Execution: The Difference
That Makes the Difference

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"The devil's in the details."

~ Ross Perot, Former CEO, EDS Corporation

Safety policies, procedures, programs, processes and standards all play a vital role in the effort to send people home safe. They represent the organization's comprehensive safety strategy, reflecting the collective wisdom and experience of those who authored them: experts, regulators, and safety staff and line leaders in the organization. So, when something goes wrong and someone is injured, the odds favor someone correctly noting, "If the procedures had been followed, this never would have happened."

They might as well have said: "We failed to execute."

In cases where following what was already prescribed and in place would have prevented an injury, logic dictates finding "inadequate execution" as the root cause. The appropriate corrective action should be "improve execution." Experience predicts a different outcome: more or different policies, procedures, programs, processes and standards.

While it's always easy to come up with "more" or "different" as the solution to problems, in situations such as these the goal of sending people home safe would be better served were leaders in safety and the line to ask: "Why don't people execute the plans that we have put in place?" and "What should we do to improve our execution?"

Execution is doing – and doing it exactly the way it's supposed to be done. Imagine a world in which every safety policy, procedure, program, process and standard was carried out exactly as planned, and the enormous power locked up in execution can be appreciated.

Policy, procedure, program, and process are a written expression of intention, and without fail, good intention. Execution, by contrast, determines what actually happens – and what doesn't. As the step in the process of managing safety that converts words into action, execution is the difference that makes the difference,

Execution is so critical to success in any effort that it should be the first thing any leader – safety or line – thinks about improving. It's often the last. Why is that? What is it about execution, particularly as it relates to safety, that makes it such an uninviting target for a leader's attention?

Once the value of execution is fully recognized, the most important question becomes this: What can be done to improve the level of execution?

The Problem of Execution

The first thing to understand about execution is that it isn't just a safety problem. Execution is a universal problem affecting all aspects of business performance. In business after business, poor execution costs customers, sales, profits – and injuries.

Despite its pervasive presence and impact, the problem of execution seldom gets the attention it deserves. Ram Charan, co-author of Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done, described the problem this way: "Execution is the great, un-addressed issue in the business world today. Its absence is the biggest single obstacle to success and the cause of most of the disappointments that are mistakenly attributed to other causes." (Bossidy & Charan, 2002) One measure of this lack of visibility is the relatively little in the way of writing and research on management execution, in comparison to other popular trends such as leadership, motivation, and customer focus.

"Turning Great Strategy into Performance" published in the Harvard Business Review gives indication of the size and nature of the execution problem. Based on interviews with CEO's of 197 large companies, the authors reported a 37% gap between their strategy – the plan to achieve results – and their performance – the bottom line. The authors reported that one third of the CEO's interviewed estimated that loss – the difference between what they expected and what their business achieved – at more than 50%. (Mankins & Steele, 2005)

There must be a good reason why as much as half of the value contained in the great thinking of those leading the company gets lost in translation. The authors asked the CEO's they surveyed for their explanation. Here's what the CEO's offered as the reasons why their organizations didn't execute at the level the expected:

> "Inadequate or unavailable resources"
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> "Poorly communicated strategy."
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> "Actions required to execute not clearly defined"
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> "Unclear accountabilities for execution"
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> "Organizational silos and culture blocking execution"
>
> "Inadequate performance monitoring"
>
> "Inadequate consequences or rewards for failure or success"
>
> "Poor and uncommitted leadership"

Said another way, "Execution fails for a variety of depressingly familiar reasons." (Sull & Spinosa, 2007)

The authors summed up the way the process normally goes: "Strategies are approved but poorly communicated. This, in turn, makes the translation of strategy into specific actions and resource plans all but impossible. Lower levels in the organization don't know what they need to do, when they need to do it, or what resources are required…. Consequently the expected results never materialize. And because no one is held responsible for the shortfall, the cycle of underperformance gets repeated." (Mankins & Steele, 2005)

If the CEO can't get their business strategy executed, why would the process be any different for safety?

With Safety, the Problem Only Gets Tougher

Those same reasons for poor execution of the business strategy help explain why safety execution – safety policies, procedures, programs, processes and standards – so often fall short of full compliance. With safety, there is one significant factor that exacerbates the problem: the way safety performance is measured.

In the case of business performance (sales, revenue, expenses, product quality) there is a small army of accountants – and, for a publicly held company, independent financial analysts – pouring over the financial records, looking for the performance gaps, both present and future.

