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Exploring the Opportunities of Minority Senior Executive U.S. Federal Government Agency Leaders: A Qualitative Analysis

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Keywords

Strategic Leadership and Development, Employee Motivation, Engagement, Empowerment, Stakeholder Engagement



EXPLORING THE OPPORTUNITIES OF MINORITY SENIOR EXECUTIVE U.S. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AGENCY LEADERS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the opportunities and challenges minority senior executive U.S. federal government agency leaders (MSELs) faced on their path to leadership, and their strategies to manage and overcome these challenges. The phrase minority senior executive leaders refer to individuals who lead U.S. executive departments; individual federal agencies, departments, or commissions; and those that report under the direct leadership of majority or minority leaders. This study explored how MSELs gained entry into leadership positions typically held by majority leaders; how MSELs take advantage of the opportunities presented to them; and what had the most impact on these MSELs during their journey to senior executive leadership positions within the U.S. federal government. A triangulated data collection and analytical approach generated themes in the areas of top management team critical thinking & strategic development; employee motivation, engagement, and empowerment; agency representation and exposure; integrity and stakeholder engagement; mentors, sponsors, and mentoring; and developing agency leaders. This study has far-reaching implications because it provides a roadmap not only for minorities but also for all who aspire to obtain senior executive leadership positions.

Introduction and Background

A baby boomer “tsunami” has been forecasted by Congressional overseers to have a major impact on federal government agencies due to massive retirements. According to Liberto (2013), “So far, it hasn’t happened because more workers hung on to their jobs far longer than expected, in part due to the recession” (para. 5). Wenger (2012) noted the magnitude of the federal workers retiring has far exceeded the expectations of the government. In 2012, “Nearly 95,000 federal workers left this year through October, according to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, surpassing projections by more than 8,800. Another 78,000 are estimated to retire by next July” (para.3).

Data from the Pew Research Center, according to Minton-Eversole (2012), have “revealed that 10,000 baby boomers will reach age 65 every day during the next two decades. The oldest of the country’s estimated 77 million baby boomers began turning age 65, the traditional retirement age, in 2011” (para. 4). Researchers at the Center for Education and Workforce at Georgetown University produced a study that notes, “Overall employment is expected to increase by about 24 million to 164.6 million in 2020. The other 31 million positions will open up due to baby boomers retiring” (Bidwell, 2013, para. 3). The report further states that of “the nearly 165 million jobs, 65 percent will require some sort of postsecondary education or training, up from 59 percent in 2010. In industries like information technology and government, 80 percent of the jobs will require more than a high school diploma” (Bidwell, 2013, para. 3). By 2030, there will be only an estimated 41 million workers who will be joining

the workforce ranks, most of whom will not be adequately prepared to replace the average skilled worker, according to Hurt (2015).

Diversity and leveling the playing field for minorities in the workplace, on the other hand, has been a major topic in all professional arenas for many years now. Thomas and Gabarro (2012) argue: “The barriers, both organizational and individual, that impede the career advancement of racial minorities have been well researched and documented. But little is known about the experiences of the small percentage of minorities who do crack the glass ceiling of race” (para 1). This six-year study by Thomas and Gabarro (2012) highlights the advancement of minority executives in corporate America who were able to gain entry into leadership positions typically held by majority leaders in what was once considered White corporate America.

There is a major gap in leadership studies, and the body of literature in the area of majority senior executives who lead U.S. federal executive departments, independent federal government agencies, departments, and commissions. While Regan (2015) gives statistics on the breakdown of women in the U.S. federal government, diversity insights such as these are frequently provided, which highlights the racial differences between White women, and their diverse counterparts:

White women dominate the federal government female ranks with a representation of 58.4 %. They more than double the representation rate of their 2nd place colleagues, Black women who comprise 23.8% of federal positions. Hispanic women and Asian women are neck-in-neck for 3rd place when it comes to federal representation. Hispanic females make up 7.8 % of the federal workplace while Asian females represent 6.0% of the federal sector. Consistent with so many other negative affirmative employment indicators in the federal government for American Indians/Alaska Natives, American Indian/Alaska Native women bring up the rear as the smallest female demographic among all women in the federal space. They represent only 2.3% of all female federal employees (Regan, 2015, para.8).

Little is known about the minorities who have broken through the racial and ethnic glass ceiling who lead U.S. federal executive departments; independent federal government agencies, departments, and commissions; or those minorities who report under the direct leadership of majority or minority leaders in these agencies. When minority senior executive leaders (MSELs) are referenced within this study, it will be referring to minorities who lead U.S. federal executive departments; independent federal agencies, departments, or commissions; and those minority officials who report under the direct leadership of majority or minority leaders who lead these agencies in the capacity of deputy, under, associate, or assistant positions. The minorities explored within this study are also those who have had prior federal government agency experience preceding a political appointment or have spent the majority of their professional careers as federal employees.

Starks (2009) notes that there is a lack of minority representation at the senior executive ranks within the U.S. federal government. He further suggests the following:

While minorities make up a sizable percentage of lower level government employees, their percentages decline progressively up through the senior levels. In fact, the racial composition of some agencies' workforces' mirrors that of the nation's population only at the lowest pay levels, and a race is the leading category for equal employment opportunity charges filed by aggrieved federal employees. (p. 79)

According to the United States Office of Personnel Management (2017), The SES was created to fulfill the following key goals:

1. Improve the executive management of the government
2. Select and develop a cadre of highly competent senior executives with leadership and managerial expertise
3. Hold executives accountable for individual and organizational performance (p. 2, para 6).

Justification of the Problem

In 2015, there are two major crises that U.S. executive departments, federal agencies, departments, and commissions are experiencing. The first crisis deals with a demographic shortage of “working age people to fill jobs and support a population of long-lived retirees. By 2030, demographic experts predict, there will be two workers for each retired social security recipient” (Liebowitz, 2004, p. 434). Major workforce threats are facing the federal government between having to find leadership to replace the vastly aging workforce and various downsizing efforts. With a major governmental resource being its people, their sustainment and development must be protected, and corrective processes must be implemented to successfully protect and fill this major leadership gap (Ingraham & Getha-Taylor, 2004).

Based on information provided by the Government Accountability Office, “Retirements will hit the government’s ranks of federal managers and supervisors, disproportionately older and with more years of service, hardest. By 2015, which is already here, 58% of Senior Executive Service members and 45% of GS-15s will be eligible to retire” (Moore, 2013, para. 6-7). This is going to be a tough transition, notes President Carol Bonosaro, who is the Senior Executives Association president. According to Moore (2013), “A lot of agencies are not able to hire now and start building towards that point where you’re going to need to be . . . Moving people into middle and upper management” (para. 8), and Dietrich (2013) state that “HR professionals and employees both reported that adaptability/flexibility and critical thinking/problem-solving skills were of greatest importance now compared with two years ago” (para. 10).

