

Getting it Done: Winning the Execution Game

By Roxanne Emmerich

Quick, think of *Gulliver's Travels*. What are you picturing? The big guy tied to the ground by the tiny people of Lilliput, right?

Not me. My favorite part of that story is the flying island of Laputa. The Laputians are philosophers, wicked smart, but they spend all their time navel-gazing—thinking deep thoughts, making complex calculations—and never get around to *doing* anything. (No surprise that their wives often leave the island and never come back. Talk about SMART.)

I know an awful lot of business leaders who probably have Laputian passports, if you know what I mean.

That's not good. Execution is everything. Plan all you want, dream all you can, then turn that key or you've accomplished nothing. Execution is what separates those who merely have lofty ideas from those who end up winning the game. It's about taking strategies and making sure they are implemented with power.

If you generate ideas without a plan to execute them, you might as well be Gulliver tied to that beach in Lilliput.

Creating a culture of execution is a leadership issue. It combines creating a "no-excuses, get-it-done" culture with the systems, processes, and accountabilities that ensure things are done consistently and done well.

But it's also *more* than a leadership issue. People at every level in an organization can get bogged down in planning and strategizing without ever getting off the pot.

Making execution happen

It's easy to guess which things in a company are measured and audited: It's the things that people actually DO and do well. If you want something done with fairly strong consistency, set measurable benchmarks.

The bad news—a.k.a. the OPPORTUNITY—is that the service, sales, and spirit components of business hardly ever receive any systemization, audits, compliance exams, measurement, or rewards—or repercussions for non-compliance.

If a standard is measured in the forest, and no one is there to audit it—does it make a difference? Not bloody likely. Why should it?

Dropping the ball in this kind of follow-up is why most companies do a better job at operations than they do at culture, sales, and service.

© MMIV Leadership Press Avenue, LLC. All rights reserved, including translation. No reproduction or duplication, whole or in part, in any form or by any means without written permission from Leadership Press Avenue, LLC. Material provided under license, for internal use only pursuant to the terms and conditions of the license agreement.

Do you smell an opportunity? I sure do.

Moments of Truth

You can't monitor and audit every tiny facet of your business, or you won't have time to *run* the business. So where does execution matter most? It matters most in the critical moments I call Moments of Truth—the moments where execution can mean the difference between success and failure.

Moments of Truth are those critical times when a customer forms an impression of you, deciding whether your offerings and their standards see eye-to-eye. Though they vary from industry to industry and business to business, every business has them.

Jan Carlson took over the reins of Scandinavian Air at a time when the airline was suffering an \$8 million loss and turned it around to a \$71 million profit within one year.

He created a miracle with more than a hope and a prayer or even a little charismatic leadership. He created a strategy that was so airtight it left no room for misinterpretation.

Carlson started his "miracle" by identifying every "Moment of Truth" that each customer encountered. He defined a Moment of Truth as each time a customer had the opportunity to form an impression of the business. He felt that at each of those Moments, a customer would either feel better or worse about Scandinavian Airlines. He felt that if he managed every one of those Moments meticulously, he could create extremely positive impressions consistently, thereby increasing the amount of repeat and referral business.

He identified some of his Moments of Truth as being the cleanliness of the waiting area, the announcements of the pilot, the check-in process, and even the cleanliness of the plane. If a customer saw a coffee stain on a tray when it was pulled down from the seat back, Carlson knew that the person's first thought would be, "Oh my goodness, I wonder if they remembered to service the engines."

But that's unreasonable, you say. Darn right it is. But Carlson is grasping something that too many people miss about human nature—that passengers **WILL** make unreasonable assumptions about whether coffee stains really have anything to do with something more serious. Why? Because the human brain makes those leaps. One impression creates concerns for other areas. So it's essential to manage the perceptions.

As a frequent traveler on planes, I pray every day that the same person who cleans off those trays isn't the one who services the engines! I think not. But each person's perceptions create his or her reality.

Getting it done day in and day out

The real question is, how do you apply a system that turned a company from a devastating loss to a sensational gain in only one year so you, too, can create such a powerful benefit for your company?

In addition to the areas of sales, service, and culture, you also need systems and accountabilities to make sure that your defined key initiatives get accomplished in a timely manner. Such systems ensure that all of your team members are working on the things that matter most without being distracted with the minutiae.

It is critical that every organization starts this process by being very clear with all team members about the 3-5 key initiatives and the 3-5 key results that are to be completed each quarter.

Each team member should have a quarterly plan, including a timeline for their contributions to achieving the overall objective. They should bring the plan to their supervisor each quarter to make agreements and list exactly what they accomplished in the last quarter and how it compared to the plan.

Best of all, your productivity-killing low performers will have no place to hide and will need to shape up or start shopping their résumés.

Use weekly planning meetings in which each attendee declares focused results following a clean process that wastes no time and you will create magic. These meetings create the engine to keep people focused on doing the right things and getting results in the areas that matter. It also reveals the "stealth slackers"—those who are otherwise masterful at hiding and looking busy.

Top performers don't just stay busy—they know how to get the RIGHT things accomplished. Top performing leaders also know how to get their people focused on doing the right things, especially those things intimately tied to the Moments of Truth that can make or break a company. They know that accepting no excuses from their team members means permitting no excuses from themselves as well. They need to go to war with their own "lack-of-execution demons."

For an organization to thrive in these highly competitive times, it is more critical than ever that leaders build an environment where their word is law. Only by conveying that attitude can they expect others to be held to the same standard.

A peek in the mirror

And what if *you* are the culprit—the one who never gets off the dime? Then it's time for you to CHANGE, and change *now*. You are operating on a set of poor habits and will need to fight for your own growth.

Start by reframing each project in your mind. When something important needs to happen and you think it's not possible, remove failure from the list of options by asking yourself, "If my life depended on it, how would I make sure this happened?" With that frame of reference, you'll be amazed at the miracles you will produce regularly.

Then: Use templates and checklists to hold yourself to the completion of your key projects.

The truth is, having a life that works DOES require you to live your commitments. Miracles are supposed to happen, but they require a steadfast ironclad system of execution and a leader who is committed to making the miracle happen.

Be the miracle!

SIDEBAR

Seven Secrets for Brilliant Execution

1. Define your Moments of Truth
2. Decide how you will measure progress in each area
3. Put systems in place both to instruct and to assess performance
4. USE those systems to hold people accountable
5. Assess individuals weekly, monthly, and quarterly
6. Make sure YOU are meeting your own standards
7. Celebrate victories large and small all along the way

Roxanne Emmerich is renowned for her ability to transform "ho-hum" workplaces into massive results-oriented "bring-it-on" environments. To discover how you can ignite the passion of your employees, catapult performance to new levels, and boost the morale of your company subscribe to the Thank God It's MondayTM e-zine at www.ThankGoditsMonday.com.