

Chapter 5

The Unlearning of Managerial Skills: A Qualitative Study of Executive Officers



Sacrifice oneself for the good of the majority others.
(Kamiya, 1966, p. 260)

5.1 Highlights

- The goal of this chapter is to qualitatively investigate the managerial unlearning process during promotion from senior manager to executive officer, based on the upper echelons perspective and leadership pipeline model, using interview data from 46 executive officers.
- The results indicate that they unlearn and learn their managerial skills in relation to “decision-making,” “delegation and motivation,” and “collecting information,” and that the unlearning process is discontinuous.
- Specifically, decision-making skills are transformed from “short-term, analytic, and partial” to “long-term, intuitive, and holistic.” Skills in delegation and motivation are switched from “directive” to “dedicated and entrusting.” Skills in collecting information are changed from “direct collection” to “network-based collection.”

5.2 Typical Case

The following is the case of the manager of a manufacturing firm who unlearned his management style after being promoted from senior management to an executive position.

When I was a senior manager, my management style was to focus on the tasks at hand and to try to commit myself to every single point within the unit. However, this approach does not work in executive positions. It is important for us to have a clear vision from a holistic and long-term viewpoint, place the right people in the right posts, entrust them, and

prepare ourselves for any consequential responsibility. Besides, as executives always seem to be isolated from subordinates within the organization; we should attempt to build external networks with wise men and elites within the industries, in order to gather information on multiple sources, so as to establish our confidence and non-collapsible axis.

This case suggests that the executive officer discarded the previous management skills that he used in his senior management position and adopted a new approach that involves “a clear vision from a broad viewpoint,” “entrusting subordinates,” and the “establishment of external networks.”

5.3 Theoretical Background and Research Question

As discussed in previous chapters, individual unlearning is necessary for unlearning at the organizational level, because organizations ultimately learn via their members (Kim, 1993). In particular, unlearning is critical for top executives because they have a strong influence on organizational performance through their values, personalities, behaviors, and the strategic choices, as suggested by the upper echelons perspective (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Therefore, the success of organizational unlearning depends on the top management team, because enacting such changes requires decision-making authority (Hutzschenreuter et al., 2012).

Despite its importance, the individual unlearning process in the upper echelons has been neglected in past studies (Hislop et al., 2014; Klein, 1989). Previous research on executive managers' capabilities have examined necessary skills and capabilities for their positions (e.g., Adner & Helfat, 2003; Helfat & Peteraf, 2015; Kor & Mesko, 2013). However, few studies have investigated the transition in managerial skills from senior managers to executive directors, during which they are required to transform their skills substantially, because executive directors typically have to handle multiple businesses (Charan et al., 2001). Although some models of managerial skills and capabilities have been proposed (Adner & Helfat, 2003; Katz, 1955; Mintzberg, 1973), differences in managerial skills between senior management and executive levels have not been explored sufficiently. The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the unlearning process of managers by comparing their managerial skills before and after their promotions to executive positions, using interview data with male managers at medium- and large-sized Japanese firms.

5.3.1 Upper Echelon and Pipeline Model

The upper echelon perspective postulates that top executives affect organizational performance through their personal characteristics and behaviors (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Sosik et al., 2012), and that top management teams collectively possess the skills that influence their performance (Coad & Timmermans, 2014). Therefore, the capabilities of executive officers to unlearn may have a

major impact on organizational unlearning, as they have decision-making authority to enact and acknowledge changes in organizational routines (Hutzschenreuter et al., 2012). Changes in managers' frames of reference and mental models can stimulate exploration that enriches innovation (Zahra et al., 2011). Vera and Crossan (2004) stated that this mode of leadership on the part of CEOs and executive officers facilitates learning that challenges institutionalized learning. Despite the importance of the executive officers' unlearning, there are few empirical studies that analyze how executive managers unlearn and what factors may influence such unlearning.

