVENTURE**

Seeks stimulation, likes to try new things. Enjoys travelling to other countries, eating different kinds of foods, meeting new people, trying out new ideas. Is comfortable with new things, environments, and people. Has many outside interests and pursues knowledge outside of daily work. Likes to change things and uses the organization as a place to try things out. Makes the most of experience.

**III. READINESS/HARDINESS**

Is not threatened by criticism and is open to feedback. Has sufficient self-esteem and self-confidence to solicit and accept feedback; to learn from both success and failure; to take personal as well as business risks. Has perseverance to pursue feedback, even when it is critical and others are reluctant to give it. Has a high degree of self-awareness, but isn't hung up on or crippled by weaknesses. Can give up bad ideas and ineffective behavior without undue defensiveness or damage to ego. Failure and mistakes are not an enemy, but are viewed as a means of getting better.

(Figure 5 Continues on the Next Page)

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(Figure 5, Continued)

**IV. BIASED TOWARD ACTION**

Once confronted with a problem or area that can be improved, is able to focus, bring resources to bear, use other people, and find ways to solve it. Doesn't just let it dangle or procrastinate indefinitely. Is a quick study and action-oriented. Will stick with trying new ideas even if at first they don't work and in the face of initial criticism.

**V. ACCEPTS RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING AND CHANGE**

Takes responsibility for his/her actions--doesn't blame others or wait for others to dictate what should be done. Does not expect the organization or the boss to manage his/her career and development. Will "do whatever it takes" to learn a new area that is important to effectiveness. Seeks experiences that will enhance personal effectiveness. Admits mistakes and actively learns from them. Is willing to involve others (e.g., peers or bosses) in efforts to change him/herself. Learns to manage weaknesses that can't be changed.

**VI. RESPECTS DIFFERENCES**

Shows respect for people different than him/herself. Is sensitive to cultural differences. Seeks to understand other people's perspectives and shows respect for them. Fights his/her own biases and prejudices. Is able to talk to people with different backgrounds and perspectives. Likes to kick ideas around. Shares dilemmas with others and talks about options. Likes to build on ideas. Cultivates relationships with a diverse array of people characterized by openness and candor. Generally has good relationships with people. Others would like to see him/her succeed. Values the success and growth of other people and is willing to help them do both.

(Figure 5 Concludes on the Next Page)

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(Figure 5, Concluded)

**VII. SEEKS AND USES FEEDBACK**

Is open to feedback. Is honest and open, creating a tone that tells others it's okay to be candid. Is not defensive, self-promoting, or arrogant. Both gives and receives candid feedback.

Actively seeks feedback. Asks lots of questions. Is able to draw people out. Approaches multiple sources. Is not afraid to ask others about his/her impact or effectiveness. Is good at creating an environment where others will answer questions honestly.

**VIII. CONSISTENT GROWTH**

Consistently, over time, has acted like a person who wants to learn. Consistently, over time, has actually changed. Has incorporated feedback and changed as a result of it. Has been able to restart. Does not allow stagnation, boredom to set in. Will try something else when current actions aren't working. Continually seeks out opportunities to learn new things, be exposed to new people, face new challenges.

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clear. However packaged, the dimensions reflect the basic elements of people's 1) willingness to expose themselves to experiences that can provide learning (and to the risks associated with doing something new), 2) willingness to engage those experiences (to take responsibility for learning from them and to create an environment rich in information), and 3) use of the learning as reflected in observed development over time. To the degree this is an accurate model, the absence of any of the three pieces would negate development.

Overall, these dimensions (or some other version of them) provide us with a skeletal framework for understanding the forces leading a person to seek out developmental experiences, make maximum use of them as a learning event, and then incorporate their lessons. This process is reflected in Figure 6:

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FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

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What the diagram suggests is that at some stage in their careers talented people begin to show a pattern of active learning as reflected by the three behaviors that can be observed, and that the patterns will result in a track record of demonstrable growth. The hypothesis is that people with the "ability to learn from experience" can be seen 1) seeking out more experiences that provide learning opportunities, 2) once in those opportunities, creating an environment and acting on the environment in ways that produce more useful information and feedback, and 3) being more receptive to information on their impact and incorporating more of it into future behavior.