According to the 2009 Skills Gap poll from the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), skills gaps in the following areas will be experienced by various public and private sectors. Galagan (2009) identifies the following areas of concern:

Leadership and executive skills; Basic workplace competencies such as literacy and numeracy that are building blocks of successful performance in any job; Professional or industry-specific skills; Managerial and supervisory skills; Communication and interpersonal skills; Technical, IT, and systems skills; Sales skills; and Process, program and project management skills (p. 5).

Galagan (2009) further identifies or shares that adaptability, innovative thinking skills, and taking a personal responsibility to continually enhance work-related skills, tasks, and individual capabilities are instrumental in ensuring an elevated and sustainable level of performance in today’s knowledge economy. However, in 2008, a “Critical Skills Needs and Resources for Changing Workforce Survey,” which was a combined SHRM and *Wall Street Journal* survey, states that critical thinking and employee adaptability are the skills that employers identified were most important to them (Dietrich, 2013).

The second crisis deals with the great disparity that exists with men and women of color holding Senior Executive Service (SES) leadership positions and GS-15 positions, and an even graver disparity exists with minorities who head up and lead U.S. executive departments, independent federal agencies, departments, and commissions. Long (2011) discusses an anticipated shortfall in the diversity of SES personnel starting in 2030. If a major diversity

shortfall is expected to occur in 2030, that means little growth, if any, is expected to occur within the years leading up to 2030. A report by the Center for American Progress (CAP), which was released on September 2011, found that “82.7 percent of the SES in 2010 will remain overrepresented at 71 percent in 2030 compared to 57 percent of the overall labor force, while Hispanics will continue to fall below the national average” (Long, 2011, para. 2).

This report was created as a result of examining the diversity within the present SES, as well as looking at the pipeline of employees who currently work within the higher levels of the General Schedule, according to Long (2011). President Obama issued Executive Order 13483 on August 19, 2011, to combat this major diversity shortfall within the SES and General Schedule workforce ranks. Tapia and Kvasny (2004) suggest that minorities often have inadequate access to role models, sponsors, or mentors who can help them successfully maneuver their way through the executive pipeline. They are often disregarded when it comes to promotional opportunities and increases in salaries and often face downsizing and termination more quickly than their majority counterparts.

Worsley and Stone (2011) stated that their research study in the Parks and Recreation sector revealed that “There were inconsistencies with hiring and promotion practices as well as barriers that prevented African Americans from obtaining advancement opportunities” (p. 86). Woog (2007) argued that many African Americans pursue opportunities outside the federal government because the only benefit in corporate America is increasing the organization’s bottom line. “For African Americans in government, it can be hard to move up the ladder, especially into SES positions, if you don’t have a mentor,” says Farrell Chiles, chair of the National Organization of Blacks in Government” (para.11). O’Keefe (2011), on the other hand, notes that Hispanics have the largest inequality among the national and federal workforce. The federal sector numbers for Hispanics based on the 2010 Census “remained flat year-to-year and more than five points below the national average, based on the EEO Recruitment Annual Report . . . Despite an astounding 43 percent growth rate of Latinos in the United States in the last decade” (O’Keefe, 2011, para. 7).

According to Starks (2009), “The racial composition of some agencies’ workforces mirrors that of the nation’s population only at the lowest pay levels, and a race is a leading category for equal opportunity charges filed by aggrieved federal employees” (p. 79). It is important that the majority workforce at all levels of pay be examined by agencies to ensure that their salaries are equal to the rest of the overall population. Starks (2009) further argues that a federal employment study revealed that, even though “minorities make up a sizable percentage of lower level government employees, their percentages decline progressively up through the senior levels” (p. 79). The Board of Governors of the “Federal Reserve” (2014) report, “Minorities in the Executive Senior Level category increased from 21 percent in 2012 to 23 percent in 2013. In the 1st/mid-level manager category, the percentage of minorities increased from 42 percent in 2012 to 53 percent in 2013” (p. 4). Finally, in 2013, there was a workforce increase of 69 employees in which the minority total increased by 32 employees, and women had an increase of 20 employees, according to the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve (2014). While there is some level of growth within the diversity numbers of minorities in the executive senior-level category, there is still a lot more work that has to be done to rectify the projected 2030 diversity shortfall.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the opportunities and challenges minority senior executive U.S. federal government agency leaders (MSELs) faced on the path to leadership and the strategies used to manage and overcome these challenges.

Overarching Research Question

How do these minority senior executive leaders (MSELs) gain entry into leadership positions typically held by majority leaders?

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions; however, for this article, Research Question 1 will be explored in more depth.

1. What opportunities do minority senior executive leaders face?
2. What challenges do minority senior executive leaders face?
3. In what ways do minority senior executive leaders manage their opportunities? In what ways do minority senior executive leaders manage and overcome their challenges?

Theoretical Framework

Upper echelons theory focuses on the top executives within an organization by analyzing how the impact of the leader's observable characteristics (age, functional tasks, other career experiences, education, socioeconomic roots, financial positions, group characteristics and psychological characteristics of cognitive base values) impact his or her organizational effectiveness (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). This study fills a unique gap because it investigated and explored minorities who lead U.S. executive departments; independent federal agencies, departments, and commissions; and those minorities who report under the direct leadership of majority or minority leaders who lead these departments, agencies, or commissions. These are leaders who have worked within the U.S. federal government in a capacity other than a political appointee at some point within their professional careers before their current or previous political appointment. While upper echelons theory, which was developed by Hambrick and Mason (1984), has focused more on the CEO, business unit heads, top management teams, and the board of directors, the researcher did not see any studies dealing with the upper echelons within a U.S. federal government agency.

Methods

The research methodology used to explore this topic was in-depth qualitative interviewing with probing questions as the method of inquiry. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest there are many key strengths in utilizing the significant true-to-life research method of in-depth qualitative interviewing. Being able to acquire a deeper understanding of the research participants in a much more comprehensive way than the participants even understand themselves or the phenomenon they are experiencing is what the researcher should be able to ascertain through the use of this type of qualitative interview process (Josselson, 2013). Finally, Klenke (2008) posits that, to acquire fullness and "depth of understanding, those engaged in qualitative interviewing listen for and explore keywords, ideas, themes, and use follow-up questions to encourage the interviewee to expand on what he or she has said that the research feels are important" (p. 129).