According to the leadership pipeline model proposed by Charan et al. (2001), executive officers need to unlearn, especially after being promoted from senior manager positions. This model postulates that there are six leadership passages or transitions, especially in large organizations: (1) from managing self to managing others; (2) from managing others to managing managers; (3) from managing managers to functional manager; (4) from functional manager to business manager; (5) from business manager to group manager; and (6) from group manager to enterprise manager. The leadership pipeline model has some support in academic literature (Kaiser, 2011).

Charan et al. (2001) stated that each passage requires managers to acquire a new way of managing and to leave old ways behind. As this chapter focused on the learning processes of executive managers, passages five and six are described here briefly, based on Charan et al. (2001). At passage five, when a manager is promoted from business manager to group (executive) manager, he or she needs to be aware of valuing the success of other employees and helping them and businesses to succeed. If a group manager does not value the success of others, he or she may fail to inspire and support the performance of the business managers who report to him or her. A group manager also has to help the development of business managers using coaching skills. During the sixth passage, there is a subtle but significant shift in his/her responsibilities, from strategic to visionary thinking, and from an operations perspective to a global one. This is why this chapter focused on the unlearning of managerial skills during this passage. The new leadership role requires managers to have well-developed external sensitivities including managing external constituencies, sensing significant external shift, and doing something about such insights proactively. To negotiate any career crossroad effectively, managers-in-transition need to decide which elements in their previous role they should omit or minimize, preserve or continue to use, and supplement or do more or better (Freedman, 2011). Although the roles of new positions require managers to transform, upgrade, and refine their skills, most of them tend to stick with previous, but no longer appropriate, skills.

Reviewing the literature, Meuse et al. (2011) pointed out that there are two perspectives on management transition: the continuous versus the discontinuous. The continuous or continuity perspective assumes that all levels of effective leaders need to possess the same behavioral repertoire, and that promotion requires managers to perform more of those behaviors. Conceivably, the assumption suggests that managerial skills used at the level of lower positions can be applicable to the tasks of higher positions, and that managers need to periodically brush up their skills when they are promoted. In contrast, the discontinuity perspective posits that leadership behavior positively related to effectiveness at a lower level may become negatively related to

effectiveness at higher levels. Thus, managers have to stop performing those behaviors that are not contributing to effectiveness after being promoted (Meuse et al., 2011). Obviously, the leadership pipeline model (Charan et al., 2001) adopts the discontinuity perspective of management transition.

Notably, Kaiser and Craig (2011) found that managerial behaviors associated with effectiveness were different at the bottom, middle, and top and that these differences were often discontinuous, reflecting qualitative differences by level. Specifically, middle manager effectiveness is a function of more directive and less empowering leadership, whereas executive effectiveness is characterized by more empowering and less directive leadership. The findings support the leadership pipeline model and discontinuity perspective of management transition. Dai et al. (2011) also reported that when managers move to different position levels in an organization, the requirement for successful job performance changes. The results correspond to the pipeline model, suggesting that managers must unlearn obsolete skills and learn new ones to be effective in new positions. However, previous studies have only focused on interpersonal skills, and thus further investigations are necessary to comprehend cognitive and decision-making perspectives.

5.3.2 Managerial Skills of Executive Officers

There are two traditional models that have been often used in research on managerial roles or skills. One is Katz's (1955) model of managerial skills, and the other is Mintzberg's (1971, 1973) model of managerial roles. Recently, a newer model, "dynamic managerial capabilities" (Adner & Helfat, 2003), has attracted attention in the strategic management literature. These three models are reviewed here.

Katz (1955) classified managerial skills into technical, human, and conceptual skills. Technical skill refers to proficiency in a specific kind of activity, such as methods, processes, procedures, or techniques. Human skill involves the ability to work effectively as a group member and to build cooperative effort within the team. Conceptual skill is the ability to recognize how the various functions of the organization depend on one another, and how changes in any one part affect the others. According to Katz (1955), conceptual skill becomes increasingly critical in more responsible executive positions.