The effects of different cultures on this basic model can be inferred from the various stages. In some cultures access to learning opportunities is controlled externally, by birth or social class. Access also can be determined by age. In Japan, for example, most large corporations rotate managers across the organization largely on the basis of seniority, so certain opportunities are more likely to appear as a result of tenure than of initiative, and the sequencing is likely to be pre-ordained rather than result from curiosity. Within experiences, culture can have profound effects on the acceptability of giving and receiving feedback, who is allowed to give feedback, and the subjects that can be discussed. The hypothesis is, however, that the basic prerequisites of learning are still valid, even in cultures where context suppresses their playing out. Thus, if access to learning opportunities is restricted by cultural forces, the learning afforded by those opportunities will be denied to many people. If feedback is restricted by social or cultural considerations, learning will be restricted as well (or those who wish feedback will have to go to extraordinary lengths to get it). A primary implication of this is that global firms operating in certain cultures may have to create unusual conditions or literally move their talented people to other cultures if needed development is to take place.

It is obvious at this point that there is enormous interplay between the individual's desires and abilities about learning and the environment in which that person operates. On the one hand, the person must bring a proactive mindset and real skills into a situation to make the most of it; on the other hand, the organization exerts a great deal of control over access to opportunities, the design of experiences (especially the degree of challenge in the job and the availability of feedback), and the degree to which development (as opposed to immediate performance results) is rewarded. A framework for understanding learning from experience must have a strong context component that incorporates the nature of the challenges faced, access to those challenges, and relevance of the challenges to desired future states.

FIGURE 6

Why do some people have more learning opportunities than others?	Why do some people generate more learning in the opportunities that they have?	Why do some people seem to develop more as a result of the opportunities?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <b>CURIOSITY ABOUT HOW THINGS WORK</b> (seeks opportunities to get into things more deeply)</li> <li>* <b>SENSE OF ADVENTURE</b> (enjoys trying new things, taking on challenges)</li> <li>* <b>ACCEPTS RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING AND CHANGE</b> (doesn't wait for somebody else to control opportunities)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <b>RESPECTS DIFFERENCES</b> (creating an environment in which others are willing to share and is open to what others have to offer)</li> <li>* <b>SEEKS AND USES FEEDBACK</b> (creates an environment that makes others comfortable providing feedback and actively seeks feedback)</li> <li>* <b>BIASED TOWARD ACTION</b> (does things and carefully watches the impact of those actions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <b>READINESS/HARDINESS</b> (has sufficient ego strength to incorporate negative feedback and change as a result; always striving to get better, so welcomes information that leads to improvement)</li> <li>* <b>CONSISTENT GROWTH</b> (learning is more than occasional-- it is a central skill)</li> </ul>

It is also obvious at this point that any model of development has to have a temporal component. As new skills and abilities are learned, they lead to improved performance, which leads to new challenges, and so on. It is only over time that the pattern of consistent growth can be observed-- and then only so long as a person has had appropriate learning opportunities. We might hypothesize as well that over time success itself will serve to distinguish between those more and less talented in learning from experience. As John Kotter pointed out in his study of general managers (1982), a pattern of success after success (called the "success syndrome") can result in a decrement in learning as individuals come to believe in their own prescience. Lombardo, Bunker, and Webb (in preparation) found that some of the same qualities that enhance task performance can get in the way of learning.

We also know that some of the skills and abilities required for learning may themselves develop over time. Howard and Bray (1988) found, for example, that tolerance for ambiguity increased over time, and such a characteristic is probably related to a number of the learning dimensions from willingness to do new things to ability to accept feedback from a variety of sources. Time, therefore, must be part of the framework in both its short- and long-term implications.

