

The Wisdom Report

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Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done

Execution and Results

We all know people who talk a good game. But we admire the ones who achieve results. Athletes who break records, pianists who move us with their music, teachers who ignite the spark of learning within us... all of these are people who execute and excel. Companies that execute are admired as well.

So if we know what execution looks like, why is it so hard to achieve? Why is it that some companies execute well while others die? *Execution*, the book by Ram Charan and Larry Bossidy, examines a wide spectrum of companies and presents lessons learned from companies that execute well.

Execution is Not Grunt Work

One problem in poorly-executing organizations: Leaders view execution as something to be delegated to others, while the leaders focus on “bigger” issues. Nonsense, say the authors. High-performance companies have an execution mindset embedded in their DNA. Once properly analyzed, the execution mindset can be extracted and duplicated in other organizations.

Components of Execution

The authors of *Execution* have spent decades running and advising large, multinational companies. They have extracted the discipline of execution from their real-world experience, breaking it down to three essential processes:

- People
- Strategy
- Operations

The People Process

Bossidy and Charan regard the people process as the most important of the

A strategy must address the “hows” of execution. Otherwise, it is a fantasy, not a strategy.

three. When you recruit and train the right people, they will create executable strategies and convert them into successful operating plans.

Leaders can best influence the people process through their behavior. “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say,” goes the mantra. The authors list seven things a leader must do as part of the people process:

- Know your people and your business.
- Insist on realism.
- Set clear goals and priorities.
- Follow through.
- Reward the doers.
- Expand people’s capabilities.
- Know yourself.

Know Your People

When a high-performance person is presenting a business case to company leaders, he wants to be quizzed in detail about his work. The questions should not take on the flavor of an interrogation, but rather a dialog between colleagues who are challenging each other to grow.

Leaders who know their people and the business will know how to ask incisive questions. The presenter is ready for the test, and a leader who is execution-minded will give him the chance to shine while still pointing out areas needing additional growth.

Realism, Goals, and Priorities

Stretch goals. Eighty-hour work weeks. Missed vacations. Are these the signs of achievement, or a prescription for burn-out? Clearly, such stress behaviors are the pathway to burnout.

When leaders set goals and priorities that are based on the realities of the marketplace, people on the team are more productive. And productive people achieve goals (even stretch goals) without burn-out.

Follow Through

Goals are meaningless if people don’t take them seriously. If you announce



**Business is a marathon, not a sprint.
Marathons require discipline.**

a new productivity initiative, be sure to follow through with measurements and rewards for the top performers. Otherwise, your next initiative is likely to be greeted in a “ho-hum” manner as the next fad of the month.

Great People Want to Grow

There’s a difference between giving orders and teaching people how to get things done. When leaders actively look for opportunities to coach, people have opportunities to grow.

A core coaching skill: Asking incisive questions that force people to think. Many times, incisive questions force the leader to think as well, and the whole team grows stronger as a result.

Developing Emotional Fortitude

All of us need frank feedback from the people around us if we are to grow. Responsibility for frank feedback falls heavily on leaders and coaches.

Some leaders avoid giving frank feedback during employee evaluations. Why? Basic human nature. We all want to be liked. But if being liked means that your people never receive honest feedback, is it worth it?

Execution-minded leaders have the emotional fortitude to give honest feedback. They can focus specifically on the issue at hand without resorting to personal attacks. When an execution-minded leader uncovers a shortcoming in performance, he looks at it as an opportunity to coach, not to scold.

The Strategy Process

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, has been known to say “If you want to grow long term, you have to eat short term.” A great strategy wins customer in the short term and the long term.

A great strategy is not a bunch of numbers on a spreadsheet extrapolated for ten years with a year-by-year “growth factor.” A great strategy comes from the minds and experience of the people charged with its execution, the people recruited and trained as part of the people process.

Realism: Tough Questions

A strategy must address the “hows” of execution. Otherwise, it’s a fantasy, not

Three Core Processes of Execution

People.

The right people will enable you to develop the other two processes.

Strategy.

A great strategy wins customers now and in the future.

Operations.

Following through and getting results.

a strategy. One way to keep a strategy grounded in reality is to ask tough, incisive questions such as:

- If we’ve tried this before and failed, how have circumstances changed to raise the odds of success?
- Are our people trained in the key areas required by the strategy?
- How are competitors likely to respond when we execute? How will we respond to their response?
- Does government regulation play a role in our success? If so, are we subject to a government timetable?

A good strategy is like a roadmap. Since nobody can predict the future, a sound strategy will give the organization plenty of room to maneuver when faced with unanticipated obstacles or opportunities.

Strategic Success

Some strategies are destined to fail because they are born without the execution mindset. Stretch goals ignite the imagination and they get people pumped-up at company pep-rallies. However, moral can nosedive when the grandiose goals are not achieved. Companies that execute well know how to build realistic and achievable strategies that excite people and move the company toward its goals. Once the strategy has been developed, it’s time for action.

The Operations Process

All planning must eventually degenerate into work, as Peter Drucker said many years ago. In the operating plan, the people (from the people process) take the strategy (from the strategy process) and break it down into actionable steps and deadlines, thereby creating the operating plan.

Credenza-Ware

So often strategies and operating plans are developed, printed, inserted into

three-ring binders (or PowerPoint presentations) and quickly forgotten. The printed documents become credenza-ware, those beautifully-bound books that sit in executive offices, unopened because everyone is running around putting out fires.

Part of execution is opening those binders and putting the good strategies and operating plans to use. A good operating plan is all about follow-through and results.

Conclusion

Execution is a discipline which must be practiced on a consistent basis if benefits are to be realized. People, strategy, and operations must all be aligned and focused on company goals. Companies that execute produce outstanding results.

Suggested Reading

Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done, by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan. Bossidy is the former CEO of Honeywell and the leader who instilled the discipline of execution within the company’s culture. Charan is a sought-after consultant and business thinker who coaches CEOs along the path toward execution.

About the Author

Raymond T. Hightower is president of WisdomGroup, creators of outstanding web-based software. To find out how WisdomGroup can execute for your company, visit WisdomGroup.com.