Senior Department of the Army Self-Perceptions on Executive Core Qualifications Proficiency: Selection Results

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Abstract

As part of the Army Management Staff College's (AMSC) capstone course, Continuing Education for Senior Leaders (CESL), a pre-requisite written requirement was introduced into the course. The purpose of the prerequisite was to serve as a concrete experience (from KOLB's work on the Experiential Learning Model) and push the students into the affective zone in order to enhance their adult learning experience. In this case, each student was asked to write a one-page information paper to answer the following question: "Of the five Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ) – Leading Change, Leading People, Results Driven, Business Acumen, and Building Coalitions, which one do you believe your government service career/experience has prepared you for the least, why, and what can you do as a supervisor to better prepare your subordinates for that ECQ?" The results of six classes reveal some interesting and consistent trends in how Department of the Army Senior Civilians view their expertise and experience and also illustrate some fairly common beliefs.

The Continuing Education for Senior Leaders Course

Continuing Education for Senior Leaders (CESL) is a one-week resident course offered at the Army Management Staff College's Fort Leavenworth Campus. CESL is offered to Army civilians in the grades GS14–15, lieutenant colonels and above, chief warrant officers 4 and 5, and command sergeants major who supervise Army civilian supervisors and managers. Prerequisites include completion of the CES Foundations and Advanced Course for civilians hired after September 2006. In recent years, the course has been offered in two different venues. Initially it was offered at the Humphries Engineering Center, adjacent to Fort Belvoir, VA. In that configuration, CESL provided a participatory environment where Army senior leaders, both uniform and civilian, discussed current issues and challenges facing the Army and its civilian and military leaders. The course included the Deputy G3 of the Army introducing two real-world challenges. This was followed by a series of senior leader presentations to inform the students as they worked in groups to prepare a response briefing/presentation. The Deputy G3 returned on the last day of the course and received the briefings. In 2015, the course was piloted under a slightly different model. The course was delivered by a contracted and accredited university college of business. The intent was to approach the leader competencies and Executive Core Qualifications through the lens of the business community. In both delivery venues, CESL leverages former and serving senior DOD civilian leaders' and corporate business leaders' expertise to facilitate learning. Facilitators use the Experiential Learning Model (ELM) in support of an executive education framework to guide the curriculum.

CESL is conducted four times each year. It consists of a phase one distributed learning module (requires online discussion with classmates and an information paper) and a one-week resident phase. The Continuing Education for Senior Leaders (CESL) course is designed to give

senior civilian leaders (GS 14/15) the executive level education and training required to be effective senior leaders. The intent is to approach the leader competencies and Executive Core Qualifications through the lens of the business community. Each class consists of approximately 64 students. CESL learning outcomes include:

- Improve student understanding of the contemporary operating environment, to include current and anticipated strategic level challenges, issues and priorities.
- Understand how to better apply the Army's "Mission Command" doctrine at the organizational and strategic levels of leadership and beyond, while operating in complex environments that requires risk management and informed decision making.
- Improve each student's self-awareness of his / her strategic leadership attributes and competencies IAW current doctrine and Executive Core Qualifications.
- Broaden student understanding of how to manage strategic direction and lead change.

CESL Way Ahead

CESL is being adapted to Army Operational Concept 2025 – 2040, doctrine updates, National Security Strategy updates, and DODI 1430.16, Growing Civilian Leaders, in combination with the Army Learning Concept 2015 philosophy and methodology. Students will experience collaborative, contextually based problem solving within a seminar format. SES and senior leader engagements will be augmented with case studies and small group work facilitated by private sector / corporate leadership experts partnered with our senior civilian leaders. The aim of this approach is to further broaden student understanding of how to think strategically and lead fundamental change within their organizations.

Explanation of Executive Core Qualifications

The ECQ define the competencies needed to build a federal corporate culture that drives for results, serves customers, and builds successful teams and coalitions within and outside the organization. The ECQ are required for entry to the Senior Executive Service and are used by many departments and agencies in selection, performance management, and leadership development for management and executive positions. The ECQ were designed to assess executive experience and potential – not technical expertise.