Based on Katz's (1955) model, Dierdorff et al. (2009) suggested that there are three general categories of managerial work role requirements: technical/administrative; interpersonal; and conceptual requirements. Technical/administrative requirements involve managerial work dealing with the traditional functions of business, whereas interpersonal requirements include interacting, influencing, and leading others. Conceptual requirements involve knowledge, skills, characteristics, and behaviors associated with cognitive processes. Importantly, Dierdorff et al. (2009) stated that although technical/administrative, interpersonal, and conceptual requirements appear to broadly underlie all managerial work, these requirements are likely to vary

across different managerial occupations with regard to their relative significance to role enactment.

Furthermore, Mintzberg (1971, 1973) proposed a different model of managerial roles based on research that considered the chief executives of five medium- to large-sized organizations. He classified the manager's role into interpersonal, informational, and decisional roles, which can be further divided into ten distinct roles. The interpersonal role consists of three roles relating to interpersonal contact: "figurehead" (performing a number of ceremonial, legal, and social duties as a symbolic head); "leader" (motivating, encouraging, and training employees); and "liaison" (establishing a network of contacts to bring information and favors to the organization).

The informational role includes three roles involving the processing of information: "monitor" (receiving internal and external information with a view to understanding the organization and environment); "disseminator" (transmitting information received from outsiders or from other subordinates to members of the organization); and "spokesperson" (transmitting information to outsiders on the organization's performance, policy, and plan).

The decisional role encapsulates four roles relating to the organization's important actions: "entrepreneur" (being an initiator and designer of much of the controlled change in the organization); "disturbance handler" (handling important, unexpected disturbances that the organization faces); "resource allocator" (allocating organizational resources of all kinds for significant organizational decisions); and "negotiator" (participating in important negotiation sessions). The replicating studies have supported Mintzberg's (1973) model (e.g., Martinko & Gardner, 1990; Pavett & Lau, 1983, 1985), and it has been used as an important source of reference in management research and education (Gibbs, 1994; Tengblad, 2006).

More recently, Adner and Helfat (2003) proposed a model of dynamic managerial capabilities, i.e., a manager's capacity to build, integrate, and reconfigure organizational resources and competencies. This concept is built on "dynamic capabilities" (e.g., Teece et al., 1997), and postulates that management intent in the upper echelons has an impact on organizational outcomes (Martin, 2011). Specifically, the capabilities focus on managers' resource-related decisions (Sirmon & Hitt, 2009), including managerial cognition, managerial human capital, and managerial social capital (Adner & Helfat, 2003). "Managerial cognition" refers to managerial beliefs and mental models that serve as a basis for a manager's decision-making. "Managerial human capital" consists of learned skills and knowledge that managers develop through their work experience, training, and education, whereas "managerial social capital" includes goodwill derived from formal and informal relationships with others (Helfat & Martin, 2015). Previous empirical research indicates that the dimensions of dynamic managerial capabilities influence firm performance and strategic change (Helfat & Martin, 2015; Sirmon & Hitt, 2009). Kor and Mesko (2013) argued that the CEO influences the absorptive capacity of the executive team in achieving an evolutionary fit, through the configuration and orchestration of senior executive dynamic capabilities.

Comparing these three models, conceptual skills (Katz, 1955), decisional roles (Mintzberg, 1973), and managerial cognition (Adner & Helfat, 2003) are closely related. However, because each model has its own unique configuration of these dimensions, there is no consensus as to which model is the most appropriate for upper-echelon managers. Additionally, the models of Mintzberg (1973) and Adner and Helfat (2003) do not adopt a discontinuity perspective, which assumes that managerial jobs change dramatically as managers ascend the hierarchy.

5.3.3 *Research Question*

The unlearning of individual executive officers is important for firms because it may have a major influence on unlearning at the organizational level (Hutzschenreuter et al., 2012). According to discontinuous perspectives of management transition (Charan et al., 2001; Meuse et al., 2011), executive officers need to unlearn their managerial skills when being promoted from senior management. However, the appropriate configuration of managerial skills for the upper echelon remains unclear. Therefore, the following research question was proposed:

Research Question: What managerial skills do managers abandon and acquire when they are promoted from senior manager positions to executive officers?