Participants

Stratified purposeful sampling was used to select the research participants for this study because the research was examining "the characteristics of a particular subgroup of interest" (Wengraf, 2001, p. 102; Patton, 1990, pp. 169-83). This purposefully selected sample consisted of minorities who lead U.S. executive departments, independent agencies, departments, and commissions; and those minorities who report under their direct leadership in the capacity of a deputy, associate, or assistant positions. The defining factor used in considering political appointees was that they had to have experienced a prior work history within the federal

government before a past or current political appointment. The research purposefully selected the sample by viewing all executive departments, independent agencies, departments, and commissions to see what minorities led agencies, as well as viewing those minority leaders who reported directly under the leadership of those who lead those agencies, whether minorities led them or not. The researcher tried to get a good mix and balance of research participants to have research participants that could relate to all. Some were attorneys, others had military backgrounds, and others came through the traditional pipeline without the extra training and experience of the previous two groups.

The pilot-study research participants were also included in the total sample consisted of one presidential appointee who ran the Agency; three senior executive service (SES) personnel, who hold the title of associate administrator; and one who is a recently retired SES employee who held an associate administrator position, reporting directly to the administrator during his professional career. The researcher traveled to Washington, D.C. to have face-to-face interviews with four interview participants and; finally, resorted to a telephone interview with the retired official because their schedule would not accommodate a face-to-face interview. A total of 16 research participants, were included in this research study. Table 1 below provides brief demographic information about the participants.

Table 1

Profile of All Participants

Participant's Identifier	Gender	Race	Years of Fed. Government Service	Education	Marital Status
MSEL # 1	Female	African American	43	Law Degree	Unsure
MSEL # 2	Male	African American	24	Master's Degree	Single
MSEL # 3	Male	African American	42	Master's Degree	Married
MSEL # 4	Male	African American	34	Doctoral Degree (Ph.D.)	Married
MSEL # 5	Male	Mexican American	29	Bachelor's Degree	Married
MSEL # 6	Male	Mexican American	38	Degree Not Completed	Divorced
MSEL # 7	Female	Native American	18	Law Degree	Married
MSEL # 8	Male	African American	37	Law Degree	Married
MSEL # 9	Female	African American	40	Master's Degree	Married
MSEL # 10	Female	African American	32	Master's Degree	Married
MSEL # 11	Female	Asian American	17	Master's Degree	Separated
MSEL # 12	Female	African American	17	Master's Degree	Married
MSEL # 13	Female	African American	34	Master's Degree	Married
MSEL # 14	Female	African American	10	Master's Degree	Married
MSEL # 15	Male	Native American	17 ½	Bachelor's Degree	Married
MSEL # 16	Male	Native American	55	Degree Not Completed	Married

Data Collection

The qualitative data collection approach that was used in this study was to “conduct semi-structured interviews, audiotape the interviews, and transcribe the interviews” (Creswell, 2014, p. 193). It is important to note that the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data was collected for the pilot-study from April 15-18, 2013, in Washington D.C. at the headquarters' location of one of the independent federal agencies within the U.S. federal government. The pilot-study telephone interview took place on April 22, 2013. The researcher again traveled to Washington, D.C. and collected data from six research participants from September 24-October 5, 2015. Five remaining interviews were conducted upon the researcher's return to Michigan, four by telephone conference call and one by Go-to-Meeting webinar. Field notes were taken during each interview and engaged the participants to acquire more detailed information when needed to ensure that breadth and depth of insight were provided. Before the interview, an extensive review of each official's biography was reviewed to engage each official at a deeper level if needed during the interview. The data-collection section covered the following: preparation for establishing pre-interview approval, pre-interview protocols, interview protocols, and post-interview protocols.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2014), the data-analysis process began for the researcher during the first interview and continued throughout the remaining 15 interviews. As each interview took place, the researcher started internalizing things within her mind and started the process of mentally analyzing what was being said by each MSEL and mentally recalling information, grouping together commonalities, and analyzing this type of data with new information as it was being shared. Lapadat and Linsay (1999) propose how important the transcription process is. They also acknowledge that “Analysis takes place and understandings are derived through the process of constructing a transcript by listening and re-listening, viewing and reviewing” (p. 82). Making sense of the data being transcribed requires a special attention to detail because the transcriber must think interpretively while going through the transcription process (Lapadat & Linsay, 1999). The researcher confirmed this because the transcription process provided the researcher an opportunity to revisit each interview several times, reflecting deeply throughout the transcription process. A total of 16 interview protocols were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Copies of these interviews were given to the research chair, and detailed discussions about the interviews took place to analyze how these interview questions would answer the study's research questions. Also, the researcher member-checked the interview protocols with the interview participants, and they were asked to sign off on the document and send it back at their earliest convenience.

The researcher utilized triangulation methods to enhance the validation and reliability of this qualitative research study. Klenke (2008) defined triangulation as a way of “verifying facts through multiple data sources. It addresses the issues of internal validity by using more than one method of data collection such as combining interviewing and participant observation to answer research questions” (p. 44). The researcher utilized triangulation, prolonged interaction with the research participants before and shortly after the interviews, agency biographical information of interviewees, chair debriefing, and member checks to enhance the dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the qualitative research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the interview transcripts were reviewed in great detail and manually coded, they were uploaded as a rich text file into ATLAS.ti version 7.5.4 computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Friese (2012) notes, “ATLAS.ti, like any other CAQDAS program, does

not analyze data; it is simply a tool for supporting the process of qualitative data analysis” (p. 1). ATLAS.ti was utilized to code and examine the qualitative interviews to assist the researcher in ascertaining a deeper level of understanding and insight into the overwhelming amount of raw data that needed to be analyzed.

Themes and codes were developed through deductive and inductive means. The deductive theme codes came from the upper echelons theory. Inductive themes and codes were developed from the interviews by analyzing quotes identified throughout the sample when there was not a deductive code available that appropriately fit the sample. Inductive codes were developed utilizing the guidelines by Boyatzis (1998):

- A. Reducing the raw information
 - B. Identifying themes within samples
 - C. Comparing themes across subsamples
 - D. Creating a code
 - E. Determining the reliability or consistency of judgment of the codes
- (pp. 45-49).

Research Question 1 Results

What opportunities do minority senior executive leaders face?

