

The Eight Keys to Execution

By Curt Swindoll, *Executive Vice President, Strategy*

I will never forget the first day of my MBA course on strategic implementation. The professor, who must have been awfully tired of hearing how exciting his MBA students thought the strategy course was, said, “Strategy without execution is useless!”

Endless books have been written on strategy: discovering the next big idea, building products that catapult organizations into the stratosphere, going viral, leveraging social media, building cultures, feeding creativity, penetrating markets, and harnessing talent.





But the one thing critical to each of these strategies is the need to follow through. Great organizations usually have a great strategy, but they are always executing. Want to be a lasting organization? You have to execute well over time.

This is certainly true in the area of fundraising. Pursuant is often hired to help our clients execute critical fundraising campaigns and initiatives. They can't take the chance that a much-needed revenue-generating milestone will be missed.

My observation is that too few organizations execute well. I have observed very few management teams with the ability to even develop a detailed action plan. Many lack clear vision. Some struggle to find a sense of urgency, especially when much of what they are doing is working well. Books have addressed the subject of execution, but predominantly from a large corporate mindset. They have some good things to say—I even quote some of them in this whitepaper.

But the need exists to understand what is going wrong in nonprofit organizations that struggle to execute, and how they can turn the problem around. Many of the questions we routinely receive at Pursuant concern issues of execution. “How do we turn our strategic initiatives into reality?” Their challenges are somewhat (though not entirely) different from an executive overseeing a multi-national, billion dollar business unit, so the prevailing literature doesn't offer the practical guidance they need. It certainly isn't written from a nonprofit perspective.

This whitepaper presents eight keys critical to successful execution. Having worked in and consulted with nonprofits as well as for-profit companies, I have witnessed these hurdles repeatedly tripping up many executives and staffs. Conversely, those who have conquered the mysteries of *getting things done* are widely valued as key contributors to organizational success.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but execution—the act of carrying out a stated priority—is absolutely critical to organizational health. Larry Bossidy and Ram Charam state in their book, *Execution*, that execution is ultimately about three things¹:

- 1) **It is a discipline.**
- 2) **It is a major job of leadership.**
- 3) **It is a core element of an organization's culture.**

Can you honestly say that execution is part of your culture?

In their book, *What (Really) Works: the 4+2 Formula for Sustained Business Success*, authors William Joyce, Nitin Nohria, and Bruce Roberson cite execution as one of four elements consistently present in the successful organizations they studied.²

¹Bossidy, Larry, and Ram Charan, *Execution*. Pg. 21.

²The other three elements were strategy, structure, and culture. Pursuant evaluates all four elements in our best-practice based organizational assessment instrument and comprehensive strategy studies.



If execution is so important, why aren't more organizations known for their ability to execute? *High-Performance Nonprofit Organizations* authors Christine Letts, William Ryan, and Allen Grossman suggest in their book that nonprofits struggle to focus on organization performance issues like execution because nonprofits "place more value on service than on the analysis and measurement needed to improve organizational performance....Moreover, many would see such analysis as inherently competitive and punitive, designed to uncover sub-optimal performance and thereby threaten the cooperative nature of nonprofit workplaces."³

The authors also cite concerns that investments in the development of high-performance competencies and culture run against the drive to maximize investments in organizational programs. That could certainly be a contributing factor.

My observation is that nonprofits generally place a higher value on passion for the mission, loyalty to the organization, personal character, and a willingness to work for under-market wages than on the hard skills vital to executional excellence.

In addition, execution and action plans are often complicated. They require the coordination of many people and multiple moving parts towards the accomplishment of initiatives no one in the organization has tackled before. And if that isn't enough, most nonprofit leaders have too many initiatives competing for too few resources.

The result is a recipe for executional disaster.

There is no easy answer to such challenges. But the first step is at least being aware of the principal areas where execution gets off track, and that is what I want to discuss. I have found eight areas that contribute to the derailing of initiatives: urgency, vision, priorities, plans, actions, measures, accountability, and recognition. There's nothing cute about these words. They don't create an acrostic, or all start with the same letter. They are not necessarily memorable.

But they are difference makers when creating a culture known for execution. You may have a challenge in one area or, more likely, multiple areas. But if you address all eight, the likeliness of successful implementation will skyrocket.

People

Before we go any further, core to execution is having the right people in the right roles, committed to their ongoing development. Every book on the subject of execution references the importance of people. Jim Collins in *Good to Great* is credited with the business byline: "...Get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus..."⁴ No level of diligence to the eight keys to execution can compensate for having the wrong people at the center of the process:

³Letts, Christine W., William P. Ryan, Allen Grossman. *High Performance Nonprofit Organizations*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999. Pgs. 33-34.

