



Mid-Market Management Trends ...

The Nuts and Bolts of Execution: Putting Ideas to Work

by Theresa Sullivan Barger

In an effort to increase sales at Avery Dennison, senior management established a pilot project charging three divisions in one office with creating new business that might yield results within 100 days and have sustained growth potential.

One team took duct tape made for the construction and commercial heating and ventilation industry and decided to slice it into smaller pieces and market it to consumers through a national retail chain. Within 100 days, the product, Fasson foil sealing tape, had been packaged, labeled and placed in home improvement and hardware stores nationwide, according to Robert Schaffer, Ph. D., a management consultant. Within two years of the pilot, the \$5.5 billion, global company implemented 500 of these 100-day projects. In 2003, the first full year the “rapid results” method was introduced to 50 sites around the world, the projects generated \$50 million in sales, according to Schaffer. By 2004, the method produced \$150 million in sales.

Carrying out these projects has been built into the way people work, forcing changes in company culture.

“Execution becomes second nature,” said Schaffer, founder of Robert H. Schaffer & Associates, of Stamford, Conn. and author of *Rapid Results! How 100-Day Projects Build the Capacity for Large-Scale Change* (Jossey-Bass, 2005).

Initially, companies may resist trying to do things differently because it sounds too good to be true. Leaders know the challenges inherent in getting people to approach work in a profoundly different way, and they’re skeptical that changing the approach to how work gets done could have a meaningful impact on profits, he said.

Five Essentials of Execution

1. The agenda to be executed should make sense to those who must execute it—people should be persuaded that the agenda is worth following.
2. Someone needs to be held accountable for getting it done—explicit, as opposed to diffuse responsibility.
3. The person who is accountable for getting it done needs to be a person who can get things done. The best estimate is that well over half of the managers in any organization “can’t get anything done.”
4. There needs to be some possibility that by the time it gets done, someone senior in the organization will still care—as opposed to the attention of the senior people having shifted on to the next problem du jour.
5. There should be a payoff for the person responsible for getting it done, as opposed to finishing the project and having it ignored.

Source: Robert Hogan, Ph.D., president of Hogan Assessment Systems and author of *Personality and the Fate of Organizations*, which is due to be published this year by Erlbaum

Ensuring “consistent execution of strategy by top management” is the second highest priority of CEOs, according to The Conference Board’s Mid-Market CEO Challenge 2006 survey, which included 260 CEOs of mid-market companies. In fact, 38 percent of respondents ranked it their greatest concern, second only to the 39.1 percent who ranked “sustained and steady top-line growth” their top priority.

The term “execution” became a buzzword in management circles after the widely successful book, *Execution, the Discipline of Getting Things Done* (Crown Business, 2002), reached number one on the *Wall Street Journal* bestseller list and was on the *New York Times*’ bestseller list for more than 50 weeks. In it authors Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan spell out the steps to successful execution, using their experiences as CEO of Honeywell and a consultant to blue-chip companies, respectively.

Despite the success of the Bossidy/Charan book and others that followed, and a lot of discussion surrounding execution, leaders at mid-sized companies have regarded execution somewhat warily. Can the principles of execution be adapted to mid-sized companies, regardless of their product? Can the principles work in all corporate cultures? Is execution just another fad?

Business leaders and executive consultants are excited about execution, but agree that implementing its principles is no small challenge. (And done right, it’s no fad.)

“A lot of how you spell success is execution,” said Dan Fisher, senior vice president, people and processes with Welch Allyn Medical Products in Skaneateles Falls, N.Y. “Execution is how effective you are in fulfilling your strategies.

“It’s not a program. It’s bound up in culture, in how decisions are made, in how effective an organization is about delegating and accountability,” Fisher said.

And these principles can work for companies of all sizes, from Fortune 500 companies to small, privately held businesses. In his March 13, 2006 *Business Week* column, Jack Welch said, “Strategy is strategy, whether the company is large or small. It’s that killer idea, a ‘big aha,’ as we call it, that gives you a sustainable competitive advantage.”

When it’s time to implement that strategy, small and mid-size companies have an advantage over big businesses because they’re more flexible, he said. “When there are only 100 employees, or even 1,000, it is much easier to communicate strategy and ignite a contagious intensity,” he said.

Mission Accomplished

Execution is about getting things done. It’s not about activity with no end result. “If there are a lot of meetings, you’ve got a problem,” said Robert Hogan, Ph.D., president of Hogan Assessment Systems, Tulsa, Okla.

