On the Theory and Practice of "Executive Sessions"

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1.0. What is an Executive Session?

An Executive Session is a process that has been developed by the Kennedy School of Government to allow practitioners and academics to search together for plausibly effective answers to important public problems. It differs in important ways from the usual form of engagement between academics and practitioners.

1.1. Shared Responsibility for/Complementary Capabilities in Developing "Useable Knowledge"

In the usual form of engagement (often called "dissemination," or "outreach"), the assumption is that the academics have developed some important new knowledge. The purpose of the engagement is for the academics to "reach out to" practitioners in the interests of "disseminating" the new knowledge they have created.

In contrast, in an Executive Session the assumption is that neither academics nor practitioners have the knowledge needed to solve the problem at hand. They are both uncertain. They may be uncertain about the shape of the problem, or the best way to frame the problem, as well as uncertain and the best feasible solution. The challenge facing the members of the Executive Session, then, is to work together to find the best possible way to describe and act on the problem.

In this effort, the practitioners and academics bring different but complementary strengths. The practitioners bring a strong sense of the problems they face, and some degree of urgency about solving it. They also bring intuitions, ideas and experiences that point toward the answer. Indeed, sometimes they have the answer! Finally, they bring the discipline of the practical: they can tell whether a proposed idea is politically and administratively feasible in the concrete environments in which they are operating -- in effect, whether an idea "has legs."

For their part, the academics bring an outside perspective -- ideally, one that is rich in current substantive information and historical context. They also bring imagination and creativity, and a determination to test new ideas against both logic and evidence in trying to gauge the likely results. The whole point of an Executive Session is to combine these formidable assets in an important "discovery process."

1.2. "Leaning Into Implementation"

Executive Sessions differ from conventional views of academic outreach and engagement in a second important way: they are designed to move beyond the development of an actionable idea; to breathe life into the idea; to make it an actual policy that is adopted or a practice that is implemented in the "real world." To do this, the processes of an Executive Session are designed to create conditions favorable to the widespread adoption and implementation of the idea, or to engage the commitment of participants and others to acting on the advice of the Executive Session. Executive Sessions do not stop when an idea has been developed; they continue on to encourage implementation and continued learning. In the end, a report is not the goal; it is a social commitment to develop and explore the idea in practice.

2.0. What Sort of Problems can an Executive Session Address?

Generally speaking, Executive Sessions can focus on two different kinds of "problems." One type could be considered a "substantive" problem: for example, what can be done to improve the efficiency and fairness of electricity generation across the United States, or how could the country best respond to an "epidemic" of youth violence. These are "substantive" problems in the sense that they are defined in terms of social conditions that need to be addressed, and if addressed, would improve the overall welfare of society. In effect, the problems are defined in terms of outcomes that society should be trying to achieve rather than the institutions that provide the means for dealing with the problems.

A second type presents itself as an "institutional" or "organizational" problem: for example, what is the best use of the Child Protective Services agencies to support struggling families and communities, or how might the assets represented by a Municipal Police Department best be used to improve the safety and quality of life in today's urban communities, or what can be done in hospitals to reduce medical errors. These are "institutional" or "organizational" problems in the sense that they start with an existing organization, and then ask whether those organizations in their current configuration and operations are being most effectively used to accomplish goals assigned to them, or that they could take on.

2.1. Substantive Policy Problems versus Organizational Positioning Problems

It would be easy to make too much of the distinction between these two kinds of problems. For example, working out the answer to an important substantive problem necessarily requires an Executive Session to attend to the political mobilization and organizational implementation that would be required to breathe life into the substantive policy idea that emerges from the Session. The proposed idea cannot be inconsistent with the political and administrative realities (though it can strain them). And, ideally, the process of the Executive Session will have readied the ground for the adoption and implementation of the new policies, and in this way, have engaged some important institutional and organizational questions as well as substantive issues.

Similarly, working out the answer to an important question of organizational or institutional "strategy" requires an Executive Session to have defined the substantive results and outcomes that would be valuable for a particular institution to have achieved.

So, one cannot really divorce substance from institutions and organizations if one is trying to work out a real answer to a social problem.

Yet, it is worth noting that there really is some tension between beginning with the idea that the Executive Session is trying to address a substantive problem, and the idea that it is trying to address a question of institutional or organizational strategy, or operations. If the focus is a substantive problem rather than an organization, then many of those invited will be policy analysts and designers -- not necessarily implementers of programs. This is not a problem if the issue under consideration is a policy decision that has to be made, and once made, will be largely self-implementing. It is a bigger problem, however, if the problem under consideration is one that requires important changes in the way organizations across the country do their work.

