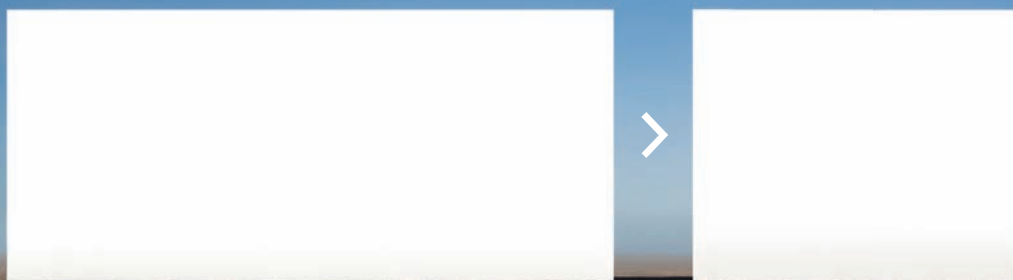


CLOSING THE EXECUTION GAP

RICHARD
LEPSINGER

HOW GREAT LEADERS AND THEIR
COMPANIES GET RESULTS



Closing the Execution Gap

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Richard Lepsinger

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About the Author

Richard Lepsinger is president of OnPoint Consulting (www.onpointconsultingllc.com) and has a twenty-year track record of success as a human resource consultant and executive. He was a founder and managing partner of Manus, a human capital consulting firm, which he grew to over \$4 million in revenue and sold to Right Management Consultants in 1998. At Right, Rick was the managing vice president of the Northeast and Eastern Canadian Consulting Practice, where he was responsible to fifty-five professionals and grew the region's revenue from \$7 million to \$20 million.

The focus of Rick's work has been on helping organizations close the gap between strategy and execution. He has served as a consultant to leaders and management teams at Astra-Zeneca, Bayer Pharmaceuticals, Citibank, Coca-Cola Company, Conoco-Phillips, Eisai Inc., GlaxoSmithKline, Goldman Sachs, Johnson & Johnson, KPMG, Merck & Co., the NYSE Euronext, Northwestern Mutual Life, PeopleSoft, Pfizer Inc., Pitney Bowes, Prudential, Siemens Medical Systems, Subaru of America, and UBS, among others.

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Rick has co-authored three books on leadership, including *Flexible Leadership: Creating Value by Balancing Multiple Challenges and Choices* (with Dr. Gary Yukl), published by Jossey-Bass; *The Art and Science of 360-Degree Feedback* (2nd ed.; with Toni Lucia), published by Pfeiffer; and *The Art and Science of Competency Models* (with Toni Lucia), published by Pfeiffer.

He is also the author of several book chapters and articles on leadership and organizational effectiveness, including “Performance Management and Decision Making” in *The Handbook of Multisource Feedback*; and “Using 360-Degree Feedback in a Talent Management System” in *The Talent Management Handbook: Creating Organizational Excellence by Identifying, Developing, and Promoting Your Best People*. “Why Integrating the Leading and Managing Roles Is Essential for Organizational Effectiveness” (with Dr. Gary Yukl) appeared in *Organizational Dynamics* and is one of their most frequently downloaded articles.

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Introduction

If your company is like many companies, you may have a vision or mission statement about being number one in your industry...about your exceptional customer-driven service...about being a “one firm” firm. That’s great. Having a shared picture of the kind of company you want to be provides something to strive for. But here’s the real question: How true are these statements? How well are you delivering on your vision’s promise?

In the past, the chasm between what’s proudly proclaimed on your company website and reality might have been seen (and written off) as the standard “mission, vision, and values” statement that all companies feel obligated to produce. Even worse, it might have been joke fodder for customers and employees alike. But these days, it’s just not funny anymore. If you can’t execute in this sluggish economy (or any economy)—and execute well—you won’t thrive. And there’s a very real chance you won’t survive.