All 6 Minority Senior Executive Leaders who participated in this study have had many developmental and promotional opportunities, which have helped prepare them for their current senior executive leadership positions within the U.S. federal government. Under this section of opportunities, 16 out of 16 MSELs responded to the questions from which the following six themes emerged, which are reflected in Table 13: TMT Critical Thinking and Strategic Development; Employee Motivation, Engagement, and Empowerment; Agency Representation and Exposure; Integrity and Stakeholder Engagement; Mentors, Sponsors, and Mentoring; and Developing Agency Leaders. It is important to note that there were no guiding questions that led to their responses. These were the themes that emerged from the research participants’ answers to the interview questions. Fourteen of the 16 MSELs spent their careers in the U.S. federal government. Two MSELs were recruited from corporate America into senior-level positions. One came into her position as a GS-15, and the other officials came into the federal government as a senior-level SL position. One of the most significant accomplishments was by MSEL # 6, who started out as a GS-5 38 years ago, who had 90 hours towards his bachelor’s degree, and who had aspirations of becoming a GS-9 and moving to San Antonio, Texas. Today, he is holding a very senior-level position and attributes his success to his mentors who saw more in him than he saw in himself. He essentially found several of his opportunities, volunteered for every assignment or opportunity, and asked every senior official that he met throughout his career what he could do to help or be of service, to acquire as much knowledge and skills as possible, which paid off greatly for him.

Table 2

Research Question 1: Opportunities Themes

Theme	Total
TMT Critical Thinking & Strategic Development	16
Employee Motivation, Engagement, and Empowerment	16
Agency Representation and Exposure	16
Integrity and Stakeholder Engagement	16
Mentors, Sponsors, and Mentoring	16
Developing Agency Leaders	10

TMT Critical Thinking and Strategic Development

Goll, Johnson, and Rasheed (2008) suggested that the education levels of top management teams (TMTs) reflect a direct influence on organizational performance. They argue, “More educated TMTs contributed to a greater firm performance under regulation. These findings lend some support to a model of partial mediation in which TMT characteristics influence business strategy and firm performance through some other intervening mechanism” (2008, p. 218). Hambrick and Mason (1984) highlight that age, race, education, and gender are the variables that have the leading impact on a leader’s decision-making and leadership behavior. While strategic leadership theory strives to comprehend the effect of top executive teams or individuals within organizations, it is important to recognize that the final responsibility and authority for establishing and sustaining the strategic choice within an organization rests on the CEO (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Under this opportunities theme of TMT Critical Thinking and Strategic Development, 16 out of 16 officials discuss how they utilize members of their TMTs to help them plan and carry out their organizational tasks and responsibilities. While 16 out of 16 responded to this question, it is important to note that there were no guiding questions that led to these responses, and these were the results of the participants’ responses to the interview questions. Fourteen MSELs shared ways that they have had an impact on training and engaging members of their TMTs to assist in the decision-making process. The following topics will be discussed in more detail below: strategic knowledge skills gap; critical thinking; collaborative efforts and employee training; imparting strategic decision-making processes; doing things more strategically; and exposing TMTs and others to higher levels of leadership.

When it came to providing diverse types of human capital opportunities for federal government employees, especially to help them develop key skills at a lower level, Minority Senior Executive Leader # 14 shared an opportunity that she provided to others. “In the human capital area, one of the things I would say is there is a difference from working in the federal sector now versus my previous work in the private sector; there is a skill gap in strategic knowledge.” Knowing how to draft strategic HR initiatives and processes and always thinking about and providing people at lower levels within her organization the tools needed to think more strategically and be more involved in human capital planning processes is something that MSEL # 14 does on a regular basis. The critical-thinking process, like the strategic-knowledge process, needs to be shared, and highly skilled leaders need to teach and pass down the techniques and processes to their top management teams (TMTs) as well as their subordinates.

According to Minority Senior Executive Leader # 13, “With every issue that I got, I felt that I needed to do the critical thinking, and I also felt that I needed to bring other people to the table to do the critical thinking as well.” She further suggested that penetrating investigative questions were always used to get to the root of the problem: “There is a way to do that in a way that is very pleasant. I can do that with family members, senior people, and I have learned how to do that effectively.” It was important for this MSEL to do that more at the strategic level. “I had to figure out all the issues, all the problems, what was causing them, and what I needed to do to correct and make it right” (MSEL # 13).

Being collaborative and training her direct reports the same way she trains their subordinates and engages them was something that Minority Senior Executive Leader # 12 does within her executive department. “I trained them in those processes, so they’d know what to do. I gave them opportunities to do that too. When I had recognition programs, I would recognize people who had taken training to develop themselves.” At the end of each fiscal year,

MSEL # 12 would go to the director of finance and say she wanted to spend their end-of-year money in a certain way. She would go to each of her direct reports and ask them to give her a list of things they wanted to do. They would have this list ready just in case they had end-of-year money left, already knowing what they were going to do with it. They would use this money for training, various types of programs and activities, and their people were able to have wonderful opportunities for personal growth and development.

Understanding the political landscape and the lay of the land was something that Minority Senior Executive Leader # 4 looked at personally before making any major decisions, and it was important that he imparted that knowledge and process to his TMT. The first thing that he liked to do was look at what was needed: get a lay of the land or the political landscape. He looked at where he thought the industry or a particular field was going.

I think about what is realistically possible, and this is not something done in a vacuum. I would involve my leadership team in this process. We discuss what is possible, what we want to do, what role we want to play, what we want to be in the big scheme of things, how we can participate, how we can lead in this area, and what part we will lead in. The leadership team is involved to help me get some framework for what I want the organization to be and to understand how to go through this process themselves. (MSEL # 4)

After working more strategically with her TMT and key agency stakeholders across the country, Minority Senior Executive Leader # 1 could institutionalize policies and procedures that would have a major impact on transforming the harassment complaints process within her agency. They were addressing employee needs and concerns immediately before they had to go to a complaint process. All allegations were addressed right away.

They were tracking everything to identify how much time it takes for us to address these issues, what the outcomes are, how we are addressing the problems, at what level we are addressing the problems, whether or not these people ultimately end up filing complaints, what type of disciplinary action has been taken if any, and how each case is resolved. (MSEL # 1)

She further noted that, as a result of this new process, which was implemented by her and her TMT, they had a significant impact on decreasing their discrimination complaints:

As a result, we believe even though we can't say that these are the only factors that are affecting our formal complaints process, but we believe that, because we have become so active in this area, our complaints have dropped by 50%. (MSEL # 1)

Minority Senior Executive Leader # 6 believes in showing his TMT and others under his direct leadership what they can do at higher levels within his executive department by giving them experiences that would forever impact their careers. He not only tells them but shows them that "being a leader comes about when people are watching what you do and see that you demonstrate that you are capable and that you are confident of what you are capable of doing. Your body language and demeanor speak more loudly than words." He further shares that he thinks that he does an excellent job of giving employees opportunities to show what they can do at higher levels. He enjoys taking people with him on various trips and activities. "I'll take them with me on international trips so that they can learn and see how things are done at that level, politically. I have had a couple of interns who have gone on to Harvard Law School." He believes that one day when he is gone, those are the people who will be running the place anyway. MSEL # 6 further stated that it would be through opportunities he has given them, simply because "saying you are a leader doesn't make you a leader."