Those who understand execution don’t confuse activity with accomplishment. When Anne Mulchahy became the CEO of Xerox, she told the staff she didn’t want any more meetings after which nothing happened, said Hogan, author of the soon-to-be-released *Personality and the Fate of Organizations* (Erlbaum).

Because every company is made up of people with varying levels of ability, productivity, and work ethic, if execution is to work, he said, it has to be embedded throughout the culture.

“Once you get a culture of execution, away you go. Toyota is so good at execution, they don’t mind showing what they do because they know no one else can do it,” Hogan said. They are willing to be open about their internal processes and share their methods with other businesses because they are so confident that others can’t duplicate it. “They’ve institutionalized execution. They’ve got assigned roles and responsibility; they’ve got accountability around productivity,” Hogan said. “They have so many procedures about how to get work done that execution takes place despite the politics.”

United Aluminum built execution into its corporate culture after trying it on one short-term project. In the early 1990s, the New Haven, Conn. manufacturer was late on 20 percent of its orders and was poised to bring in an expensive system. Instead, they decided to see if they could fix the problem themselves, with the help of Schaffer’s firm.

Company leaders designated a week about a month away and set a goal of 100 percent on-time success for that one week. Initially, managers thought the idea preposterous. To get into the spirit, leaders distributed “Mission Impossible” hats and played the “Mission Impossible” theme music on the loud speakers.

They hit the 100 percent goal in the target week and in the following week. In the 15 years since, the company’s 98 to 99 percent on-time delivery has become one of its major marketing features.

They didn’t need that system after all, Schaffer said. “If there is this kind of zest and a clear cut, tough goal,” he said, “you get all sorts of exciting results.”

But what works for one challenge, may not work for another. The companies that do best with this method are those that take what they learned and use that elsewhere within the company. “The most important principle is to try it with a team that feels empowered to experiment,” Schaffer said. And once it’s done, ask, “What did we learn? How can we expand on it?”

John Lapides, president of United Aluminum, said the experiment changed the culture. The practice of setting short-term goals, using existing tools and breaking down barriers between departments has become part of how the family-owned firm operates, he said.

Another business that has implemented execution successfully is MetLife Auto & Home, and its divisional president, Bill Mullaney, said one of the key factors in his success is setting clear goals for employees that are aligned with the organization’s goals.

For example, Mullaney said, his firm establishes a sales plan every year and has weekly sales meetings. At those meetings, they don’t talk about sales strategies or new products. “We talk about whether we met the plan last week and why we did or we didn’t and what things we might have to do to make our sales plan.”

This creates “an environment where people feel they can have open, honest and candid feedback about how well they’re doing relative to [company] goals,” he said.

Communicate—Then Communicate Some More

There are plenty of obstacles, but first businesses have to lay the right foundation. A strong foundation requires listening to staff; creating a game plan based on core values and sticking to it; communicating clearly from top to bottom and between departments; bringing people from different functions together; and starting small to test and tweak. Some successful companies also seek input from customers and suppliers.

John Baldoni, of Baldoni Consulting of Ann Arbor, Mich., cites Xerox’s Mulchahy as a leader who listened to the troops. When Mulchahy became Xerox’s CEO in 2001, some suggested the unprofitable company declare bankruptcy. Instead, she appeared before various divisions, explained the situation and asked her employees what the company could do to turn around. With the feedback and help of employees, the company came out of the red and into the black.

“The ideas and the products for success are already on the table,” Baldoni said. Companies just have to be ready to look at what’s in front of them.

Mullaney says listening to employees has become part of MetLife Auto & Home’s corporate culture. Twice a year, company officers go to all the office sites and hold a town-hall style meeting. And they actually get valuable feedback, he said. “It’s about setting the tone. When people tell you something is wrong, you need to get back to them. If you can demonstrate that you actually fixed it, you’ll have no shortage of suggestions on how you can improve the business.” Conversely, if the staff doesn’t think anyone is listening, they’re not going to put their neck out and tell senior leadership what they really think, he said.

“If a leader acts defensively or says you’re being negative if you give me bad news, that’s going to go right through the organization,” said Fisher, with Welch Allyn. “If you punish people for making a mistake, you’re going to get lots of politics.”

Just as important as listening, another vital task is making communication a two-way street by keeping employees informed about changes and goals. For execution to work, the strategic plan has to be communicated to all levels and to all departments, experts said. And the communication needs to be ongoing so that staff understands that the goals and strategy are still in place.

