Career Development and Advancement Patterns of Aboriginal Executives in the Canada Federal Public Service

Rocky J. Dwyer
Athabasca University

Abstract: The research examined the career development and advancement patterns of Aboriginal executives in Canada’s Federal Public Service to determine whether such factors as development opportunities, job assignments, education levels, mentoring, leadership experience, and networking increase the advancement of Aboriginal People to the executive category within the Canadian Federal Public Service.

The majority of senior positions of power and authority continue to be occupied by white males in many of today’s organizations (International Personnel Management Association, 1990; Weschler, 1994), and in few places is this more evident than in the executive category of the Canadian Federal Public Service (CFPS) (Public Service Commission of Canada, 2001; Treasury Board of Canada, 2000). Despite substantial efforts by government departments to eliminate roadblocks to career development and to foster the advancement of Aboriginal People into the CFPS executive category, the share of executive appointments to the Public Service for Aboriginal People continues to be disproportionate. Among the four designated groups (women, persons in a visible minority, and persons with disabilities, and Aboriginal People) identified under Canadian Employment Equity Provisions, Aboriginal People are, in more than 60 federal departments, agencies, and commissions for which the Treasury Board is the employer, the furthest from reaching proportional executive category representation.

Many current and former Aboriginal employees frequently comment on the difficulties faced in adapting to the Public Service. For example, The Report of The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Restructuring The Relationship Volume 2 (The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 937) notes many instances of difficulty among Aboriginal Peoples attempting to adapt to the public service:

How was I [an Aboriginal] supposed to deal with a manager and a system that continually sought to treat me as a child? I have both a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree, and their tactics included requests that I submit all of my calculations for verification by a supervisor, ostensibly because they couldn’t be sure my totals were correct. No other person among my forty-three co-workers was required to do this. They told me that my work was being checked because I grew up on a reserve where nobody learned to add properly.

According to Jetté (1994), the real reason for ineffective career development and limited advancement among Aboriginal People stems from barriers of a character different from those faced by other designated group members. Yet, despite these barriers, there is a cadre of Aboriginal executives within the Public Service. How is it that, within the government’s current executive complement there are Aboriginal executives who have been able to demonstrate their
abilities and skills as capable bureaucrats while overcoming discriminatory barriers, and advance within the Public Service to the executive category?

The study of careers and how they develop is one of the most active areas of inquiry in the social sciences. Educators, sociologists, economists, and human resource practitioners are all trying to understand how an individual selects, works within, and makes decisions to change the focus of his or her working life. The literature is replete with numerous theories of career development such as Miles and Snow’s Trait and Factor Theory, Holland’s Typology, Roe’s Need Theory, and Super’s Developmental Theory. These theories; however, reflect a traditional focus on white college students and middle class professionals (Fitzgerald & Betz, 1994). Although there has been a slow but steady increase in the research pertaining to the career development and advancement patterns of designated group members, Aboriginal People have been much ignored by career development theorists and researchers (Johnson, Swartz, & Martin, 1996). Research studies conducted by James et al, 1995; Johnson et al, 1996; and Lenton (1979) represent some of the very few exceptions.

While most research on career development and advancement patterns in the CFPS has focused on discriminatory practices affecting designated groups (Abella, 1984; Public Service Alliance of Canada, 1996; Samuel, 1991; Samuel and Karam, 1996), there are other possible influences, which are not well understood. To explore the multi-dimensional issues of career development and advancement of Aboriginal executives in a public sector milieu, a study was designed to investigate whether or not such factors as developmental opportunities, job assignments, education levels, training, mentoring, leadership experience, and networking increased the career development and advancement potential of Aboriginal People to the executive category within the CFPS.

Methodology

The study used multiple lines of evidence including a literature review, a biographical analysis based on a mailed survey, in-depth personal interviews, reviews of (CFPS) internal executive recruitment / competition notices; career development and advancement materials; and other reports to gather information from a geographically dispersed population of Aboriginal executives in the CFPS. The research examined whether or not developmental opportunities, job assignments, education levels, training, mentoring, leadership experience, and networking were prominent factors. To control bias, and ensure consistency participants mailed completed questionnaires to an independent consultant who also tabulated the data; interview questions were presented neutrally with the same explanation and in the same order; and interview sessions were tape recorded so that the accuracy of responses could be verified.

Sample Frame and Definition of Aboriginal People

For employment purposes within the CFPS, Aboriginal Peoples are provided with an opportunity to self-identify as Status (persons registered under Indian Act), Non status (aboriginal persons not registered under the Indian Act), Métis (those of mixed Indian and other origin), or Inuit (persons north of 60th parallel). The CFPS considers Aboriginal Peoples as one group statistically; hence the sample population does not distinguish among those groups, although many other studies do. The sample for the study consisted of 55 individuals, with a response rate of fifty four percent.
Key Findings

Some common themes emerged regarding the factors Aboriginal executives consider important for career development and executive advancement. The results also add interesting information to the emerging knowledge base on career development and advancement patterns concerning various racial groups.

First, the findings of the study suggest that the specific factors ranked by Aboriginal executives within the CFPS as important for career development and advancement potential were: leadership experience; education and job assignments. They also stressed training as a major factor.