Successful performance in the SES requires competence in each ECQ. The ECQ are interdependent; successful executives bring all five to bear when providing service to the nation.

(Guide to Senior Executive Service Qualifications. Office of Personnel Management. (September 2012). Retrieved from http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/senior-executive-service/executive-core-qualifications/)

ECQ 1: Leading Change

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to bring about strategic change, both within and outside the organization, to meet organizational goals. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to establish an organizational vision and to implement it in a continuously changing environment. The *leading change* ECQ has six components.

Creativity and Innovation

Develops new insights into situations; questions conventional approaches; encourages new ideas and innovations; designs and implements new or cutting edge programs/processes.

External Awareness

Understands and keeps up to date on local, national, and international policies and trends that affect the organization and shape stakeholders' views; is aware of the organization's impact on the external environment.

Flexibility

Is open to change and new information; rapidly adapts to new information, changing conditions, or unexpected obstacles.

Resilience

Deals effectively with pressure; remains optimistic and persistent, even under adversity. Recovers quickly from setbacks.

Strategic Thinking

Formulates objectives and priorities, and implements plans consistent with the long-term interests of the organization in a global environment. Capitalizes on opportunities and manages risks.

Vision

Takes a long-term view and builds a shared vision with others; acts as a catalyst for organizational change. Influences others to translate vision into action.

ECQ 2: Leading People

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to lead people toward meeting the organization's vision, mission, and goals. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to provide an inclusive work place that fosters the development of others, facilitates cooperation and teamwork, and supports constructive resolution of conflicts. The *leading people* ECQ has four components.

Conflict Management

Encourages creative tension and differences of opinions. Anticipates and takes steps to prevent counter-productive confrontations. Manages and resolves conflicts and disagreements in a constructive manner.

Leveraging Diversity

Fosters an inclusive workplace where diversity and individual differences are valued and leveraged to achieve the vision and mission of the organization.

Developing Others

Develops the ability of others to perform and contribute to the organization by providing ongoing feedback and by providing opportunities to learn through formal and informal methods.

Team Building

Inspires and fosters team commitment, spirit, pride, and trust. Facilitates cooperation and motivates team members to accomplish group goals.

ECQ 3: Results Driven

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to meet organizational goals and customer expectations. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to make decisions that produce high-quality results by applying technical knowledge, analyzing problems, and calculating risks. The *results driven* ECQ has six components.

Accountability

Holds self and others accountable for measurable, high-quality, timely, and cost-effective results. Determines objectives, sets priorities, and delegates work. Accepts responsibility for mistakes. Complies with established control systems and rules.

Customer Service

Anticipates and meets the needs of both internal and external customers. Delivers high-quality products and services; is committed to continuous improvement.

Decisiveness

Makes well-informed, effective, and timely decisions, even when data are limited or solutions produce unpleasant consequences; perceives the impact and implications of decisions.

Entrepreneurship

Positions the organization for future success by identifying new opportunities; builds the organization by developing or improving products or services. Takes calculated risks to accomplish organizational objectives.

Problem Solving

Identifies and analyzes problems; weighs relevance and accuracy of information; generates and evaluates alternative solutions; makes recommendations.

Technical Credibility

Understands and appropriately applies principles, procedures, requirements, regulations, and policies related to specialized expertise.

ECQ 4: Business Acumen

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to manage human, financial, and information resources strategically. The *business acumen* ECQ has three components.

Financial Management

Understands the organization's financial processes. Prepares, justifies, and administers the program budget. Oversees procurement and contracting to achieve desired results. Monitors expenditures and uses cost–benefit thinking to set priorities.

Human Capital Management

Builds and manages work force based on organizational goals, budget considerations, and staffing needs. Ensures that employees are appropriately recruited, selected, appraised, and rewarded; takes action to address performance problems. Manages a multi-sector work force and a variety of work situations.

Technology Management

Keeps up to date on technological developments. Makes effective use of technology to achieve results. Ensures access to and security of technology systems.