⁴Collins, Jim. *Good to Great*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 2001. Pg. 41.



I won't take the time to define what it takes to place the right people in the right seats.

But if you have a people problem, you have much more to be concerned about than execution. Solve your people issues first (or use this process to help identify and solve that problem), then move on to the rest of the keys.

Urgency

The first key to execution involves

creating a sense of urgency. Nonprofit leaders usually have too many things to do. The question is, are any of them urgent enough to drive the time and attention it will take to get an important job done? Urgency creates drive. It helps overcome resistance, especially when initiatives require us to follow through on tough decisions.

I consulted recently with an organization that is in the process of making some foundational changes to its business model. These changes are going to require intense focus and time from most of the senior leadership team. One of the last things I said to them before I left was to realize that the future of their organization will likely depend on their follow-through.

Not every strategic initiative involves a life-or-death matter, but our most important priorities need to be connected to the very significant consequences that will be incurred should they go unfulfilled. The business sage Max Dupree once said that one of the two jobs of a leader is to “define reality.” Leaders need to define reality by clarifying the ultimate destiny of continued poor execution.

Many organizations use crisis as a form of urgency. Nothing gets attention like a crisis. Some people can't function until priorities become crisis. It works, for a time. But crisis is often a failure of leadership to define the road ahead well before our car goes over the cliff while there is still time to act.



Too much crisis creates chaos and burnout. Consider these differences between the constructive value of urgency versus the destructive conditions that surround crisis:

	Crisis	Urgency
Driver	Reactive	Proactive
Attention	Diffusing	Focusing
Priorities	Kills	Makes
Options	Limited	Maximized
Timeliness	Late	Anticipated

Crisis usually results from an external, unexpected situation, while urgency involves the proactive anticipation of a coming need. Crisis drives attention away from other important priorities and makes it hard to focus, while urgency focuses attention on important initiatives. Crisis kills priorities. Urgency makes them. By the time we jump into crisis mode, our options for responding are limited. It's too late to do what we would have done had we anticipated the need before it turned into a crisis.

What kinds of things kill urgency? John Kotter lists nine in his well-respected business book, *Leading Change*:

- 1) **Never allowing problems to “blow up”**
- 2) **Having too many obvious examples of excess**
- 3) **Maintaining low standards**
- 4) **Focusing on narrow, functional goals**
- 5) **Measuring the wrong things**
- 6) **Providing little feedback from customers**
- 7) **Enforcing a kill-the-messenger or low-confrontation culture**
- 8) **Allowing human nature to drive performance (denial, business, stress)**
- 9) **Too much “happy talk” from senior management**

He admonishes leaders to “never underestimate the magnitude of the forces that reinforce complacency and that help maintain the status quo.”⁵

Leaders need to create the conditions that will drive their teams to act. Consider this example:

Team, I want to be up front with you about the challenge in front of us. As you can see on this chart, if we don't address this donor communication problem within the next six months, the trend in major gift revenue will continue to drop another \$X,000,000. That's

⁵Kotter, John. *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press. 1996. Pg. 40-42.



the equivalent of XX jobs. On the other hand, if we can successfully complete this initiative, I estimate the impact will be...

Honest communication like this, ideally before the adverse symptoms show up, will go a long way toward creating the urgency we need to execute.

Is there a sense of urgency in your organization? Are people operating as if the future of the organization is at stake? Does everyone understand the repercussions of a failure to act? Is there a willingness to confront problems? Is there an understanding of key trends in performance?

Vision

I doubt any other business term has received as much attention with such little impact and clarity as the second key to execution: vision. I routinely ask leadership teams what their vision is. Most think they have it, yet struggle to articulate it. If it is fuzzy and unclear, it is ineffective and essentially nonexistent.

First, let's be clear about terms. Since mission is often referenced in the same sentence as vision, we need to define both. Your definition for mission and vision may be opposite of mine, which is fine. I just care that both are clearly understood in your organization, regardless of what you choose to call them.

Mission, as defined here, is essentially purpose. Why do you exist? It states the problem you are trying to solve and who you are trying to help. It rarely changes any more than the name of your organization changes. Every charity has a mission statement; it is a required part of receiving a 501(c)(3) determination from the IRS.

The problem is that you may be working on achieving your mission for the next several decades. How does a team get its arms around such a long-term challenge as accomplishing a mission? That's where vision comes in. Vision is an articulation of the next, albeit large, step you intend to take towards seeing your mission accomplished.