Rarely do safety metrics provide management with the same kind of performance visibility as do the financial numbers. There are far fewer safety metrics, and the ones seen by senior management are typically lagging indicators of performance. Those safety metrics can look very good for a very long time – even if the real, underlying performance isn't. That makes it easy for senior management to scan the performance metrics and, in the absence of any serious incidents, conclude: "All is well with safety." Whether all really is as well as it seems can be an entirely different matter.

Given that serious injuries are a lagging indicator of safety performance, execution makes a great candidate for a leading indicator – and a critical one at that. But, since it is "the great, un-addressed issue in the business world," execution isn't drawing anywhere near the attention it deserves.

Execution Un-addressed

In "Three Reasons Why Good Strategies Fail: Execution, Execution, Execution" the authors at the Wharton School of Business publication observed "…despite the obvious importance of good planning and execution, relative few management thinkers have focused on what kinds of processes and leadership are best for turning a strategy into results." (Hrebiniak, 2005) By comparison, there's no lack of books written for business leaders on subjects like strategy, motivation, human relations, quality, and productivity.

Why would something as vital as execution be overlooked not just by the experts, but by those with the most at stake, senior leaders?

The answer to that question starts with the definition of execution, "faithfully carrying out the plan." It's easy to see why most senior leader might think that execution is work better done by someone else. Execution begins once the strategic decision has been made, the direction chosen: decision-makers think the hard part is over, leaving execution as an afterthought.

Larry Bossidy, former CEO of Honeywell, points out: "Many people regard execution as detail work that's beneath the dignity of a business leader. That's wrong – it's a leader's most important job." (Bossidy & Charan, 2002)

Those details constitute the very nature of execution: the work required to convert a plan into action. Ignore them and execution flounders. But that's often what happens: "The biggest factor of all may be executive inattention. Once a plan is decided upon, there is often surprisingly little follow-through to ensure that it is executed: "…(L)ess than 15% of companies routinely track how they perform over how they thought they were going to perform." (Mankins & Steele, 2005)

In place of that depressing picture of the current practice, consider what could be done to get the kind of performance management has in mind: the decision made, execution starts with a face-to-face explanation. There's a world of difference between broadcasting a change by email or letter and explaining the change directly with those affected – and then listening to what those impacted see as the problems standing in the way.

That approach to communication might not be the norm, but it's not unheard of. Tyco's CEO, Edward Breen did just that, communicating the changes the company made in the aftermath of the scandal that put his predecessor behind bars. He "…visited dozens of Tyco facilities around the world and briefed employees about the company's …new governing structures, new code of ethics… He made sure question time was at least as long as his prepared remarks so that employees could feel personally engaged with the new boss." (Anders, 2008)

Doing that requires listening. When it involves communicating a change in policy, procedure or rolling out a new process or program, it means treating people who see practical problems not as resistors but as people dealing with the often-painful details of the change – and the conflicts change can create.

Doing that well requires not just listening, but empathetic listening. Moreover, it means providing real answers to legitimate questions and devoting resources to the real problems created by the change. Those are exactly the kind of leadership behaviors that the 197 CEO's find absent in their organization.

Then, there is the matter of tracking performance over time. Safety policies and programs have one built in advantage: audits are often the norm. In the best-case scenario, audits are one component of a larger measurement effort, and the resulting performance metrics have the same amount of visibility to the decision makers as does their original decision.

Taken together, these factors begin to explain why good execution is rare: it requires the energy and engagement of leaders over time, two commodities in short supply in management ranks.

Managing execution also requires very specific and pragmatic leadership skills. How does a leader learn how to manage – and master – execution?

Training, Development – and Evaluation

Attending to all the little things that add up to results is a style of leadership that used to be known as "hands-on." It's an approach that has long been out of favor, perhaps because the more obsessive of these hands-on leaders came to be known as "micromanagers," so consumed with every last detail as to miss the more important things.

That model of the leader, out on the shop floor sleeves rolled up and in the thick of things, (or worse, the leader who spends hours in staff meetings debating the font and type size on the PowerPoints) has been replaced by the modern version of the visionary leader who is focused on strategy, sets ambitious goals, and then leaves it up to the rest of the organization to figure out how to make things happen.

That's certainly a far more appealing model for the consultants to write about and for leaders to follow. While it is possible to single out successful leaders who've gotten results following the approach, the model doesn't square well with the management techniques great execution demands.

Found somewhere between the extremes of the micro-manager and the visionary are the leadership practices necessary to drive the devil out of the details. Where are they learned?

Among the methods by which business leaders learn the practice of leadership are formal education and the identification and emulation of role models. The former is the particular role of MBA programs, and the latter is what smart and successful leaders have done on their own for years.