ECQ 5: Building Coalitions

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to build coalitions internally and with other federal agencies, state and local governments, nonprofit and private sector organizations, foreign governments, or international organizations to achieve common goals. The *building coalitions* ECQ has three components.

Partnering

Develops networks and builds alliances; collaborates across boundaries to build strategic relationships and achieve common goals.

Political Savvy

Identifies the internal and external politics that impact the work of the organization. Perceives organizational and political reality and acts accordingly.
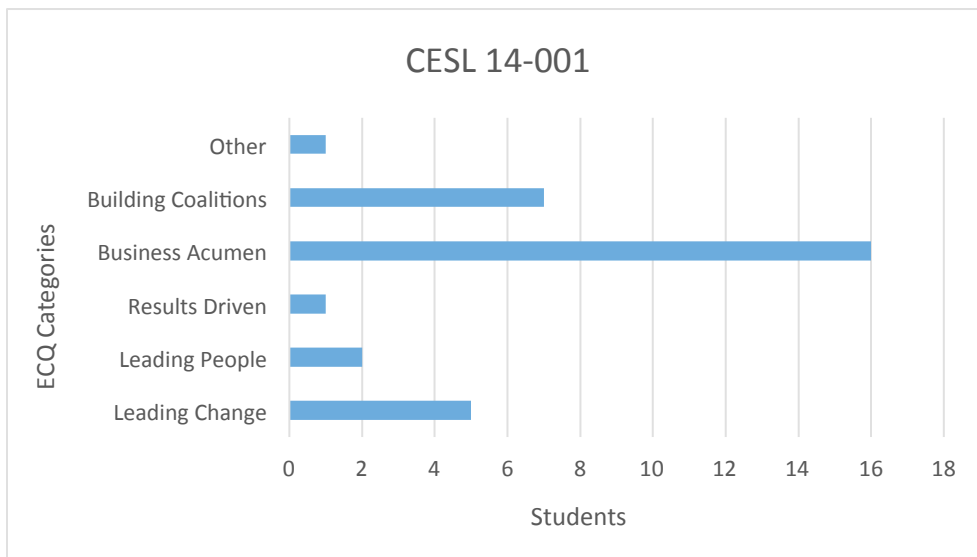
Influencing/Negotiating

Persuades others; builds consensus through give and take; gains cooperation from others to obtain information and accomplish goals.

Frequency of self-identified shortcomings:

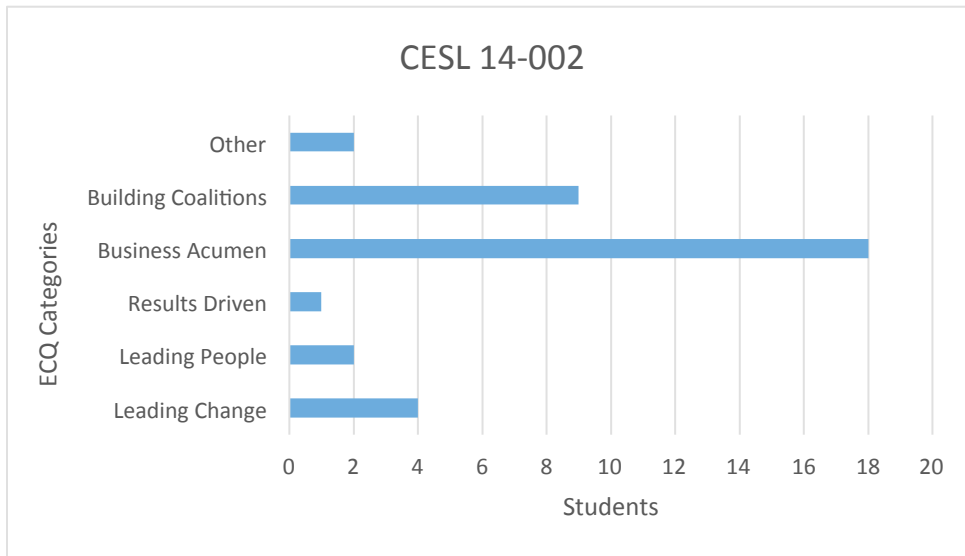**The Results by Class:**

CESL CLASS 14-001

Leading Change	5	16%
Leading people	2	6%
Results Driven	1	3%
Business Acumen	16	50%
BC	7	22%
Other	1	3%

