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CRITICAL SKILLS FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVES
IN ADVENTIST INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

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Introduction

The literature on leadership and management identifies a wide range of skills needed by chief executives to lead their institutions effectively. This paper discusses a few of these skills which the writer considers critical for effective performance of chief executives. It is hoped that chief executives of Adventist institutions and other leaders will find this paper useful reference material.

The skills needed by chief executives of Adventist institutions of higher learning are no different from skills needed by other executives. The differences are found in the underlying values and the world views brought to the workplace by the chief executives. It is for this reason that a major step in the integration of faith and learning in an Adventist institution is taken at the faculty, administrator and staff selection as well as the curriculum design levels. Gaebelin (1968, 37) states that "this standard, 'No Christian education without Christian teachers' must never under any condition pull its colours down. Compromise on this issue, if persisted in always results in the progressive de-Christianising of an institution."

The skills discussed in this paper are not inborn qualities but behaviours that can be learnt through management courses, books, models or peers at the institution. The broad treatment of concepts, as distinguished from a more detailed approach, is intended to give chief executives a bird's eye view of the major areas of their responsibilities. The title "chief executive" is preferred as a generic term in the context of executives of Adventist institutions worldwide who come under various titles: President, Vice Chancellor, Rector, Principal. "Chief executive," "leader," and "manager" are used interchangeably and so are the words "institution" and "organisation."

Although the chief executives of an Adventist institution of higher learning are ultimately accountable for what happens in their institutions, as Christian managers they need to constantly bear in mind that they do not own the school but that God owns it; they are His stewards. As stewards, chief executives do not carry single-handedly the complex burdens

of managing the multifarious aspects of institutional operations. They refer matters to God who assumes ultimate responsibility for His school.

The chief executives who see themselves as stewards of God have gone a long way towards relieving themselves of the stress and the pressure that often come to the managers who view themselves as the last port of call on all matters that pertain to the institution. When the leaders see themselves as stewards and not the owners, they recognise their true position within the institution, and they cannot help but be humble before God and their subordinates.

Effectiveness of chief executives does not happen by chance. It is due to appropriate attitudes towards people and work. Conscious development and utilization of appropriate leadership and management attitudes and skills is an integral aspect of successful leadership.

The role of the chief executives of an institution is multidimensional. It involves interface not only with faculty, students, administrators, staff and the board of trustees but also stakeholders¹ outside the institution comprising parents, church members, private and public sector organisations. To discharge these numerous responsibilities effectively, chief executives need to consciously work towards developing appropriate interpersonal and task-related skills.

In performance of their duties, the chief executives in an Adventist institution are guided by the words of Jesus found in Matthew 20:25-28:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whosoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, whosoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Viewed from this biblical perspective of leadership, chief executives do not lord it over their subordinates but set Jesus as their model for leadership and managerial conduct. In this way they integrate their faith and their day-to-day operations. They take people in their

¹In management circles a stakeholder is a party who is interested in the result of the operation. For example, at Solusi College, the stakeholders are students, parents, faculty and staff. Some management books use the term "publics" interchangeably with the term "stakeholders."

organisation as the most important resource, primarily because they are created in the image of God: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:28)

The value of the people-centred management style is supported not only by the Scriptures but by a number of management specialists. Covey (1991, 300) states: "The human resource movement defines people as assets, as resources; they are that and more-- they are intrinsically valuable in and of themselves, not just as assets."

A large number of skills needed for managerial and leadership effectiveness could be discussed. However, the scope of this paper allows treatment of only a few. The critical skills chosen by the writer for discussion are strategy formulation, marketing the institution, management of change, training, delegation, motivation, problem solving, time management, self-awareness, modelling behaviour and values.

Strategy formulation

The strategy formulation process involves, first, a statement of the mission of the organisation. Then the process proceeds to show **how** (methods) the organisation is going to achieve its mission, **when** (time) goals are going to be attained and with **what** resources.