Developing strategy is part of the core curricula of every MBA program in the country; nowhere to be found in the course catalogue is how to execute strategy. MBA programs don't teach much in the way of the "what to do and how to do it" of execution.

The result, observed Professor Lawrence Hrebiniak, Wharton School of Business, is that "…managers know a lot about how to decide a plan and very little about how to carry it out." (Hrebiniak, 2005) It is as if developing a strategy is an academic exercise, completed when the manager submits the paper and receives his "A" from the professor.

That's exactly what Bossidy found with the strategic planning processes when he became CEO at AlliedSignal: "The processes were empty rituals, almost abstractions. People did a lot of work on them, but little was useful." (Bossidy & Charam, 2002)

Hrebiniak explains: "Even though they are good managers, over time they really have to learn through the school of hard knocks, through experience, which means they make a lot of mistakes." (Hrebiniak, 2005) Lessons learned that way are expensive: in the case of poorly executed business strategy, the cost can be measured in dollars; in the case of poorly executed safety policies, the cost can be measured in lives.

Then there are those who have not only mastered the skills of execution, but have the visibility to stand as role models. Finding good role models for execution isn't always easy, particularly for those in middle level management. Larry Bossidy had Jack Welch at GE. As CEO, Welch's profile was so big that no one could miss it, but he served as Bossidy's role model long before he became CEO. (Bossidy & Charan, 2002)

Given that execution is "the great un-addressed issue" chances are the skillful practitioners of execution also go unrecognized internally. It's not hard to see why. Unlike Welch and Bossidy, leaders who are really good at execution aren't normally the flashy types who write books, make speeches, and show up in interviews in the business magazines. That personality type isn't the best match with the demands of good execution.

Sam Walton's pick-up truck evokes a more useful image of the leadership style of the masters of execution, which is less about persona and more about paying attention to the details, focusing on progress and results, spending time working down in the organization – where the real action of execution is found, and solving everyday problems.

The problem for senior leaders is that they're prone to overlook the "masters of execution" working in their organizations. Sure, these folks are getting great results and having to deal with fewer execution crises than their peers. But that's a recipe for flying under top management's radar. And when it comes time to promote, those with the higher profile – are more likely to be recognized.

It's a message seldom lost on the rest of the organization.

Execution Best Practices

Execution sounds simple – and in many ways it is. "Just do it, and do it right" sums up the process. The tough challenge leaders in the safety staff and line organization face is achieving and maintaining the level of execution where everybody does "it" – and does it "right" all the time. Easier said than done.

Here are five leadership best practices that can make a big difference in getting the kind of execution needed to achieve great safety performance.

Explain Better

Once the decision has been made – for example, a new safety policy approved – the execution process starts. Communicating the change is first critical step in the process: telling those who are not just affected, but responsible for making the change happen – what the change is. It sounds simple, and it is. But simple doesn't mean easy.

Several of the reasons that CEO's cited for the poor execution of their decisions – for example, "organization silos and culture" – are more commonly called resistance to change. It takes no genius to know that people naturally resist changes that aren't of their choosing and which are forced upon them. But, that is exactly what happens every time management sets a policy or government issues a regulation.

So resistance is both endemic to the process and interferes with execution. Understanding that, what are the options for a leader?

It's not practical to give everyone a vote in the decision process. But telling people the reasons why the policy has been changed, the process established, or the program developed goes a long way towards gaining buy in. The wisdom of doing so was validated by a survey done by communications expert, Phillip Clampitt. Here's what was reported in the Wall Street Journal:

Clampitt "…surveyed roughly 300 managers and employees at more than 100 U.S. employers, asking what they knew of decisions and how supportive they were of them. Mr. Clampitt says employees of companies that explained decisions more fully were more than twice as likely to support those decisions as workers who got less information." (Dvorak)

Explain the reason and the likelihood of buy-in doubles. Since tragedy somewhere on the planet is the most likely motivation for establishing or changing safety policies and procedures, those changes ought to be the easiest to explain and get buy-in: all that is needed is a full explanation of the reasons for the changes. It sounds too good to be true.

"The more-information-is-better rule sounds like common sense, but it is easy to neglect in practice, Mr. Clampitt says. Executives may feel too busy to explain their thinking. They may be so wrapped up in the decision-making that they think their conclusions are obvious." (Dvorak)

That explains why, when it comes time to communicate the change – by broadcast email, letter, or an announcement read at the safety meeting by a supervisor who often knows little more about the change than does his audience – the reason is not typically part of the message.