Employee Motivation, Engagement, and Empowerment

Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) suggested that “People with the highest levels of productivity and fulfillment view themselves as inseparable from their work (Mohrman & Cohen, 1995), are intrinsically motivated by the work itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and are professionally committed to and engaged with the organization” (p. 200). Zhang and Bartol (2010) highlight that “Empowering leadership is likely to have a stronger impact on psychological empowerment to the extent that an individual views empowerment as part of his or her employee role identity” (p. 119). Under this opportunity theme of employee motivation, engagement and empowerment, 16 of 16 MSELs shared strategies they have used to empower and engage their employees. While 16 out of 16 responded to this question, it is important to note that there were no guiding questions that led to these responses, and these were the results of the participants’ responses to the interview questions. Six of these officials highlight insight in more detail in the following areas: an innovative plan to meet new employees; open door policy; taking care of your people; please, thank you and respect; letting your people know that you care, and giving your people more authority.

After moving into her key senior executive position, Minority Senior Executive Leader # 12 established a plan to meet for 15 minutes with each one of the 200 employees that were under her leadership. She noted how many people felt her request was looked upon as taking them back to the mindset of being asked to go to the principal’s office during grade or high school.

I asked them the following three questions: What’s your favorite dessert? What do you like to do on the weekends? What is your birthday? During that initial meeting, I did not ask them anything about work because I wanted to get to know them; they were sharing with me, and that put them at ease about getting to know me. (MSEL # 12)

People from all levels within their agency know that Minority Senior Executive Leader # 6 has an open-door policy, which he takes very seriously. Since people know he cares about them, it’s not difficult for them to take advantage of his open-door policy. “You would be surprised how many people have my personal cell phone number and actually call me. I think this fosters the great relationships I have with our folks in the field” (MSEL # 6).

One of the key things that have had the most impact on the career of Minority Senior Executive Leader # 3 was his value system that reflected his strong position:

Take care of your people, and they will take care of you. At every step of my career, I have focused on my people and have been very concerned for their welfare. I have been rewarded a thousand times over and over again. (MSEL # 3)

He attributes being in the position he is in today because the people with whom he has worked did exceptionally well in the ways they have handled their responsibilities, duties, and overall performance in the workplace. He further noted, “My job is to facilitate their success.” The way this is done, MSEL # 3 continued to highlight, was through providing them with a work environment that was healthy and giving them an umbrella where they don’t have to deal with toxic, nit-picking people who continually try to rain on their parades. MSEL goes on to finally state “In that type of environment, they will do fairly well, and the organization will end up being very successful.”

When it comes to motivating employees, Minority Senior Executive Leader # 9 likes to be very respectful of her people, always saying “please” and “thank you.” She also noted how she always refers to her staff as a part of the team. “Those who work with me rather than for me; when we did not have money for performance rewards, I told my staff that we were going to recognize everyone that would have received a performance reward” (MSEL # 9). During this

ceremony, employees received certificates, and their accomplishments were shared with the entire agency. Listening to people motivate them and relying on them lets them know that their contribution matters, highlighted MSEL # 9.

You motivate your employees by doing the following things, suggests Minority Senior Executive Leader # 13: “Letting them know you care about them, being sincere, encouraging them, acknowledging them, praising them, helping them feel accepted, and making it a point to talk to them.” The delegation of authority is one of the biggest ways MSEL # 16 motivates his employees. “You give them enough authority, you give them the backing and support and try to give them an opportunity to show you an end result.” He further suggested that sharing his knowledge and experiences, as well as delegating responsibility, puts him in a position to mentor as much as possible. What comes back from this process usually is going to be the empowerment of those at whatever level he is delegating.

Agency Representation and Exposure

It is always important to remember that when a person becomes a senior executive leader, especially one that is a minority, people are always watching the things he or she does and says regardless of whether that person is on the clock or off. Under this opportunities theme of Agency Representation and Exposure, 16 of 16 MSELs shared insight on having the opportunity to represent their respective departments and agencies. While 16 out of 16 responded to this question, it is important to note that there were no guiding questions that led to these responses, and these were the results of the participants’ responses to the interview questions. The following nine officials highlight in more depth on the following themes. Influencing Congress on DOD leadership selection processes; speaking on “The Mall” and congressional testimony; being a referee; speaking engagements; too much exposure could be a barrier; visibility and leading from the front; gaining more insight into the political process; agency representation on an international level; justification of agency needs and policy development; and task force representation.

MSEL # 13 enthusiastically shared a very symbolic contribution that had a major impact on her career as a high-level official. “Having the ability to influence Congress in a way, which had them to write legislation that spoke to things that the Department of Defense needed to do to be more comprehensive in their selection of leaders, was very impactful” (MSEL # 13). Also, she has embraced having an opportunity as a high-level official to be able to have an impact with her agency’s highest senior executive level. “This has enabled me to do far more than I ever thought that I could or would do professionally” (MSEL # 13).

Although Minority Senior Executive Leader # 11 shared the various types of activities that she had to represent her agency:

I just spoke on The Mall in front of 25,000 people. That was exciting. Even in the last few weeks, I have been participating at the Secretarial level, attending Secretary Senior Leadership meetings, doing Congressional testimony, and being a spokesman for the agency at the national level. (MSEL # 11)

She also highlighted that she also had the opportunities to meet with major state political groups, address the media, and attend large events. “I did two events of 25,000 people last month” (MSEL # 11).

“My job is that of a referee,” suggested Minority Senior Executive Leader # 3. As a key independent federal agency MSEL, he further stated: “My job is to try to bring the two ends of Pennsylvania Ave. together so that we can come up with a compromise that would be good for the country.”

Minority Senior Executive Leader # 12 shared the importance of taking advantage of every opportunity possible to get exposure.

Getting out there, speaking engagements, belonging to groups, being part of organizations, and getting the exposure is very valuable to you because you get the opportunity to build your network and get exposed to what people are doing at other agencies. (MSEL # 12)

Having these types of opportunities are significant because a leader might find out about something he or she can implement at his or her agency, as well as share things others can use at their departments or agencies as well (MSEL # 12). Sometimes agency exposure, yet can cause problems internally within the organization, noted MSEL # 14. “The more exposure you get, the more people are out to trip you up, and this could sometimes turn into a barrier,” highlighted MSEL # 14.

