

Execution is the Key

by Bill Sparkman, The Coach

Michael Dell of Dell Computer was recently asked if he was concerned that the competition was duplicating his business model. His response: "Not at all, I know we will execute it better." Effective planning and execution is key to your success. With ever-increasing competition, execution becomes paramount. The marketplace will reward those who effectively execute a well-planned strategy.

Let's face it – the best ideas and strategies are worthless unless they are implemented. Fortune magazine recently ran a cover article entitled Why CEO's Fail. The eight-page article analyzed the reasons behind the failures of some of America's top CEO's – the result: poor execution. It is the same for CEO's of small companies, and for entrepreneurs. Top performers, regardless of industry, don't necessarily have better ideas. What they do have is a better system of implementing ideas and techniques. The bottom line is that top producers execute better than the rest of the industry.

Effective execution means carving out time each and every week to focus on the high payoff activities. It is completing on a timely basis all the important strategic and money making activities that will build your business. It means rising above the day-to-day and focusing on the future. Plain and simple, it is getting things done – the right things. To improve your execution you will need to set aside all the problems and "fires" and focus your energies on the stuff that really matters, the strategically important items. In order to do that you need an organized approach to execution, you need a "Performance System."

I want to share with you a proven Performance System that consistently delivers results. The System is similar whether it is being applied to an organization or to an individual. It is a coordinated approach to managing and improving performance. The components are as follows:

Executive Mental Models – Big thinking always precedes big achievement. Winston Churchill said: "The empires of the future are the empires of the mind." First things first, you must know where you're going – vision. Over the past decade there has been much talk about and written regarding vision and mission. In fact, many organizations sequestered their "top brass" away for a couple of days together in a room and came up with a "corporate vision statement," which in most cases was then introduced with much fanfare to employees and quickly forgotten. The challenge is to create a vision that is clear and tangible. Answer the following questions:

- Where do you see yourself in 1 year, 3 years, 5 years, and 10 years?
- What is your competitive advantage?
- How do you differentiate yourself in the marketplace?
- What value do you produce that no one else does?
- What level of income do you want to be earning five years from now?

We create things twice: first mentally, then physically. You need to be very clear about the future.

PLANNING – Imagine driving across the country on a family vacation without a map – definitely not recommended. Having a plan for your business is just as essential as navigating from a map while trekking across the country, perhaps

even more so. The sad truth is that most entrepreneurs spend more time planning a vacation than they do planning their business. Once we understand the destination, the vision, we then need to build a comprehensive plan to support that vision. Working from a plan has three distinctive benefits.

It reduces mistakes – We make less mistakes. By determining the steps in advance we have an opportunity to think through the best route. We can make the mistakes on paper, which are obviously less costly than making them live in the business.

It saves time – Studies have shown that planning saves time. A few years back I was involved in project work with a number of Fortune 500 companies and we conducted an informal study. We broke the project into two components: planning and doing. We found that if, on average, we took X amount of time planning then it took Y amount of time doing. We then experimented by increasing the planning time. The results were that as we increased the planning time, the doing time decreased. Furthermore, the overall project time (planning and doing) took less time.

And yet for many, the thought that planning saves time seems paradoxical. They feel that if they are not constantly doing, they are not productive. The truth is that planning is some of the most productive time one can spend.

It provides focus – I'm told that a flight traveling from New York to Los Angeles (or anywhere for that matter), is off course most of the time due to winds and jet stream, etc. The only reason it arrives at its targeted destination is because: 1. It has a clear end destination, and 2. It has a flight plan that the pilot is constantly correcting to. Your performance plan serves the same function. As you progress throughout your year, your plan brings you back on purpose and keeps you focused on the strategically important items.

EXECUTION – Effective execution takes place daily and weekly. The weekly plan is where the “rubber meets the road.” Due to the structure of the planning process, the weekly plan contains the strategic activities that are most important to building a profitable business. It should be apparent then that if the weekly plan is consistently executed, the strategies and vision will be accomplished. If you are faithful to complete the activities contained on the weekly plan, you will accomplish your strategic objectives and goals.

KEY MEASURES – Have you ever wondered why sports are so motivating? In fact, not only are they motivating to the player, but also to spectators. Can you imagine people – fans – coming to watch you work? Paying for the privilege of seeing you in action? One of the key reasons sports are stimulating is that in sports we keep score.

Scorekeeping is the heart of athletics. Scores, measurements and stats are tracked and used to determine success. At any point during a sporting event, every player, every coach, every fan knows exactly where their team stands. This information provides a base of knowledge upon which further decisions can be made in order to be successful. In other words, scorekeeping lets us know if what we're doing is effective. Too often in business we fail to keep score. Without keeping score, without some objective measure, we cannot know for certain if we are effective.

There is a saying “If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.”
Actually, we score at two levels. In every business there are Lead Indicators and Lag

Indicators. Lead indicators are the activities that produce the end results. Lag Indicators are the end results that you are striving to achieve – things like sales, profits, commission dollars. You need to measure both! Lead indicators measure how well you executed your plan, while Lag indicators measure the results of your strategies. If you find that you are executing well and the strategies are actually producing the results you desire, then we just continue to execute. If however, you are executing well and the results are falling short of your expectations, then you will need to go back and adjust the plan accordingly. The measures provide the necessary feedback on a timely basis so that you can adjust your plan, or improve your execution, or create new strategies.

The Performance System is powerful when applied as a system. But like most systems, when only portions of the system are employed, the overall results are drastically reduced. Initially as you begin to apply the system recognize that you will have weeks when you struggle and fail to accomplish the important items. When this happens, don't give up and abandon the system, just start fresh again the very next week. Effective execution is not about perfection. You don't have to be perfect, just consistent and persistent.

As you implement your plan and it begins to bear fruit you will build momentum and that momentum will help carry you forward. Just like a steam locomotive, initially you will feel like you are shoveling a lot of coal without much to show for it. Keep shoveling. Results don't come instantly, but they will come if you continue to work your plan. Learning to execute is a skill and like any skill it takes time to master. The time you invest will prove valuable. In the end EXECUTION IS KEY!

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