The mission statement is a succinct (often one sentence) description of the reason for the existence of the organisation. It needs to remain short so that people, especially members of the organisation, can memorise and internalise it with ease to enable it to guide their operations on a continuous basis.

According to Covey (1991, 295), the purpose of the mission statement is "to serve the leaders of organisations as an expression of their vision and sense of stewardship. It attempts to encompass, in one brief sentence, the core values of the organisation; it creates a context that gives meaning, direction, and coherence to everything else." To remain in harmony with the ideals of the organisation, the chief executives base the activities of the institution on the mission statement.

In a situation where there is no mission statement that is written down, it is the primary responsibility of chief executives to ensure that one is in place to enhance communication with the various stakeholders with whom the chief executives have to relate. Where the mission statement is in place, the chief executives monitor implementation and ensure that it remains

relevant. If a change in institutional mission is required, the executives take the matter to their boards for a decision.

The mission statement of an institution of higher learning specifies the academic levels offered, the target group and the core values of the institution. The Solusi College mission statement reads:

Solusi College exists to provide holistic Christian education at undergraduate and graduate levels for Seventh-day Adventists and others in eastern and southern Africa who meet the educational and character standards established by the Solusi College Board of Trustees. The college has a primary concern for the nurture and education of students for leadership in the church and community.

Once the mission statement is articulated, the strategic goals, operational structures and systems can be set up in conformity with the statement. For tertiary level institutions strategic choices spell out the specific degrees to be offered, the times of offering and the departments concerned. As needs and priorities change both within and outside the organisation, the chief executives need to reflect them in their strategic plans.

Marketing

Effective marketing requires the ability to identify essential others outside the confines of the institution, establish contact with them and project an appropriate institutional image. The executives inform and mobilise support for their institutions.

When the need arises, they participate in the recruitment of faculty and students. In countries where there are many institutions of higher learning competing for students, the executives ensure that an effective student recruitment drive is in place.

Interaction between the chief executives and the external environment is two-way. They get input from the church authority, the general membership, the government, and the private sector on their manpower requirements to enable the institution to develop relevant programmes. In turn the chief executives inform them on developments within the institution. They refrain from operating independently of significant stakeholders to increase and retain their programme ownership and support.

Depending on the environment, the chief executives can find themselves dealing with government officials on matters pertaining to regulations and accreditation. These kinds of meetings may require personal visits by the chief executives to establish good working relations with officials at the appropriate levels or to clarify policy and procedural matters.

The executives have various ways of communicating with the public. They can use institutional publications, newspapers, radio or even television. Sometimes they visit groups of alumni, church groups and service organisations to update them on issues pertaining to the organisation.

Occasionally they invite alumni and friends of the institution to visit the institution so that they can see the situation for themselves first-hand. Financial considerations and the target audience determine the appropriate mode of communication. However, in all their communication with the various publics, the chiefs adhere to high ethical Adventist standards. It often takes time and money to market the institution, but the rewards more than offset the expenditure.

Management of change

The institution operates in an environment characterised by change. For the institution to survive and grow, the chief executives must understand the dynamics of change and persuade stakeholders to accept, support and participate in the change effort. The forces involved in any change effort must be identified, analysed and addressed skillfully.

In any change effort, there will be forces supporting the change and others impeding it. To effect change, the chiefs identify the negative forces and endeavor to remove them to enable the driving forces to move the organisation to its desired state.

An institution of higher learning encounters changes of various kinds and at different levels of organisational operation. Some changes will be initiated by the organisation itself, and others will be imposed on the organisation by the environment. Change can be expected in the area of accreditation, affiliation, enrollment, funding, personnel, academic offerings, government regulations and a whole range of other areas. Whatever the cause of change, the chief executive is responsible for its implementation.

Management literature presents behaviours and principles that can assist the chief executives in implementing change in their institutions. A key consideration in effecting

change is developing trust among people. If there is mutual trust between the leaders and their followers, change is easier to make.

