

Execution - Making Things Happen

Most often today the difference between a company and its competitors in terms of success is the ability to execute strategies and plans and to do it consistently.

Execution is one of the great “unaddressed” issues in the business world today. Bossidy and Charan, in their landmark book, “Execution – The Discipline of Getting Things Done”, assert, “Its absence is the single biggest obstacle to success and the cause of most of the disappointments that are mistakenly attributed to other causes.”ⁱ

Execution is a specific set of behaviors and techniques that need to be mastered in order to have competitive advantage. It is a discipline of its own. It is not just about the tactical issue in business but it is a discipline and a system. Bossidy and Charan believe that it has to be built into a company’s strategy, its goals, and its culture.ⁱⁱ

Leaders with execution strategy can respond quickly when the unexpected happened.ⁱⁱⁱ They are not rigid. Their approach is more like following a road map than taking rigid paths.

Why is execution important?

Big dream becomes pipe dream without execution

Unless you translate big thoughts into concrete steps for action, they’re pointless. Without execution, the breakthrough thinking breaks down, learning has no value, people don’t meet their stretched goals, and the revolution stops dead in its track.^{iv}

Benchmark becomes ordinary level without execution

Many leaders are talking about taking their organization into the “next level”. Some organizations try to use technology, new products, breakthrough strategy, new organizational systems to bring them to next level. No company can deliver on its commitments or adapt well to change unless all leaders practice the discipline of execution at all levels.^v Execution is the missing link between aspirations and results.^{vi}

People become demoralized without execution

When execution does not happen consistently or does not happen at all, people become frustrated, demoralized and angry. They feel that the organization is not serious about their business. They may complete their job but don’t give the extra. They can get things done but don’t feel enthused about the tasks. The feeling is one of despondency, displeasure, disenchantment and disillusionment with their leaders, managers and the organization. If not addressed, this disease begins to spread through the organization and will eventually lead to its demise.

In my consulting with organizations, I often hear leaders venting their frustration in their inability to getting things done. Mindset has not been changed. One of the issues is that they place too much emphasis on high-level strategy, on intellectualizing and philosophizing, and not enough emphasis on implementation. People may agree on a project or initiative, but very often nothing would come out of it.

How to make it happen?

Execution is the culture of getting strategies and plans done consistently to create value for stakeholders, staff, and the customers. How do we execute?

1. Execution is a discipline, and integral to strategy

Execution is a systematic process of rigorously discussing the hows and whats; the process of questioning; and then the discipline of tenaciously following through and ensuring accountability. It is asking the 5 W and 1 H questions.

Why should we do it?

What needs to be done to achieve the outcomes we want?

Who is going to get it done??

When it is going to get done??

Where should we do it?

How should it be done?

It is a systematic way of exposing reality and acting on it. Jack Welch forced realism into all of GE's management processes, making it a model of an execution culture.

The leader creates the culture for the team to face realities squarely.

We need accountability for results – discussed openly and agreed to by those responsible – to get things done and then to reward the best performers. We need follow-through to ensure the plans are on track.

2. Business leader sets the tone. Execution is the major job of the business leader.

An organization can execute only if the leader's heart and soul are immersed in the company. Leading is more than thinking strategically, attempting to inspire your people with visions, while managers do the grunt of the work. The leader has to be engaged personally and deeply in the business.

Distinguish between micro-managing and execution

Micro-managing diminishes people's self-confidence, discourages their initiative, and stifles their ability to think for themselves. Leading for execution is active involvement. Leaders use their knowledge and wisdom to constantly probe. They bring weaknesses to light and rally their people to correct them.

Don't tell but ask

Leaders who execute often do not tell people what to do but ask questions so their followers can figure out what they need to do. In this way, they coach them, passing on their experiences as a leader and educating them to think in ways that were never tried before. Far from stifling them, they help people expand their capabilities.

Walk not just talk

Execution leaders are "M & M" (Mix and Mingle) leaders. They manage by walking around. They have intimate knowledge of their business but they must also know what to say and what to listen for when they are walking around.

3. Creating dialogue

Dialogue is the core of the execution culture. We need robust dialogue to surface the realities of the business. It must occur at all levels - CEOs communicating personally with their senior and middle managers and staff. Emails are not good enough. Managers engage in conversations, both formally and informally with their supervisors and staff. Employees are given opportunities to exchange values, information, and ideas with one another.

How people talk to each other absolutely determines how well the organization will function. The key issues in dialogue cover the following:-

Are people candid, open and sincere?

Are people raising the right questions?

Are people debating the issues and finding realistic solutions?

4. Making structures and processes work for your accountability

Leaders create the right structures to make managers accountable so that execution can take place. Processes are made efficient. People who spend too much time briefing and debriefing processes stifle performance. They can keep improving processes by:

- Identifying process bug
- Cutting waste and lag
- Experimenting new process
- Improving service process
- Monitoring service process

When execution must become a core element in an organization's culture, we will begin to see engaged staff, clear objectives and roles, and performance from our staff.

John Ng, *Ph.D*
President
Meta

Tel: (65) 6419 5255
Fax: (65) 6227 7170
Email: john@meta.com.sg

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Why do leaders fall? Read **When Leaders Fall...Causes of Leadership Failure (Part 1)**

ⁱ Bossidy, L. & Charan, R. 2002. Execution – The Discipline of Getting Things Done. Crown Business, New York, New York. USA.

ⁱⁱ Bossidy, L. & Charan, R. 2002. Execution – The Discipline of Getting Things Done. Crown Business, New York, New York. USA.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bossidy, L. & Charan, R. 2002. Execution – The Discipline of Getting Things Done. Crown Business, New York, New York. USA.

^{iv} Bossidy, L. & Charan, R. 2002. Execution – The Discipline of Getting Things Done. Crown Business, New York, New York. USA.

^v Bossidy, L. & Charan, R. 2002. Execution – The Discipline of Getting Things Done. Crown Business, New York, New York. USA.

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