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The First DH&S Executive Family Seminar

Talking, Listening, Sharing

Firm history was made the first week in June at Stouffer's Inn in White Plains, New York, and the 124 new partners, directors and their wives who were present appeared to have enjoyed the experience. The event was the first national Executive Family Seminar held by Deloitte Haskins & Sells, with the emphasis on the husband-wife teamwork that becoming a partner or director implies.

For the better part of the three days and evenings of the seminar the group was helped, through a carefully structured program, to become aware of the possible ways of coping with conflicting pulls between their professional and their private lives. The seminar members listened to discussion leaders, watched films and video tapes, read, wrote down their own thoughts, talked privately, spoke up publicly and conversed in small groups. They became immersed in the subjects under discussion. When it was all over several participants were heard to comment:

"This is the most valuable meeting we have been to in years!"

It was this accolade that marked the seminar as a resounding success. And to the best of the firm's knowledge, it is the first meeting of its kind in the public accounting profession. Bob Pivik, PIC-personnel, outlined the origin and purpose of the seminar when he opened the first day's proceedings:

"Previously this meeting for new partners was called the Management Seminar, which was one part of our overall management education program for partners and directors. This year spouses are attending. [Editor's note: throughout the seminar the term "spouse" was used regularly, although this year all spouses happened to be wives.] Changes were made to accommodate that fact and the program was renamed the Executive Family Seminar....

"Becoming a partner or director is not something that happens on June 3, 1979, or on any one day, for that matter. The process started the day you joined the firm. And some time after that your spouse began to share to some extent whatever happened during the time that followed — your success, your disappointments, your joys, your frustrations, your growth, your doubts. It seems only fitting, then, that this time at this meeting should also be shared."

Bob went on to explain that the seminar had evolved from similar programs, without spouses, started in the 1960s and changed in recent years to meet the needs of new partners. "Back in 1973 when we were converting the program primarily to the needs of new partners," he said, "the specific slant of those changes was conceived by Charlie Goldsmith (management training specialist in EO continuing education) at the suggestion of his wife Yvonne. She had attended a similar program at the Harvard Business School under the direction of Dr Barrie Greif. In a combined effort Barrie and John Drake developed and conducted the program at the 1974 management seminar, and at every seminar since.

"I believe one of the objectives of this seminar is to help us cope with some of the realities of life. Certainly the firm contributes its share of encounters with business realities: career ambitions versus perceived opportunities, relocation, travel, stress — to name a few. Within our personal lives we deal with other challenges: keeping communication lines open with family members, handling upsets, staying healthy mentally and physically and finding out more about ourselves. In simple terms, we have to keep up with the 'current developments' of life."

Attendance of wives at the seminar was remarkably high, in view of the
fact that the invitation to join the firm and consequently to attend the seminar had reached the new partners a scant three weeks before. Somehow arrangements were made for child-care, and schedules of working wives were adjusted. The resulting attendance was 56 couples, with six new U.S. partners attending as singles.

In addition, there was an international contingent of DH&S partners consisting of Neil and Jenny MacDonald (South Africa), Tim Head (London), Patrick Nunan (Dublin), George Sokota (Lusaka, Zambia) and Godfrey Everson-Davis (Ndola, Zambia).

Discussion leaders for the seminar were Barrie S. Greiff, psychiatrist with the Harvard Business School, John Drake, psychologist, and his wife, Dee. They set the stage on the first day with a few well-chosen words designed to let the participants know in general what to expect. Greiff: "The purpose of this seminar is to help make your life richer... This is a unique seminar — certainly among the Big Eight accounting firms. It is exciting, and a bit scary.... You may not have the same opportunity again in your lives." Drake: "When you have a problem at home, you don't leave it when you close the door in the morning. And when you have a problem at the office, you don't leave it there. You bring it home."

On the first day participants were asked to fill out, privately, a survey of personal behavior styles, which was a form consisting of questions on one's own behavior under normal and under stress conditions. Then the group was shown how to score their surveys of themselves, and from the numerical score emerged a preliminary analysis of each person's personality type — at least as they saw themselves in responding to the questions. The discussion leaders then explained that according to the theories developed by Carl Gustav Jung, a pioneer in analytical psychology in the first half of this century, personalities fit roughly into four types: the thinker, the feeler, the intuitir and the sensor. It was explained that we have elements of all
four types within our make-up, but that in many cases one trait is dominant. Furthermore, it was pointed out that different personalities react differently under stress, and their dominant characteristics may shift from one type to another.

The discussion leaders developed their premise by showing a number of videotapes illustrating how the basic types of personality react to approaches by another personality type. These frequently brought laughs from the participants as they recognized, sometimes with a touch of pain, familiar scenes of personality clashes on the job or within the family.

The lesson inherent in the self-analysis, the videotaped situations and the lively discussion that ensued was that we should come into a situation and deal with another personality as he or she is, not as we think the other person ought to be. No one of the four personality styles is objectively better than any other, the discussion leaders said. Each has its positive points, but each also has what they called its “downside risks,” if carried too far.