The difficulty in dealing with these kinds of problems is that one has to find a way to bridge from policy analysts and advisers and legislators who have policies they would like to have implemented to those who lead the organizations that are charged with implementing the policies. This is not an easy transition to make.

Executive Sessions focused on both kinds of problems can succeed. But the most effective Executive Sessions seem to be either those that can focus on developing an answer to an important policy problem (say, for example, what to do about social security) in which the implementation will be fairly straightforward once the policy is agreed to, or those that focus on the best way to use a particular organization or institution either to maximize their mission effectiveness, or to make their largest possible contribution to social welfare. The kind that are difficult are those in which the participants are designing work for others to do. Then, they tend to produce advice without necessarily readying the ground for effective implementation, and in doing so, add relatively little to more conventional forms of academic engagement.

2.2. Focusing on Big, Scary Problems

Executive Sessions are also best used for problems of certain sizes and shapes. Because Executive Sessions are expensive -- not only in financial terms, but also more importantly in the time and attention of the academic and practitioner leaders in a given field -- the problems they take on have to be large enough to be worth the cost. Moreover, because the process is set up to encourage a discovery process, the problems to be considered should not have at the outset an obvious technical answer. This is not a process for working on relatively small technical issues. It is a process for working on large issues that are troubling to those who feel accountable for dealing with them precisely because there is not an obvious answer.

Indeed, Executive Sessions may be particularly well suited for dealing with a particularly important kind of substantive or institutional problem: the kind that everyone knows is big and important, but for which they do not have a satisfactory answer. These are the problems that get put into the "too hard" box; the kind that wake people up at three o'clock in the morning because they know they are important, and they haven't done anything recently to solve them. These are also the kinds of problems that are hard to act on *as individuals* -- partly because it is hard to get the answer right, and partly because even if one got it right, the society couldn't recognize that the answer was the right one without others agreeing that it was the right answer. The group process of an Executive Session is ideal, then, for addressing the biggest and scariest problems that a professional community confronts. This is also what makes these problems worth the attention of first rate academics and academic institutions.

3.0. What is the process of an Executive Session? How does it work?

The process of an Executive Session is designed to accomplish the goals set out above. First, to allow academics and practitioners to work on that particular set of public problems that are important, and for which current solutions do not exist. Second, to work on these problems in a way that not only increases the chance that a "value creating" solution will be found, but also creates conditions favorable to widespread implementation and continued learning.

The process is a complex one about which we are still learning, but the basic idea consists of the following components. An Executive Session is:

1) a "sustained conversation;"

2) among a "core group of members selected for their ability to provide leadership to a practice field;" that

3) produces "learning and transformation in a practice field through continuing dialogue, digestible publications, and education."

More detailed discussion of each part of the process are presented below.

3.1. A "Sustained Conversation"

Central to the idea of an Executive Session is the idea of a *sustained, confidential conversation* among a stable, core group of members who have been chosen because they can exercise significant influence over a policy domain or a field of practice. An Executive Session is not a single meeting; it is a *series* of meetings --often lasting over several years. The meetings are not public; they are *private*. They provide a "back-channel" of communication, protected from the usual pressures that public officials face, that allows individuals to express their doubts and misgivings, and to talk about failures as well as successes. The group that meets is not a different group, assembled and reassembled to deal with particular technical issues; it is the *same group* meeting over the entire period. This core group may decide that it needs the help of some specialists, and those might be invited to attend a meeting to offer their assistance. But most of the time in the meetings is spent with the core group talking to one another; not taking the testimony of expert witnesses. The group may also allow some people to come and observe the meeting, but the observers are just that. They observe. They do not participate. And, they are bound to rules of confidentiality just as members of the Executive Session are.