It is notable that a senior manager handles a single business, while an executive officer may be in charge of multiple businesses. Charan et al. (2001) stated that executive officers who handle multiple businesses have to prepare themselves for bigger decisions, and greater risks and uncertainties. The transition in managerial responsibility may require executive officers to unlearn previously acquired skills.

5.4 **Methods**

5.4.1 *Research Strategy*

The methodological approach was characterized by the following three features. First, I analyzed interview data collected by senior managers as interviewers. The senior managers were asked to identify a high-performing executive officer in their firms, and interview him or her. An advantage of this method is that the interviewers occupied senior positions and therefore had the opportunity to find and communicate with high-level executive officers, who were successful in unlearning their knowledge and skills. Specifically, the interviewers were able to observe and assess how true interviewees' comments were, and how well their management skills had worked in their executive positions. Second, the grounded-theory approach (Strauss & Cobin, 1998) was adopted for developing and integrating the categories related to

the unlearning of executive officers. Third, the interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which has been used to transform interview transcripts into categories (Molina-Azorin, 2012).

5.4.2 Data Collection

Interviews were carried out in 46 medium and large-sized Japanese firms in various industries. The interviewers were senior managers of the firms who participated in a management training program in which I was a lecturer. The program was aimed at developing the leadership skills of the participants, who were candidates for CEOs of their firms.

In the program, I asked the senior managers to conduct interviews with excellent executive officers they considered as role models, and to submit interview reports. There are two reasons why this method was adopted. First, most of the senior managers may have maintained good relationships with the interviewees, allowing them to extract frank opinions throughout the interviews. In particular, many Japanese managers like to convey their past experiences to their subordinates, suggesting that more substantial interviews would be possible when the interviewers were internal managers rather than external researchers. The second reason is that as the senior managers were CEO candidates, they had networks and capabilities for identifying and selecting excellent executive officers in their organizations.

The main question in the interview was, “What managerial skills should be changed, revised, or discontinued when you are promoted from senior manager to executive officer?” Interviewers were instructed to conduct semi-structured interviews based on this question for more than an hour, and to write down the comments of interviewees as field notes as accurately as possible. In the management training course, the interviewers had received training on field work including interview methods by professional scholars and had conducted several field work initiatives. Although the interviews were not tape-recorded as that might have hindered an open conversation, they were encouraged to record interviewees’ remarks and voices in a realistic manner in their reports.

All of the executive officers were men. Most of the organizations the 46 interviewees belonged to were top-level companies in a variety of industries. They worked for manufacturing firms, including electronics (8), machine (5), food (3), automotive (2), chemicals (2), pharmaceuticals (2), commodities (2), others (2) (56.5%), as well as non-manufacturing firms, including IT/communications (6), transportation (6), construction (4), insurance (2), and trading (2) (43.5%). Regarding numbers of employees, 8.7% had 999 or fewer, 6.3% had 1000–4999, 38.2% had 5000–9999, and 46.8% had 10,000 or more. Interviewees’ ages ranged from 50 to 65 years old.

5.4.3 Analysis

The research in this chapter adopted mixed methods, or the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data were collected concurrently or sequentially (Creswell et al., 2003). Interview data were analyzed using primarily a grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Then, content analysis (Babbie, 2001) was used to supplement the results. This method has been called “qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research” (Johnson et al., 2007).

First, a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) was used to extract categories of managerial skills unlearned, as the approach is a qualitative research method for developing an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Strauss & Cobin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1990) stated that the elements of grounded theory are concepts, categories, and propositions. Concepts are the basic unit of analysis, emerging from the conceptualization of actual data, whereas categories are higher in level and more abstract than the concepts. Propositions refer to generalized relationships between a category and its concepts and between discrete categories. Because the main goal of the analysis was to categorize managerial skills learned and unlearned, the focus was on concepts and categories among the three elements.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the analysis consists of three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is the process through which categories are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data. Axial coding is the process by which categories are systematically developed and related. Selective coding is the process of integrating and refining the theory whereby categories are organized around a central explanatory concept. From among the three steps, I conducted open and axial coding to extract categories of unlearned managerial skills, and did not use selective coding because the main purpose of the analysis was to categorize unlearned and learned managerial skills rather than finding central concepts or categories of the skills.