Secondly; selection criteria used by Public Service Internal Executive Recruitment Notices required potential candidates to possess an undergraduate degree; sought candidates who could demonstrate networking ability; and sought individuals with extensive leadership experience.

Thirdly, the most prominent factors identified by Duxbury, Dyke, and Lam (1998) in their landmark study (breadth of knowledge (high mobility, lateral moves and acting / stretch assignments; increased visibility; and mentoring) were not perceived by the majority of Aboriginal executives as important or relevant for career development or advancement with the public sector.

Finally, themes, which emerged from the analysis of La Relève documentation, revealed that both public sector central agencies and departments have well entrenched initiatives, which recruit and develop individuals with leadership potential. However, the La Relève documentation also indicated the specific utilization of developmental assignments and programs, increased networking opportunities, mentoring and coaching initiatives to progressively develop a cadre of individuals with depth, breadth, and scope of leadership experience was well pronounced and utilized throughout the public service.

From an organizational perspective, it appears that successful career advancement strategies in the CFPS include: building depth, breadth, and scope of professional experience; networking with senior management; utilizing development opportunities and job assignments; and acquiring a mentor.

Discussion and Implications

The study discovered a variety of perspectives regarding the factors, which have influenced the career development and advancement patterns of Aboriginal executives in Canada’s Federal Public Service.

This study found that Aboriginal executives in Canada’s Federal Public Service have different perceptions regarding the value of developmental opportunities, job assignments, mentoring and networking as effective strategies for increasing their career development and advancement potential. According to researchers Badwound and Tierney (1988); James et al. (1995); and Sanders (1987) educational, economic, and work experience influence socio-cultural values and attitudes and thus may explain why Aboriginal public service executives perceive and view
opportunities that provided leadership experience; training and increased education qualifications accelerate the likelihood of advancement within the CFPS.

In fact, there are many studies that show culturally based values and norms can create conflicts for Aboriginal individuals working in organizations where Western values and norms dominate. For example, Wares et al. (1992) found that Aboriginal individuals tend to be unwilling to praise their own skills or accomplishments; which in turn, can have negative implications for Aboriginal individuals seeking career advancement in organizations where touting one’s own accomplishments is the norm. Researchers Burke and McKeen (1992) and Thomas (1990) have suggested that non-Aboriginal mentors may not provide effective psychological support for Aboriginal individuals due to differences in culturally based values and norms. Research conducted by Tupahache (1986) indicated that differences in “white” and “Aboriginal” leadership styles and norms might also be a cultural source of difficulty. Tupahache (1986) points out “aggressive assertion of leadership is not accepted within many Indian tribes” (p. 47). Tupahache also notes that “Aboriginal leaders are expected to serve as examples, to seek not personal power or status but the common good, and to reach decisions by consensus” (p. 48). Thus, Aboriginal Peoples working in an environment where individualism, interpersonal competition, and other such embraced norms and values may experience stress and conflict. Consequently, Aboriginal individuals working in mainstream organizations are often caught in a vise of pressures that are incompatible with their own views and values.

However, despite the negative impact of culturally based values and norms on Aboriginal Peoples, the flexibility demonstrated by Aboriginal individuals to adapt to public service organizational culture has led to some positive changes. For example, cultural values concerning education have helped to foster changes in attitudes toward higher education by Aboriginal Peoples. According to Sanders (1987) figures from the Educational Testing Service indicates encouraging levels of educational attainment and success among Indians. Sanders denotes that “Indian Peoples understand the linkage between improved educational success and opportunity” (p. 84). As well, Canadian federal departments have actively promoted cultural diversity programs and sensitivity training as a means of educating its staff on the diverse and rich culture of Canada’s Aboriginal Peoples and its cultural orientation toward such values as cooperativeness; group cohesiveness; and consensus-based style of leadership.

**Conclusion**

There are many challenges and issues facing Aboriginal public sector employees. As well, the role public sector organizations play in tailoring and formulating career advancement policies and programs in the public sector toward Aboriginal People must change if they are to be effective.

Alternative ways to approach career development and advancement for Aboriginal People in a public service environment need to be developed. These new approaches need to be broader in focus, employee-centered, and collaborative. These approaches must advance the personal development and growth of Aboriginal individuals as opposed to the narrow focus of the organizational paradigm, which is concerned with very specific pre-determined organizational objectives.
This study lays the foundation for future investigations because very little research of this nature presently exists in the career development literature. Many questions remain. Would the study of career development and advancement patterns of non-executive Aboriginal Peoples within Canada’s Federal Public Service produce similar findings? Would the findings for Aboriginal Peoples be similar for other executives from different employment equity groups? How successful are Aboriginal female executives as compared to Aboriginal male executives? Why are so many Aboriginal executives in Canada’s public service clustered in one federal department? Why is it that 95% of federal departments have no Aboriginal executives within their management cadre? Do current federal special initiative programs support or hinder the career development and advancement of Aboriginal Peoples? Theses questions present rich possibilities for ongoing research to increase the Public Service knowledge base regarding the participation rate of Aboriginal Peoples to the executive cadre of the Canadian Federal Public Service.

References


Public Service Alliance of Canada. (1996). Fighting for our rights. Ottawa, ON: PSAC.