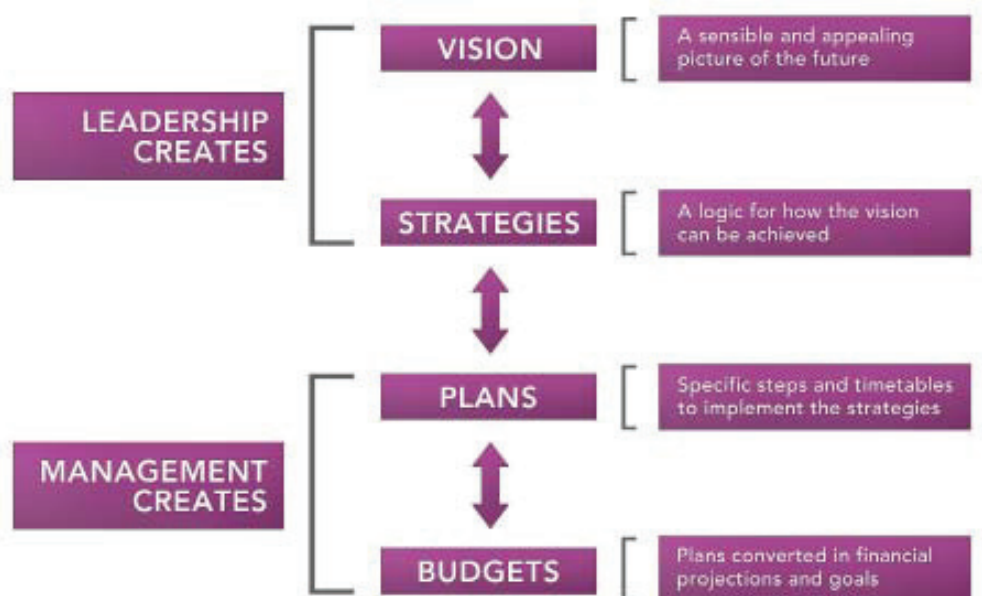
If mission is what will be **consistent** about your nonprofit 50 years from now, vision is what will be **different** about it just a few years from now. Vision often has a three to five year horizon, though larger organizations may define a 10-year vision, and smaller organizations may shoot for a one to two year horizon. But what all organizations share is the need for a vision statement that offers clear, concise, compelling, and quantifiable direction about what you hope to achieve in the future.

What do you aspire to accomplish? When do you want to see your vision fulfilled? Is it challenging? Is it motivating and inspiring? Does it encourage people to get up early and stay late? Is it bold and daring? Jim Collins in *Built to Last* challenged companies to establish a "big, hairy audacious goal." That's vision.



Many organizations have vision statements that begin with the words “to be the number one... .” I recently looked that phrase up on Google and got nearly 250,000,000 hits. But have they defined what “being the number one...” looks like, what it has to do with their mission, or when they hope to achieve their vision? There is a big difference between a timeframe of three years, five years, 10 years, or just “someday.” Did they adopt the statement because a consultant or board member said they needed something called a vision statement? Do they realize it is the starting point for motivating change and growth?

LEADERSHIP VS. MANAGEMENT



Vision requires boldness and is a key responsibility of leadership. I appreciate the clarification of leadership versus management as defined by John Kotter⁶ in the graphic above. It shows their respective roles as well as the importance of alignment between vision, strategies, plans, and budgets.

Vision is critical to execution. When properly defined, it challenges people to tackle tough initiatives. It helps staff understand why specific strategies, action plans, and personal roles and responsibilities are so important. Without it, the dream of what you are collectively trying to accomplish remains hidden or unclear.

Vision connects a team to the primary focus of the organization. In effect, it communicates that if this task doesn't get done, our initiative may not get done, which means our strategy—and ultimately our vision as an organization—may not be realized.

⁶Kotter, John. Ibid. Pg. 71.



Vision essentially clarifies “failure”—not in a negative sense, but in a positive one. I love the illustration Peter Senge used in *The Fifth Discipline*.⁷ He describes vision as a rubber band. It creates a tension between your current reality and the dream you long to accomplish. That tension, or failure, can only be allayed by abandoning our dreams or accomplishing them.

Vision may sound like one of the following phrases:

- **To provide food, shelter, clothing, and care for 10,000 people in our community by 20XX.**
- **To serve the health care needs of 100,000 children and their families by 20XX.**
- **To become the top research institution in the country, investing \$XX,000,000 over the next X years in a search for new treatments for _____.**

What do you do if your organization doesn’t have a vision and you are not in a position to encourage the adoption of a company-wide vision? Set one up for your workgroup that connects your most important priorities to a broader strategic accomplishment. Do not allow the lack of corporate vision to be an excuse for failure on your team.