Most institutions have a history of past changes. The results of past changes will affect people's reaction to proposed change. If change has been successful, it will be easier for them to accept new change.

Effective executives solicit the support of influential people within the organisation before the proposed change is made. They encourage them to influence others informally. Major changes should not take people by surprise. Influential people within the institutions are the leaders' source of strength if they are approached properly. If not, they have the potential to frustrate change.

If people are given ownership of the change effort, they will gladly give their support.

People accept ownership of change if:

- they are informed in advance and given time to digest the change.
- the objective of the change is explained as well as the manner in which it will take place.
- people are informed how they will benefit and lose from the change and what assistance will be provided to help the "losers" adjust to the change.
- affected people are asked to participate at every stage of the change.
- implementation of the change is flexible.
- leaders demonstrate commitment to the change.
- communication channels are kept open and feedback is encouraged.
- those who are implementing the change are rewarded.

Effectiveness Consultants² have developed a mathematical change formula worthy of consideration by the chief executives while contemplating change. They suggest that if any of the values in the formula is zero (0), the change effort is doomed to failure:

$$SCE = D \times V \times S \times B$$

In the formula

$$SCE = \text{Success of Change Effort}$$

²A group of management consultants who teach leadership and management development courses.

D = Dissatisfaction with the current state

V = Vision of desired state

S = Steps to follow in effecting change

B = Belief in the success of the change effort

In essence the change formula tells the chief executives that when they wish to effect change they need to articulate a clear picture of what the change entails; they need to ensure that people are dissatisfied with the way things are at the given time; they must challenge the subordinates to believe in the change they want to effect; and they must ensure that the people know the steps to take to effect the change because not many will cherish groping in the dark.

Resistance to change is natural. People will give a lot of rational-sounding reasons for resisting change, most of which have little to do with the reality of the situation. However, the most common real reasons for resisting change are:

- comfort in the status quo
- habit
- fear of the unknown future
- pressure from peers
- vested interests
- defective information
- strong existing norms

Successful chief executives will, while contemplating change, think of the ways of dealing with the resistance to change they are likely to encounter in the change effort and take appropriate measures.

Training

Training within an institution is a close associate of change. Most changes within an organisation are accompanied by appropriate training activities to equip staff with the skills, attitudes and knowledge required to deal effectively with the changed situation.

Successful chief executives are firmly in the training business. They realise that, in a world characterised by rapid change and obsolescence of skills, the only way to keep abreast with the times is through training and re-training. They ensure that training takes place within

the organisation and that sharpening of professional and administrative skills must begin with themselves to ensure that an atmosphere of continuous learning becomes an integral part of organisational culture. They encourage the development of a systematic training programme in the institution to enable faculty and staff to participate in upgrading programmes outside and inside the institution as appropriate.

They facilitate training to upgrade skills and prepare subordinates for higher responsibility. They nurture training at the managerial and operational levels to increase effectiveness of the institution. The chief executives who are conscious of the value of training foster a culture in the organisation that accepts training and learning as lifelong experiences taking place at all levels of the organisation. Faculty upgrading and training are viewed as an investment in the most important resource to the organisation, its people.

Training in the institution is not a haphazard activity. It is firmly rooted in the goals and the strategic direction of the organisation. Commitment to training is reflected in the budget. The training needs are systematically assessed, and the effects of the training are measured in terms of outputs and changes in attitudes. Those participating in training are rewarded as recognition of the value of training to organisational effectiveness occurs.

Delegation

Successful executives are aware that they can achieve organisational as well as personal goals for growth through effective delegation which involves letting someone else who is competent do the job. Chief executives cannot do everything in the organisation though they are ultimately accountable for everything. They delegate as much as they can to give themselves time to monitor activities in the organisation as a whole and to attend to the more strategic concerns of the organisation.

