

# The Art of Execution: A Critical Leadership Strategy

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*Ideas not coupled with action never become bigger than the brain cells they occupy – Arnold Glasgow*

## Introduction

If the prize-winning dessert you ordered arrives at the table just after the busboy has cleared the spoons, is it still a four-star meal? If your tech support line connects you to a Ph.D. in Latvia, are you getting the best support? We don't judge the products and services we order by how well they are conceived or designed. We judge by results. A good leader knows that skilled execution gets results.

The goal of this brief is to help leaders assess their awareness of the elements of effective execution:

- Know your resources.
- Determine if the right people are in the right positions.
- Effectively anticipate.

In *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* Larry Bossidy, the former CEO of Honeywell International, teaches that installing a system that monitors and tracks the stages of execution is a leader's most important job. This system should ask:

- What are the individual tasks?
- Who does them?
- How do we know when they are done right?

Failure to study execution levels may be the single biggest barrier to success for today's corporations. A well planned execution strategy considers if and how employees follow instructions, whether a plan is realistic and what consequences result when things are not done as anticipated.

## Strategic Evaluation

No company approves strategy without first doing its homework. A lot of research is done to evaluate the "gut instinct" that led to the initiative. Is the strategy congruent, realistic and cost

effective? Strategic evaluation must be applied to implementation as well. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, made a point of knowing the day-to-day details of his operation and knew the capabilities and capacity of his staff. This level of knowledge and presence is necessary when evaluating an execution strategy. The distant leader assumes and learns about failures after it's too late. A plugged-in leader anticipates and can see what's going wrong in real time and adjust to get the desired result.

The below is a fast focus measure to help you self-evaluate your present execution effectiveness:

### Fast Focus: Business Execution Effectiveness Measure

*Circle NT if not true; T if sometimes true; VT if very true. Total your score. The higher the score, the less this is an issue at this time in your life.*

| NT | T | VT | Statements   |
|----|---|----|--|
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 1. I am not concerned about execution within my group.                   |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 2. I do not worry about execution issues in my group.                    |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 3. The organization is efficient as a whole.                             |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 4. I enforce consequences of ineffective execution consistently.         |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 5. All projects have clear, measurable execution measures.               |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 6. I am aware of the details of all projects for which I am responsible. |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 7. I reward and acknowledge employees based on performance outcomes.     |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 8. I ensure employees are provided with my expectations in writing.      |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 9. I hold all employees accountable on a consistent basis.               |
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 10. I actively communicate to my entire team consistently.               |

#### TOTALS

The higher your score, the greater your comfort in the area of execution effectiveness. This is only an awareness activity to help you form some questions and define some areas of need.

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### Strategic Evaluation Exercise

Task: You are asked to provide food for the company annual picnic. The company has given you access to the executive kitchen and staff, but you will have to create the menu, shop for the food and transport it all to the picnic grounds by noon. No vendors are allowed.

The picnic is in one week – a Wednesday. Julie from HR is your contact for the number of attendees and any dietary restrictions they may have. You estimate a half-hour drive from the kitchen to the picnic grounds. The kitchen opens at 7 am.

Your group has four people:

- Joe: has a large family and shops at the discount MegloMart
- Angela: trained as a dietician before starting at your firm; suffers from agoraphobia
- Eric: has a van, but warns that the smell of mayonnaise makes him dizzy
- Naomi: has a van and worked as a caterer, but is off work on Wednesdays

Using the above scenario, break down the tasks, make assignments and set a timeline that will allow your group to deliver the food to the picnic site on time.

### Fast Focus: Strategic Evaluation Exercise

| Task Breakdown | Resources Needed | Staff | Timeline |
|----------------|------------------|-------|----------|
|                |                  |       |          |
|                |                  |       |          |

## EAC for Effective Execution

EAC for Effective Execution examines a strategy and breaks it down to its:

- Expectations
  - Accountabilities
  - Consequences (positive and negative)
1. *Expectations* – These are the intended outcomes, clearly defined by outlining how responsibilities for all tasks will be aligned. Expectations must be measurable and clearly placed on a timeline. At this stage a leader will confirm that all needed resources are available to meet expectations.
  2. *Accountabilities* – Assigns responsibility for each of the expectations and outlines the reporting structure and process. Setting an expectation does not automatically assign accountability. Leaders must meet and define their expectations with the individuals charged with implementation. Each team member deserves the chance to understand the expectations, evaluate his or her own resources and then accept accountability. Only then can the members be evaluated by what they do or do not do.
  3. *Consequences* – It must be made clear what the consequences are if the tasks are not completed. Consequences affect the entire team, the company and the project. Team members need to understand how their performance affects those around them.