Has your organization defined a clear, concise, compelling, and quantifiable statement of what you intend to accomplish over the next three to five years? Is it exciting? Is it challenging you to think strategically beyond the current fiscal year? Do you regularly talk about it?

Priorities



Does this look familiar?

⁷Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Currency Doubleday. 1990. Pg. 157.



Most organizations find their opportunities far outweigh the resources they have available. So which priorities are you pursuing? Have you made conscious trade-offs, choosing to pursue some and not others, or are you still trying to get everything done?

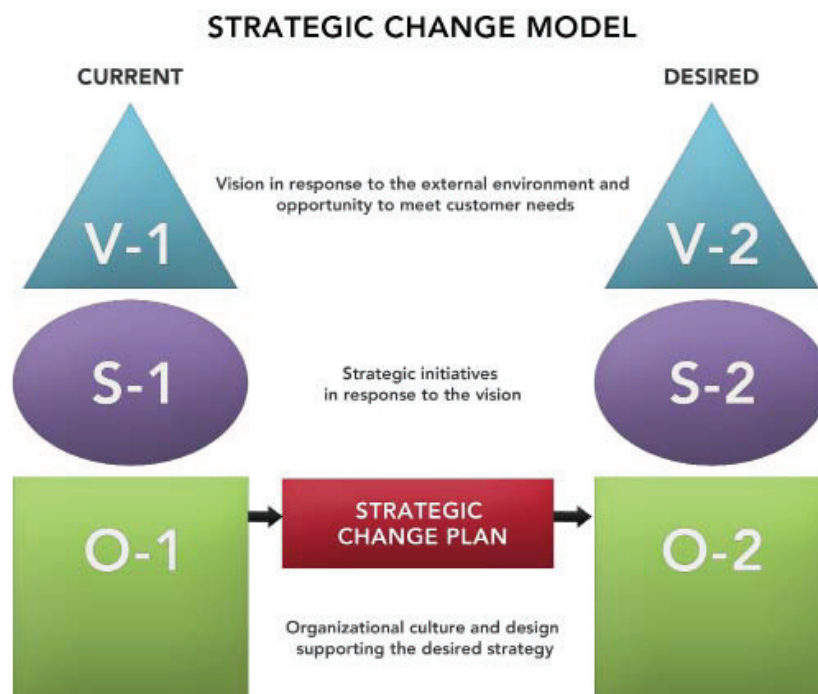
What evaluation process was used to determine your priorities? Our third key to execution involves establishing clear priorities—those things we will do, even if it means sacrificing other worthy objectives.

We can no longer say “no” to our bad opportunities and “yes” to our good ones as a means of maintaining balance. Most nonprofits have too many good options. So what are you willing to release so that other, more important work can be realized?

This question not only exists for organizations, but for individuals. Personally, what is your most important work? What can you and only you accomplish? What can you do that can be highly leveraged by others? How are you balancing short-term needs versus long-term opportunities?

Vision isn’t realized when our priorities fail to align with the strategic and operational requirements of our vision. To accomplish your vision, what are the strategic initiatives necessary to achieve it? What needs to be addressed? What needs to end?

Vision doesn’t get accomplished without making changes in the way we have been operating. In fact, it infers the need to identify the strategic initiatives and operational infrastructure—the culture and design of our organization—that will be required to realize our vision. We then need to make those initiatives a priority. I have often used the model below as a simple way of expressing this idea:





The execution challenge of “priorities” is two-fold: identify the strategic initiatives and operational infrastructure needed to realize your vision, and then make those initiatives your top priorities, even if it means other, lesser priorities must be sacrificed.

Most leaders I know maintain a clear sense of their priorities by allocating a few days each year to get away from the daily demands of the workplace so they look objectively and at length at the opportunities and resources available to them, and how they are aligning their efforts behind their vision. It doesn’t take a lot of time, but it does take some.

Conversely, executives and staff whose priorities have not been established tend to do what they did **yesterday**, what they feel most **confident** doing, what they **want** to do, what is **most familiar**, what they can do the **fastest**, or what is most **tangible**. The only problem is that those things may not represent their most important contribution to their organization’s success and vision.

Executing lower priority initiatives at the expense of higher priority ones is ultimately not much better than not executing at all.

What have you done since establishing your vision? Have you take the time to align your priorities to your vision? What significant opportunities have you said no to as a means of maintaining balance and alignment? Does your calendar reflect your top priorities?