For Minority Senior Executive Leader # 15, visibility and leading from the front are imperative. “I think it is good for an organization to see their leader leading from the front, which is only part of it. I thoroughly enjoy being around our folks doing their jobs” (MSEL # 15). While this MSEL loves being around the law enforcement professionals and other professionals as well, he also enjoys having conversations with his cooks in their facilities and jails when he travels to their different facilities across the country. “It is important for me to know the things they need and the other things I need to be doing to improve our operations” (MSEL # 15).

Having an opportunity to work with the Chief of Staff within their executive department gave Minority Senior Executive Leader # 10 more insight on the political process and how it works. “I was asked to work with the Department’s Chief of Staff as her senior advisor in the capacity and working title of Counselor to the Chief of Staff shortly after we closed out all of our shutdown activities” (MSEL # 10). This opportunity gave MSEL # 10 an actual view of the political process, especially not having a law background, because her office was strategically located just outside the office door of the Secretary and the executive department’s senior leadership team. Having the opportunity to also lead two of the Secretary’s Seven Priorities for 2014 was a very exciting opportunity for MSEL # 10.

Minority Senior Executive Leader # 6 had the unique opportunity to represent his executive department in a major international way. “Who would think that in the position I am currently in I would be traveling around the world and sitting in a room negotiating food safety issues with top Chinese, Brazilian, Mexican, Canadian, and Chilean officials” (MSEL # 6). These are just a few of the many countries and officials that he has had the opportunity to work with while representing his executive department.

When dealing with representing his agency and getting exposure, Minority Senior Executive Leader # 4 noted the importance of effectively laying out his case and having good justifications for the things he needs.

I tell them, this is why I need what I need. This is what happens if I get what I need.

These are the impacts if I don’t get what I need. I do this internally within the agency and externally with our stakeholders who are the Executive Office of the President and stakeholders in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. (MSEL # 4)

Lastly, having the opportunity to represent the Assistant Secretary has given a lot of exposure for Minority Senior Executive Leader # 7. “I have been asked to represent the Assistant Secretary on certain task forces, outside my work divisions. I currently sit on three different task forces for him, and also within my position, I can rewrite and create new policies.” She further accepts

invitations to speak on a regular basis to five different divisions that oversee numerous programs within her agency, and she has been told by many that she is also a dynamic keynote speaker.

Integrity and Stakeholder Engagement

The crucial elements in successful stakeholder relationships and partnerships are a commitment, trust, and the ability to create an environment that is conducive to successful business interactions and communications according to (Gao and Zhang, 2006). Under this opportunities theme of Integrity and Stakeholder Engagement, 16 out of 16 MSELs highlight the importance of engaging in relationships with stakeholders with the highest level of integrity, trust, and valuing what each person brings to the table. While 16 out of 16 responded to this question, it is important to note that there were no guiding questions that led to these responses, and these were the results of the participants' responses to the interview questions. Below 4 of the 16 MSELs will share insight in the following areas in more depth below: Never lie to anyone; do what you say you will do; prove that you are a capable office with a capable staff; and be a doer, worker, and team player.

According to Minority Senior Executive Leader # 3, when dealing with stakeholders, it is always important that you, first, know yourself.

Never lie to anyone. If you do, you are toast. The only thing that you have is your personal integrity. Don't let someone else back you up against the wall where you feel your only course of action is to lie. (MSEL # 3)

This MSEL further suggests that this happens all the time, especially to people in very, senior executive positions (MSEL # 3). It is also important to do the right thing, he further argues. "Tell the truth; be consistent; treat people the way you want to be treated; look out for your people, and don't worry what happens to you. If you take care of them, they will take care of you," according to MSEL # 3. "Finally, it is crucially important to let people know what you can tolerate, but also let people know what you will not tolerate and what you won't do" (MSEL # 3).

When dealing with stakeholders and securing trust amongst internal and external partners, Minority Senior Executive Leader # 4 noted the following: "Do what you say you will do; be honest with them; don't be afraid to deliver bad news because people don't like to find out things after the fact." He further suggested that people respond better when they are told things rather than finding out things. People will begin to question your integrity and wonder what else you might not be sharing if you are not forthright in your interactions and dealings with them (MSEL # 4).

When dealing with stakeholders, building trust is vital, suggested Minority Senior Executive Leader # 1. "You have to say what you are going to do, and not only do it but also do it well. This goes back to building up the belief that you have a capable office with a capable staff." Finally, MSEL # 1 added, "It is very important when you tell people the thing you are going to do that you put everything you have into fulfilling that promise."

It is important to be seen by stakeholders and partners as a doer, worker, team player, and someone who can solve a problem, according to Minority Senior Executive Leader # 5. When a leader is dealing with stakeholders and internal and external partners, "You can't hold back on any information they might need to know when it comes to materials or not telling them about the challenges or obstacles you are facing and trying to work out." Trust is imperative, according to MSEL # 5. He explained:

They must trust you, and you must be honest with them. You can't prejudge things that they present to you by creating obstacles; saying that you don't think that is going to work. You must brainstorm with your partners and let everyone put his or her ideas on the table without being interrupted. Finally, you must also look for the positives in everything; agree with it and let everything come out on the table and out in the open while giving all ideas some consideration to see what can be done. (MSEL # 5)

Mentors, Sponsors, and Mentoring

According to Comeau-Kirschner (1999), "Against a backdrop of discrimination, mentoring plays a key role in the career development of minorities. Minority executives believe that mentors are very helpful in advocating for upward mobility, teaching them how to navigate through the corporation" (para. 1-2). Prospero (2007) shares some of the challenges minorities face without having mentors to help them maneuver their way to higher levels of leadership positions. Mentors could help minorities deal more effectively with the challenges faced by majority groups. Some of the experiences that minorities have faced and have been unable to deal with effectively due to lack of effective mentorship are issues surrounding inappropriate verbal and nonverbal communication, people being made to feel that they did not deserve to be in leadership positions or trying to make them feel that they were not competent, and not knowing the proper executive mannerisms or ways to interact in social gatherings or executive settings (Prospero, 2007). Under this opportunities theme of mentors, sponsors, and mentoring, 16 out of 16 MSELs stated that they have mentored others, and 15 out of 16 stated that they had mentors and/or sponsors who have successfully spoken up on their behalf and helped them successfully maneuver through the ranks of senior executive leadership with the U.S. federal government. While 16 out of 16 responded to this question, it is important to note that there were no guiding questions that led to these responses, and these were the results of the participants' responses to the interview questions. The experiences of 10 MSELs in the following areas are highlighted in more depth through the themes provided. The differences between mentorship and sponsorship; the importance of looking for role models and mentors; the effectiveness of mentors; being open to different types of mentorship; reaching back and bringing others along; having people to speak on your behalf; repaying a debt; and non-native mentors and supervisors who genuinely cared.

