

Achieving More Through Execution

To be successful, organizational leaders must translate their goals into tasks, which allows employees to be held accountable for their part in the business' success.

By Richard Wallace



"Execution is the great unaddressed issue in the business world today. Its absence is the single biggest obstacle to success and the cause of most of the disappointments that are mistakenly attributed to other causes."

— Ram Charan, author of *What the CEO Wants You to Know* and *Boards that Work*

In the year 2000, 40 CEOs of the top 200 companies on *Fortune's* 500 list were fired or forced to resign. When 20 percent of the most powerful business leaders lose their jobs, something is clearly wrong.

Organizational leaders make big promises...and then fall short of delivering on expectations they have set. The problem is their organizations have accountability problems — people aren't doing what they're supposed to do. For an organization to achieve a competitive advantage, execution should become a key part of its culture. Additionally, leaders must have a specific set of behaviors and techniques they need to master. Execution is more than a tactic; it is a discipline that must be built into the company's system for achieving organizational objectives. Furthermore, leaders must be engaged in making execution a priority.

According to Ram Charan and Larry Bossidy in their book *Execution* (2002), a lack of focus on the discipline of execution is the main reason companies fall short on their promises. It explains the gap between what leaders want and what they deliver.

Execution should be a central part of a company's business strategy for

achieving organizational objectives.

However, too often leaders assume that if they have a great plan, it will translate into proper execution.

When execution becomes a consistent priority, the culture of the organization will evolve. The desired result is the organization moving toward better alignment between their people, process and business strategies. When alignment occurs, the organization will focus on prioritizing and accomplishing what is important to achieve the vision of its leaders. If organizations will put as much effort into execution as they put into planning, they will increase efficiency, productivity and profits.

When accomplished, the execution phase forces leaders to translate their understanding of the organizations' strategy into an action plan for how results will be achieved: who will do what in which sequence, how long will each task take, how much will it cost, and how will each step affect subsequent activities.

Execution Questions

- Who will do the job, and how will they be judged and held accountable?
- What human, technical, production and financial resources are needed to execute the strategy?
- Will the organization have the resources it needs two years out, when the strategy goes to the next level?
- Does the strategy deliver the earnings required for success?
- Can it be broken down into an achievable task?

People engaged in execution processes claim that these questions help in searching out reality and in reaching

practical conclusions. In this process, the leader must define what success looks like. Then, everyone involved must agree on their responsibilities to achieve success, the benefits or rewards for achieving success and make a commitment to their responsibilities.

Essential Elements

The heart of execution lies in the three essential elements — people, process and strategy — that every business uses in one form or another. However, more often than not, people, processes and organizational strategies stand apart from one another like silos with no obvious connection.

Typically, the CEO and their senior leadership team allot less than half-a-day each year to review the organizations strategic business plan and, generally, the reviews are not particularly interactive. Interactive meetings can be scary for an organization that purposely avoids the risk of generating conflict. However, too much conflict avoidance often leads to other subversive activities that have a very negative impact on execution. What organizations do need is:

- **Robust dialogue to surface the realities of the business**
- **Accountability for results discussed openly and agreed to by those responsible for getting things done**
- **Rewards for the best performers**
- **Follow-through to ensure that progress tracks to the plans**

An execution culture requires robust dialogue that brings reality to the surface through openness, candor and informality. When mistakes are made, openness is preserved and blaming is avoided. Candor and honesty can be painful for organizations that are looking

for somewhere to place blame. However, in a healthy organization, candor and honesty foster creativity, and ultimately lead to competitive advantages, as well as increased shareholder value.

Emotional Fortitude

Robust dialogue is great, but to be effective, leaders must have the emotional fortitude to be open to whatever information is provided, whether it is what you want to hear or not. It takes a special kind of confidence to encourage and accept challenges in group settings. It also is necessary to accept and deal with your own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, to be firm with people who aren't performing and to handle the ambiguity that so often exists within the organization.

Bossidy and Charan point out four core qualities that make up emotional fortitude: authenticity, self-awareness, self-mastery and humility.

Clearly these qualities should be well developed in executives in top positions; however, often one or two of them are un-

derdeveloped. Leadership development at this level requires the services of a professionally trained executive coach to provide focus in enhancing these four qualities.

Essential Behaviors

There is an enormous difference between leading an organization and presiding over it. The leader who boasts of a hands-off style is not dealing with the issues of the day or searching for problems to solve and making sure they get solved. Putting the right people in the right jobs and ensuring that rewards and recognition reinforce performance are essential.

So, how does a leader in charge of execution avoid being a micromanager? There are seven essential behaviors that form the building blocks of execution:

1. Know your people and your business
2. Insist on realism
3. Set clear objectives and priorities
4. Follow through
5. Reward those that achieve results
6. Expand the capabilities of your people

7. Know yourself.

The key to the problem is that most executives don't understand the "discipline" of execution. Execution involves a specific set of core processes built on a foundation of leadership behaviors. Fundamentally, execution is a systematic way of exposing reality and acting on it. However, most companies do not face reality very well; hence, they cannot execute.

Joel Barker, a futurist, emphasizes the need not only for action, but also the importance of tying it to a vision. "Vision without action is merely a dream; action without vision just passes the time; vision with action can change the world." Does your organization have an execution culture?

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