3.11. Why Sustained?

These principles were developed for the following reasons. First, we assume that the learning and creating that are so central to a discovery process take time. *Elapsed* time may be as important as time spent in the meetings. Ideas that are unfamiliar have to be encountered several times before they can be fully understood. Multiple exposure may be necessary as people come back to an issue time and again until they have developed it clearly, and are satisfied with the conclusion. For these reasons, the members of the Executive Session themselves need time to create and learn if they are going to be successful

Second, we assume that the Executive Session has its impact on the practice community whose work it is trying to improve over time. Just as members of the Executive Session need time to think, to invent, to mull over, to test, to get familiar with ideas; so the field they are trying to influence needs the same things. A field is not changed by a single meeting or a single report. It is changed by the accumulation of considered judgment, led by a group of persuasive thinkers and leaders, who are engaged in a continuing dialogue with a policy domain or a practice field. For this purpose, too, time matters. If the Executive Session is a continuing presence in a field for three to five years, its impact will be greater than if it is a presence for only a year or two. It also helps if over this time the Executive Session seems to grow and learn as well as speak authoritatively. This means that it is engaged in a real, on-going dialogue with the field -- not just an effort to speak *ex cathedra*.

These considerations lead us to plan for a series of meetings that occur frequently enough to keep the issues on the minds of participants, but slowly enough to allow the Session to fit into the schedules of busy, important people, and to allow for elapsed time to do its work. Generally speaking, this means 3-4 times per year over the course of three to four years. We have done Executive Sessions that meet less often, less frequently, and over shorter periods of time; but these have often been less successful than the ones that carried on more intensively over longer periods of time.

3.12. How is the Discussion Managed?

Each meeting of an Executive Session is also run in a particular way to maximize the group's ability to draw from the knowledge and perspective of its members. The method is best understood in contrast to the usual practices of meetings.

The usual meetings one attends are organized in a particular way. Usually, there is some individual who is considered the Chairperson of the meeting, and sits at the head of the table. That person is usually expected to fulfill two important responsibilities: 1) a "process responsibility" to manage the group's time, and allocate the right and the responsibility to speak among members of the group; and 2) a "substantive responsibility" to keep the group focused on an agenda, and to clarify and summarize the discussion within the group. Often, the Chairperson has to face and deal with some important tensions: not only the difficulty of balancing the process role with the substantive role, but also dealing with important tensions within each role.

For example, in the process role, the Chairperson often has to manage the tension that develops between, on one hand, ensuring that everyone who wants to speak has a chance to do so (important both for the morale of the group, and to ensure that issues that are important to at least one member of the group do not get ignored), and on the other, to allow an animated discussion that breaks out within the group to follow its course (important because it encourages dialogue rather than monologue, and is usually much more interesting and important than people simply "getting on the record" with their views). The familiar process that assures the first goal is one in which the Chairperson simply records who raises their hand, and then takes them in the order in which they raised their hand. While this process assures "due process," it also usually produces individual, isolated speeches rather than dialogue, and is pretty boring. The process that is designed to allow some dialogue as well as individual, disconnected comments is to have some special signal such as holding up two hands that indicates that a person wants to respond directly to a point made by someone else. These are often clumsy, and open to abuse.

In the substantive role, there is often a tension that arises from members views that the Chairperson has a substantive agenda of his or her own that is being advanced, and that the challenges that come from the Chair are designed to advance their own substantive views at the expense of the others. It also proves to be very difficult to be attentive to process when one is thinking hard about the substance of what is being said, and searching for common themes in the discussion.

Anyone who has ever had to be a Chairperson of a meeting is familiar with these difficulties. The technique we have developed to deal with these problems is a simple one: we divide the jobs among several different people. The meeting still has a Chairperson who sits at the head of the table, and takes the responsibility for recognizing people and giving them the right to speak. But that person's *only* responsibility is process. The Chairperson's job is to strike the right balance between hearing from everyone on one hand and encouraging dialogue when it breaks out on the other. The Chairperson in this model is also authorized to call on people who have not raised their hand. This is often important when one member shows obvious signs of distress or disengagement, but is choosing not to articulate the reasons. It is also appropriate when one person's temperament is less overbearing than another's, and the group runs the risk of not hearing what that person has to say. Because the Chairperson is free to concentrate solely on process, the Chair can take a far more proactive stance in managing the conversation.

The substantive tasks of "challenging" and "clarifying" on one hand, and "summarizing" and "synthesizing" on the other, are given to other members of the group -- often the "academics" or "leaveners" who are added to the group of practitioners in the interests of challenging their thought. Some individuals are designated as "substantive challengers." Their job is to challenge what individuals say. In ordinary conversation, people often collude in pretending to both understand and accept another person's statement even when they didn't understand it, or didn't agree with it. That politeness often stands in the way of learning. To break through the politeness and set a higher standard for the conversation, individuals need to be specifically authorized to behave "impolitely:" to be able to say. "I didn't understand what you just said," or "Why do you believe what you just said." Such questions force the conversation to a higher level of information exchange that helps the group learn. Other individuals are designated as "synthesizers:" their job is to listen to the whole flow of the conversation, trying to make connections between what one person said at one time and another person said much earlier or later. Often, these individuals are given specific times to make their comments -- such as the end of a particular session. But they are also encouraged to offer their summaries at other opportune moments in the conversation when a particular idea has crystallized. Because these individuals have no process responsibilities, they can concentrate exclusively on the substance.