CESL 14-001

CESL CLASS 14-002

Leading Change	4	11%
Leading People	2	6%
Results Driven	1	3%
Business Acumen	18	50%
Building Coalitions	9	25%

Other   2   5%

CESL CLASS 14-003

Leading Change   5   8%
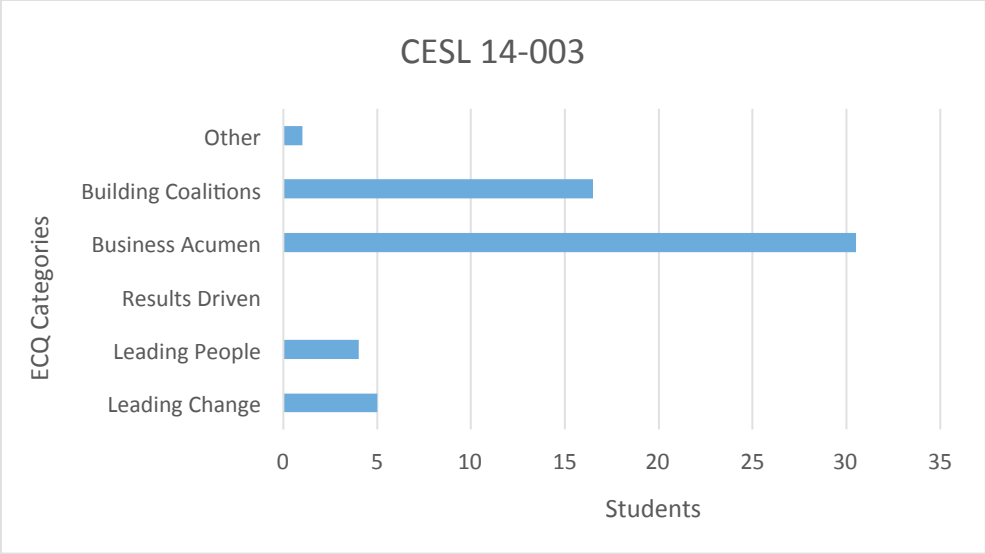
Leading People   4   7%

