



**tom brown**  
*inside*  
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# Who Needs Executives?

Top managers have three  
key jobs.

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## **TOM BROWN**



**T**he most curious aspect of working in this “Age of Empowerment” is the identity crisis that has fallen upon many executives. Does business still need management?

Executives used to be those people in an organization who had junior executives reporting to them. The junior execs had senior managers reporting to them. The senior managers had plain-vanilla managers reporting to them. And the managers had supervisors reporting to them... well, you remember the old organization charts.

Then came the great de-layering of companies around the world, the intense thrust of participative management, and the significant chopping of countless execs in middle-management ranks — sometimes called “the gray cloud of managers.” Suddenly there was new proximity between senior executives and workers.

Still, things are not exactly right in management corridors these days. Many executives, now perhaps only one or two layers above the rank-and-file, have either become unsure what to do — or are assuming that their new job is to take the place of the junior managers and supervisors who are no longer around.

Which is why, in huge industrial corporations, I hear of group vice presidents checking on yesterday’s shipping delay, or who called in sick, or how much overtime will be needed next week. Not that these issues aren’t important, but is that what group vice presidents should be doing?

It all reminds me of a classic management article I once came across; it was written by two professors at Concordia University in Montreal. Titled “Executive Behavior: Its Facts, Fictions, and Paradigms,” it appeared in the March-April 1991 issue of *Business Horizons*, Indiana University’s quarterly journal. As I re-read it now, a dozen years after it first appeared, it strikes me that many senior executives today are *still* confused about their role. Some may be wondering whether they even have a role. I won’t try to recap the entire article by Joe Kelly and A. Bakr Ibrahim, but here’s a taste: “The Pepsi Generation of executives has a different vision, are young in years but seasoned in experience, and often behave in quite unmanagerial ways.”

What these professors were calling for back in 1991 were new executive techniques to accompany new executive points of view. Still, my own perspective on an executive’s job today remains essentially unchanged: *Executives must make sure that the right priorities are being addressed in every part of their corporate realm.*

**First, executives must rigorously guarantee that priorities assure quality of work.**

This means that they must not only ask questions, but demand that the right answers are being given everywhere, on issues like: Who decides when quality levels are right? Are workers and managers communicating with customers to ascertain and meet customer needs? Are the right conditions and tools in place for people to work? Are “teams” a reality or just a pompous cliché? Once an exec is assured that quality products and services are being delivered day-in, day-out, he or she must confront the second priorities challenge:

**Executives must be concerned about and ensure that the quality of worklife promotes a healthy workforce.**

They must demand that the right answers are being given everywhere on issues like: Are rewards correctly balanced between employee desires and organizational needs? Are employees and supervisors growing in their jobs? Has tedium replaces a sense of work challenge? And how is the morale level being managed? But every company has a set of needs that go beyond quality of work and quality of worklife.

**Executives must absolutely ensure that the overall quality of management promotes organization longevity.**

They must demand that the right answers are being given everywhere on issues like: Does the future strategy/vision of the organization complement the traditions of the enterprise? Is there a unique “spirit” at this company that makes it unlike any other? Do disparate internal units trust each other and avoid internal “civil war?”

It was Warde Wheaton, the now-retired president of Honeywell Inc.’s Aerospace and Defense business, who first talked about quality of work/worklife/management. I remember well how he drew three interlocking circles to illustrate how the executive’s challenges needed to be thought of as threefold, interfused, and inseparable.

Warde helped me (more than he may ever realize!) to think about what it would take to establish the right priorities to make those circles come alive.

So for any executive confused today about what he or she should be doing, let me emphasize: resist the inclination to pore over the production and shipping schedules, to check on absentee lists, to re-verify the inventory lists — and give those tasks to someone who reports to you. That’s their job. You have a much bigger task.

If you’re not questioning, proposing, and subsequently campaigning for the right organizational priorities, then don’t expect anyone else to step up to the challenge. That’s your job.

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**Tom Brown** is a champion of vanguard thinking about leadership.

The author of hundreds of articles, he also wrote the first online book on leadership: *The Anatomy Of Fire: Sparking A New Spirit Of Enterprise*, which explores the look and feel of leadership in the 21st Century. To learn more about Tom, including his major role in *Business: The Ultimate Resource*, the largest handbook/database ever on managerial leadership, go to [www.tombrown.us](http://www.tombrown.us).

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