Specifically, I (1) compared the interview data collected from participants to generate the theoretical properties of the unused or acquired skills (open coding), (2) reduced the list of properties for coding to formulate a smaller and more highly abstract set of theoretical properties, and (3) repeated steps (1)–(2) until no new property of the unused or acquired skills emerged (axial coding). Considering the definition of individual unlearning, which assumes the simultaneous occurrence of relinquishing the use of obsolete knowledge and acquiring new knowledge, I analyzed the finding that managers unlearned some skills when they adopted new skills or ways of thinking. The analysis generated the following three categories: decision-making, delegation and motivation, and collecting information.

To supplement the analysis of grounded theory approach, content analysis was performed to examine the extent to which the three categories were referred to in the interviews. That is, coding in content analysis was conducted after completing the analysis using the grounded theory approach. Following the standard procedure

(Babbie, 2001), two coders (doctoral students) who did not know the goal of the study were asked to check whether interviewees had any comments on the unlearning of three managerial skills (decision-making, delegation and motivation, and collecting information) using 0 (no comment) or 1 (comment). If coders did not agree on coding, they discussed the issue to decide the coding. The coding agreement was 81.7%, which is above the agreement criterion of 0.70 (Lombard et al., 2002).

5.5 Results

As shown in Table 5.1, the results indicate that when promoted from senior business manager to executive officer, the participants' knowledge and skills changed, with 87.0% of the managers experiencing "unlearning." For the three categories, the managerial skills most referred to were "decision-making" (61.5%), "delegation and motivation" (59.0%), and "collecting information" (35.9%). These figures refer to the percentage of utterances that executive officers made on related managerial skills or capabilities. As suggested earlier, unlearning occurs simultaneously with learning. That is, managers tend to unlearn their knowledge and skills when they acknowledge that these are no longer valid or useful and they need to acquire new ones.

5.5.1 Decision-Making

Decision-making is a skill concerned with managerial judgment and the ways decisions are made. With stakeholders, including stockholders and analysts, some officers stressed the importance of having management principles:

After becoming a director, I was in the position of having to listen to the opinions of stockholders and analysts, etc., directly. Also, I have to undertake the responsibility of decision-making from new perspectives that differ from those of the past, such as taking into consideration dividend levels. In order to deal with these new tasks, it is imperative to possess a knowledge of principles with regard to management and operations, and always to be consistent.

This comment indicates that the manager stopped using internally concentrated decision-making skills in learning to make decisions from broader viewpoints, based on management principles. Another officer also emphasized the importance of having a broad perspective in taking a long-term, versus a short-term, view, and in dealing with customers and competitors:

Nowadays I have to think not only of today and tomorrow but also of the "future," from a long-term perspective, when I act. Compared to my former position, as a senior manager, now I am required to have a broader perspective in order to consider matters such as customers, competitors, and technology, in the context of domestic and global markets.

There were also officers who shifted from analytical to intuitive decision-making after their promotions. For example:

Table 5.1 Unlearned and learned managerial skills

Categories		Unlearned managerial skills		Learned managerial skills	
		Characteristics	Examples	Characteristics	Examples
Decision-making	61.5%	Short-term Analytic Partial	Thinking of today and tomorrow Using in-depth analysis and quantified indicators Micro organizational focus	Long-term Intuitive Holistic	Thinking of the future Having a broader perspective Relying on intuition in leadership
Delegation and motivation	59.0%	Directive	Being recognized as the top person Deciding direction and directing implementation Keeping track of what is happening	Dedicated Entrusting	Ensuring everything goes smoothly even when I am away Fostering the people who require minimum supervision Give authority to my subordinate managers
Collecting information	35.9%	Direct collection	Expecting information from the operational level Collecting workplace information directly	Network-based collection	Designating a key person at each division for collecting information Enhancing my network of 'brains' inside and outside the organization