Participants, obviously warming to the subject as they recognized the prototypes of familiar personalities, quickly learned to recognize the types revealed by characteristic lines such as these: “What are the long-range implications?… Never mind all the details — how much does it cost?… Walk me through your proposal step by step… How did you arrive at those figures?… I don’t think you can see the big picture… How soon can you get going on it?… How do you feel about this?…”

Another session dealt with listening — that is, being sensitive to the feelings and thoughts of the other person that lie behind his or her words. Although the stress up to this point had been on how one person should try to express his or her thoughts to the other, this time the emphasis was the other way around — how to make real effort to listen, rather than to tune out an unwelcome message. Here, as in other parts of the program, the group was asked at various times to write down their answers to several searching questions, to discuss their written answers quietly with their own spouses, and then to hold a general discussion among the eight participants at each of the sixteen round tables. This procedure stimulated a general sharing of views throughout the seminar, and resulted in a number of comments on how common are the problems that various participants have faced, and are facing.

“To be a good listener, you have to get the other person to open up,” John
Drake commented at one point. He observed that some couples require more time than others to get started in a discussion of personal issues. He suggested that they ask questions, without being afraid of periods of silence for a while.

Later in the seminar Barrie Greiff told the group briefly about his course on “The Executive Family,” which he has directed at the Harvard Business School over the past ten years. (See article in the Summer 1977 issue of H&S Reports.) He focuses on trade-offs, he explained, the ones we must make when living in a world that may involve dual careers for husband and wife, travel for the job, transfers to another city, the effect of firm mergers on executives and professionals, what success can do to us, loss of a job or starting a second career.

He advised couples to ask themselves: What are my priorities? How do I maintain control over my priorities? How do I handle all my responsibilities in a limited amount of time?

“It is sheer fantasy,” he emphasized, “to think that after a husband becomes a partner in this firm he will then be able to pay more attention to his family. The need is for you to start now, if you have not before, to communicate more with each other and to share your lives. There is a changing relationship between men and women today, putting stress on many marriages. The essence of any marriage is openness and sharing views.”

At another point in the seminar the participants were shown a movie that had been run on network TV a few years ago, about a business family in comfortable circumstances that had difficulty establishing their goals. Outwardly they had all the material things money could buy — inwardly the parents, Sam and Jane, were concerned over where they, in early middle age, and their three children were headed. The ensuing discussion showed that the issues raised in the film had struck home with the DH&S group. During the lively exchange of
views, one voice summed it up: "We may not be Sam and Jane at this point, but we may be headed in that direction."

Another session during the intensive three-day program was devoted to husband-wife conflicts (the discussion leaders openly spoke in terms of "fights," not necessarily meaning physical violence), and ways of tackling their underlying causes. There was also a period devoted to the conflicts inherent in the two-career marriage, which Greiff termed the most important phenomenon affecting the American family in the years just ahead. More and more, he said, wives are not content to restrict their role to the home, child care, social events and volunteering. And in a society where nearly 50 percent of all current marriages end in divorce, he said it makes economic sense for women to be trained for remunerative work. A quick show of hands revealed that about 25 to 30 percent of the wives present were working at the time of the seminar. And about 50 percent said that they anticipate working outside the home in the future.

In all sessions of the seminar, the wives were equal participants with their husbands. It was quite noticeable that they did not merely attend — they took an active part in the round-table discussions and in their questions directed at the discussion leaders. And there were no segregated sessions; everyone took part in all meetings together.

The one exception occurred late on the third morning, when Shirley Steele, wife of DH&S managing partner Charlie Steele, hosted a luncheon at the Greenwich Country Club for the new partners' and directors' wives. Later the group visited the Steele home for coffee and dessert, where they could get acquainted with Shirley's expert needlework and decorative skills that have become well known among her friends and neighbors through the years. (See H&S Reports, Spring 1968, p. 31.) Meanwhile, the husbands got respite from long hours of seminar-sitting by taking to the golf course and tennis courts for the afternoon. The entire group was reunited that evening at a banquet, after which Charlie Steele said a few words of friendly welcome to the new partners, directors and their wives.

Informally throughout the seminar, whether at meals or during the evening social hours or at odd moments between sessions, the three discussion leaders were reachable for private consultation and discussion. So were
Charlie Goldsmith and Bill Kuntz, partner responsible for continuing education in EO. From their contact with the participants and their analysis of the confidential evaluations of the meeting written by each participant, Charlie and Bill agreed that "while there is room for improvement in several areas, with this seminar we hit on the high end of the spectrum." To DH&S Reports Charlie Goldsmith added:

"At the end, when they were writing their evaluations, there was more intensive writing than I have seen at any seminar, in this firm or anywhere else, and their comments showed more thought, more personal input. Some of the people wrote on extra pages, and on the back of the forms. They had a lot they wanted to say!" Among the points most often touched on in the evaluations, as analyzed by Charlie and relayed in paraphrase to DH&S Reports:

"It was great for the firm to invite husband and wife to attend this seminar together."

"By inviting me to be present for the entire program, DH&S recognized me as a person, and not just as a partner's wife."

"I found out that others share the same concerns and problems that we have."

"It was important that we came here together, away from the stresses of home, family and office."

"I got many concrete ideas from the seminar. It made me think about travel and transfers, setting goals, being aware of future traps."

"It forced us to reflect on our relationship with our own spouse and with DH&S."

When DH&S managing partner Charlie Steele spoke at the banquet at the close of the seminar, it was clear that the meeting was judged a rousing success by participants, by those active in arranging it, and by the management of the firm. Plans for a similar Executive Family Seminar in 1980 are under active consideration."