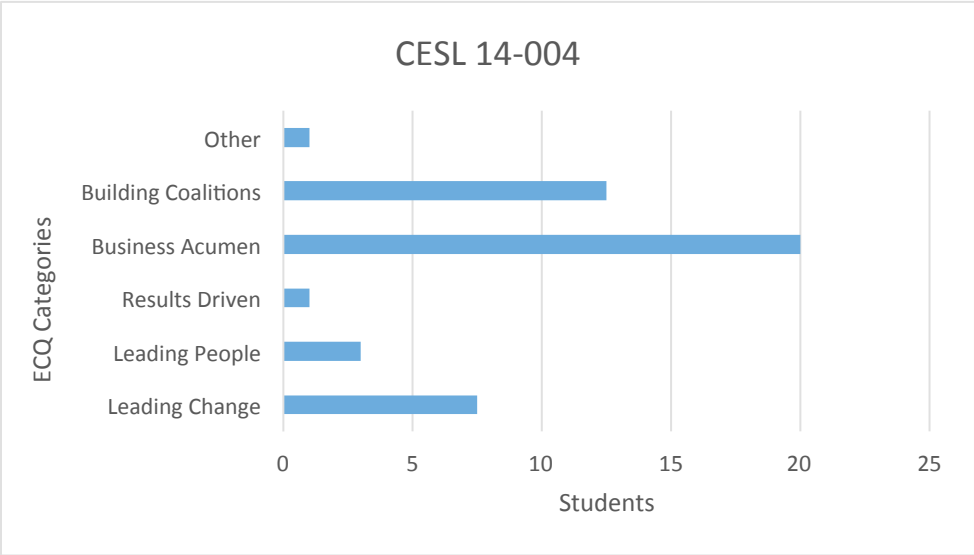Results Driven   0   0%

Business Acumen   30.5   54%

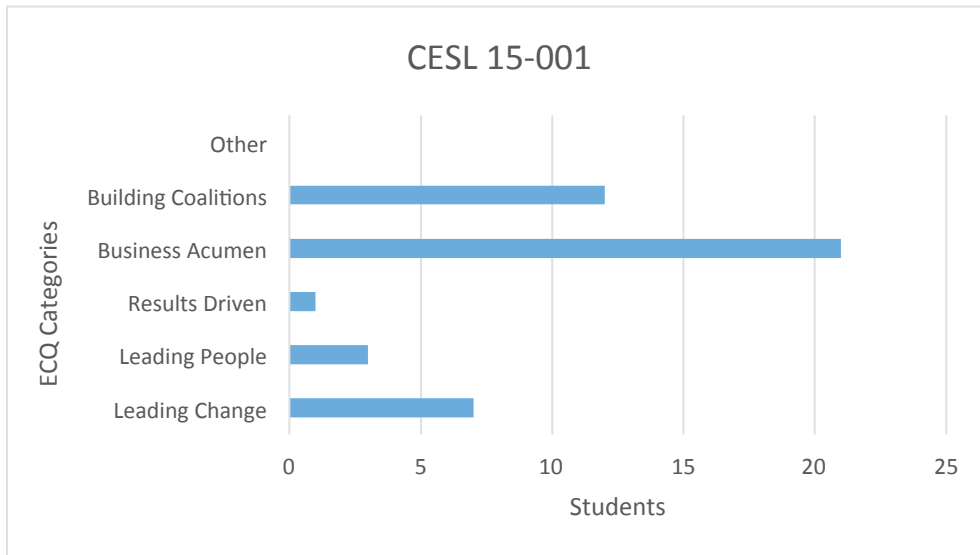Building Coalitions   16.5   29%

Other   1   2%

CESL 14-003

CESL CLASS 14-004

Leading Change	7.5	17%
Leading People	3	7%
Results Driven	1	2%
Business Acumen	20	44%
Building Coalitions	12.5	28%
Other	1	2%

CESL 14-004

CESL CLASS 15-001

Leading Change	7	16%
Leading People	3	7%
Results Driven	1	2%
Business Acumen	21	48%
Building Coalitions	12	27%

CESL 15-001

CESL CLASS 15-002

Leading Change	11	19%
Leading People	4	7%
Results Driven	1	2%
Business Acumen	25	42%
Building Coalitions	17	28%
Other	1	2%