Generally, people want to succeed and they want to be part of a vibrant company. Senior leaders will have more success in seeing their vision implemented if they articulate their case well throughout the process, Baldoni said. Leaders can spell out the reasons for implementing change such as lowering costs, improving profitability, improving efficiency, and engaging the workforce.

Keys to Executing Successfully

Does the organization have a good vision? Are employees energized and do they embrace the organization's mission?

Does the business have an articulated strategy that employees understand?

Are the priorities clear? Do people know they should focus their energies on three or four clearly defined goals?

Are the incentives aligned? Does the company reward the right things, such as implementation and follow through of stated priorities?

Strong leadership. Do you have A-team members with positive attitudes? Do they work well together? Are their skills complementary?

Project management. Add up the tasks and assign responsibilities. Hold people accountable, break down tasks into manageable bites, and create a calendar spelling out deadlines.

Have a scorecard to chart results weekly and monthly. When the team discusses progress, are they talking honestly about status and the real obstacles to executing? The CYA mentality won't work.

Source: Dan Fisher, senior vice president, Welch Allyn Medical Products

Business consultant Wally Adamchik told the story of a computer manufacturer whose lack of communication among departments hurt its bottom line. Someone in the purchasing department decided the company could save \$50,000 by buying a \$5 transistor for \$1 less. When the computers built with the cheaper part started to fail, the company was faced with a \$1-million breakdown.

"It's a classic story of operating in our silos," Adamchik said. Had purchasing reached over to operations and manufacturing to suggest testing, the failure could have been avoided. "Great companies have great communication. That allows them to execute," said Adamchik, president of FireStarter Speaking and Consulting of Raleigh, N.C.

Leaders need to ensure that those in senior and middle management are monitoring results. Once a project is up and running and showing success, make sure that is communicated to employees. Avery made a point of internally promoting its 100-day project successes.

When skeptical employees hear about a method that works, said consultant Paul Thornton, they may get on board. "At some point, they either have to get on the bus and go in the direction we're going or get off the bus," said Thornton, author of *Leadership: The Best Advice I Ever Got* (Wingspan Press, 2006).

Overcoming Obstacles

Making execution work is hard. Employees tend to be skeptical and instinctively resist change. Middle managers try to hold onto their power, and divisions suffer from overzealous competitiveness with one another and a lack of communication. Businesses that have tackled these common problems are the ones that see results.

Power

"The people in power at any company tend to be very successful at driving yesterday's success," said Rita Gunther McGrath, associate professor, Columbia Business School. "If you do something new, that says their model is no longer going to be the dominant one. They're facing a loss of power."

She suggests co-opting them into coming on board with your plan, by linking it to a method they care about. For example, if an executive is a champion of Six Sigma, create a plan that would give Six Sigma recognition while moving forward with your strategy.

“The real dangerous ones are those who oppose you silently,” said McGrath, co-author of *MarketBusters: 40 Strategic Moves That Drive Exceptional Business Growth* (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2005).

One way to overcome resistance is to engage people by motivating them to buy into your plan, Baldoni said. “Peter Drucker famously said that ‘managing knowledge workers is like managing a volunteer organization; you have to capture their hearts and minds.’ ... Tell them what needs to be done, give them the tools to help them do it, and let them go.”

Schaffer’s suggestion for avoiding boredom is to make the projects short term and build “zest” into them by allowing people to experiment and do something completely different.

Sometimes that zest for getting things done will come out in a time of crisis, when all sorts of untapped potential often emerges. A good example is the recovery of Tylenol and its maker, McNeil Laboratories, after the tampering incident that required all their capsules to be pulled from the shelves, Schaffer said. They couldn’t come back into the marketplace until they had safe packaging. Within about eight weeks, they were back in production with triple-safe packaging.

The Tylenol story shows that when people or companies are in crisis, their capability and performance rise to higher levels of productivity, Schaffer said. People instinctively drop the busy work and focus on what needs to get done. “That extra performance is not just people driving themselves crazy, but working together in a different way,” he said.

Schaffer teaches his “rapid results” method all over the world, he said, and he hears the same response—that it’s exciting and fun.

Be Yourself

No two organizations are the same, so what works for one company won’t necessarily work for another business, said consultant Pamela S. Harper, author of *Preventing Strategic Gridlock: Leading Over, Under, & Around Organizational Jams to Achieve High Performance Results* (Cameo Publications, 2003). “What I’ve found is that executives will benchmark the best practices of GE and try to adopt them in their own company. That’s like transplanting a tree without its roots,” she said.

