



# Book Closing the Execution Gap

## How Great Leaders and Their Companies Get Results

Richard Lepsinger  
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### Recommendation

“Vision without execution is hallucination,” warned inventor Thomas Edison. CEOs love to focus on vision and strategy, but without execution, vision and strategy can’t accomplish anything. According to HR consultant Richard Lepsinger, who surveyed executives in 409 companies, many organizations suffer from poor execution. He offers solid solutions to that problem, including numerous valuable tips, tools and tactics. Although his writing style is a little heavy on lists and some of the information is obvious, Lepsinger offers a good overview of how to lead employees to execute more effectively. *BooksInShort* recommends his presentation to leaders and managers who are responsible for implementing strategy and turning vision into reality. HR managers will also benefit from Lepsinger’s insights, since he comes from that field.

### Take-Aways

- Effectively executing your organization’s vision and goals requires an action plan.
- Action plans explicitly detail what will happen, when, and who is responsible.
- Define your firm’s vision in terms of specific goals. Then create an action plan that meets those goals through a series of specific, discrete tasks.
- Employees perform at their best when their leaders demand excellence.
- Hold workers accountable to clearly stated performance and time standards.
- Always encourage staff members to offer and implement their ideas.
- Staff members who know the most about specific issues should be the ones responsible for decisions about those issues.
- Businesses that cannot handle change execute poorly.
- Execution depends on cooperation among executives, managers and staffers.
- Visionary leaders should be effective daily managers. Conversely, good managers should embrace and understand the company’s vision.

### Summary

#### The Gap in Execution

Skilful execution – not visionary leaders or elaborate company strategies – is what produces results. Poor execution is problematic in a normal economy and ruinous in a difficult one. The inability to “get stuff done” – to execute – will wreck even the best-laid plans. HR consultant Richard Lepsinger asked 409 executives from diverse industries three questions about execution:

1. “Is there a gap between an organization’s ability to formulate a vision and strategy” and its ability to “achieve business results?”
2. “What differentiates organizations that are more effective at execution from those that are less effective?”
3. “What can leaders do to enhance their organizations’ ability to close the strategy-execution gap and achieve business results?”

“Establishing priorities is the essence of execution.”

Results showed that 49% of respondents believe their organizations suffer a gap between strategy and execution, and 64% of those who believe a gap exists don’t think their companies can close it. Firms that execute successfully use the following five “bridges” to unite ambition and achievement: 1) Executives handle change well;

2) all business units and management levels coordinate their actions and decisions; 3) managers' actions match the company's values and priorities; 4) the firm's organizational structure supports its strategies; and 5) executives and employees are involved in the decisions that affect them personally.

“Action plans are the cornerstone of execution.”

The leaders of companies that execute well expect, encourage and reward superior performance. They hold their employees accountable for their actions and results. They enable their workforce to focus on the firm's central priorities.

To span the strategy-execution gap, use these six tactics as “bridge builders.”

### “Bridge Builder 1: Translate Strategy into Action”

To execute, you need an action plan. Most organizations do not have one. A solid action plan lets employees know who must do what – and when – in order to execute the company's strategy. The plan assigns accountability, outlines areas of coordination and sets priorities. An action plan breaks the strategy down into discrete tasks that fulfill the firm's strategic objectives. Take three steps to create your action plan:

1. **“Clarify implementation goals and standards”** – Establish the overall project, detail each employee's role, tasks and responsibilities. Create a definitive “goal statement” and a deadline. Your action plan defines excellence by enumerating project quality standards and delineating tasks and schedules.
2. **“Develop an action plan”**– Your action plan aids workload management and describes how to measure progress and maintain communication. It segregates work into specific tasks. It includes a detailed schedule with start and end dates, and it outlines requirements for the project, including personnel, funds, and so on.
3. **“Minimize risk”** – Every plan goes awry. Your action plan must consider unforeseen contingencies. Ask, “What could go wrong here?” and “What would be the likely impact?” Create reaction strategies to contend with the most likely events.

### “Bridge Builder 2: Expect Top Performance”

Superior execution depends on employees working together at a level of peak performance. When team members don't perform, they will face repercussions. Otherwise, their teammates will be stuck picking up the slack. To prime your staffers for success, make sure they know that you require excellence and have confidence that they can deliver it. Studies indicate that people's performance rises to meet their leaders' expectations. This is the “Pygmalion Effect,” a transformation based on having high standards to meet. Use these three techniques to redirect underachieving staffers:

1. **“Assume value”** – Never insult or embarrass your staffers. Do not belittle their ideas. Respond with care. First, make a positive statement, such as “What I like about your idea is...” or “What I found especially helpful is...” Then state any problems you perceive: “What I'm concerned about is...” or “Some things that might be improved on are...” Never use the word “but” between your first and second statements. “But” negates your positive message. Use “and.”
2. **“Focus on what they do well”** – Every employee does at least one thing well. Find out what it is and emphasize those skills. Build future excellent performance based on this area of accomplishment.
3. **“Make the unconscious conscious”** – To boost weak-performing employees, make them feel important, urge them to move beyond their comfort zones, organize a supportive work environment, applaud assertive actions and supply helpful feedback.