3.13. Recording and Transcription

Because we take the conversation that happens at these meetings very seriously, we have also followed the practice of recording and transcribing the meetings. This is expensive to do. It is also expensive to use the transcripts, since it takes a long time to read through them and study them. But we have found the expense well worth the cost. There are several reasons for this.

First, it relieves us of the need to take comprehensive notes of what happened in the meeting; the recording and transcription accomplishes that for us, and does a much better job than any note taker could. One is free in the meeting to have one's thoughts take off in several different directions without having to worry that one will miss something when one is thinking about a comment that was made.

Second, we have often found that reading the transcript gives a much different picture of what happened at the meeting than what we experienced going through it. There were important comments that were made and not picked up in the meeting that seem very important on reading the transcript. Some quiet voices that did not attract a great deal of comment turn out to have made significant observations once their voice emerges more equally in the transcript.

Third, the transcript often provides a useful way of feeding back to the group the discussion they had on a particular issue, and thus provides for some substantive continuity from one meeting to another. It also helps us to see more clearly what the perspective and point of view and position of particular members of the Session, because we can see in the transcript the reflection of their concerns and themes.

Fourth, the transcript often gives us a leg up when it comes time to write about a subject. The discussion recorded in the transcript is invaluable in alerting the authors to issues that need to be addressed. The summaries and syntheses often provide schematic outlines of papers to be written.

The recording poses some threat to the confidentiality of the proceedings. But we deal with this by saying that the recording and transcriptions are being made only for internal purposes. We promise that we will not use quotes from individuals (whether attributed or not) in any form without their expressed permission. We have so far never had this rule violated. We have on occasion published parts of our discussion when individuals have consented to doing so. We have always asked for permission.

3.2. "Among a Core Group of Members Selected for Their Ability to Provide Leadership to a Practice Field"

Because the Executive Session depends so much on a continuing discussion within a small, particular group of people, selecting the "members" of an Executive Session" is a crucially important step. One can think about this in terms of: 1) the criteria used to decide on what particular individuals should be included; and 2) the process one uses to nominate particular individuals as members, and to vet their credentials against the criteria.

3.21. The Selection Criteria for Individual Members

Remember that the goal of an Executive Session is to simultaneously invent an idea and help create the conditions under which that idea will be adopted and widely implemented. If we were to focus first on the goal of influencing the field, we could conclude that one important criteria would be "current influence and standing in the policy domain or in the practice field" that we are trying to influence. One easy way to think about this is that one is looking for the 15-20 people who together represent the largest fraction of influence over a policy domain or practice field that could be assembled. That amount of influence may never be very much. (For example, one would be doing very well if one thought one had about 3% of the effective influence in the room.) And, the amount of influence that can be assembled might well vary from field to field. But the point is to find a group of people who, if they could agree, and start moving in a particular direction, would send out a pretty big ripple.

This criteria gets modified a bit, however, when we recall that we are trying to find ideas at the frontiers of current practice that will be important in the future rather than reproduce the commitment to current orthodoxy. Often, those who are most influential currently are those whose commitments are to the current orthodoxy. Indeed, they may have helped create the current orthodoxy! Or, they may safely embody it. In any case, they may be interested in defending and protecting the *status quo* rather than searching for an important improvement. This means that the idea of "current influence and standing" has to be modified to focus on "*future* influence and standing" and "reputation for innovativeness and forward thinking." Ideally, the group would include some of the powerful representatives of the current orthodoxy as well as some who were (more or less respectfully) challenging the current orthodoxy. Ideally, the balance would be weighted a bit toward the latter group, but the Executive Session cannot be seen as something that is wholly divorced from the traditions and current practices of the field or it risks discrediting.

Because the group has to work together in a discovery process, certain temperamental qualities also become important criteria for selection. One might be tempted by a iconoclastic visionary, but if that person is not someone who is prepared to be open and to learn from others, and will only use the Executive Session as a platform for advancing his or her idiosyncratic views, that person has to be rejected. The success of an Executive Session depends on having people who are interested in the views of others, in learning, and in creating together -- not in simply insisting on the rightness of their cause. It also helps a great deal if the person can write, since Executive Sessions work best when members take a lot of responsibility for writing.

