

What makes an effective executive?

By Peter F Drucker, Harvard Business Review, June 2004

Effective executives vary in terms of personality, attitude, values, strengths and weaknesses. But what makes them effective is that they follow eight practices:

They ask, "What needs to be done?"

Effective executives know how to prioritize. They try to concentrate on one task at a time. Once that task is completed, they reset the priorities.

They ask, "What is right for the enterprise?"

Asking this question does not guarantee that the right decision will be made. But not asking this question invariably leads to a wrong decision.

They develop action plans.

Effective executives define the expected results. They ask whether the course of action is ethical and compatible with the company's mission and values. The plan should be flexible and take advantage of new opportunities. The plan also needs to have a system to check the results against expectations. The plan should guide how the executive spends her time.

They take responsibility for decisions.

Effective executives know that a decision is made only when people know who will implement it, what the deadline is, who will be affected by the decision and who will have to be kept informed about the decision. They review the decision periodically and take appropriate corrective action. Checking the results against expectations provides them valuable feedback about their strengths, weaknesses and knowledge gaps.

They take responsibility for communicating.

Effective executives share their plans with their colleagues and ask for their comments. They are clear about what information is needed to get the job done and keep pushing till they get it.

They are focused on opportunities rather than problems.

Problem solving does not produce results. It only prevents damage. Exploiting opportunities produces results. Effective executives look at the changes within

and outside the organization as opportunities. They ensure that problems do not overwhelm the opportunities. They put their best people to pursue opportunities rather than to take on problems.

They run productive meetings.

The key to running productive meetings is to decide in advance what kind of meeting it will be, understand the kind of preparation needed and the results expected. Good follow up is as important as the meeting itself. After the meeting, effective executives spell out clearly what needs to be done and who will be accountable.

They think and say "we" rather than "I".

Effective executives know that they have authority only because they have the trust of the organization. They think of the needs and opportunities of the organization before they think of their own needs and opportunities.

The first two practices provide executives with the knowledge they need. The next four help them convert this knowledge into effective action. The last two enforce accountability and responsibility across the organization.

At the end of the article, Drucker also suggests a ninth practice that is very important. In fact, he elevates it to the level of a rule: **Listen first, speak last.**

Effectiveness is a discipline. And, like every discipline, it can and must be learnt.