A framework for the early identification of international executives must have, then, at least three components: individual attributes and skills, context, and time.

### The Individual

From the individual perspective we are proposing a set of characteristics that, as a whole, seem to define the ability to learn from experience. These characteristics are a subset of and buried in a larger set of attributes that experienced executives look for in a talented manager. We believe that there is enormous value added by reconfiguring these characteristics into an explicit and developmentally-oriented framework for use in early identification. This is because the dimensions that emerge both in the literature and from interviews about what to look for in identifying high potential managers focus on end states. That is, they look for demonstrated qualities like "knowing the business" or having a "special talent with people" that may not be apparent until late in a career. If these are the things that people develop, then it would not be a good strategy to look for them as cues in early identification. Instead we would want to look for indicators that the person could develop the desirable skills.

In the same vein, the interview data from executives emphasizes learning related to doing the job or accomplishing business-related goals. Senior executives evaluating talent tend to look at how well junior managers do in solving problems, mastering new contexts, or dealing effectively with certain groups. Hall and associates (1986), however, pointed out a difference in learning about the task versus learning about oneself. In particular, task learning relies heavily on cognitive skills and trial-and-error learning styles. Perhaps there are two other kinds of learning crucial to the overall ability to learn from experience. One might be what Hall called personal learning, learning about one's self-- who I am, what I want, what I'm good at. A second might be learning about self and task-- how my behavior relates to how well the job gets done. These two aspects of learning might hold promise for untangling the elusive nature of early identification, at least as it regards the very bright people who derail. Performance learning may get results, but over time learning about self is also a requirement.

### Context

Considering context presents a potentially all-inclusive network of variables that might make a difference. These range from cultural socialization (which can affect a person's outlook about learning) to the broad cultural and organizational forces that shape jobs, careers, and adult developmental opportunities. But when it comes to the development of executive skills for the international corporation, we think the most salient contextual variables are those that affect the content of assignments (the challenges they pose and the relevance of the experience for developing new skills needed in the future), how people are chosen for assignments, and the reward systems for development. These issues have been discussed extensively by McCall et al. (1988) and McCauley (1986) and need not be repeated here except to point out that talented individuals will have great difficulty developing in an environment that inhibits development. We believe that the larger cultural differences pertinent in international business today have impact on development through their impact on these basic dimensions. Even though an effective global executive may need different skills than an effective "domestic" executive, the same basic processes of growth would apply to those different ends. Given the existing confusion over what a global executive is, what an effective executive is, and what the executive of the future may need to be, it seems wiser at this point to direct our attention to how people learn, grow, and change rather than to what they should look like as a finished product. Indeed, Bennis (1989) has suggested that the "product" is never finished-- that developmental is lifelong.

### Time

Finally, time plays several roles in the general framework. Clearly there is a cyclical nature to the process of development that is dependent on both the accumulation of learning and the availability of developmental experiences. Further, one might expect that the ability to learn from experience, as reflected in the eight dimensions, might improve over time.