CESL 15-002
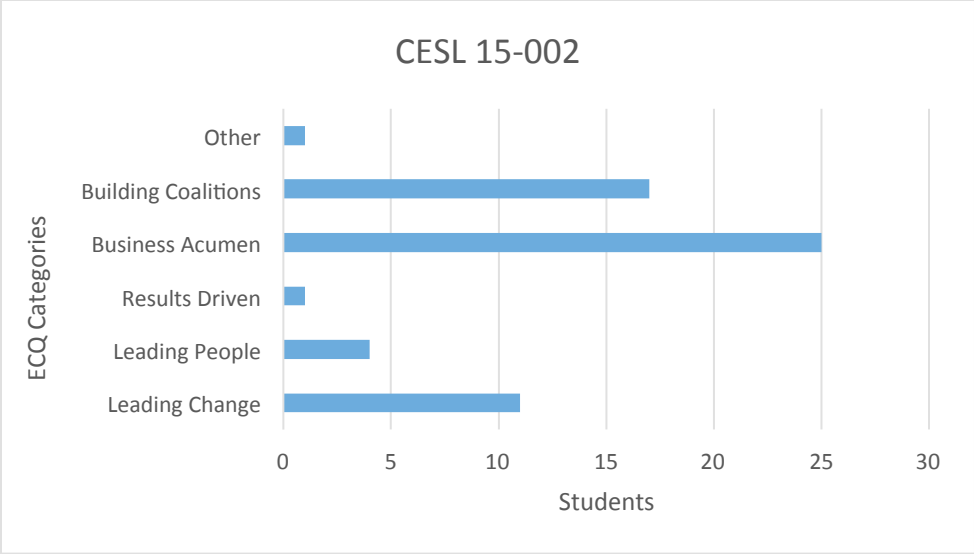
Overall Result

Leading Change	39.5	14%
Leading people	18	7%
Results Driven	5	2%
Business Acumen	130.5	48%
BC	74	27%
Other	6	2%
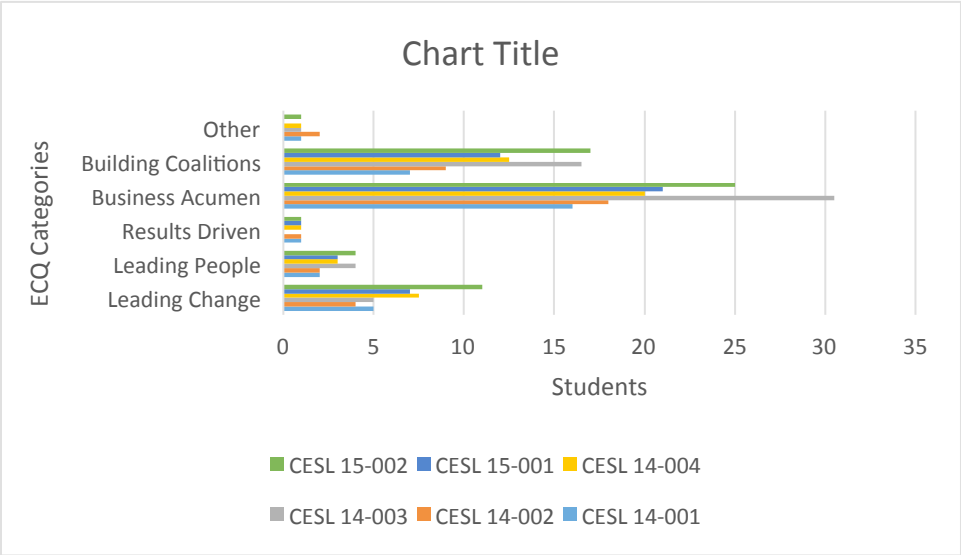
RESULTS

After personally reviewing and providing feedback to over 273 students, it is very clear to me that each student possesses a unique perspective based on personal experience, organization of origin, duty position and level and specifics of responsibilities. Additionally, writing styles and abilities vary greatly. In a perfect world, each paper would have started with a bottom-line-up-front (BLUF) sentence that read, "Of the five executive core qualifications, my civilian service career has prepared me least for (insert ECQ selected) because (insert reason)." I could have then gone through all 272 papers, selected the ECQ and the reason, and conducted an analysis of the most cited reasons for lack of preparation. However, due to the diversity of the students and their writing approaches, some reasons were more implicit than explicit, causing me, in some cases, to divine or interpret a paraphrase from the information presented. While this approach is less than scientific, the results are representative of a large sampling of senior Department of the Army civilians.

Common Threads

Overwhelmingly, the ECQ selected most often as the one senior Department of the Army Civilians are least prepared for is Business Acumen (BA). The reason for selecting this ECQ, in order of frequency, follow. The most cited reason for lack of expertise in the components of BA, Financial Management, Human Capital Management, and Technology Management was "stove piping." Specifically, many senior DA Civilians felt that these areas are managed by very specialized staff elements and that this specialization caused or facilitated dependency.

"…funding, contract administration, equipment refresh, and HR functions are centrally controlled."

…these areas are different from the other ECQs in that within most organizations they are managed by separate specific specialized staff elements such as the Resource Management Office, Human Resources, Force Modernization, Information Technology and contracting.

"…expediency and stove-piped equities often dictated that only the comptroller community received adequate training in fiscal discipline."

