

Maximize

YOUR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL



University of Florida Training and Organizational Development, Office of Human Resource Services

Execution – Delivering On Your Intent

Our UF Training & Organizational Development Team often conducts strategic planning retreats throughout campus. We spend days, sometimes weeks (even returning for annual updates) working with both academic and administrative departments to help them define and articulate their mission, vision and values. On many occasions we even assist in identifying priorities that will evolve into specific goals and action plans. However, the positive energy and momentum that often results from successful retreats can turn into frustration or skepticism when leaders fail to transform them into action – when they fail to execute.

Execution is not just the final step

The misconception that many leaders have is that execution is what happens at the end of the strategic planning process when in reality it needs to be built into the development of the strategy and, just as importantly, the culture of the organization. Execution should not be regarded as the detail work that is delegated down to the staff but must be embedded by leaders into the three interdependent organizational core processes of: people, strategy and operations. (Bossidy and Charan in “Execution, The Discipline of Getting Things Done”)

Why it matters?

“Execution is a systematic process of rigorously discussing hows and whats, questioning, tenaciously following through, and ensuring accountability.... In its most fundamental sense, execution is a systematic way of exposing reality and acting on it”.

Bossidy and Charan

People

Judgment calls, decisions and the translation of strategies and organizational priorities into action are all made by the people in the organization. Choosing the right person for the job is a priority for any leader. But a leader who excels at execution considers not just the immediate hiring decision but the skills that will be needed to execute *tomorrow*. **Developing** the skills of employees, sustaining a leadership **pipeline** and looking at who is performing or **who needs help** are some of the ways in which a leader who executes gets involved in the people process. By **asking questions** (rather than telling people what to do) a leader can coach, pass his/her experience and allow staff members to think in new ways so *they* - with your guidance - can figure out what they need to do to accomplish their work objectives. The leader who executes well is also committed to **dealing with non-performers** by confronting reality and addressing deficiencies in performance and behavior. A final element of the people process includes **aligning motivators** to reward for desired outcomes. Although distributing a salary increase may be the common approach, leaders who are committed to executing spend time and effort getting to know the members of their organization and learning which opportunities for growth truly motivate their people; sometimes much more meaningfully than monetary rewards.

Strategy

Knowing the organization’s purpose and vision is an indispensable precursor to execution. But what really makes a difference in turning ideas into effective action is whether you have infused realism into that strategy. Before

finalizing a strategic plan, invite debate on the assumptions on which the plan is based. Consider alternative plans or options. Ask for evidence that the organizational capacity to execute will exist in the people, the resources, and the support that you are expecting to engage. Seek those answers from the people who will be involved in making things happen; those who will be held accountable for executing the plan must be involved in its development. Inviting feedback from outside the organization (stakeholders, experts and competitors) will also bring new information to address the hows. An added benefit to this process of breaking things down is that it will keep your strategy focused and easily expressed in simple building blocks.

Operations

Operations refer to paths and targets: how and when you will achieve your goals. If your strategy process has included the unedited input of your key stakeholders, your operations process should evolve smoothly. Still, defining the procedure for the practical application of ideas is where the rubber meets the road. Consider what you might need in the short and medium term in order to achieve the long term. Keep asking: “how are we going to get that done?” Set clear milestones and be willing and ready to adapt if these are not met along the way. When you challenge what you hope to achieve with a good dose of reality, you come up with what you are likely to achieve. This is why a reliable operations process should include regular *operations reviews* offering occasions for robust dialogue regarding the operating plan’s elements and assumptions. These reviews also allow for discussion on specific actions that will make outcomes a reality. Finally, operations reviews provide opportunities for coaching; while seeking answers to possible challenges, people understand the need for making tradeoffs and adjustments, as well as how their individual and collaborative contributions support the common cause and fit into the big picture.

A Call to Action

In the end, execution is all about action - about following through and making things happen. Once you become mindful of integrating the three processes of people, strategy and operations you will be able to: establish clear goals that are in alignment with the overall strategy; define metrics to evaluate progress toward those goals; and reinforce accountability toward reaching those objectives. Then, what was once the future vision can finally become today’s reality.

References

Bossidy, Larry, Charan, Ram. 2009. *Execution. The Discipline of Getting Things Done*. New York, NY: Random House.

The Wall Street Journal. *What are the Keys to Good Execution?* Adapted from Murray, Alan (2010) *The Wall Street Journal Guide to Management*. New York, NY: Harper Business. Retrieved from: <http://guides.wsj.com/management/execution/what-are-the-keys-to-good-execution/>