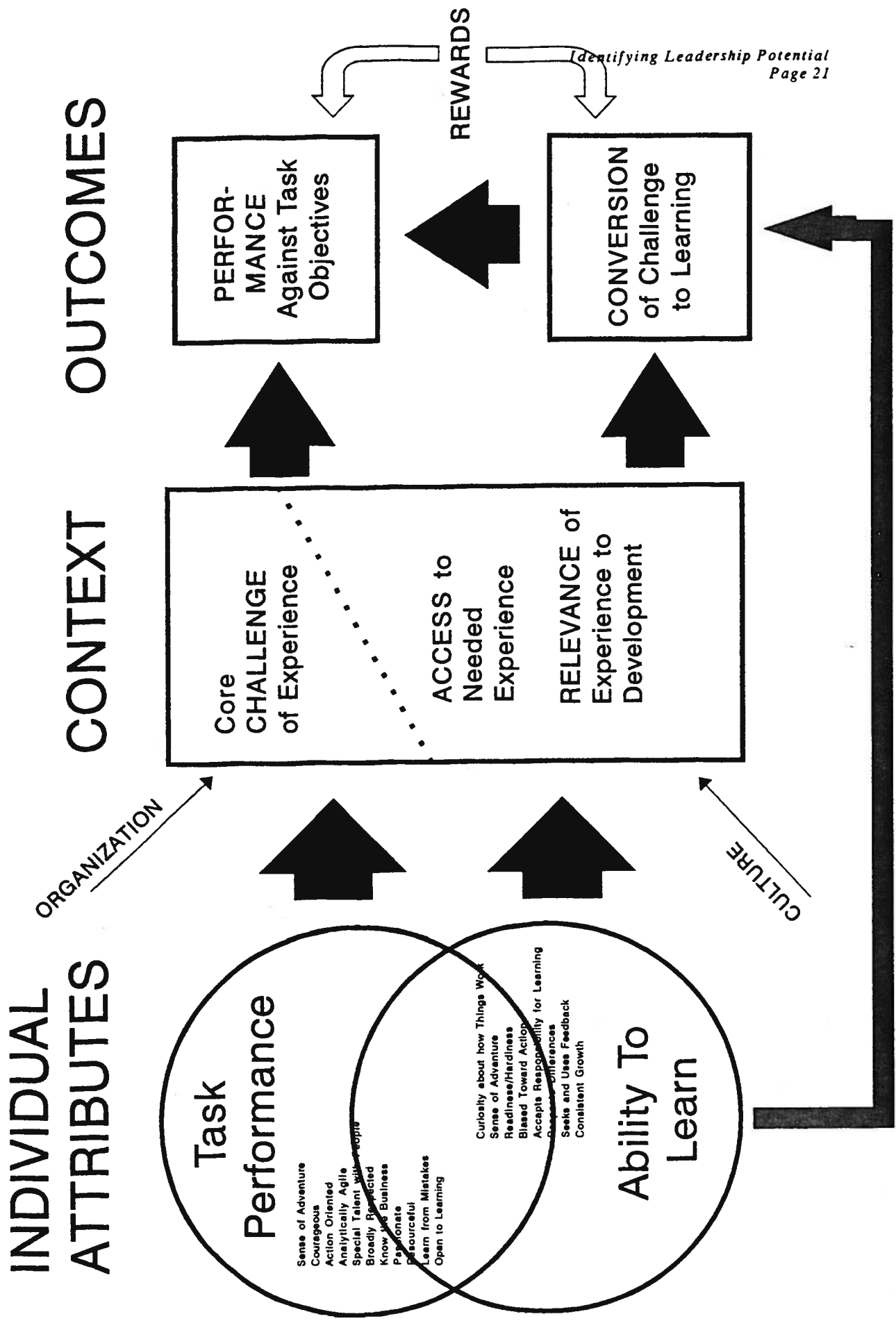
The hypothesized framework is depicted schematically in Figure 7. Represented here are the basic components as outlined in this final report. The individual is represented with two overlapping circles, signifying the overlapping but distinct dimensions of task performance on one hand and learning ability on the other. The context is represented by the rectangle, which suggests that the challenges of a given assignment (see McCall et al., 1988, for a detailed description of the core demands/ challenges of an experience) are relevant to both performance against task objectives and to learning, but that learning is also influenced by the relevance of the assignment to desired executive skills and by access to the relevant kinds of assignments. The figure shows a short term temporal component by depicting the need to convert challenge into learning, a stage which also relates to the skills described as "ability to learn from experience." Figure 8 shows how this cycle can be repeated, resulting in an accumulation of learning over a career (assuming that future assignments are related to the development of needed executive skills as opposed to emphasizing skills already developed). Phase 2 of this research, as described below, would develop an operational measure of the individual variables in Figure 7 and relate the dimensions to both context and outcome variables. Phase 3 would follow individuals over time, as depicted in Figure 8.