Two of the biggest gifts leaders can give their employees are a clear sense of the task at hand and encouragement for doing a good job. Credibility and loyalty will grow when employees are rewarded for good performance.

## Ten Strategies for Increasing Execution Effectiveness

1. *Understand Your Talent Pool* – Leaders need to be interested in their people. It's not enough to know what the task at hand requires. Leaders must know what their teams can do and work with them to develop the skills they need. Measure experience and hard skills, but remain aware of intangible skills like accountability, trust, integrity and respect.
2. *Understand the Impact of Positive Leadership* – A leader is, by definition, the one in front, demonstrating the expected behavior and showing the way to go. Effective leaders will strive to see their blind spots and take action to overcome them. However, a leader must also get the team to follow. Respect is the key. By being fair, firm and consistent, a leader teaches the team to pay attention to the expectations in place while making it safe to report when outcomes are not being achieved. Finally, a positive leader must be approachable. A remote “boss” may keep staff in line, but will never inspire them to their best efforts.
3. *Break Strategy Down into Milestones* – Almost anyone can come up with a great idea, but not everyone can break an idea down into measurable milestones. Leaders need to set clear objectives and explain the logic to their staff. Each step must be defined to ensure that expectations, accountabilities and consequences are understood and accepted.
4. *Determine Execution Measures* – Leaders cannot assume progress is being made. They must design and establish measures that track progress and determine if the project is on course. Once established, the measures must be monitored regularly. By stopping to get their bearings, a leader can make adjustments and avoid disaster.
5. *Set Realistic Expectations* – Leaders must be mindful of the resources at their disposal and know what can be expected realistically. It is fine to set the bar high, but do not put it out of sight.
6. *Practice Risk Management* – When making a strategy, always look for what could go wrong. Explore the “what if” questions early and make sure you have contingency plans in place. Firemen, police and other first responders constantly drill, testing themselves against the wildest scenarios. A leader who is ready for the worst will minimize damage when things actually go wrong.
7. *Make Execution Decisions with Facts* – When designing an execution strategy, have the facts to back up your logic. Instinct alone cannot be the sole guide. A leader removed from the team is thinking in a vacuum. Consulting with staff and finding the facts both test the validity of the strategy and help develop achievable expectations.
8. *Implement Professional Development and Learning* – Never assume that an employee has the core skills needed to be successful. Evaluation must be coupled with training if a team is going to continue to succeed and grow. However, employees report that they learn from practical job experience. That is why it is important for organizations to combine practical with traditional classroom learning.
9. *Reward Success* – The entire team must see outstanding effort rewarded. Nothing kills a workforce faster than when compensation is divorced from achievement. But a leader must also demonstrate that the bar will continue to rise. Employees will see that they cannot rest on what they did yesterday. They will need to focus on the present.

10. *Understand Human Motivation* – Despite a leader’s efforts, some employees will not be motivated by reward. Unmotivated employees will slow down operations and negatively impact others because of their inability to execute. These employees need to be told clearly that their behavior and choices are their own and so must either strive to improve or self-sort. But leaders also need to be consistent and objective in their evaluations. Does the leader fully understand the circumstances of an employee’s performance issues? Finally, a leader must be able to distinguish between a good relationship and good performance.

In closing, remember that the execution of strategy is as important in the end as the strategy itself. As a ship crosses the ocean, the crew must constantly take bearings, consult charts and monitor their instruments to be sure the ship is on course and able to come to port. Business is the same. It is important to ensure the course is being monitored so all strategies that are put in place have the greatest chance of becoming successful and delivering the pre-determined outcome.

## Reference

Bossidy, L, Charan, L., & Burck, C. (2002). *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*. Boston, MA: Harvard Review.