3.22. Characteristics of the Group as a Whole

So far, we have been discussing the characteristics of individuals in the Executive Session (their influence in the field, and their ability to teach and learn in a process like the Executive Session). It is also important that the group as a whole have some aggregate characteristics.

3.221. Ideological Diversity

Because an Executive Session is also trying to develop an idea that can actually be adopted and implemented, it is important that the group actually include, and be perceived to include, people from many different ideological positions. Unless both "right" and "left" of the political spectrum are each powerfully represented in the group, the ideas that emerge will have little chance of either being different than the ideas now being developed in those ideological circles, or of being easy to adopt and implement.

Conversely, if an idea can weather the ideological conflict within a properly constituted Executive Session, it can probably stand up pretty well in the real world.

It is worth emphasizing this point for the simple reason that is very tempting to ignore it. There are many who would like to use the Executive Session process for their own political purposes. They can use the Harvard name and the process itself to get leverage over an issue they would like to advance. There are three problems with allowing this to happen, however. First, in these cases, relatively little learning takes place. People remain rooted in the positions they had when they first arrived. Second, there is less chance that the results of the Executive Session will be widely embraced because they are already familiar and have not yet mustered a constituency. Third, it is an improper and wasteful use of a University. The whole point of a University is to encourage a wide-ranging dialogue --not to aid in the establishment of an orthodoxy. Indeed, I think the most common error we have made has been to fail to ensure sufficiently powerful representation of ideologically divergent positions, and the greatest successes (as well as some failures) have occurred when we had very different ideological perspectives in the room. So, ideological diversity is probably a necessary, but by no means a sufficient cause of success in Executive Sessions.

There is an important connection between this point and the funding of Executive Sessions. Generally speaking, it is extremely valuable to have funding from multiple sources, and from sources that have different ideological positions. This provides the Executive Session with the freedom to explore many different avenues of thought, and reassures people within the Session that they have not been selected as "token" members. One might also think that the interest in ideological diversity in the group would privilege foundation funding over government funding. But in our experience, we have sometimes found foundation funding to be more ideologically limiting than government funding.

3.222: The Central Role of Practitioners

The most important individuals in the Executive Session are the practitioners who are influential in a policy domain, or who can lead a practice field. It is their work that the Executive Session seeks to inform and support. It is their judgments and commitments that ultimately determine the success of the Executive Session. For this reason, we make these principals the dominant voices in the Executive Session -- certainly more than half the people in the room, often as much as 70%.

Sometimes, and particularly when one is running an Executive Session that includes representatives of many different professions, it is tempting to gain representativeness and significant leverage by inviting the leaders or staff of professional associations rather than the individual professionals who are outstanding innovators in the field. This can work when the individual who heads a professional association is, in him or herself, an important, innovative, reflective practitioner. Then one gets the most of both worlds. On the other hand, this can be a problem if the person who heads a professional association is no longer a leader of the field, or never was a leader and simply has the responsibility of maintaining a professional association. Those who have the responsibility for maintaining a professional association have often learned to avoid conflict and controversy. As a result, they often turn out to be an intellectually orthodox force in the discussions, and to become extremely uncomfortable when conflict breaks out, or when radical ideas are advanced. Also, they often less influence over their practice fields than those individuals who are viewed as substantive leaders in the profession rather than professional apparatchiks.

3.223. "Leaveners" and Academics

So, the influential practitioners are the most important principals in an Executive Session. At the same time, however, because the point of the Executive Session is to use the resources and capabilities of a University and its commitment to seeking important truths to challenge and improve the answers that today's practitioners can supply, the group of practitioners has to be "leavened" with those who are in a position to challenge them. Part of this "leavening" process has to do with "holding a mirror up to the practice field." Often, those who have committed their professional careers to a particular practice field have become wholly pre-occupied with their problems and their goals. Because they talk primarily to one another, they have lost touch with the way they appear to people outside the profession. That usually makes them more vulnerable and less effective than they could be. Their internal strength creates an external vulnerability.