Some functions will be delegated: academic matters to the vice principal for academic affairs; financial matters to the vice principal for financial administration; issues pertaining to students to the vice principal for student affairs and so forth.

A prerequisite for effective delegation is that the delegatee is given both the responsibility and authority to get the job done. Failure to do this may lead to frustration or constant reference back to the chief executive, hence rendering the delegation ineffectual.

Chief executives are aware that delegation is not abdication or dumping. With this understanding they ensure that the persons receiving the delegation have a clear job description which spells out what they are expected to do. They also ensure that they have adequate authority to discharge their delegated responsibility.

Chief executives need to combat the fear of delegation from which many executives suffer; they wrongly fear that they may lose their power and authority through delegation. Systematic training and well-written job descriptions which reflect levels of authority prepare subordinates for effective delegation. The effective leader holds people accountable and follows up on tasks that have been delegated.

Motivation

Effective motivation involves getting faculty, staff, administrators and students to want to perform assigned tasks. This constitutes one of the biggest challenges facing the chief executives because it involves satisfaction of complex organisational and individual needs. The chief executives are always conscious of the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of motivation and deal with them appropriately.

Getting a sense of achievement in tasks performed is motivational because it enhances the self-worth of the individual. To meet this human need, the executives ensure that goals and objectives are clearly stated and achievable in the given time frame for students, faculty and administrators. In addition to being achievable, the task should be adequately challenging and have a measure of completeness so that the person doing it experiences a sense of achievement.

When the task has been well-accomplished, the person needs to be given feedback, whether it is a student obtaining a 4.00 GPA or the vice principal for financial administration submitting his financial statement at the end of the month as required or a faculty member presenting a well-researched paper.

Those who fail to achieve stated goals also need to be given appropriate feedback that ensures that they do not lose their self-respect. The executives are aware that giving negative feedback is more difficult than giving positive feedback. However, they must give it to improve performance as well as for personal development of the subordinate.

Negative feedback is given with sensitivity. It is realised that the purpose of giving feedback is not to hurt or belittle the subordinates but to help them. Negative feedback is better received if it is sandwiched between statements of praise, appreciation of effort and support.

Problem solving

Problems are a common occurrence in institutions. Some problems are task-related and others are due to interpersonal relationships. Problems will occur at all levels in the organisation. Usually they are solved at the lowest level possible within the organisation. However, some problems find their way to the chief executives. By their nature, some problems need the attention of the chief executives. For this reason they need to develop problem-solving skills.

The effective executives approach problems creatively. They view problems as opportunities for improving the institution. They have open minds for problems and their solutions. Realising that people are the most important resource in the institution, the executives invest time and other resources in developing problem-solving capabilities within the institution. Their people-centred management style will lead them to solve problems with people, not solve problems for them.

Effective executives follow a systematic process in solving problems. Before attempting to solve a problem, they take time to identify the real problem and not just the symptoms of the problem. They take time to discover the issues beneath problems. They might discover that the real issue behind lack of cooperation between faculty and administrators is due to lack of clarity of roles within the institution. Problem solving in this case might start with role clarification. Dealing with the issue of roles might eliminate lack of cooperation.

Chief executives do not attempt to solve all problems at once. They line them up one by one in order of priority and solve them one at a time, beginning with the most pressing problem if possible.

In dealing with problems, the executives do not operate single-handedly. They involve people so that they take ownership and responsibility. They integrate their ideas with those of others. They consult people to get facts as well as feelings. Often when facts have been

systematically assembled, a solution clearly stands out. Next, alternative solutions are listed.

Before selecting the best solution, the executives examine:

- which solution has the best potential to be right?
- which solution is in the best interest of the organisation?
- which solution takes the least time and/or expense?
- which solution has the best chance for success?

The best solution is implemented. However, implementation of the solution is not the end of the whole matter. There is still a need to monitor and evaluate implementation. There is need to find out if the diagnosis has been correct. The executive will evaluate whether the right decision has been made.