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FIGURES 7 & 8 ABOUT HERE

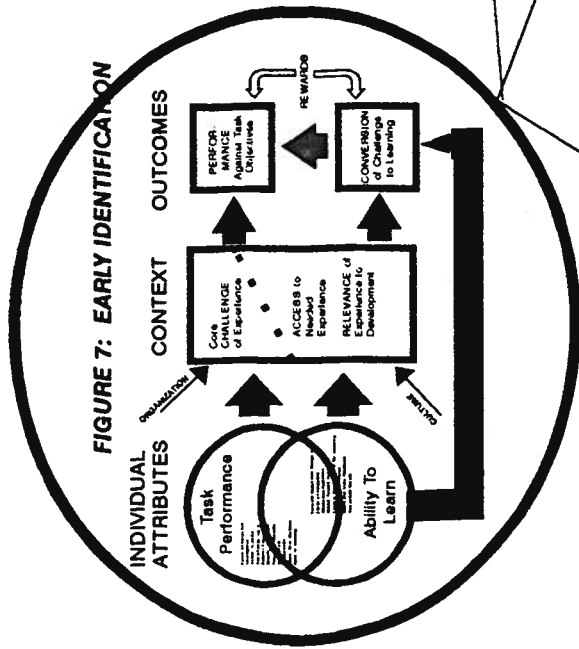
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# FIGURE 7: EARLY IDENTIFICATION