There is a significant difference between a mentorship and a sponsorship, noted Minority Senior Executive Leader # 13: "A sponsor is someone that fights for you to get a promotion and sits at the table and speaks on your behalf when people are voting on whether or not to give you a promotion." She argued that a mentor may or may not fight for you to get that promotion, but a sponsor fights for you and on your behalf. "The more sponsors you have sitting around the table, the better your chances are of getting that promotion. You want a mentor who is also a sponsor" (MSEL # 13). MSEL # 13 further shared that she has had several mentors and sponsors throughout her career and has had the opportunity to give back by mentoring and sponsoring others as well. Her mentors ended up being civilian, military, male, female, White, Black, and Hispanic. "They all had different personalities and different thoughts. I could pull on the best of the best. And I felt comfortable talking through things with each of them. I would have to say that I was one of the fortunate ones" according to MSEL # 13.

Mentors and mentoring has been a very instrumental and important part of the life of Minority Senior Executive Leader # 5. His mentors were always there for and with him to help him overcome the obstacles he had faced. They also helped him by giving him opportunities to personally and professionally improve himself. "You have to champion certain things that are

important and look for someone in your work environment that can be a role model or mentor. Always be willing to take advice; this is very important,” noted MSEL # 5. Nevertheless, “I have always tried to recognize what skills and talents people brought to the table and gave them the opportunities, training, and resources that they needed to continue developing themselves,” stated MSEL # 5.

Minority Senior Executive Leader # 6 attributed his success to having effective supervision and great mentors. He further stated that these mentors saw so much more in him and his potential future when all he could initially see for himself was being promoted from a GS-5 to a GS-9 and living in San Antonio, Texas. These mentors guided him through mistakes that they made so that he would not repeat the same types of mistakes that each of them made in the past. “They set goals for me that I never thought were even in my universe of thoughts. Being a very high-level administrator now, within our executive department, far exceeded my expectations.”

Mentorship works both ways, noted Minority Senior Executive Leader # 10. “I had mentors that were all races, male and female. I have also had mentors that were at a lower grade level than I was, and I strongly feel that mentorship works both ways.” She has a woman who tells people that MSEL # 10 is her mentor, and then, on some days when MSEL # 10 needs a sanity check, this mentee becomes her mentor because the mentee has a good sense of discernment and can help MSEL # 10 to see things from a different perspective. In conclusion, she shares that it is important for people to be open to all types of mentors and mentorship (MSEL # 10).

Minority Senior Executive Leader # 12 agrees with MSEL # 10 when she suggests the importance of being open to all types of mentorships. “I have mentored a lot of people, but I had a mentor that I would share a lot of different things with who worked for me. He had great wisdom, profound knowledge, great experiences, and was very smart.” She further shared that this mentor was essentially in the same position that she once held. Initially, he was in a position that was parallel to hers, and, when she got promoted, he ended up working for or rather working with her. She also suggested that she has always had a network of people that were in her corner who could be called upon to give her advice when needed. Through these relationships, she could deal more effectively by talking through what she was experiencing.

Minority Senior Executive Leader # 4 loves to develop people and help them reach the areas they would like to move forward in their personal and professional careers. It is important for him to do whatever he can to reach back and help bring others along. “Since I have been with our agency, I have had eight Ph.D. students that I have advised; six master’s level students that I have advised; my most recent one graduated less than two years ago.” He was on the Ph.D. dissertation committee of one of his senior leaders, who was an African American female who got her Ph.D. in Systems Engineering.

Minority Senior Executive Leader # 8 stated any job that he has gotten of any significance was really because someone he knew suggested him or either spoke up on his behalf. Either they told him about a position or pushed for him to get the position. Those relationships have been key to his advancement, so he believes it is imperative that everyone has these types of people in his or her corner.

Minority Senior Executive Leader # 2 strives to ensure that he gives his employees everything they need to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. “I fight for resources, opportunities, and empowerment for them so that they can use the creativity and intellect that they have been hired for to do their jobs. There is no micromanagement here, only

empowerment.” MSEL # 9 said, “People put their personal reputations on the line when they refer you for opportunities. A personal investment of their credibility is being made on your behalf when these mentors or sponsors go to bat for you.” She added, “When I said I don’t know how I can repay you, they said repay me by mentoring others and giving opportunities to others. You don’t have to thank me for doing this; I am repaying a debt” (MSEL # 9).

Lastly, Minority Senior Executive Leader # 16 stated that the mentors he had earlier in his career were either supervisors or second-level supervisors, many of whom were non-native or non-Indian people who cared about Indian people. They guided him from falling into the pitfalls of over-confidence or becoming too confident. “At the same time, be aggressive enough that I was able to see and understand the organization better, by them being my mentors. This was definitely on-the-job training and learning as you go through your career,” noted MSEL # 16.

Development of Agency Leaders

There are many types of leadership development programs within the U.S. federal government. Many agencies have their Agency programs that prepare their leaders to address and carry out the specific vision, mission, goals, and objectives of their agency or department. Many MSELs within this study have spent a lot of time developing leaders within their departments and agencies. Under this opportunities theme, 10 out of 16 MSELs were instrumental in either developing, training, or participating in the development of their leaders. Six MSELs will share insight in the following areas in more depth highlighting the areas of programs to prepare leaders; facilitation leadership training; lieutenant command and chief of police command training; leadership training for next-generation leaders; toast masters; and the pathways to leaders and superintendent boot camp programs.

Both Minority Senior Executive Leaders # 10 and # 12 had hands-on access to the leadership training process. One of the programs that MSEL # 10 worked very closely with helped to equip those aspiring to become SES personnel with the tools needed to be successful. They also had a program for those who wanted to move out of the administrative track, which helped arm them with the knowledge and skills they needed to be successful. While, MSEL # 12 personally trained 6,000 agency employees in facilitation leadership, which helped to enhance their decision-making skills and processes. Like all the other minority senior executive leaders, this official, as well as the others, encouraged their employees to pursue various types of training, educational pursuits, and opportunities that would enhance their professional portfolios.