The leadership practices required to "explain better" aren't the least bit complicated: tell "why, what and how." Leaders should tell those affected by the change exactly why the decision was made. If there's been an accident, explain the accident and its relevant causes. Then offer the

details about what is expected to be different by the change, and how the change will be implemented.

All that probably sounds a bit like marketing. It is. As the President of Bolt Co. put it: "You're trying to sell." (Dvorak)

Listen More

What leaders see as resistance is often something entirely different: it's simply those who have to live with something different giving voice to their issues in going from old behavior to new behavior. Where the change is significant, there are bound to be practical issues that need to be dealt with. Rarely do policies and procedures provide all the details necessary to effect the change; if they did, the documents would have to be huge. Besides, it's not possible for those making the decision to know all the practical details. So, when people are complaining about change, they're often doing the leader a favor, putting the issues involving transition in play.

Getting to those real issues is a key part of the execution process. How does a leader cause that to happen? The answer is simple: ask questions.

Bossidy suggests letting questions do the heavy lifting. Asking questions is a powerful leadership tool. When the leader is asking questions, it allows the followers to do the talking. Choose the right questions, and the leader can get followers talking about execution: the important matters related to making the change happen.

What are the best questions to ask? The change to be executed always sets up very specific questions. For example, if the new policy forbids driving after midnight, an appropriate question is: "What do we do if we need to get someone to the hospital?" If the new procedure requires a certified person inspect equipment before putting it in service, an appropriate question is "How do we know who's certified to do the job?" The leader should always ask: "What do we need to do to make the change work?

Of course, asking questions obligates a leader to actually listen to what people have to say.

Teach "How To"

The state of the art at leading MBA programs has been described above. Likewise, teaching how to manage execution isn't a regular part of most internal leadership training and development programs. So, there's a significant void in this vital area. Given that execution is an integral part the management process and practice, it's more than appropriate that execution be part of the curricula for each.

Establishing an internal leadership training course in managing execution wouldn't be all that daunting a task. Many of the skills and practices needed for good execution aren't much different than the other core management skills: planning, communicating, measuring, evaluating. What's different about practicing execution – and therefore teaching execution – is largely found in context and application. A case study approach is a simple solution.

Up and coming leaders in all walks of life instinctively find and follow role models. In the case of football, the role models of execution are legends with names like Landry, Lombardi, and Bryant. Football coaches have a natural advantage: they normally serve in what amounts to an apprenticeship: they learn the tricks of the trade as assistants working for the master. Then, when they get their turn, they know exactly what to do to foster execution

Paul Bryant's peers said about him: "He could take his team and beat yours. He could take your team and beat his." Bryant's ability to manage execution explains that difference. When Bill Parcells became the coach of the Dallas Cowboys, one of the first things he did was to turn the desk in his office so it would face out towards the window into the weight room. That way, he was sure to know who was taking their lifting seriously, and who wasn't. It was probably a lesson he had learned while working as an assistant. It was certainly a lesson not lost on his players.

When it comes to role models for great execution in business there isn't an apprenticeship process. Moreover, role models aren't all that obvious – looking up or down the organization hierarchy. So, establishing a practice of identifying the best of execution would have a beneficial impact for those who follow role models, as well as those at the top. Role models should be asked to contribute their experience and practices to any internal effort to teach and promote execution. They could serve as course teachers and advisors.

Resist the Temptation to "Fix the Culture"

To any leader frustrated with the organization's collective inability to execute, culture gives every appearance of being the problem. So fixing culture always seems like a plausible approach. In many of high-profile safety failures, culture has been faulted as either a root cause or significant contributing factor. The authors of Execution concur and describe creating a "culture of getting things done." (Bossidy & Charan, 2002)

So culture becomes a tempting target, and there are always plenty of people more than happy to jump on that bandwagon. Before putting a culture survey as the first step in the process of improving execution, there's something every leader needs to appreciate about the culture present in the organization.

The Space Shuttle Columbia's investigation panel defined organization culture as the "…norms, beliefs and practices that…define the assumptions that employees make as they carry out their work." (NASA, 2003) Follow the logic of that definition, and the problem becomes clear: how much time must leaders spend delving into people's beliefs, assumptions and life experiences before execution improves – and things actually get done?

Even Bossidy and Charan admit that culture change efforts are more likely to fail than to succeed. (Bossidy & Charan, 2002) Execution as it relates to safety is far too important to either patently wait for improvement to show up – or turn up missing in action, a victim of someone's firmly held belief system.