Plans

So far we have addressed the importance of having the right people in the right roles as a central starting point in our quest for executional excellence. We have instilled a sense of urgency to help drive changes and difficult decision in our focus and work. We have cast vision that challenges us to do something extraordinary. And we have identified, in light of that vision, our strategic and operational priorities. It is time to translate our priorities into action plans.

What are the components of an action plan?





Plans are the result of translating our initiatives into specific objectives (or goals) which are accomplished through well-defined action items with due dates and deliverables (or outcomes).

Here is one suggestion about what an action plan could look like:

Detailed Action Plan **PURSUANT.**

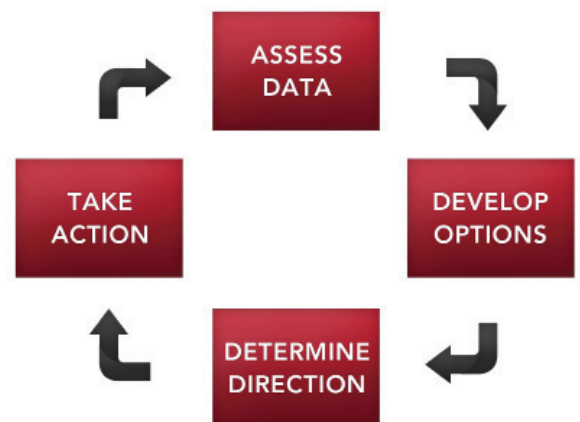
	Name of the initiative or project goes here					
	Primary Objectives	Resources	Owner	Action Items	Due Date	Tangible Outcomes
STRATEGIC INITIATIVE				Detailed list of action items go here The list can be as long or as short as necessary	03/25/03	What tangible result will have been produced once this objective is complete? How will we define successful completion? Who needs to approve it? What data should be on the report?
PRIMARY OBJECTIVES	Title/Description of the first phase of the plan	Resources required for implementing this objective	Where the buck stops...			
REQUIRED RESOURCES	Second phase of the project					
OBJECTIVE OWNERS						
MILESTONES & DUE DATES						
TANGIBLE OUTCOMES						

There is no magic to this format. Pursuant offers a spreadsheet that can be used to record action plans.⁸ Other people use project planning software to help manage “to do” lists. Notebook paper and whiteboards can work, too!

The problem of failing to create action plans has nothing to do with software. It has everything to do with the inability of management teams to identify the specific steps needed to accomplish their top priority initiatives. What actions do we need to take to build a new building? To execute a capital campaign? To drill a new well in another country? To open a new center in the downtown area?

Is it any wonder that strategic initiatives, and ultimately vision, remain unfulfilled? We have no idea how we are going to accomplish these kinds of objectives, or we have failed to reduce them to a written plan of action.

One approach I have found helpful for walking clients through an action planning process is to consider four basic steps, pictured to the right. This four-step process offers a



⁸You are welcome to download a copy of that spreadsheet by going to http://www1.pursuantgroup.com/resourceFiles/8keys_docs.zip



simple approach to identifying objectives and action items, especially when working on something you have never done before.

For example, let's say you want to execute a donor event for your organization:

- **Assess Data:** Gather information. Research donor events. Talk to organizations you admire. Consult with people who have successfully executed a successful fundraising event, such as a key board member. Review your donor database.
- **Develop Options:** Brainstorm goals. Identify options for the event, budget (revenue and expense), options for the program, invite list, size, venue, call to action, messaging, décor, collateral, and follow-up strategies. Visualize the event from before it starts until after it finishes. What will best accomplish your goals?
- **Determine Direction:** Make decisions. What are you going to do actually do? Do you have enough information? What else do you need to know to come to some decisions? Execute those steps in the plan, then complete the rest of your event plan.
- **Take Action:** Assign tasks and project due dates. Who owns each objective? What resources (staff, money, time) will each objective require? When will you reconvene to review/update the action plan? Is the plan clear? Is each action item understood?

Be intentional about this process. Building action plans requires that leaders with a stake in the initiative are involved in deciding and documenting how it will be accomplished. If those people can't construct an action plan, you need help. Strategic initiatives won't accomplish themselves.

In my experience, once an action plan has been developed with realistic due dates and owners, objectives become much more tangible and have a much stronger chance of being completed.

Another easy place to develop quick action plans is during meetings. It is amazing how much time I see invested in meetings with nothing tangible to show for that investment. Have you calculated the cost associated with meetings?