Note The figures refer to the percentage of utterances that executive officers made comments on related managerial skills or capabilities

When I was a senior manager, my management style was based on in-depth analysis and quantified indicators for all levels, from individuals to customers, as well as business concerns. By doing so, my decisions were more convincing to those around me and, thus, consensus was smoothly established. However, now I am an executive officer, I think it is important to rely heavily on my intuition in my leadership, and to be fluent with regard to a descendent hierarchic approach.

This comment illustrates that he stopped using analytical decision-making skills that were based on quantitative data in favor of acquiring intuitive and top-down decision-making skills. Another officer explained the significance of change: from thinking about what is most beneficial to the individual unit, to what is most beneficial for the entire organization:

When I was in operational management, it was natural for me to devote myself only to my department and staff, including getting involved in personnel issues like promotions, and securing the maximum budget for my department. If I had not done so, I would not have been able to win my subordinates' trust. However, now I am in corporate management, I have to set aside any "micro" organizational focus, and act in the best "macro" interests for the entire corporation.

These remarks suggest that executive officers unlearned the decision-making approach of their operational management years, and learned a new approach appropriate to corporate management. Specifically, "micro" organizational focus refers to short-term, analytical concerns, and concentrating on what was best for their business unit, whereas "macro" interests indicate long-term, intuitive concerns, and being focused on what is best for the entire company.

5.5.2 Delegation and Motivation

Although it is always necessary for managers to delegate to staff, an executive officer has control over multiple aspects and is required to manage more indirectly. One officer explained this as follows:

In my experience, what has been most fulfilling about working in an organization is to be given responsibility and authority for an area, to accumulate knowledge and experience of it, and to be recognized as the top person. However, as the breadth of my responsibility widens and the number of my staff increases, I can no longer stay in my comfort zone. Rather, I need to give up such a mentality. This is because the expectations from the organization have changed: I have to transform myself into one of the corporate leaders, not remain as operational staff. In other words, my responsibility has come to mean thinking about how to build teams, while providing my staff with the feeling of satisfaction. Some people may find such responsibility difficult.

This comment suggests that, after being promoted to executive officer, managers need to undertake a transition from the operational management perspective to the corporate management perspective. The officer seems to have discarded a mentality in which he becomes a "hero," and has learned, instead, to make subordinates the main characters. Similarly, another officer made the following comment:

Retaining the "direct chain of command" style for defining issues, deciding direction, and directing implementation, is practically impossible; and I think it may further harm the initiative of senior managers. As information and opinions from operational managers and below can only be obtained from the workplace, problems may emerge with regard to how the reception of ideas can remain consistent.

In the remarks, the “direct chain of command” indicates directive management style in which managers tell subordinate staff what they are expected to do and how to perform the expected tasks. His comments indicate that he gave up the directive management style, and adopted an entrusting and dedicated style, emphasizing delegation. How do executive officers deal with delegation on a larger scale? One officer made the following comments:

It is important to ensure everything goes smoothly even when I am away. In order to make it possible, I share my ideas and discuss issues with my subordinates. That way, they have the same sense of approach to the decision-making criteria when something comes up unexpectedly. Thus, I can empower them with confidence, and they can play things “by ear,” and make appropriate judgments. This is also beneficial for fostering the people who require minimum supervision.

This is a good example of how executive managers empower subordinates by sharing decision-making criteria. The officer’s comment below stressed the significance of clearly interpreting the different policies at operational and corporate levels.

