

# Freer to be me: The development of executives at mid-life

Division 13 Presentation

Denise Lyons

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In this study, I aimed to learn about the practice of executive development by examining the client's experience of it

- Client's view of the process
- Effect on the client's thoughts and feelings about self, leadership, relationships, career

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And to explore if this form of executive development fosters *individuation*, the task of mid-life development, as defined by Jung

- Effective executive development must take account of adult development
- Jung proposed that mid-life presents an important developmental opportunity

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Participants were eight senior executives who had been through a psychologically rigorous professional development process

- The whole person is the focus of this form of executive development
  - Inner and outer; personal and professional
  - Spouse, children, friends provide feedback
  - Addresses behavior and forces that motivate it

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Four men and four women were chosen randomly from one firm's client pool

- Based on age (37-55)
- Geography (East coast and Midwest)
- Recency of experience

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Data sources were: in-depth interviews, TAT, feedback reports

- Two, three-hour interviews per client
- Spouse and consultant interviews
- TAT
- "NewLeader" feedback (interview data, 360-degree instruments, personality tests)

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## I analyzed the interview data and a clinical psychologist interpreted the TAT

- Did a content analysis to identify key themes
- Developed behavioral indicators of individuation to operationalize Jung's theory
- Analyzed TAT data to surface group themes and compare responses of men and women

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## Executives reported that this process

- Engaged them emotionally at deep levels
- Affected their sense of self
- Created change in professional and personal relationships
- Enabled them to expand the repertoire of their leadership behaviors, making them more well-rounded

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They found the quality and heft of the data and their relationship with the consultants to be most influential in helping them change

- Data were hard to question
  - connections between personality and leadership became evident
- Consultants “professional” but not “clinical”

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Women raised several gender-related issues when describing the impact of the process

- The importance of working with a female consultant
- Confronting gender bias in the feedback
- Experiencing the pain of the personal and psychological accommodations they’ve made to fit a male-defined role

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What the study participants said about themselves in *interviews* suggested behavior consistent with individuation

- Looking within for direction and energy
- Questioning inherited values
- Relinquishing outmoded aspects of their selves
- Revealing new dimensions of who they are

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However, the *TAT data* revealed “darker” emotions--depression, sadness, anger, frustration, resentment, loneliness

- Identified with external expectations
- Repress parts of self that threaten perceived social acceptability
- Long for greater intimacy and more freedom to be themselves

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## Both personality and role appeared to reinforce these tendencies

- Persona is based on perfection, hyper-achievement and being dutiful
- Corporate role may reinforce their over-reliance on external approval and tendency to justify self-worth through activity and accomplishment

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## The individuation pattern was similar for men and women, but there were gender differences

- Women were more conflicted between personal and professional identities
- Women were somewhat more aware of their desires for wholeness and balance
- Men expressed less conflict with their professional role and with becoming more “feminine” in their leadership

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## Their individuation appeared to affect their leadership

- Both men and women said they increasingly value and express the “softer side” of their leadership
- They reported being more authentic in their roles
- They reported an expanded capacity for exercising authority and expressing intimacy

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## Findings suggest connections between their individuation and participation in “NewLeader”

- Had the effect of ego restoration and helped to repair earlier damage
- Dealt with effects of deflated or inflated ego that left them chronically dissatisfied with the reality of who they are
- Uncovered aspects of themselves that had been hidden from consciousness

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## The study suggests that mid-life executives may find benefit from this type of professional development

- Socially sanctioned therapeutic experience
- Capitalizes on the mid-life opportunity
- Has the potential to affect their sense of self and their perceptions of their leadership behavior and relationships

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## The study also has implications for practitioners of executive development

- This is new territory: What are the boundaries of this work?
- Quality and sources of the data matter
- One must use different levels of analysis to understand the data
- Group memberships matter for clients and consultants

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## Implications, continued

- Using projective measures can enrich the feedback data
- The consultants' role is critical

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