Let me encourage you to be the person who makes a profound difference in your organization by using a simple meeting template to track agenda items, discussion points, decisions, follow-up action items, owners, and due dates. The template⁹ could look something like the one pictured below.



Meeting Minutes

Meeting Owner/Initiator:

Meeting Date: MM-DD-YYYY

Meeting Title

Client:
Attendees/Unable to Attend:
Facilitator:
Distribution:
Next Meeting Date:
Attachments:

Item	Agenda Item	Follow-Up/Decisions/Action	Owner	Due Date
1.				
2.				

Meetings would be far more productive if we consistently documented outcomes and follow-up responsibilities.¹⁰ Here is a bonus for doing it yourself: the person who documents the outcomes, gets the last word in what was discussed and decided! Plus, if you do the job well, everyone will love and appreciate you!

Action planning is a huge part of the “discipline” of execution. Get it done.

Is there a written action plan in place for every strategic initiative in your company? Have owners and due dates been assigned? Are those plans updated from time to time? Are plans realistic? Are action plans a byproduct of your internal meetings?

Actions

Several years ago I was going through Steven Covey’s *7 Habits* program with a leadership team. We were watching a video clip where he had a pile of rocks that he was trying to bury in a bucket filled two-thirds with sand. The rocks represented the major priorities in life, while the sand was all the little things that fill up our day. His first attempt at inserting all the rocks into the bucket of sand, one rock at a time, was unsuccessful. It didn’t work.

He then took an empty bucket, representing an empty schedule, and carefully placed the large rocks into the bucket first, then poured the sand in to fill in the gaps between the rocks. I thought there was no way it would all fit, but with some shuffling, it did.

Covey’s memorable point was that when we try to fit large commitments and projects into calendars that are already two-thirds full (much less completely filled) with smaller commitments, we can’t possibly get our most important priorities done. We have to start with a calendar where large assignments are scheduled first, followed by smaller items that fill in the gaps.

⁹Pursuant has put this into a simple Word document you can download at http://www1.pursuantgroup.com/resourceFiles/8keys_docs.zip

¹⁰Patrick Lencioni’s *Death By Meeting* should be required reading by every management team, followed by a reconfiguration of all corporate meetings.



I realized while watching that video that something had to change in how I thought about my schedule. We all deal with the challenge of balancing great opportunities against too few resources. My problem was that some of my most strategic priorities were being postponed because they were not fitting in amidst all the other stuff already on my calendar.

Looking at the eight keys to execution, taking action—actually doing the work of execution—is the most time consuming of all the keys. Once we get to this step in the process, our challenge is to make sure we have allocated the time needed to get the right things done. That implies the need to allocate time for them **before** our calendars fill up with all the miscellaneous stuff on our plates.

This is a good place to ask: Who is managing your calendar? Are you essentially operating as a “victim” of all the requests being imposed on you? Do you ever decline a meeting request because you have more important work to do? Is it time to delegate? Are you attending meetings because it feels good to be needed, or because you don’t trust the staff who have been tasked with the responsibility?

Leaders need to take control over their schedules and should empower their staff to do the same. Start saying no to some requests. Ask that meeting time be better managed.

Sometimes our problem isn’t allocating time for important work. It is that too many crises interrupt our days. How often is your schedule derailed because of something unexpected? Why didn’t you see the crisis coming? This issue gets back to creating urgency and identifying issues that need to be addressed before they turn into a crisis.

Not only will your organization appreciate your focus, but your friends and family members will, too. They are usually the first to feel the effects of an out-of-balance work life where trivial matters and crisis issues have crowded out the room we would normally use for accomplishing the most important things in life, whether at work or at home.

How are you allocating time for top priority work? Are you scheduling sufficiently in advance, or is crisis crowding out the important items on your calendar? What does your calendar say about your priorities, or about how well you are scheduling and investing time?

Measures

How are you measuring progress? Are you measuring the right things? The old adage “what gets measured, gets done” rings true here. So, what are your key performance indicators? Are they aligned with your priorities? Will they alert you early in the process (as in a “leading” indicator) or late in the process (a “lagging” indicator) that something



ALIGNMENT:
THE ULTIMATE ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGE



needs attention? Having an effective set of measures is the fifth key to execution.

Consider the chart shown here. I’ve often called this an organization’s “backbone.” Do you have curvature of the spine, or is there strong alignment from vision to objectives to services? Second, how well do your measures evaluate these elements from top to bottom, or wherever your responsibilities lie? Are they helping you maintain a straight backbone?