“Rather than simply adopting somebody else’s best practices, company leaders have to adapt them to what works within their company,” said Harper, president of Business Advancement Inc., of Glen Rock, N.J.

Assuming the individual employees’ goals are aligned with the business’s goals and the reason for the strategy has been articulated, companies can take several steps to bring resisters into the fold: coach, nurture, and communicate. Ask what’s not working, whether they’d like to move to a different team. If they still fail to contribute, experts said, fire them.

“If everyone else on the team knows they’re not executing, and you allow them to stay,” Adamchik asked, “what does that say about the organization?”

Measure Results; Demand Accountability

One basic way to encourage results is to tie employee compensation to performance. While that may seem like a no-brainer, consultants say plenty of businesses fail to do this. “Leadership is all about setting expectations around performance,” said Hogan, a former professor and chair of the psychology department at The University of Tulsa. “Do you set expectations? Do you reward performance? What do you do when people don’t meet expectations? Are the expectations around success or avoiding failure?” An organization that rewards a CYA mentality, that retains people who can’t get anything done, is an organization that won’t be able to execute leaders’ strategy, Hogan said.

Next, measure results. Don’t get bogged down in excuses; look at facts. For example, Mullaney, of MetLife, believes almost everything can be measured. “I’m a big proponent of having a good matrix in your business so you can see how you’re doing. I get a report card at 3:30 every Saturday morning

on how we did in sales. That report doesn't lie," he said. "I always want to hear the facts first; then let me know what you think about that."

Bob Prosen, executive director of the UTD Prosen Center for Business Advancement in Dallas, says accountability is crucial for execution to work. "I'm very clear on what it is I expect from you. You understand what those things are, and we develop measures that allow us to track you," he said. "People who contribute the most, I give the most."

Prosen, author of *Kiss Theory Good Bye: A No-Nonsense Approach to Positive Action and Powerful Results* (Gold Pen Publishing, 2006), tells his staff not to come into his office with a problem without a couple of potential solutions they want to bounce off him.

As Bossidy and Charan write in their book, execution "is the missing link between aspirations and results." For execution to succeed, business leaders have to work at it the way Michael Jordan worked to perfect his jump shot. "Execution is hard work. It's not sexy. It's not fun. It's day-to-day discipline and keeping the project on track," Baldoni said. "Many executives don't want to get involved in that, and they shouldn't, but when they don't stay in tune, it can go quickly awry.

"What's fun is vision and strategy. Why? Because it's the world of make believe. Execution is the real world. Execution is the doing and that's what makes it hard. And that's why organizations fail."

But when businesses work hard, measure results and keep focused on their goals, it's a beautiful thing, says McGrath. Execution takes discipline, hard work, tenacity, and true teamwork. But, done properly, execution delivers in the form of measurable, improved results and smooth operations. "When a company really executes well, it's like looking at a ballerina."

Five Attributes of Highly Profitable Companies

Assuming that you have a good market and a business plan that makes sense, if you combine the five elements below, Bob Prosen says, you'll have high profits, high revenue, high employee satisfaction and high customer satisfaction.

- 1. Superior Leadership** CEOs say they want more time. One way to get time is to surround yourself with people who are smarter than you and you will get time. They'll do the job they're supposed to do and you'll have time to do yours. If you have anyone on your team you can't trust with sensitive, confidential information, remove him or her.
- 2. Sales Effectiveness** The top three metrics CEOs need to measure sales are:
How many appointments did sales staff have with decision makers this month?
How many proposals did they deliver?
How many proposals did they win?
And in a fourth column, chart year-to-date revenue. This allows the CEO to see who is performing and who isn't, why they're doing well and why they're not.
- 3. Operational Excellence** Understand your company's cost structure. How do you make money? By product? By service? Avoid aggregation of numbers so that you can see which parts of the business are making money and which parts are losing money.
- 4. Financial Management** Business leaders really want information, not data. Have your CFO show you:
Where you made money last month, broken down however you decide to organize it, such as by product or by geography;
Where you didn't make money;
What the company needs to do differently to fix the problems.
- 5. Customer Loyalty** Your goal should be having 100 percent of your customers' business. Find out if your clients are loyal by monitoring whether they continue to do business with you and whether they provide positive references and testimonials. To keep customers loyal, tell them in writing about all the things that they're not paying for that your company does to deliver good service.

Source: Bob Prosen, executive director of the UTD Prosen Center for Business Advancement in Dallas and author of *Kiss Theory Good Bye: A No-Nonsense Approach to Positive Action and Powerful Results* [Gold Pen Publishing, 2006]

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