

# It's all about getting it done

## Addressing the what, why, how and who of execution

By Janice Giannini

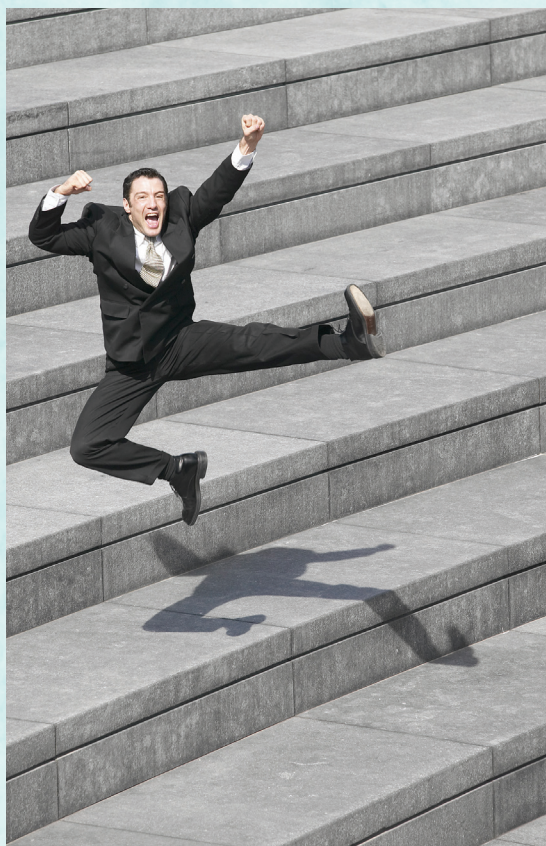
I started down the path of focusing on effective execution for very practical reasons. I have encountered many situations in which decision makers would say, "I know where we are trying to go..." or "I've got the plan in place. Don't worry..." only to hear the common denominator "but" that usually followed. The plans these decision makers had, always were in place, or about to be implemented; however, it was the "but" that always said to me, "How do we effectively execute this plan?"

Having a solid strategy doesn't get "it" done in and of itself. In the current challenging business environment a solid execution plan rarely is a plan to do "it" faster, better and cheaper. Rather, the plan requires rethinking the what, why and how of business procedure. And, while on the track to your improved procedure, it is important not to lose sight of where you want to be, or, for that matter, where you started.

So where does effective execution begin? As with any critical thinking process, it starts with defining what the results of an effective execution process will mean to a business, organization or team. Effective execution begins with persistently asking questions until the real answers emerge:

Some questions speak to what and why we are doing the work itself:

- What work absolutely is critical to delivering our product or service?
- What could we stop doing



without any negative impact on the customers, their experience or their perceived value of us?

- Is work being performed once, or does it need to be checked and re-done?

• Do the people doing the task readily understand the why behind the workflow?

- What else can be done to accomplish the same goals or outcomes?

• Is it clear to the staff how the work they are performing fits into the final product?

Some questions speak to how we are doing it:

- How fast does "fast" need to be?
- Not all work is created equal, is it?

- Why is it done that way?
- In what other way can it be done?
- If starting this business from scratch, what, if anything, would you do differently?

Some questions speak to the sequencing of the work:

- When is it done?
- Why is it done then?
- How often is it done?
- How often does it need to be done?

- Where is it done?
- Why is it done there?
- Where else could it be done?

Some questions speak to who does the work:

- Who does it?
- Why do they do it?
- Who else can do it?

That change can be made, should be made and, when changed, must be completed takes a certain mindset.

Dealing with any change requires an attitude of general acceptance and a clear thought process. Research indicates teams or individuals committed to producing better results expressly have individual and refined attitudes and characteristics. Some of these characteristics include: open mindedness; comfort with change; acceptance of risk; and perseverance.

Open-mindedness—the realization of opportunity within what always has been viewed in the same manner—is the agent of change. Consider this example: an organization once had a specifically defined process. The process had 265

steps and took three weeks to execute. It was thought the process had to be done exactly the same way each time—no deviations. The process, of course, was cumbersome and time consuming. No one could explain why the process had to be done this way. Finally, an open-minded group of employees were willing to ask the previously listed questions, see additional possibilities, understand the real cause versus the symptoms and enable true change to occur. The team took the 265 step process to less than 20 steps and cut the process execution time by more than half.

What is required to accomplish a company's current goals may not be the same as what is required to take results to the next level—it's not wrong, it's just different. The challenge is to recondition the current institutional memory in the direction of change versus the current state. The staff must become comfortable with change. The emotional link must be broken between the unconscious thought process and the ability to think and plan with more effective results. Acknowledging, from the formative stages, the downsides that will come with a new business process enables the team or individual to address and become familiar with the uncomfortable nature of exploring new paths.

The desire to accept risk is a fundamental physical, emotional and psychological attitude to do what it takes to achieve different results. According to my colleague, Doug Brown, change forces our hand to take advantage of already present opportunities. Accepting the risk and taking performance to the next level is a function of understanding that effective execution of a change in procedure can drive an organization to, and past, grander goals. The obstacle in achieving these grand goals is creating an environment in which people are able to see, hear and do what is needed to see the possibilities and to want the results that come with the acceptance of risk.

It often is said that it is not the current state or the changed state that is the issue; it is the transition or gray space we must traverse in order to get to the new state that is the biggest

challenge. The perseverance, or fortitude, to live and work through the discomfort accompanying a new performance level will determine if the proposed change can be secured for the long-term. As the decision maker, one has to identify what will propel the leadership, the team and the individual to venture into the gray space and what is needed to sustain these people to push forward until the change is complete.