The next most common reason, an organizational culture or environment that does not value BA, can be related to many of the most frequent responses. This category of reasons included the traditional argument that Army culture dictates spending all allocated assets and that failing to do so results in punishment or a future decrement in allocated resources. Also cited was a culture that tolerates excessive and unnecessary expenditures due to a sense of urgency tied to mission accomplishment. There was also a sense that senior leaders did not necessarily have an overarching or holistic view of how all the disparate operations of the organization are tied together and related.

> "The availability of vast resources coupled with the seemingly constant sense of urgency has, in my opinion, led to a culture that tolerates excessive spending in a myriad of areas, resulting in the acquisition of systems, equipment and services that in retrospect were either suboptimal or unnecessary."

The next most common response to lack of BA preparedness was lack of training. Some students mentioned a first exposure during the CES Advanced Course. Many students responded that they received no formal training in any of the components of BA. Also mentioned was that due to DA Civilian hiring practices, focus on hiring already qualified subject matter experts contributed to lack of BA professional development in senior civilians. The expertise could be in resource, human capital, or technology management, but it could also be some other very technical specialty. When the hiring process does not incorporate expertise in the components of *business acumen* or when senior civilians move to positions of higher responsibility/authority that require previously unneeded expertise in the components of *business acumen,* the absence of formal training programs and opportunities becomes problematic.

> "The focus of my development was financial management, leaving the human capital and technology managements overlooked."

> "I am surprised at how few individuals I worked with, at any level within the federal government, possess private sector experience. The lack of direct knowledge or experience of how business or the private sector functions results in a general lack of business acumen in managing and leading activities within all levels of the federal government."

Finally, the

> "…no one taught me "how" to manage the finances, just "what" finances to manage."

responses of "not empowered" and "lack of private sector experience" were cited as reasons for lack of preparedness in the BA ECQ. Many senior DA Civilians did not feel they had been empowered to establish budget priorities, that budget and hiring restrictions were not aligned with organizational goals, and that they were expected to execute assigned missions with the resources they were given. This was all done either above their level of responsibility or without their input. The lack of private sector experience was cited as a cause for lack of BA in leading and managing DA organizations activities.

Unlike private organizations not associated with the federal government, private businesses have to make their money before they can spend it; and then budget for equipment and resources; reinvest some of the profits into furthering their business to ensure they maintain with current trends.

The second most often chosen ECQ as the one senior Department of the Army Civilians are least prepared for was building coalitions (BC). The reason for selecting this ECQ, in order of frequency, follow. Lack of opportunity to build coalitions was the reason cited most often for lack of preparedness in this ECQ. In most instances cited, the senior DA Civilian employees felt they had no access to develop relationships outside of their immediate organizations.

The second most often cited reason for lack of expertise in BC was lack of training. However, this observation was not consistent, as some students expressed that they had had adequate

"Developmental opportunities within and outside of the command are almost non-existent."

"I can recall no training, education, or experience during my federal service tenure that would prepare me to build a coalition"

"… you would have to be afforded an opportunity to work with these different levels of government to include foreign and domestic as well as various organizations."

"My career has not allowed me the exposure to build coalitions with other federal agencies, state and local governments, nonprofit and private sector organizations, and foreign governments."

"There are two primary reasons for this. First and foremost, is simply the lack of any formal training. Second, is opportunity. The opportunity to build a coalition of truly diverse, difficult, competitive, and conflicting partners is rare, if existent at all in our field."

training in BC, but were never provided an opportunity to use their training.

> "The short fall is that coalition building is not addressed until very late in a person's career."

> "I believe my government service career prepares me least for *building coalitions* because these skills are not effectively taught by most government institutions. Organizational trainings are usually grade and job specific and not forward thinking."

Finally, there appears to be a fairly common disdain for or uneasiness with "political savvy." In some instances there is a feeling that political savvy runs contrary to values or is disingenuous or unethical. The second connotation is similar, but appears to address mission focus as being so important it trumps or renders politics unimportant. Finally, some students clearly did not value the political component of BC.