# FIGURE 8 ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CURVES

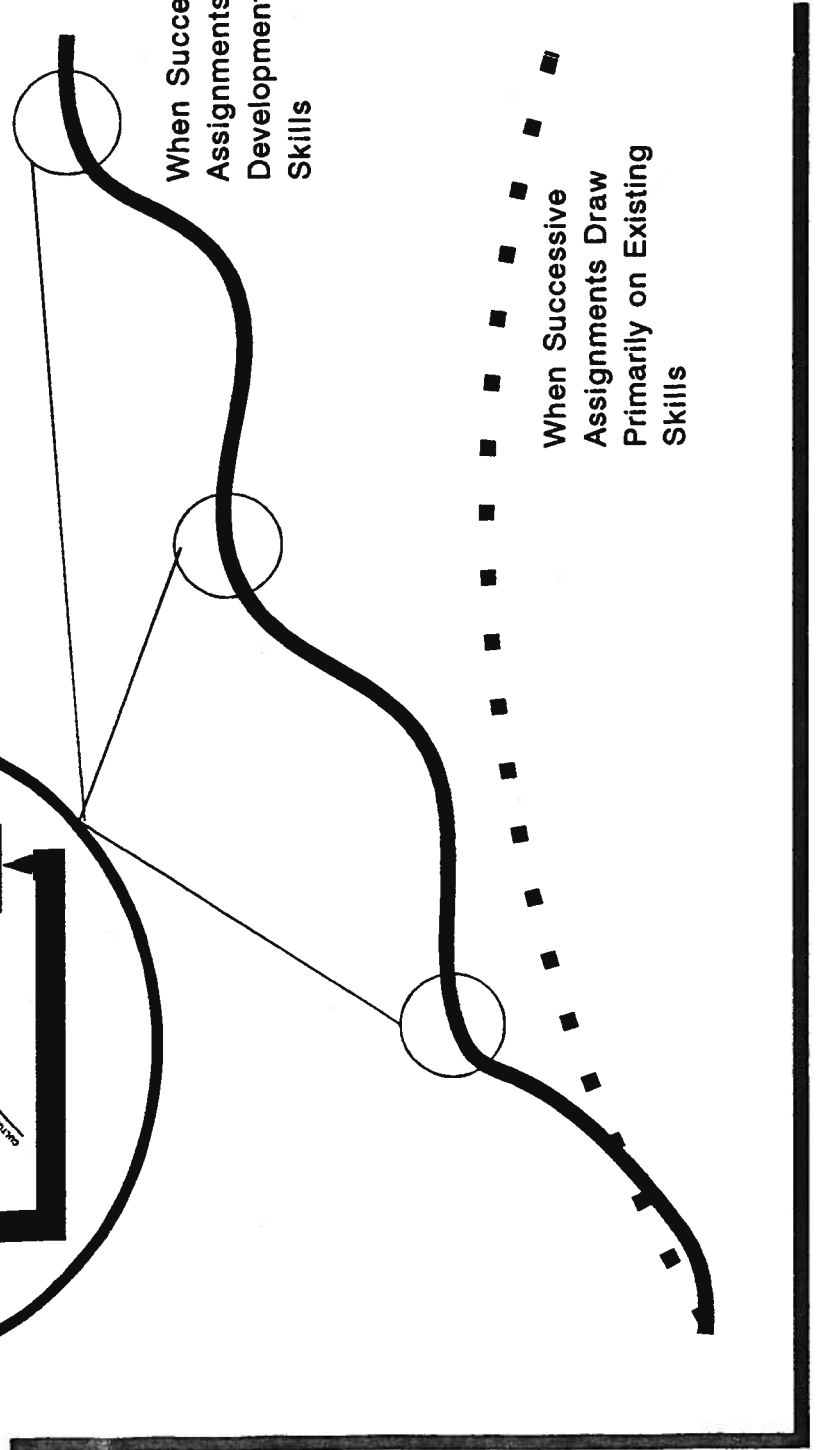


When Successive  
Assignments Require  
Development of New  
Skills

When Successive  
Assignments Draw  
Primarily on Existing  
Skills

LESSONS  
LEARNED

TIME



## V. THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING

The initial proposal to ICEDR described this research on the early identification of international executives as unfolding in three phases. This phase, the first of the three, was intended to accomplish the following:

"Phase 1: a) A developed concept of "ability to learn from experience" that can be used to assess the developmental potential of high potential candidates for international management positions, and b) Feasibility estimate for proceeding to phase 2.

We believe we have developed a viable framework for assessing the potential of international executives-- built on the dimensions of "ability to learn from experience" but also including a broader set of "clues" described by experienced executive assessors. But the promise of this exploratory research begs for empirical verification through a "Phase 2" of the project. First we want to know if the dimensions themselves can be verified using more appropriate sampling strategies and analytic techniques. To do this we propose developing an assessment instrument based on the results reported in this document and subjecting it to standard psychometric procedures to produce a reliable instrument for assessing potential.

Second, we would like to begin validation of the instrument and the larger framework by collecting additional data on context, setting the stage for a follow-up over time (context and time being the other two major dimensions of the framework). Using concurrent data we may be able to provide some validity evidence for relationships between the early identification factors and either growth or performance.

To insure that the U.S. bias in the exploratory study is offset in this stage, we propose that the instrument be administered in Europe, Asia, and the U.S., using ICEDR international corporations based in each continent. This would involve a total of 400 to 600 respondents, depending on the number of items in the questionnaire. It would also involve a "reality check" by country experts (probably ICEDR members) and translation of the survey into appropriate languages (also done within ICEDR companies).

The research would result in a measurement tool with known psychometric properties for rating the potential of aspiring international managers. It would yield an empirically determined factor structure for understanding the dimensionality of the early identification framework. It would also result in some validity evidence, but the true predictive power of such ratings could only be determined by following a sample of assessed managers over time (a potential Phase 3). At the conclusion of this stage of the project we would determine 1) whether rating is the best methodology for measuring the variables; 2) whether multiple raters are required; and 3) the best design for tracking predictions over time.

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