An important part of an Executive Session is exposing that external vulnerability. Once experienced, it often unleashes a significant amount of creativity in the group as they struggle not only to make themselves acceptable to themselves and their profession, but also to a curious and skeptical public. A good way to do that is to bring into the midst of an Executive Session somewhat disinterested representatives of the broader community. Often this means asking reporters, or state legislators, or members of other practice communities into the Executive Session. (Nota Bene: if reporters are invited for "leavening purposes," they must consent to the principle of confidentiality, and come not as working reporters, but for the specific purpose of helping the group see themselves in the mirror of public opinion.)

The "leavening" process is also importantly aided by the presence of academic expertise and perspectives in the group. The academic participants play crucial roles as "substantive challengers," as "synthesizers," and as "writers." For the purposes of an Executive Session, however, the academics have to be the kind who can adopt the role of student and support staff as well as the role of teacher and authority. It also helps if the academics have had some practical experience in the field either as practitioners or as consultants. Moreover, to reinforce the idea that the Executive Session is for the practitioners rather than the academics, it is important that the academics represent only a small minority of the group -- less than one fourth, sometimes as little as one fifth.

3.23. Finding, Vetting and Engaging Members

Once one has the criteria for individual members and for the group as a whole in mind, one faces the challenge of finding and/or selecting from a known group those individuals who can best occupy the limited seats around the table. This is a hard, delicate, and frustrating process. One needs to mix some "systematic" and "mechanical" efforts with some more "ad hoc" and "judgment based" processes.

3.231. Searching for Good Members

The process begins with those who want to initiate an Executive Session. This team often includes funders and experts who have been active in the field, sense a problem, and are trying to do find a way to get their hands on the problem. These people often know people within the field they are trying to influence, and have views about whether they would be good or bad as members of an Executive Session. A usual first step is to brainstorm with this group to identify a large number of plausible candidates.

At this stage, it is often useful to treat the names developed from this initiating group not as candidates for membership, but instead as a kind of nominating committee. Calls to these individuals asking for their views about "who would be good in an Executive Session" will produce additional names. One will also often get a sense of whether the nominator would like to be considered to be a member. At this stage, one could get quite systematic and use the technique of "snowball sampling" to generate a list of names. One can also capture and record how many times people in the growing sample mention a particular individual, and thus get a picture of whom the field regards as a potentially important leader.

One can also supplement this process by searching professional publications and academic literatures to see who is writing about and being cited frequently in the practice field.

These methods are strongest in identifying the currently influential people. If only these are used, however, they run the risk of failing to get the leaders of the future, and the people who are innovating at the edges of current practice. Finding these people is often more *ad hoc*. One can press in the snowball sampling processes to identify the younger, up and coming mavericks as well as the older, more established leaders, and that will produce some finds. One can also find such people writing in professional publications. Or, one can find them appearing at professional conferences, or in executive education programs that support a given professional field. While these methods are a bit riskier, one has to take some chances in order to create some variety among the practitioners.

Once candidate names have been developed, one begins the process of selecting the best individuals to make the most effective group. That means looking at individuals in particular categories. It may also mean checking out some of the personal characteristics of the individuals by asking for references from people who know them well.

3.232: Enlisting Members/Setting the Contract

Once selected, individuals have to be enlisted to join the Executive Session. The asking is an important part of setting the contract between the individual members and the Executive Session as a whole. It matters, then, how the Members are asked to join, and what expectations are set at the moment of enlistment.

With respect to the "how" of asking, there are several important aspects of mood and tone. Those doing the asking shouldn't feel that they are asking for a favor from the invitee; they should think they are offering a unique opportunity to participate in a process that can produce an important result. They should be respectful of the position of the "busyness" and importance of the invitees; but should be prepared to say that their participation in the Executive Session is one of the most important things they can do to make a contribution and extend their influence over a field to which they have already committed a great deal, and care a great deal about.

The managers of the Exec Session should also set out some conditions for participation. They should tell the invitees that if they say "yes," they are committing themselves to regular attendance over a period of years; they are not encouraged to "sample" the meetings and see whether they like them. The invitees should also be told that while the managers of the Executive Session will take the responsibility for ensuring the overall quality of the process and that their time will not be wasted; much of the success of the session will depend on the commitment of the Members. They should not join if they are not prepared to work hard to make the Executive Session a success.

Obviously, these are tough conditions. Not all will agree to them. Many who say they agree will not really mean it. And even those who are committed will begin to defect if nothing seems to happen in the Session.