> "The Army doesn't promote dancing around an issue and that suits my communication style. In addition, I have to admit I never liked the term "Political Savvy," as the adjective has a negative connotation, perhaps synonymous with being less than truthful. Communication that seems "political" to me also seems to be less than genuine, if not an outright lie."

> "The day-to-day direction from senior leadership tends to be more focused on specifics of completing the mission and not as much on teaching subordinates on how to build relationships (Coalitions)."

> "Achieving goals should be all about facts, figures and getting the job done; not the "informal, behind the scenes influence efforts to sell ideas, win support, or increase the power aspect" of doing business."

> "…identifying the internal and external politics that impact the work of the organization is something that I do need to be more cognizant of. Rather than perceiving the organizational and political realities I have a tendency to be more mission focused and less concerned about the politics of the situation."

> "The conundrum is how do we teach the art and craft of political savviness if it, when it is discussed, is seen as unsavory, in not, unethical conduct"

"The education, mentorship, and development that I received during this period were focused at the operational and supervisory level and on functional expertise. Junior and mid-level employees where I worked usually did not participate in strategic level projects."

"It seems that the standard has become to simply react to problematic situations as they occur instead executing well laid out plans and managing risks before they become problems."

"…my organization is reactive and based on the current crisis I am unprepared in implementing a long term strategic vision."

The third most common ECQ cited by the student population for lack of preparedness was *leading change*. The responses to this and the remaining two ECQ, *leading people* and *results driven*, are more difficult to group, as the responses tended to be very experience/ organizationally focused vice being focused on specific components of the ECQ. In *leading change*, organizational specifics seemed to be the driver. Specifically, students that cited this ECQ felt their organizations were reactive to change vice *leading change*, that the hierarchical nature of DA does not enable strategic thinking/vision at lower echelons, that only the most senior leaders can craft or influence organizational vision, and there is strong individual or organizational reluctance/inertia against change. There were also a few instances of citing frequent leadership turnover as an impediment to leading change.

> "Throughout my 24 years of service to the nation, I've found that I've been conditioned to react to change versus leading change."

> "My experience in government service is many people don't want to change."

> "It seems that the standard has become to simply react to problematic situations as they occur instead executing well laid out plans and managing risks before they become problems."

The final two most often cited or, conversely, least cited, ECQ the student felt unprepared for were leading people and results driven. Based on the infrequency of responses, it is difficult to determine a common set of drivers for these two selections, as responses were truly at an individual level. Some of the reasons mentioned for lack of preparedness in leading people were transitions from uniformed to civilian service and the stark differences in leadership styles and authorities, lack of understanding of different leadership styles, the discussion of specific leaders who, due to specific hiring or promotion circumstances, did not possess the requisite leadership skills necessary for the positions they occupied. There were no commonalities in the responses from the five students that selected results driven as the ECQ they were least prepared for.

Conclusion

Based on the responses of senior DA Civilian leaders to the question, "Of the five ECQ, Leading Change, Leading People, Results Driven, Business Acumen, and Building Coalitions, which one do you believe your government service career/experience has prepared you for the least, why, and what can you do as a supervisor to better prepare your subordinates for that ECQ?", it is obvious that the majority of the sample pool do not perceive weaknesses in the EQCs of results driven and leading people. There is a general indication, based on this sample, that senior DA Civilians do not view themselves as proficient as they would like to be in the ECQ BA, BC, and LC. This paper has attempted to address the self-identified reasons behind the perceived shortcomings.

Based on analysis of available data, our senior DA Civilians need more exposure, training, and opportunity to work with and influence the financial management, human resource management, and technology management components of BA, because there is a widely held perception that these functions are stove-piped and therefore beyond the control of senior civilian leaders. Additionally, more training, opportunity, and value need to be associated with BC and more emphasis must be placed on understanding and valuing political savvy. Finally, more training, opportunity, emphasis, and value must be associated with creativity and innovation, strategic thinking, and vision.

The final element of the CESL writing requirement was for the students to state what they could do as a supervisor to better prepare subordinates for success in the ECQ they identified as being least prepared for. Those strategies will be addressed in a separate article which is still under development.

BHJ