Measures communicate progress, or a lack thereof, against identified goals. Measures also communicate what we think is important. One of Pursuant’s clients commented that they were embarrassed that we had to tell them about the decline they were experiencing in major donors and major gifts over the last several years. His statement reflected that they had taken their eye off of something absolutely critical to their organization. They are

not alone. We routinely tell clients about trends in giving at all levels, trends in donor engagement, revenue projections based on current trends, and so forth—all measures absolutely critical to the development of strategic fundraising plans—and information the client wasn’t aware of prior to our engagement.

We also measure fundraising and organizational best practices. The existence of certain practices tells us something about how well our clients are attracting donors, engaging them in their work, and building long-term, fruitful relationships over time. It tells us of their fundraising and organizational strengths and weaknesses. Great strategy starts with an effective evaluation process.

Your problem may not be having a set of measures, but that your measures are too difficult to assemble. The best measure in the world, if it is overly difficult to assemble what is needed to calculate it, isn’t going to help. Find a simpler way to measure what you are trying to track.



Once action plans are in place, we have to measure progress and determine if what we are accomplishing is doing what we had hoped. We may have a shiny new resource center, but if no one is being served by it, what have we accomplished? Measurement requires that we courageously look at the data and draw observations and conclusions that will drive further strategy and action, or help us get our execution priorities back on track.

Once you have a commitment to measure, it is amazing how quickly leadership can drive attention to key performance indicators. Pursuant's CEO Trent Ricker recently asked our management team to include a section on key performance indicators as part of their weekly reports. Why? He wants everyone to keep their eye on identified priorities, and he wants to make sure regular progress is being made in the right areas. For those who aren't sure what key performance indicators to track, requests like this prompt important conversations.

What measures are you using that point to progress being made against your strategic initiatives? How balanced are your measures? Are they all focused on one area, or are they all lagging indicators? How quickly would you know if an initiative was not producing a desired result?

Accountability

I'm a firm believer that you never ask a question on a customer survey that won't lead to some kind of action if the feedback you receive warrants it. Similarly, it is meaningless to measure performance and progress unless you are willing to act on what you learn.

Accountability is a response to measurement and is the sixth key to execution. The feedback we receive by measuring should compel us to take action. It requires courage to not explain away performance problems or downward trends, but rather to deal honestly when the indicators suggest we are off course.

Imagine driving down the interstate becoming drowsy. You feel your tire suddenly hitting a drumbeat of bumps that signal the side of the road. Those indicators suggest that your car is leaving the driving lane and heading towards a ditch. How do you respond? One approach is to assume those weren't bumps, but rather debris from some accident that happened another day. If you believe that without at least checking to see whether or not you are going off-road, you might as well go back to sleep.

Perhaps the greatest failure of nonprofit organizations is the failure to hold people accountable for their performance. Too many nonprofit leaders are asleep while a regular drumbeat of indicators is constantly reminding them that serious change is needed. The car is heading in the wrong direction. What will it take to get back on course? When will we respond?



Most of the time, performance issues can be addressed through clearer expectations, better action planning, more support from leadership, more consistent communication, new strategies, and so forth. What measures are sounding the alarm in your environment? Anything? Are top initiatives on track? Do you know? How long are you going to wait to correct a downward trend in the donor base, or a decline in mid-level giving? Do you have the courage to call for change, or to say that your methods are not working, or are too slow for what you need to accomplish?

I recently spoke with a professional who had been hired by a large nonprofit to help them with their fundraising work. A report landed on his desk shortly after he arrived showing that *one million donors* had been lost in the last year alone! He said he waited around for a couple of days to see if someone—anyone—would show up at his door out of breath from the truth of that report. No one did. That's a firm with good measures, but no accountability.

No one enjoys addressing performance problems. The challenge is even greater when the solution involves affecting someone's employment—especially when they have a passion for your cause, are loyal and committed, and have been willing to work for substandard financial compensation.

But many studies have shown the phenomenally high cost of keeping staff around who aren't performing. It extends well beyond their salary and the problems they create. The opportunity costs and cultural costs far outweigh compensation issues. One leader commented to me regarding addressing employee issues, "I have never regretted taking action too quickly; I have often regretted not acting fast enough."

I suggest that you schedule an accountability review every other week to review key metrics and action plans. Ask the hard questions. Drive change in response to what you observe. I once worked for a boss who had a stand-up meeting with his team every Monday morning to review everyone's action plans. You knew if your project was delayed, he was going to ask you about it in detail—that alone drove amazing productivity from his group. We need more of that in our nonprofit cultures if we are going to be known for high-performance execution.

What one alarm is going off that deserves attention now? Why hasn't someone responded? What will it take to convince your team to take action? Have you fully counted the cost of inaction? What structure has been established for holding people accountable for results?