### Plans and metrics required to succeed

It is like taking big rocks and breaking them into little rocks, and then into pebbles. A disciplined, repeatable and measurable process that can be adjusted, based on the desired outcome, is the crux of achieving improved results. Sometimes the hardest part is determining what size rock really is needed.

The critical evaluation process starts with understanding the difference between needs and wants. Objectively create the list of necessary and sufficient goals, with their potential consequences, that will produce the needed performance level.

The end result of this evaluation is a list of six to eight necessary and sufficient goals for the group. The next step in this process simultaneously is the most critical, the most time consuming and the most successful. As the following action steps are being evaluated for implementation, remember the "what, why, how, when and who" questions.

- Take each goal, and successively break it down into its component sub goals until each step is a small enough step to measure and achieve.

- At each step along the way, critically analyze the successive actions that need to occur, in what order, by whom and by when, in order to achieve success.

- Take the time to understand and articulate the negative impact of not attaining the goal.

- Focus on the work that enables needed results to be achieved.

- What are the positive scenarios or outcomes that can occur and will support needed goals?

- What are all of the outcomes that can get in the way of achieving needed goals?

- What needs to be done to proactively minimize the occurrence of the obstacles?

### Clearly stated action at each step that include the:

- responsible person;
- date by which the action step needs to be accomplished; and
- consequences of not achieving the goal.

### Several results of the thinking and planning process:

- provides a roadmap to guide actions, progress and deviations from the plan;
- provides a mechanism for accountability and forward progress;
- puts timelines in focus; and
- enables meaningful re-pathing when obstacles occur.

During this entire process, objectivity is critical. It must be determined how the team is responding to changes and what is really happening. It must also be noted if the team is using the previous, or "as-is," situation as a base to measure improvement. An organized roadmap, with measurements, that truly reflects the needed result, tracked over time, is the best method to indicate real progress.

### The challenges and stumbles along the way

A clear definition of the plan helps to crystallize the vision and set the direction for the team. Small discreet action steps that can be accomplished cause the team to start building confidence as the successes add up. The result is a progression that creates:

- new confidence levels, leading to a sense of urgency to accomplish more;
- a more focused team, which improves the "what and how" of the goals;

- belief that the action plan is possible in the skeptics of the group;
- a passion for the goals from the whole team;
- a higher energy level;
- a momentum and sense of cooperation, which carries the team forward; and
- a true sense of collaboration, which propels the team to the next level.

In order to attain these riches, the team must navigate successfully these reoccurring questions: Are we on the right track? How do we know if we are on the right track? And, is progress being made? Work and progress can be evaluated based on the metrics. But, even with these questions answered, it is important to stay balanced; the normal human emotions of doubt still will seek to derail the process of change. The plan must be followed, even when it seems there is not enough time to adhere to new policy during deadline periods or heavy business cycles.

This is a process of positive re-enforcement. Follow the process and trust it will get you there. As small successes add up, and the teams start to see progress, they will develop the ability to look at the plan as a guide post and alter course when appropriate. The most challenging part of the journey, in taking performance to the next level, is the temptation to abandon your goals when changes begin to slow up the workload process. Change takes time and it will not go smoothly every day. However, when reality starts to conflict with the plan, there are times when re-pathing is necessary. This conflict may occur in two broad areas: when the plan is too robust for the job at hand, or when the plan no longer aligns with the market space. Some questions to guide analysis and re-pathing are:

- What do the metrics indicate? Are the action steps clear? Is the order aligning with the end result needed?
- What are market share, profits and new product releases indicating?
- Who is buying the product and services?
- Is the strategy and execution still in line with market place dynamics?
- Are competitors encroaching on market share?

Creating a tight linkage between execution and strategy forms an iterative cycle and is a key for the decision maker who has initiated the change; as is determining the result needed, measuring the actions taken and achieved, evaluating the results, determining the real cause of the problems (versus symptoms) and upping the commitment to the new effective execution of the new business process.

Taking performance to the next level over time requires that both external and internal forces come together. When this doesn't happen, the inevitable question "Is it execution or is it strategy?" must be asked. I claim it is both, because execution and strategy need to be coupled tightly to reinforce each other in order to make the whole stronger.

A disciplined execution model starts to confirm or confront the strategic plan. The implementation of an iterative cycle will align the business from strategy through results ... where the desired state is steady and on course so every little ripple doesn't create an emergent strategy flexible and agile enough to alter course when needed, confident and open minded enough to see what is really there. Finally, there is clear accountability. Be sure the definition of accountability is

obvious; team members must know their responsibilities, what they need to do and when they need help.

The five focal points, when taken together as a package, form the basis for taking any organization or individual's results to the next level, to execute and "Get it done!"

1. Addressing the "what, why, how, when, and who" of effective execution.
2. Properly defining the execution and emotional mindsets needed.
3. Thinking through the plans and metrics required to succeed.
4. Handling the process challenges and inevitable stumbles along the way.
5. Creating a tight enough linkage between execution and strategy to form an iterative cycle.

As George Bernard Shaw said, "The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want and if they can't find them, make them."

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### Important questions to keep in mind:

- What's different today about the markets?
- What likely is to be different tomorrow?
- How will these changes influence products and services needed?
- Is there still a market for current products and services?
- How do current services need to be adapted?
- What trends are taking place in the industry?
- What new products and services are being created as a result?
- What trends are taking place in my customers industry?
- What impact is technology creating?
- Is the customer base changing?
- Where am I going, where are my competitors going?
- Why am I going there, why are my competitors going there?
- Where is my customer base going?
- What am I doing about it?
- Am I producing what my customers want or am I trying to sell what I have?