What draws people to participation in the Executive Session even when it looks like they are making an expensive commitment to an unfamiliar and uncertain enterprise are essentially three things: 1) their commitment to leadership in a policy domain or practice field; 2) their belief that an Executive Session will allow them to exercise leadership more effectively than they can do on their own; 3) their attraction to and curiosity about the other people in the Session. It helps, then, to have the sponsorship be prestigious, and to have some of the early committed Members be prestigious. If a group of sufficient quality and commitment cannot be assembled, the Session ought not be undertaken.

3.233 The Importance of Introductions at the First Meeting in Setting the Contract

The first meeting is often particularly important in developing a sense of ownership and setting a tone for participation in the Exec Session as well as in identifying the important substantive issues to be discussed. We have found that it is often very important to use a substantial piece of the first meeting to allow each individual member to "introduce" himself to the group by talking about accomplishments and frustrations in the policy domain or practice field that is the focus of improvement, and what they think the key problems and likely solutions in the field might be. We give each individual as much as 10 minutes to set out their views. We then allow some discussion of what they say.

Obviously, if one does this for 15-20 members, a great deal of time must be committed. And, it is natural for those planning the meeting to feel two things: 1) that such introductions will be incredibly boring; and 2) that they should take more responsibility for getting into the substantive work, and do so by making substantive contributions themselves. Consequently, the planners often decide to cut the "introductions" short in order to "get to the substantive agenda more quickly."

In our experience, it is very important to resist these feelings. This is true for four reasons. First, what the principals have to say about their work and the challenges and frustrations they face turns out to be substantively important. In important respects, these introductions often turn out to identify the important substantive questions that the group will have to wrestle with over the course of the Executive Session. So it is not true that the introductions lack substance; they are usually full of important substantive issues with large implications for the group. Second, this process sends the message that the experience of the principals is highly valued -- so much so that we are all going to sit and listen to it. Third, the process sends the message that much of the work lies in the hands of the principals. If something interesting and important is to happen, they will have to make it happen. Fourth, we have found that we will eventually get from each participant the speech that reflects their views about the subject being discussed. Often, people will wait a long time to give this speech. While they are waiting to give the speech, they won't be thinking of much else. For these reasons, it is often extremely valuable to get the speech earlier rather than later. Once given, both the individual and the group can work on the ideas contained in this speech. Until given, neither the individual nor the group can interrogate the ideas that are the important views held by the individual members. While asking for this speech early does not necessarily guarantee that individuals ill give it (they may wait for a more opportune time), it increases the chance that we will hear the speech early.

In every Exec Session we have run, we have faced the worry that these "introductions" would be boring and a waste of time, and faced pressure to reduce the time committed to them. In no Exec Session where we gave a lot of time to the introductions have they, in fact, been boring. And in some where we have given this process short shrift, we have regretted it, since it left some individuals not fully included in the Session and the planning group with more of the responsibility for making something happen than is ideally desirable.

3. "That Produces Learning and Transformation in a Practice Field Through Continuing Dialogue, Digestible Publications, and Executive Education"

An Executive Session's effects on the world register through a kind of cascade effect that widens out from the Members of the Executive Session to other leaders and officials, and that extends over time through written materials.

3.1. The First Round Effect: Educating Members

The first round effect of an Executive Session is on the views and commitments of the members of the Executive Session themselves. If done correctly, the Members of an Executive Session will learn a great deal from one another and from the leaveners, and from sitting with the problem that is the focus of the session. They will become clearer and more confident in their own views. They will be more articulate about a problem.

3.2. Second Round Effect: Influencing Organizations and Professional Associations

The second round effect will come from the impact of the Members on their own organizations and the professional associations to which they belong and in which they are embedded. If these people have been selected well, they will become more effective in leading their own organizations. They will also lead by example, and through speeches and other kinds of appearances other organizations. Arguably, these effects alone would be enough to justify the Executive Session. It is no small thing to create a powerful and thoughtful cadre of leaders in a policy domain or a practice field.

3.3. Third Round Effect: Creating an Enduring Literature and a Wider Discussion

The impact of an Executive Session can be magnified, however, if written products emerge that can be more widely discussed and used in the policy domain or practice field. (Note: there is probably a really important opportunity associated with electronic media, but haven't yet explored these.) To be useful, however, we think that the written materials should not take the form of "Commission Reports."

In our view, Commission Reports have two important liabilities. First, they have a negative effect on the learning process within the group. If the group is committed to producing a voluminous "final report," members will spend all their time trying to ensure that a particular idea they have will be properly reflected in the final report. That prevents them from presenting the idea early and working on it. Second, from the point of view of the practice field to which the report is directed, such reports are often undigestible. They are too large to understand coming all at once. They claim a kind of authority that discourages active engagement of the rest of the field.