A far easier path to improving execution is to focus on behavior. It's behavior – not beliefs – that causes execution to fail and people to go home hurt. Behavior can be seen, heard and measured. Behavior can be reinforced, corrected, changed. As it relates to execution, there is plenty of behavior – simple and obvious – that causes execution to happen – or not. That behavior can be found at every level of the organization, starting at the top and going down the hierarchy to the newest individual contributor.

It's a relatively simple matter to identify the critical behaviors needed for great execution. At the top of the list is the behavior, "Following the procedure." That behavior applies to everyone. "Holding people accountable" is another behavior critical to execution. That is a leadership behavior: if people aren't held accountable, it's management's failing.

A focus on behavior represents the simplest and most effective path forward. The good news is that any effort aimed at improving execution is bound to change culture.

Deal-in Front Line Supervisors

If execution is the great un-addressed issue in the organization, then those whose job it is to manage execution on day-to-day basis must be similarly overlooked. In many organizations, these are the front line supervisors. As a group, they normally fly well below top management's radar, which may further help explain why managing execution doesn't get the attention it deserves.

Consider these safety-related work processes that are principally in the hands of these front-line supervisors to execute:

- Setting and communicating work standards
- Teaching the right ways to do the work
- Determining who is qualified to perform the work
- Observing employees as they work
- Providing performance feedback—positive and corrective
- Communicating safety policies and procedures
- Managing safety suggestions
- Running safety meetings
- Dealing with injuries and near-misses

Together, they constitute safety execution. They are critical in that the output of these processes principally determines the safety performance the organization achieves. They are managed by the front line of supervision.

Alternatively, consider three of the most likely reasons why someone might go home hurt:

- Doing something the person was not qualified to do
- Using tools, methods, procedures, or equipment that were less than adequate to do the job safely
- Choosing the wrong—unsafe—behavior

Who is in the best position to know if these problems exist? Who is in the best position to deal with these causes and prevent them from causing someone to go home hurt? The answer, of course, is the immediate supervisor. Leaders, and even front line supervisors, seldom appreciate the organizational power supervisors have over these three key components in the injury equation:

Qualifications: Supervisors have the final say over who is qualified to do the work. Often that involves passing qualification tests. The supervisor typically gets to determine the specific tasks each team member is assigned to do.

Tools, methods, procedures, and equipment: Front line supervisors don't normally write the procedures, buy the equipment, or determine the methods to do the work. As the level of management closest to the action – often having done the job – they are in the best position to determine whether the tools, methods, procedures, and equipment are sufficient to do the job safely. When these are deficient, the supervisor has the authority – and the duty – to stop the job until it can be done safely.

Choice of behavior: Behavior is ultimately a matter of individual choice. The function of leadership is to influence that choice. In the ranks of management, there is no leader in a better position to influence behavior by those doing the work than the front line supervisor: that leader has the most direct contact, the most occasions to observe behavior, the most knowledge as to what the correct behavior should be, the best capacity to reinforce or correct behavior, and the credibility to do that in a way that has real influence.

The truth is that front-line supervisors have more control and influence over safety execution than any other level of management in the enterprise. When supervisors do their jobs well, people go home safe.

So, why is it that so many senior leaders have failed to appreciate the critical role of the front-line supervisor in managing execution? Unhappy with performance, seldom does it occur to senior leaders to ask their front line what they are seeing "out in the field." Instead, managers figure the problem out for themselves, design the solution, and then communicate it, leaving execution to their supervisors.

Worse, it's not uncommon for senior leaders to put their best efforts into undermining or eliminating the role of the front line supervisor. In the name of high-performance work redesign, more than a few organizations wiped out the front-line role entirely. In the spirit of free and open dialog, senior leaders have held communication sessions with individual contributors – without their supervisors present.

That might have sounded good at the time, but there's more than a little irony in all this. Over fifty years, industry studies have consistently shown that, when those performing the work were asked, they considered their front line supervisor the most trusted and credible member of the management hierarchy. (Larkin & Larkin, 1994)

Senior management should trust the front line just as much – they depend on the front line to manage execution of the processes and technologies that ultimately determine the success the business and the achievement of their goals.

Conclusion

Ross Perot was right: the hard part of the work of execution is found in the details. They're time consuming; deal with work practices that take place in locations far removed from the executive suite; at times, they can be downright boring.

But those details are the stuff of execution, essential to faithfully carrying out the safety plan. They are the difference that makes the difference, and should be the vital concern of every leader – staff and line – who wants to see everyone go home safe – every day.

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