The 4 Disciplines of Execution

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Overview

> **"Leadership without execution is incomplete and ineffective. Without the ability to execute, all other attributes of leadership become hollow."**
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> - Ram Charan and Larry Bossidy, in Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done

Without execution, all of the other leadership attributes that we spend time cultivating become meaningless. Leaders and teams are expected to provide a service, accomplish tasks, and get a job done. Leaders and teams are expected to get results; they are expected to execute.

Surprisingly, however, most leaders and teams haven't given a lot of thought to how they will execute—especially on their most important priorities! Our team often works with departments and colleges across this university on strategic planning. One of the concerns that teams frequently cite related to strategic planning is that they spend a lot of time doing the strategic planning, identifying goals or priorities, making wonderful plans...and they accomplish very little of it! What we've learned over the years, however, is that there's often a pretty good reason for this. The team did the strategic planning but never put in place a system or process to ensure that they executed on their plan. Strategic plans don't accomplish themselves. The act of having a team, department, or college come together and do the hard work of identifying and clarifying priorities does not mean those priorities will automatically accomplish themselves.

Leaders and teams need to put in place a system or process for making sure they move forward on those goals and priorities. In the book The 4 Disciplines of

Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals by Sean Covey, Chris McChesney and Jim Huling, the authors describe execution as "the discipline of getting the most important things done." "The 4 Disciplines of Execution" is one of the most helpful systems that we've found for executing on team priorities.

Why it matters:

Without execution all of the other attributes of leadership become hollow. A great vision becomes meaningless if no one executes on it. It's not helpful to be an encouraging, inspiring coach if your team doesn't get the most important work done. In the end, leaders and teams are judged by their ability to get the most important things done. Leaders have a responsibility to help their teams execute by putting in place a system that fosters getting work done on the most important priorities.

The 4 Disciplines

The 4 disciplines is a simple, common-sense approach, yet one that is rarely used by leaders and teams to make sure they are accomplishing their priorities. Its power lies in its implementation. In simple terms, the 4 disciplines can be described as:

- Identify a few key priorities.
- Create a plan for accomplishing those priorities.
- Track progress on that plan.
- Create a "cadence of accountability" around progress made/to be made.

In their book, the authors describe the disciplines as follows:
1) Focus on the "wildly important"
2) Act on the "lead measures"
3) Keep a compelling scoreboard and
4) Create a "cadence of accountability."

Let's review each of these disciplines in some more detail.

- **Focus on the wildly important**
  Put simply, this means identifying no more than 1-3 key goals for your team for any given period of time (e.g., over the next year). Why just 1-3 key goals? Because, realistically, that's all you and your team can do with excellence at any given time. It's important to remember that while the team is working to accomplish these important goals or priorities, the day-to-day "whirlwind" of

activity still continues. For example, if a department decides its most important goal over the next few years is to increase publications and research funding, the day-to-day business of the department still continues—courses still need to be taught, students still need to be helped, committees still need to meet, etc. Focusing on the wildly important means getting really clear about what you will accomplish in order to get better, move forward, improve—above and beyond the day-to-day whirlwind. Identifying many "equally important" priorities when everyone on your team is already really busy may sound good but often has a practical effect of forcing team members to choose individually what they will focus on, or to shift from one to another priority without making significant progress on any.

- **Act on the lead measures**
  Once the team has practiced the discipline of truly identifying its most important priorities, then it must "act on the lead measures" for those few key priorities. What are lead measures? First, they reflect the 80/20 rule (20 percent of the activities will likely account for 80 percent of the impact on results). Out of all of the activities that might help us accomplish this goal, what few activities will have the biggest impact? These are your "lead activities." As a next step, the team must identify specific ways to measure progress on those activities. If, as an example, a department decides that increasing collaborative research projects will have the biggest impact on a wildly important goal of increasing long-term research funding, how many collaborative grant submissions need to be made in the next six months? That would be the lead measure. The key is to identify the activities that will have the biggest impact in moving you to the accomplishment of the wildly important goal and then find a way of measuring your progress on those activities.

- **Keep a compelling scoreboard**
  The principle behind this discipline is simple: when we are trying to accomplish something, it's incredibly helpful to be able to see how we are doing. Are we making progress or not? Are we "winning" or "losing"? There's some truth to the quip that "What gets measured gets done." Ifa department says it wants to achieve an important goal, but it never keeps track of its movement toward reaching that goal, team members are less likely to be motivated to move forward. On the other hand, if the department has created a helpful way of tracking progress (in excel, on a chart or graph, on a web page dashboard, etc.), the team can use that to see how it's doing, monitor progress, and make adjustments if necessary.

- **Create a cadence of accountability**
  In the graphic above, the fourth discipline (create a cadence of accountability) encircles the other disciplines. If you don't implement this

discipline, the others are likely to fall by the wayside. This discipline keeps the team focused on the others. In simple terms, creating a cadence of accountability means bringing the team together to discuss who has done what to this point, how are we doing on our overall progress, and who will do what before we meet again. The authors recommend a focused and simple meeting:

- o Report on commitments— Have team members done what they said they would do? What were they able to complete and are there some things on which they have fallen behind?
- o Review scoreboard—Where is the team in relation to where it planned to be? What can the team learn from successes and failures to this point? What adjustments need to be made?
- o Make commitments (plan)—What will each team member do before the next meeting? Does any member of the team need assistance from others to move forward?

Whether it takes the exact format above, this cadence of accountability is critical for keeping team members focused on the activities that will lead to accomplishment of the wildly important goal. Remember, every member of the team has her or his own whirlwind with which to deal. If time is not taken by the team on a regular basis to talk about what's been done, to review progress made, and to talk about what needs to be done next, people are busy enough with the whirlwind of day-to-day activities that progress on the goal-related activities takes a back seat.

Team goals are accomplished through focus and sustained effort. As a leader, you have a responsibility to intentionally create a system that helps your team move forward on priorities. We've seen teams have real success with a model like the 4 disciplines:

- Identify a few key priorities.
- Create a plan for accomplishing those priorities.
- Track progress on that plan.
- Create a "cadence of accountability" around progress made/to be made.

A leader can (and should) tailor the model to his or her own team or department, but the 4 disciplines provides a helpful starting point for putting in place a system for accomplishing the team's most important priorities.

References:

Covey, Sean, Huling, Jim, and McChesney, Chris. 2012. *The 4 Disciplines of Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals*. New York, NY: Free Press.