The alternative that we have found valuable is to produce a series of shorter "communiques" that take up smaller issues in a more speculative, discursive mode. The papers are ndividually authored -- ideally, practitioner and academic; not the products of the group as a whole. This avoids the necessity of having everyone in the group agree to every word. The Executive Session, of course, is an important sounding board for the production of these papers, and part of the work of the Executive Session is commissioning and reviewing these papers. But the point is that the Session as a whole is not the author, and not everyone in the group has to agree with what is said. That allows individuals to express more controversial and interesting ideas. Indeed, it is sometimes useful to publish contrary views within the group to give the flavor of an on-going, serious discussion about tough issues rather than the development of a single authoritative position.

Among the kinds of papers that are produced, we have found certain kinds of written materials are particularly valuable products. For example, we have often found that we need a "here" paper that gives a history of how a policy domain or practice field got to its current place, and what the strengths and weaknesses of the current position might be. We have also found that at some stage it is important to write a "there" paper that outlines a vision of where we would like to be, some alternative ideas of where we would like to be and the reasons that seems like a better place to be. It follows, then, that it is often valuable to produce a "getting there paper" that describes what needs to be done to move from current position to the favored alternative. Sometimes these subjects can be divided up into pieces, but they all have to hang together in a basic story and point of view.

We have also found it helpful to develop cases that provide concrete illustrations of people actually doing the things that the group thinks might be valuable and *en route* to improved practices. These cases are rarely fully developed pictures of the desired alternative. Nor are they necessarily fully detailed accounts of the actions that are necessary to move from the current reality to a preferred state of affairs. They are inevitably partial glimpses. But they help to indicate more concretely what is meant by the larger ideas, to show that some people have actually succeeded in putting them in practice, and to reveal some of the steps necessary to accomplish these results.

Finally, we have found it useful to develop technical background papers dealing with some detailed issues that arise that constitute potential stumbling blocks to others understanding the ideas, believing in them, or knowing how to act to realize them.

The fact that the written products consist of a wide variety of short papers produced over time seems to us an advantage rather than waiting for a long time to produce one publication that contains all the same information. The piecemeal development of the ideas in the papers is important to sustain the continuing dialogue with those who are not members of the Executive Session. The Session stays in touch and continues to get feedback; it doesn't go off into the wilderness for several years to produce a major tome. This ensures the freshness and relevance of the products.

What ties the papers together, however, is a consistent point of view that develops within the Executive Session. That consistent point of view -- the story that shows up in the "here" paper, the "there" paper, and the "getting there paper"-- operates like the "drone" in a bagpipe. It is the big message that is repeated over and over again both implicitly and explicitly in the publications of the Exec Session. On top of this basic story, the series of papers create a lively, detailed tune that can both entertain and inform.

3.4. Enduring Effects on the Profession: Executive Development Programs

Finally, the effect of an Executive Session can be enhanced if the ideas and materials developed within the Executive Session become the basis for a series of Executive Education Programs. In this way, many more, and many more people who will become the leaders in the future, can be exposed to the ideas and discussions that occurred in the original Executive Session.

4.0 The State of the Policy Domain or Practice Field as an Important Factor Influencing the Success of an Executive Session

We have reported here as much as we think we know about how to manage an Executive Session. Whether an Executive Session succeeds or not may depend to some degree on how well it is managed. But it is also true that the success of an Executive Session depends on the state of the policy domain or practice field that is the focus of its attention as well. In our view, the process is likely to produce the largest effects in situations where the practice field has been facing some problems, and is already in motion in search of the solutions. That is when the leverage of the Executive Session is greatest. It is also most likely to be successful when the group includes highly diverse perspectives. It also needs to find its voice in writing.

Even when well managed in a favorable setting, success is not assured. But in considering whether to proceed with an Executive Session, or in evaluating ones that have been undertaken, it is important to keep in mind the enormity of the task that an Executive Session undertakes. The goal of an Executive Session is to exert leverage over a broad field with a very limited number of days of professional time committed over a few years of time to sustain the conversation. The Executive Session is, we believe, a powerful lever arm. But we must keep in mind that it is a huge rock we are trying to move. No matter how skillful one is in wiggling the lever arm, it often helps to move the stone if an earthquake happens when one is wrestling with the rock.