Time management

Most chief executives find that they need more time than they have available to perform all their duties. Often what they need is better management of the time available rather than more time. Poor management of time may result in poor health, deterioration in family relations and other social problems.

Time is a scarce resource that needs to be managed carefully. Unless time is managed effectively, it becomes difficult to manage other resources in the organisation. Effective executives are aware that time is a resource given by God to be managed in harmony with His will.

Effective time management begins with a mission statement, institutional goals, objectives and job descriptions. If an activity is not in harmony with these, it is clearly a waste of time and should be discarded. Effective chief executives identify time wasters and time savers and deal with them appropriately. Some of the time wasters are undefined goals, procrastination, management by crisis, unbalanced lifestyle, TV, haste, friends, lack of priorities, cultural constraints, meetings, poor equipment, indecision, telephones, drop-in visitors, over-commitment. Some time savers are: setting goals, setting priorities, using the 80/20 rule³, setting deadlines, carrying reading material, having quiet time, writing to-do lists, using modern equipment, asserting one's self, saying "No", balancing one's lifestyle.

³This means that 80% of your output comes from 20% of your input.

Group processes management

Any activity requiring teamwork or cooperative effort has two aspects taking place simultaneously: task-related activities and process-related ones. Most executives devote most of their attention to task-related activities at the exclusion of process activities.

When executives are checking whether the business department has produced the monthly statement, they are looking at a task-related activity. If on the other hand, they are checking how the department is working to produce the financial statement, they are dealing with a process activity.

Most organisations do not pay attention to the process aspect of teamwork. As a result, the full potential of groups is not realised at the work place. Attention to group process matters assists teams to achieve operational synergy (1+1+1=4).

Effective executives are aware that when a new group gets together it goes through predictable sequential stages of development: the inclusion stage, control stage, and the openness stage. Whenever a member leaves or a new one arrives, the group reestablishes itself all over again.

During the inclusion stage, team members want to find out if they fit into the group. They want to know who the other people in the group are. They are eager to know if their self-image will be challenged. They want to know the group norms.

During the control stage, the group members want to know who the leaders are, what influence they will have, what responsibilities they will carry, whether their competencies will be recognized and valued. Often the behaviour during this stage will exhibit a struggle for leadership, boasting, and attacks on the formal leader.

The openness stage is characterised by greater trust, emotional closeness and free flow of discussion and interdependence. This is the stage in group development when the team will do better work than any one of the members and should be utilised accordingly.

Group process issues affect the effectiveness of teams at any given time. Awareness of process factors within a group leads the chief executive to pay attention to communication, delegation, meetings with management, participation, cooperation, decision making, goal setting, and problem solving within the organisation.

Self-awareness

Effective chief executives take time to develop awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. With this knowledge they can take steps to overcome their weaknesses and build on their strengths. Chief executives need to be aware of the effects of their behaviour on the general public, the parents, administrators, faculty, and students.

Self-awareness for chief executives is important because people both within and outside the institution react to them as they perceive them. It would be catastrophic if the chief executives carried a wrong picture of themselves. To be effective they should know themselves as they are known. The executives can gain self-awareness through giving and receiving feedback effectively.

If chief executives want feedback, they should ask for it and it will be given to them. When someone attempts to give the chief executives feedback, the chief executives should take the time to actively listen to the feedback and not try to explain away their behaviour. If they consistently explain away their behaviour, people refrain from giving them feedback.

Sometimes the feedback given is not clear. In that case they should ask for clarification but should be careful not to play the role of the prosecuting attorney. When feedback is given, it is useful to take time to paraphrase one's interpretation of the feedback before responding to ensure that one has received the message as intended. If the executives are not certain that the feedback they have received is correct, they should check with others to get their perception.

Giving feedback, especially negative feedback, is not easy. So if one has taken the risk of giving feedback, the person receiving the feedback should respond with "Thank you." Giving feedback requires skill. Giving feedback wrongly can create more problems than it solves.