After I became an executive officer, the range of my departmental responsibilities expanded and my previously valuable expertise became useless. When my area of responsibility expands, I am no longer able to keep track of what is happening at the operational level. As a result, there is always a delay in acquiring information from such a level. Without a choice in the matter, I have to give authority to my subordinate managers and, as for myself, business plans must be conducted in a descendent hierarchic approach; each business line works on its own as long as it is on the right track. As per the descendent hierarchic approach, the vision and strategies of the entire organization and its head office have become a “bible.” However, I can’t always be in the dark about the operational level. So, I take the initiative and observe operational staff meetings so that I have a better vision for the status review.

In the comments, the descendent hierarchic approach refers to a top-down management style in which the process of decision-making and goal setting is kept at the senior level. These remarks suggest that executive officers unlearn the management style acquired during their years as senior operational managers, when they were the lead characters and directed implementation. After promotion, the officers have shifted to an entrusting management style in which they make their staff the lead characters, while ensuring that decision-making criteria are shared, and exert control via the business plan.

5.5.3 Collecting Information

The third category, collecting information, is closely associated with delegation, discussed above. As executive officers find themselves detached from operations, and it is more difficult to acquire timeline information, they need to devise other ways of collecting such information. One officer made the following observation:

I think that the higher the position I am in, the more I should stop expecting information. I think it is inappropriate to get frustrated if information doesn’t reach me, and I have begun to think it is natural. Executive officers often expect information from the operational level, but

the closer we get to the operational level, we find that information is mostly in the form of “requests.” However, the requests differ from department to department, so it is imperative to amalgamate all these requests and tackle them as issues.

“Request” means a demand from the subordinates about solving problems in the workplace. The comments suggest that he gave up expecting precise information from subordinates in making decisions. Instead, he learned to identify management issues based on subordinates’ requests. In a different approach, another officer deals with this difficulty by designating a key person directly between the operational level and corporate level:

Because executive officers are isolated, it is always difficult for information to reach them. Therefore, a key person should be designated at each division for collecting information.

The term “isolated” refers to a situation in which there are few people to consult with when in trouble. This officer abandoned the direct approach of collecting information, while he learned to gather information through networks in the organization. In the following comment, which also relates to management decision-making, an officer makes it a point to have mentors inside and outside of the company, serving as his “brains”:

After I became an executive officer, the range of issues where I make decisions based on my experience has become limited. I frequently encounter cases where I am prompted to use foresight to make decisions proactively. Such experience encourages me to learn more in areas that I am unfamiliar with, and to enhance my network of “brains” inside and outside the organization.

These comments suggest that executive officers need to unlearn their methods of directly collecting information from the operation, and devise other effective and efficient ways for this that complement their positions; for example, by designating key persons for transmitting information from the operational level and by building a network of mentors inside and outside the company. As executive officers face difficulties obtaining information directly from the units they handle, opportunities to acquire information from other units or the external environment may increase.

5.6 Discussion

Executive officers are known to have an impact on unlearning at the organizational level (Hutzschenreuter et al., 2012); however, few studies have investigated management transitions in the upper echelons of an organization (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The findings of this chapter suggest that executive officers unlearned the managerial skills of “decision-making,” “delegation and motivation,” and “collecting information” in a discontinuous manner. The main contribution of this research is to demonstrate the discontinuous nature of management transitions from an unlearning perspective.

5.6.1 Theoretical Implications

There are two theoretical contributions to the literature on unlearning and managerial skills. First, the results identify the types of managerial skills that upper-echelon managers should unlearn. As shown in Fig. 5.1, newly promoted executive managers need to substantially transform their skills in “decision-making,” “delegation and motivation,” and “collecting information,” which correspond to Mintzberg’s (1973) model of managerial roles: decisional, interpersonal, and informational, although these two models are not identical. The findings suggest that Mintzberg’s (1973) model is useful for explaining the managerial transitions of managers in the upper echelon. This may be because informational roles are significant for executive officers in making decisions, while the models of Katz’s (1955) and Adner and Helfat’s (2003) do not clearly include the informational roles. The results indicate that researchers in organizational behavior should be aware of the importance of a manager’s information-related capabilities in theorizing managerial skills.