Recognition

The eighth and final key to execution is recognition. Acknowledging great performance, great project management, great accountability, and great follow-through is critical to creating cultures of execution.

Think of recognition as a deposit in the bank account of future strategic initiatives. It is a public opportunity to say, “This is what we are looking for. This is what we value. This is the kind of thing we want everyone to model.”

We have to make celebration a priority. I recently bought an old cowbell for our CEO to ring publicly when we land a major account. Several companies I have worked for have thanked their employees in different ways for attracting quality staff to come on board. We celebrate anniversaries and birthdays. Why don’t we do that at work?

Is it because it costs too much? Hogwash. Take off an hour early on a Friday, head to a park and do a barbecue. Everyone brings a dish. Is it because it takes too much time? Bologna. Set up a celebration committee of three staff members and have them plan the quarterly party. They’ll stay late to have the opportunity to put something together.

Or perhaps you don’t think it really matters. Several years ago I was assembling a presentation on “developing a talent strategy” for nonprofit organizations. I discovered that there are several elements to talent: acquiring, developing, deploying, and retaining talent. Which of these four categories do you think is impacted by celebration? It wouldn’t be hard to make a case that two, or even three, of these areas is affected by celebration, and yet a McKinsey study several years ago found that:

- **73% of executives strongly agree they need to find and retain top talent, but only 9% felt their actions would lead to that outcome**
- **84% didn’t even know who their top performers are**
- **Only 23% felt they could attract top talent, and only 10% felt they could retain top talent**

Yikes! Serial recognition won’t solve all these problems, but it would sure help—and it doesn’t take a lot of money.

Frederick Herzberg, a recognized authority on organization cultures, conducted a study that was published in *Harvard Business Review* in January 2003 on what he called “hygiene” motivators, or essentially external motivators versus intrinsic/internal ones:

He asked employees which of the above factors contributed to their job satisfaction versus dissatisfaction. Here is what he found:



Hygiene Motivators	Intrinsic Motivators
Company policies/administration	Achievement
Supervision	Recognition
Work conditions	The work itself
Salary	Responsibility
Relationship with peers, subordinates	Advancement
Status	Growth

Recognition may provide some motivation for executing a strategic initiative, but far more valuable is what it does for the culture, for future projects, and for individuals who have worked long and hard to see a project through to completion. It's time to make their success a visible, celebrated part of the culture.

Do you celebrate success? Do you do it in a way that contributes to the growth of your culture? What is stopping you from celebrating success? What is worth recognizing in your environment? Where might you find inexpensive ideas for celebrating on a tight budget?

Conclusion

Those are the eight keys to execution, on top of a foundation of having the right people in the right roles. Are you concerned that it takes too much time to execute well, or that this involves too much overhead?

Think about this:

- 1) Reality Check/Urgency Meeting: ½ day**
 - What's wrong? What are we rationalizing?
 - What is the truth of our situation? Show it graphically and share it.
- 2) Vision Casting Meeting: 2 days**
 - I've seen vision cast in one day, but we'll give it two...
 - You are setting the course for the next several years...is it worth two days?
- 3) Strategic Planning Meeting: 1 day**
 - What are the primary strategies we will use to accomplish our vision?
 - What do we need to set aside because it isn't contributing to where we want to go?



- 4) **Detailed Action Planning Meeting: 1 day**
 - What action items will accomplish our objectives?
 - What do we not know? How will we fill the gaps in knowledge or experience?
 - What resources are required? How can we sequence strategies to fund this effort?
- 5) **Metrics and Accountability: 2 hours/month**
 - How are we measuring success and progress?
 - What changes are needed? Who isn't getting the job done? Why?
- 6) **Celebration: 2 days/year**

What does that total? I count about 10 days per year to manage the execution process. Certainly much more time is needed to execute the initiatives themselves. But you are already investing in that work. The question is, are two weeks per year worth it to make sure that the rest of your time and that of your staff is being invested in the right things and producing the right results?

In my introduction, I quoted Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan who stated that execution is three things:

- 1) **It is a discipline.**
- 2) **It is a major job of leadership.**
- 3) **It is a core element of an organization's culture.**

No doubt, execution does require discipline; but it is the job of leadership to adopt it as an essential part of their job. Only then does it have a chance to become a core part of our cultures and an invaluable competency to nonprofit work.

This whitepaper presents many questions to help you evaluate where your execution challenges lie. I encourage you to consider them and then take some bold steps forward. Your staff, and the people your organization serves, deserve no less.

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