Police Lieutenants are the most important supervisors in our entire organization, noted Minority Senior Executive Leader # 15. A Lieutenant Command School was developed to prepare their Indian police force more effectively. “This school not only prepares them for their current position but prepares them for their next job by giving them a general understanding of what they are expected to know after they have been promoted.” MSEL # 15 addressed the importance of training all of their current Lieutenants first to make sure that there was a consistency in processes and to ensure that each Lieutenant knew what was expected of him or her. Once each of the Lieutenants went through the training, they started taking the patrol officers through the training. The development of a Chief of Police Command School is currently underway. Minority Senior Executive Leader # 15 further noted: “This school will train our Lieutenants for their next promotional opportunity as Chief of Police. Our current Police Chiefs will be the first group that we take through the training.”

When Minority Senior Executive Leader # 9 was in a high-level position for an executive department, she had the very exciting opportunity to develop and implement a senior leadership development program to develop next generation leaders, which was one of her proudest

accomplishments. She went out to the federal executive institute and put together a program that would help prepare her leadership participants for future promotional opportunities. Because of her efforts, she shared the following results:

Out of that class, at least one-third, if not one-half of those candidates got promoted after they finished the course. I left my department before the start of the second class, and the agency leadership did not want to continue the program. (MSEL # 9)

After experiencing a problem with interacting with people in the public, Minority Senior Executive Leader # 5 turned one of the areas that helped him into a way to help others. “I strongly believe in Toastmasters because it has helped me improve my public speaking skills. I’ve worked with many organizations and individuals to help strengthen, build, and give them the opportunities to acquire more confidence in dealing with people” (MSEL # 5). He further suggested that these are areas that people need to strengthen and build. It was also an area that he initially felt very uncomfortable with himself. Getting involved with Toastmasters enabled people to be able to stand up on their two feet when there was an issue that needed to be addressed. “This makes you feel more comfortable, especially if you have had practice. I always tell people, ‘If you are going to run a marathon, you can’t get up and decide that you are going to run in one day’” (MSEL # 5). He continued that practicing and getting into shape would be crucial marathon preparation and repeating the same preparation with Toastmasters will greatly enhance public speaking skills as well.

The Pathways to Leadership Program and the Superintendents’ Boot Camp are two leadership programs that Minority Senior Executive Leader # 16 implemented during his tenure at his agency. He described the Pathways to Leadership Program:

We take GS-9s through GS-12s and provide them with mentors; project assignments; developmental assignments; training, interactions, and formal training with contractors. We develop them into a cadre of technical program people, who have been provided some potential to rise into leadership and management positions within the organization. (MSEL # 16)

A Superintendents’ Boot Camp is another program that this official was currently providing to his Superintendents throughout the country. MSEL # 16 further highlights that these officials make decisions on behalf of the Secretary at the community and tribal levels. “We are trying to provide the kind of orientation, guidance, and development that people need at this level.” All Superintendents will go through the training making sure that everyone old and new can learn, understand, and be able to apply the things they have learned in their present jobs or another position in the future according to (MSEL # 16).

Summary for Research Question 1

Several types of opportunities themes emerged and were discussed under Research Question 1. These were reflected in Table 2, highlighting the areas of TMT Critical Thinking and Strategic Development; Employee Motivation, Engagement, and Empowerment; Agency Representation and Exposure; Integrity and Stakeholder Engagement; Mentors, Sponsors, and Mentoring; and Developing Agency Leaders.

Conclusion and Implications

Upper echelons theory was the theoretical framework used to frame this in-depth qualitative interview study with probing questions. This research has a far-reaching impact on the field of Organizational Leadership because it provides a roadmap not only for minorities but for all who aspire to obtain senior executive leadership positions. It explores and answers how Minority Senior Executive Leaders (MSELs) gain entry into leadership positions typically held

by majority leaders, how MSELs manage the opportunities presented to them, and it also shares areas that have had the most impact on MSELs during their journeys to senior executive leadership positions within the U.S. federal government.

This study is unique because there are minimal studies if any that deal with the upper echelons who lead U.S. federal government executive departments; independent federal agencies, departments, or commissions; or those who report under their direct leadership. Also, this study fills a gap that is unique because at the time of this research it dealt with minorities who lead executive departments; independent federal agencies, departments, or commissions; and minorities who report under the direct leadership of majority or minority leaders who lead these agencies. Diversity within the leadership of these federal agencies may vary significantly based on the U.S. President's view on diversity and is reflected through their political appointment choices. This study is significant because it only considers those minorities who have held prior federal government service preceding a political appointment. Below there are several significant contributions to the body of knowledge, body of literature, and informed practice.

Informed Practice

Under Research Question 1, which dealt with opportunities, this study highlighted the need for training under the TMT Critical Thinking and Strategic Development theme. According to MSEL # 14, there are skills gap shortages in the areas of strategic knowledge within the U.S. federal government. MSEL # 14 functioned worked in the area of Human Resources and Development within an executive department. The training of both minority and majority senior executive leaders and others having a desire to enhance their skills in the following areas can have a global effect through the following informed practice recommendation areas.

While MSEL # 13, MSEL # 4, and others noted the importance of involving their TMTs and supervisors in the critical thinking process, other recommendations for training and development in the following areas are also highlighted. Below are a few examples of ways to enhance informed practice and increase leadership skills using the upper echelons theory areas of cognitive processes, managerial cognition, and dynamic capabilities. Scenario planning activities and other training would be given to TMTs, supervisors, and others would receive hands-on experiences and training in the following areas:

1. Cognitive processes, decision making, sense-making, and scanning because this is the initial step in the process of motivating changes for TMTs in developing and changing the strategic direction and performance within organizations according to Tripas and Gavetti, (2000).
2. Learning how to enhance managerial cognitions also highlighted under upper echelons theory by teaching leaders, TMTs, supervisors, and others how to adapt or deal with the effective adaptabilities of their strategies, especially in crisis situations, is very important (Eggers & Kaplan, 2009).
3. Enhancing the dynamic capabilities highlighted under upper echelons theory to teach leaders, TMTs, supervisors, and others how to more effectively seize opportunities while protecting, combining, and maintaining competitiveness. Realigning tangible and intangible assets; as a result of having to deal with changes and challenges that occur within the internal and external environments is also a very significant part of effective leadership (Buyl, Boone, & Mattysens, 2011; Teece, 2007).
4. More intense training for leaders, TMTs, supervisors, and others in political skills would also be a major benefit. This training would more effectively prepare leaders how to

strategically maneuver through relationships with members of Congress, House of Representatives, the Office of the President, as well as stakeholders and partners within the U.S. and internationally as well. This type of training would be very advantageous to these leaders as well.

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