Modeling behaviour and values

The character of the chief executives is the critical factor in determining the character of the organisation as a whole. The institution responds more to the chief executives' operative values than the professed values. For this reason the chief executives live what they preach. It is only by being what they teach that they gain credibility with their constituencies.

Modelling appropriate behaviour and values has to do with integrity. Maxwell (1993, 31) defines integrity as "the state of being complete, unified". The executives unify their words with their actions. They do what they say. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Integrity for the chief executives goes beyond merely what they do. It is what the chief executives really are. If they act out what they are not just for convenience, they soon learn that they cannot sustain a lie for a long time. Sooner or later the truth will come out.

Integrity is not a common virtue in our world today. However, through prayer and constant self-analysis chief executives establish values which they do not separate from themselves. These values become the navigating force that drives their lives. They tell them what to do and what to reject in all situations. As a result their behaviour is consistent and authentic. They are first and foremost human beings not human doings, which harmonises all their actions.

Successful leaders model behaviour and values that are congruent with the goals of the institution. They serve as examples for others. They are aware of the importance of harmonising what they say with their actions. The example expected of the chief executive of an Adventist institution is the one left by Jesus.

Maxwell (1993, 33) states that 89% of what people learn comes through visual stimulation, 10% through audible stimulation and 1% through other senses. It follows that it is critically important for chief executives in Adventist institutions of higher learning to understand that the more people hear and see them being consistent in word and actions, the greater their loyalty and consent.

The Challenge

The challenge facing the chief executives of an Adventist institution of higher learning is to utilise the skills outlined in this paper to enhance the effectiveness of their organisations. They need a clear mission statement that is concise and understood by the entire institution to give direction and meaning to all activities undertaken by the institution and to ensure that operations are in harmony with the reason for the existence of the organisation. They take articulation of the organisational mission as one of their major responsibilities.

Chief executives market their institutions to ensure that the stakeholders know their needs, as well as where they are going, to enable them to provide the support and assistance the institutions need for sustainable development and growth.

Chief executives monitor the environment in which they operate to effect necessary change in the manner and strategies with which they carry out business. They remain aware of the threats and opportunities that they need to manage. They help members of the organisation cope with necessary change for greater effectiveness. They look for training opportunities for themselves and the rest of the institution because they realise training is an investment in people.

Chief executives delegate appropriately so that they have time to personally carry out duties that by their nature cannot be delegated. Through delegation they strengthen and motivate the people in their organisation. They motivate subordinates by use of appropriate incentives and by assigning tasks that are intrinsically challenging and which recognise their abilities.

Chief executives manage their time effectively as well as assisting their subordinates to manage their time because they realise that management of time is indeed management of life and that, if time is not managed, nothing else can be. They help their organisations identify time savers and time wasters to be able to deal with them effectively.

In group task performance they are aware of the group dynamics at play and deal with them appropriately to ensure that the full potential of teams within the institution is realised. They encourage subordinates to give them feedback so that they increase self-awareness to enable them to deal with both their strengths and weaknesses as leaders for the benefit of the whole institution.

One of the major challenges of the chief executives in an Adventist institution of higher learning is to identify and model the values that undergird their management skills as Christians and to cultivate them to the extent that they permeate their entire management style. Thus the character of Christ will be visible in their interactions with the entire institution. Such values as humility, love, holiness, fairness, honesty, respect, gentleness, availability, conscientiousness, cooperation and teamwork will be evident to all from their behaviour.

The ultimate challenge for chief executives is to utilize the critical management skills presented in this paper in a Christ and people-centred manner. Through this approach they will personally grow both spiritually and professionally. With inner growth firmly grounded in Christian principles, they will be empowered to positively influence the people in the institutions to support them in the attainment of both individual and institutional goals. A transparent and transformative leadership will enjoy the support of the constituency.

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