### “Bridge Builder 3: Hold People Accountable”

Accountability is essential. Most employees believe that they hold themselves accountable, but that their superiors do not hold others equally accountable. Leaders lose power when they do not enforce negative consequences for poor performance. Such tolerance tells underachieving performers that their slackness has no downside, and it tells superior performers that their hard work earns only more hard work. Team members who see that poor performers suffer no hardships question the value of their own efforts. Why be so diligent when working less brings no ill effects and doing great work brings no rewards?

“Develop the habit of being explicit about why you are doing something or making a request.”

Managers make some common mistakes that undermine accountability such as being vague about required project actions, blurring who is responsible for specific work, not certifying project completion dates, failing to monitor the project's progress and letting staffers slide on their commitments. Accountability depends on detailing leaders' specific expectations for each employee and clearly listing all necessary project activities. Establish firm completion dates for every project pivot point and create checkpoints for project monitoring.

### “Bridge Builder 4: Involve the Right People in Making the Right Decisions”

Solid execution depends on the right employees discussing the right steps at the right time. Hold discussions within the groups whose members know and understand the problem, and who have decision-making responsibility. Help your managers and employees build decision-making skills.

“Clarifying roles and responsibilities not only defines when cooperation is necessary and what it looks like, but also reinforces the norm that cooperation is expected and appropriate.”

To ensure that your employees will exercise sound judgment, clarify decision-making areas of authority so they know who has the final say on each step of a project. Balance responsibility between centralization and decentralization so that employees with the most knowledge of the issues at hand end up making the decisions on those issues. Before you make a decision, collect as many informed opinions as possible, consider the information and circumstances that affect your choices, and take your time. Refrain from rushing into a decision until you hear all the factions and weigh all the input, but once you decide, show confidence in your choice.

“Empowerment should be seen as an outcome, not a behavior in and of itself, which directly results from the manager's interaction with his or her direct

report.”

When considering a decision, employ this five-step process: 1) Create a “decision statement” that specifies why a choice is necessary and what your individual employees must do; 2) set up “decision criteria” that explain how the best outcome will work and that examine any “constraints such as cost, time and resources;” 3) contrast alternative solutions; 4) assign risk to each alternative; and 5) make your selection.

### “Bridge Builder 5: Facilitate Change Readiness”

Companies usually devote attention to change management, but many handle change poorly. Dell and General Motors once offered examples of this problem. Dell created “The Dell Way,” which involved attracting and keeping customers who ordered low-cost custom computers. When other manufacturers began to offer competitive computers at cheaper prices, Dell was slow to respond. General Motors’ past refusal to change its top-heavy bureaucratic management structure cost the company billions. Only after its federal bailout did GM institute the necessary forward-thinking practices that experts had been urging it to adopt.

“High expectations seem to result in higher performance.”

Companies that excel at handling change use a dozen best practices: They are clear about objectives. They identify likely obstacles. They formulate and plan the actions necessary to deal with potential obstacles. Their top leaders anticipate change and do not fear it. Executives act in accord with stated corporate goals and guide their employees to do the same. They make sure that required resources are always on hand. The company has a strong vision. The firm’s leaders update other executives and employees on new developments and keep all stakeholders informed. Managers follow up on assigned tasks and deadlines. Leaders encourage employees to offer their opinions. Companies maintain communication up and down the corporate ladder. They understand their goals and are prepared to adjust their strategies to meet them.

### “Bridge Builder 6: Increase Coordination and Cooperation”

Superior execution requires coordination and cooperation. Build cooperation and coordination among your employees by being transparent and communicating openly. Define cooperation in terms of individual responsibilities so all participants understand exactly what their specific role entails and what is required of them. Make sure that common ground exists among all factions of your workforce. Four effective tactics can help you persuade others to cooperate:

1. **“Rational persuasion”** – Muster solid evidence and sensible arguments to persuade others that the task at hand is worthwhile.
2. **“Inspirational appeals”** – Frame your request to resonate with your employees’ most cherished values.
3. **“Consultation”** – Ask those whom the change will affect directly to share their opinions and ideas on how to improve working processes and decision making.
4. **“Collaboration”** – Offer resources that other people need in return for their support and assistance.

### “Five Lessons for Leaders”

Implement five specific steps to help your company execute more effectively:

1. **“Integrate the leader and manager roles”** – Successful organizations develop ambitious visions for the future – a leadership activity – and attend to masses of details – a management function. Executives at such organizations can establish and share clear visions, while managing at the same time. Train your executives to be adept visionaries and competent managers, and grant them the latitude to be both.
2. **“Clarify assumptions and priorities”** – Your organization must set strategy and create a hierarchy of priorities to make that strategy work.
3. **“Make sure the right systems are in place”** – Employees should not have to fight against the organization’s systems. This applies particularly to work that supports execution, which demands cooperation. Employees should feel free to act and should have the resources to move ahead when warranted.
4. **“Coordinate and monitor high-impact actions”** – Constant monitoring of actions and sharing information ensures that your business units will not inadvertently work at cross-purposes.
5. **“Get change management right”** – Involve employees in the decisions that directly affect them.

“To get cooperation you must demonstrate cooperation.”

As a leader, you can develop the vital skills necessary for execution. Take a page from *Outliers: The Story of Success* by Malcolm Gladwell, who posits that practice is the primary factor that separates those who excel from those who are merely proficient. Practice these execution tips and techniques. Focus on the areas where you and your employees need to improve.

### About the Author

**Richard Lepsinger**, an HR consultant, is the president of OnPoint Consulting and the co-author of three business books, including *The Art and Science of 360-Degree Feedback*.

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