Second, the results show discontinuous transitions in managerial skills before and after promotions to executive positions. Although the pipeline model (e.g., Charan et al., 2001) and other related research (e.g., Kaiser & Craig, 2011) assume that there is discontinuous management transition when promoting senior managers to executive officers, previous findings have tended to be partial, fragmented, or not empirical. As shown in Fig. 5.1, decision-making skills were changed from “short-term, analytic, and partial” to “long-term, intuitive, and holistic,” whereas skills in delegation and motivation were transformed from “directive” to “dedicated and entrusting.” Skills in collecting information were changed from “direct collection” to “network-based collection.” This may be because executive officers have to handle multiple businesses with bigger decisions, and greater risks and uncertainties (Charan et al., 2001). Notably, the unlearning of “decision-making” (61.5%) and “delegation and motivation” (59.0%) were more substantial than that of “collecting information” (35.9%). The results indicate that unlearning by executive officers may influence the

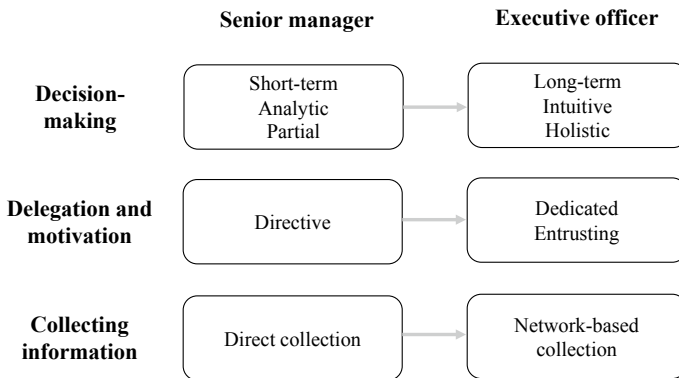


Fig. 5.1 Summary of findings

nature of organizational visions or objectives, which guide and direct employees' behaviors and performance. Although some studies on dynamic managerial capabilities have stressed the importance of cognitive capabilities for executive officers (e.g., Helfeat & Peteraf, 2015), the findings of this chapter also indicates that they have to unlearn not only cognitive or decision-making skills but also human or interpersonal skills.

5.6.2 *Practical Implications*

There are some implications for management development. First, managers who become executive officers have to review all aspects of their managerial skills, including “decision-making,” “delegation and motivation,” and “collecting information,” rather than considering only partial improvement. Specifically, executive officers need to have long-term, intuitive, and holistic viewpoints, to empower subordinates, and to collect information through inside and outside networks. To promote the managerial transition, it may be effective to provide candidates for executive officers with training programs that help them prepare for unlearning obsolete skills and learning necessary ones after they are promoted to executive positions.

Second, managers should understand that the changing skill requirement is discontinuous. It is ineffective for executive officers to stick with managerial skills that have worked well in the previous position, such as short-term and partial decision-making, directive leadership, and direct collection of information. These skills may hinder staff development and performance in the unit. After being promoted to executive positions, managers need feedback on their leadership styles from superiors, colleagues, and subordinates to improve their leadership performance. Additionally, executive coaching by external professional coaches or an apprenticeship within top management teams is beneficial for improving managerial skills when managers fail to deal with discontinuities in transitions.

Third, organizations should introduce several systems and practices to make managers at all levels aware of discontinuities in managerial transitions and the need for unlearning their managerial skills when they are promoted to higher positions. It may be desirable for managers to acquire unlearning capabilities when they are lower or middle managers. To facilitate this, organizations can introduce not only formal systems such as 360-degree appraisals and management training programs but also informal systems including apprenticeships and mentor networks in which senior managers coach their junior managers.

5.7 Conclusion

Although executive officers have an impact on organizational unlearning, little is known about unlearning processes in the upper echelon. This chapter identified

discontinuous unlearning flows in managerial skills before and after promotions to executive positions. The findings suggest that managers need to substantially unlearn their decision-making managerial skills as well as delegation and motivation when they are promoted from senior managers to executive officers.

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