

Getting Results

By John Durel

A plan without execution will not succeed.

A solution without implementation will not solve the problem.

A business that produces nothing of value will not be in business for long.

A nonprofit organization that produces nothing of value will soon become irrelevant.

These statements seem obvious. Yet many leaders, who are very good at seeing the big picture and acting strategically, fail to create organizations that perform effectively day-to-day. The visioning and planning are excellent, the results are merely okay.

Successful organizations not only have a great mission and plan, they also have the systems and discipline to get things done.

Data and Action

One of the most successful companies of the past 20 years is the one founded by 19-year old Michael Dell in 1984. Dell set up a business model that by-passed retailers and sold directly to the customer, building only what customers wanted. An initial investment of \$1,000 produced a global company now valued at more than \$100 billion.

Beyond the business model, the key to Dell's success is an organization prone to action based on good information. At any given time managers know the gap between what they need to achieve and what they are achieving, and they act quickly to close it. When something goes wrong they fix it. They make decisions fast, even if they don't have complete information, as long as they have good data.

It's a fine balance. Dell won't make a rash decision, and will move forward only when they are almost certain of success. However, once they reach that point they move quickly.

As Dell's CEO Kevin Rollins puts it: *Good execution requires a sense of urgency. The notion of investing for the future can become a trap.* This is not to say that the company does not take time to plan, but it clearly recognizes that execution is fundamental to its success, and is wary of spending too much time planning. Put another way, planning is

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always going on in the minds of the leaders, who both see the big picture and engage in the day-to-day.

The Leader's Role

“Leaders get the behavior they exhibit and tolerate.”

Bossidy and Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* (2002)

What are the leadership attributes necessary for creating an organization that gets things done with no excuses?

1. Really know how things get done, from the bottom to the top. Be engaged at every level. Work with managers, and alongside the managers. Engage the workers. Avoid micro-management. Coach and encourage. Help people understand the business.
2. Set high expectations of yourself and others. Make your goals and their goals clear and simple – three or four at the most.
3. Be honest with yourself and insist on honesty from others. The worst thing is denial. Make sure that managers know that the consequences of not telling the truth will be worse than telling the truth. Be open to discussions of weaknesses and failures without defensiveness and blaming.
4. Have a bias toward good timely data. Get the information you and your managers need to make good decisions.
5. Think about failure, before it happens. Play out “what if” scenarios with your managers and anticipate your responses when results are threatened.
6. Have a bias toward action and results. Follow through: make sure that action follows decisions. Delegate, then verify.
7. Reward those who produce the expected results, and give honest assessments to those who don't.
8. Teach, coach, share your knowledge and experience. Push people to perform at a higher level, and support them through coaching.

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9. Practice continuous improvement by always asking: how can we improve service, how can we be more efficient, how can we reach more people?
10. Be humble, contain your ego, take responsibility for your weaknesses.

Engagement

Consider the spectrum of interaction between a manager and workers, from micro-management at one end to totally hands-off at the other. Micro-management leads to inefficiencies, bottlenecks, and frustration on the part of the workers, who feel they are not trusted. Hands-off management may send a different message: that the manager does not care about the people or the results. The hands-off approach also distances the manager from the real work, so that she does not understand how things really get done. At the middle of the spectrum is the engaged manager, who is in frequent contact with the workers and the work, and serves as a coach for solving problems and creating efficiencies.

The engaged manager...

1. Tells the workers what results she expects.
2. Explains how these results fit with the overall goals of the organization.
3. Discusses how to get the results, helping the workers come up with efficient and effective work processes.
4. Tracks the results with timely data.
5. Rewards people producing results.
6. Coaches those who come up short, or gives them other jobs, or lets them go.

Engagement should take place at every level of the organization, from the CEO to the frontline worker. Obviously a CEO cannot engage with everyone everyday, but engagement should be frequent enough to ensure that he understands what is going on, and that the workers know that he cares.

Do you have communication problems in your organization? Have you tried setting up systems to manage the flow of information with internal newsletters, staff meetings, and the like? While such mechanisms can be useful, Southwest Airlines takes an additional approach to internal communications. Southwest managers function as “player-coaches,” working alongside employees, doing the actual work. These managers are fully engaged with the workers and the work. Communications flow naturally as workers and managers work side by side.

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Creating a Culture of Getting Things Done

Most efforts at changing an organization's culture fail because they are not linked directly to improving the organization's results. Rather, culture change is viewed as an end in itself. Such change should not be solely about making the organization a better place to work. There should be an explicit link between better morale and better results.

“We don't think ourselves into a new way of acting, we act ourselves into a new way of thinking.”

Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* (2002)

The culture of an organization is manifested in what Bossidy and Charan call the Social Operating System. This includes the mechanisms for social interaction – formal and informal meetings, memos, emails, etc. – and the systems for measurement and reward. If you want to create a culture of getting things done, you need to pay attention to the Social Operating System.

- **Social Interaction:** This is where beliefs and behaviors are practiced. Ensure that discussions of problems or opportunities, in meetings, at the water cooler, or in emails, have a tone that says “what will we do about this?” Do not let conversations drop without some decision or assignment for a next step, leading to action.
- **Measurement:** There must be systems in place so that everyone knows how they are doing against expectations. Financial goals, on-time goals, attendance goals – push to come up with meaningful numbers. Make sure that the measurements are not cumbersome, so that the information is timely.
- **Rewards:** Recognize those who achieve their goals in a way that is meaningful to them. Sometimes this is a financial reward, in the form of a bonus. However, managers should know the workers well enough to be able to find non-financial rewards that the worker would really value, such as an extra day off, an opportunity to attend a conference, or tickets to a ball game. The key is to tailor the reward to the individual so that it is indeed appreciated and serves as a motivation for continued excellent work.

Assessment

The assessment on the next page should be completed by directors and managers. Compare and discuss any scores below 5 to identify areas where your organization can improve its ability to execute plans, produce desired results, and achieve your goals.

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Circle your answer and total your points in the last column.	Never	Rarely	Usually	Almost Always	Always	Points
I know where we stand on all important projects and initiatives.	1	2	3	4	5	
My organization is known for quick response to problems or opportunities.	1	2	3	4	5	
I frequently ask staff how we can improve service, be more efficient, and reach more people.	1	2	3	4	5	
I reward employees who produce the results we need.	1	2	3	4	5	
We execute our strategic plan everyday, in a systematic way.	1	2	3	4	5	
When I tell staff what I expect of them, I explain how the expectations fit with the overall goals of the organization.	1	2	3	4	5	
I consider myself results-oriented.	1	2	3	4	5	
I receive timely and accurate data on all significant revenue sources.	1	2	3	4	5	
When I set a goal for someone, I don't tell them exactly how to do it, but if necessary I help them figure out what to do.	1	2	3	4	5	
We are producing the results we need in order to achieve our longer range strategic goals.	1	2	3	4	5	
When I assign someone a goal or task, they inform me when it is achieved.	1	2	3	4	5	
Whenever I am faced with a problem or decision, I am able to get good information quickly, so that I (or the right group of people) can make a timely decision.	1	2	3	4	5	
In our emails and informal conversations about problems we have a "can do" attitude.	1	2	3	4	5	
I give honest assessments to employees who fall short of my expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	
I have 1-on-1 or small group conversations with staff frequently enough so that I really understand how things get done here.	1	2	3	4	5	
I consider myself a coach.	1	2	3	4	5	

Total Points: _____

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Further Reading

Execution Without Excuses, Harvard Business Review, March 2005

Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*
(2002)

Jody Hoffer Gittel, *The Southwest Airlines Way* (2003)