

## EXECUTION: GETTING THINGS DONE

It's Too Bad We Think of Execution as Something That Happens in Death Penalty States.

Come on, be truthful. If I said to you, "Quick. Define Execution." That is what you would say, right? "Uh, when they give someone a lethal injection for a terrible crime."

And that is the point of Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan's book:

**Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done**  
(Crown Business, 2003):

Businesses, the biggest among them, spend inordinate amounts of time and money creating and talking about "strategy" and "tactics," "Operating Plans," etc. etc. And then, more often than we realize, they *just don't work*. Does that mean the plan was bad? Maybe, but not necessarily.

**Make no mistake about it. Execution always happens.**

You set a plan in motion and something will happen. The question is only was it what you planned to happen, or what you hoped would happen, or was it your worst nightmare? Bossidy and Charan feel that companies spend too little time and effort looking after the execution of the plans they make. In fact, they say that, "Execution is *the* great unaddressed issue in the business world today."<sup>1[i]</sup> So what they are talking about is more than simply execution; it is *correct* execution.

**What exactly is correct execution to the authors?** It's not the *what*, but the

*exactly how*. Anyone remember an IBM commercial where the boss comes in to the IT group with a big fat book that he received from the consultants, saying that everything was in that book, and that they paid thousands (hundreds of thousands, millions?) to get that document. All he wanted to know from the group, he said, was do we have the resources to execute this plan? Someone in the back says quietly, "no" and it becomes a chorus. He looks at them in shock and says only, "no?"



While the IBM commercial is a caricature, Bossidy and Charan indicate that this type of situation may be very common: companies, especially big companies, love blue sky but don't come down to earth.



"When I walk into the office, I want you to wag your tail, jump up and down, and set a good example for my staff."

**From its inception, any plan should be subject to severe reality checks.** But a reality basis is not the ambience at many corporate meetings. Not true? How many of us have heard a meeting we have attended referred to in analogous terms to a teenager's group masturbation exercise?

And how many people (author included, proudly) have aborted their climb up the corporate ladder because they spoke or insisted on reality at meetings?

**Boiling it down to its fundamentals**, according to the authors, "execution is a systematic way of exposing reality and acting on it."<sup>2[iii]</sup> The key word being *reality*. Of course, it falls upon the leader to exemplify and relentlessly pursue the constant quest for reality. To

do that, a leader must be involved in his business, understand the external environment as well as anyone, and know his people. Clearly, the last is key; it rests on people to execute the plan. Given that premise, what are the qualities of a leader whose company executes well, according to the authors? They are:

**'Such decision making requires knowledge** of the business and the external environment. It requires the ability to make fine judgments about people—their capabilities, their reliability, their strengths, and their weaknesses. It requires intense focus and incisive thinking. It requires superb skills in

conducting candid, realistic dialogue. The work is as intellectually challenging as any we know of.

**Failing the above discipline,** the authors assert, "Leadership without the discipline of execution is incomplete and ineffective. Without the ability to execute, all other attributes of leadership become hollow."<sup>3[iv]</sup>

**So now you believe execution** is the key focus for success in business. What differentiates good from bad execution, and what disciplines and procedures must be in place to insure superb execution takes place? The book is peppered with good and bad examples of the consequences of execution, but the authors take it a step farther and lay out the "building blocks of execution." They are:



**1. The Leader's Seven Essential Behaviors.**

- Know your people and your business.
- Insist on realism.
- Set clear goals and priorities.
- Follow through.
- Reward the doers.
- Expand people's capabilities.
- Know yourself.

Sounds obvious, right? So how come companies go under on a daily basis? The authors offer examples of Fortune 100 companies who couldn't figure the above out.

**2. Creating the Framework for Cultural Change.** The authors offer a system for creating a reality-based culture. They offer a refreshing approach of looking at the company culture as an Operating System, and the software that runs under it as Operating Mechanisms.

This includes meetings, presentations; everywhere that dialogue takes place should be subject to and exemplary of the overarching goal of superb

Execution:

**A "reality-based culture."**

**3. The Job No Leader Should Delegate-Having the Right People in the Right Place.**

Bossidy is the Chairman of Honeywell, but he worked for a long time at GE under Jack Welch. He uses Welch as a good example of a leader's involvement in hiring, assessment and deployment of personnel. Because the success or failure of execution depends first and foremost on people, it is far too critical to delegate. If you have read Welch's book, *Jack: Straight From the Gut* (If not, you should), you will remember that a substantial portion of the pages in the book is devoted to discussion of people, and their results. Welch is surely a practitioner of the culture of realism.

Then the authors finish the book with instructive chapters about the application of the above building blocks in three core processes:

**4. People, Strategy, and Operations.**

For those of us who have been managing for any length of time, a lot of what Bossidy and Charan promote in the book seems like just so much common sense. But if you have ever been to a meeting where common sense didn't prevail and kiss ass did, you know that decisions coming out of such meetings don't make any sense, much less common.



I believe the key here is, as it always is, that key steps must be taken from the top. The leader must embody the culture of realism and insist on it throughout the organization. He must reward doing and not talking. And he must be personally involved with the people that are charged with executing the plan, down as many levels as possible, not just his inner circle.

**Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done** is well worth reading, no matter in what situation you find yourself, either you don't have a clue why things are not going the way they are supposed to, or just as a reminder.