We’re living in unforgiving times. As I write these words, we’re officially in “recovery,” but experts warn of the possibility of a double-dip recession. Unemployment is hovering around 10 percent and consumers are clinging tightly to their wallets. Despite a hefty TARP infusion, banks are reluctant to lend. And many businesses are paralyzed by fear—fear of launching new products, entering new markets, buying new equipment, hiring staff, and taking the kinds of risks that can lead to prosperity and (ultimately) economic expansion.

This combination of frozen commercial credit, tight-fisted customers and general economic malaise has serious implications for businesses. They *must* be able to keep their promises to customers and shareholders and meet their goals. Execution has always been important, but when margins (and the margin for error) are paper thin, it's everything.

And that's why I wrote this book.

By the time you read this, economic conditions may have changed. Perhaps they'll have improved greatly or at least moderately. Perhaps they'll have stayed much the same. Or perhaps (and I sincerely hope this isn't the case) they'll be worse. Either way, execution will still matter, and the information in this book will still be relevant. And I think you'll see it's not the kind of information you'll find anywhere else.

As my company's recent study made clear—and as you will discover in the first chapter—the “conventional wisdom” about execution isn't all that wise. Most of us have been taught that if an organization has a clear vision and strategic direction, communicates that vision across the company, engages and motivates employees to achieve the vision, focuses on the customer, and provides quality products and services, success will surely follow. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

In many companies, there is a deep and troubling gap between vision and strategy and actually “getting stuff done.” What's worse, it appears many executives just don't believe their organizations can bridge that execution gap.

Although much attention has been focused on the need for organizations to improve their ability to execute, up until now, few specific, practical, research-based guidelines have been offered at the level of the day-to-day behavior it takes to get things done. Many of the current books on execution treat it as a “process” and focus on policy and procedure and organizational structure and systems. The implication is that you can “program” execution and that if you follow certain steps you will achieve the intended results.

Our research shows that “process” is only part of what it takes. This book is designed to fill that gap. It focuses on execution at the day-to-day operational level and describes what all managers (not just senior leaders) can do to ensure the delivery of consistent results. Unlike many of the books currently available, I will not only describe what needs to be done to enhance execution, but I will provide specific “how to” guidelines, tools, and skills for leaders.

This book is intended for anyone, at any level of the organization, who depends on others to get work done and is responsible for the successful implementation of plans and initiatives. Specifically, three groups will find this book particularly relevant and helpful:

- Leaders who manage a business, function, department, work unit, or team and are responsible for translating strategy into action and delivering results.
- Managers who do not have direct reports but need to coordinate across organizational boundaries to get work done.
- HR professionals who control many of the organizational systems required to support effective execution (hiring and selection, performance management, leadership development, rewards and recognition, and succession planning) and are responsible for ensuring leaders have the skills and knowledge needed to close the execution gap.

In addition, if you are dealing with one or more of the following situations, you will benefit from reading this book:

- You’d like to enhance your knowledge of execution in preparation for taking on a new role or implementing an important plan or initiative.
- You’re preparing to take on additional responsibility as a result of a promotion.

- You'd like to enhance your ability to consistently implement plans and initiatives on time and on budget.
- You have an inconsistent track record in the delivery of business results.

The book is organized into seven chapters. Chapter One, "Vision Without Execution Is Hallucination," is a brief overview of the findings of my study of 409 companies from across industries. The baseline factors required for effective execution are briefly reviewed, and the majority of the chapter is spent on the five factors that differentiate companies that are most effective at executing plans and initiatives. Positive and negative examples of companies are provided for each differentiating factor. The rest of the book covers the specific things leaders can do—the Six Bridge Builders—to close the execution gap and help people get things done day-to-day.

Chapter Two, "Bridge Builder 1: Translate Strategy into Action," focuses on how to ensure a strong link and clear line of sight exists between strategy and vision, strategic projects and programs, and project action plans. Tools for action planning and techniques to help minimize risk and increase the likelihood of success are also provided.

Chapter Three, "Bridge Builder 2: Expect Top Performance," explains how and why your expectations of others and how you interact with them produces the level of performance, high or low, consistent with those expectations. I've included suggestions for how to set higher expectations for direct reports who have not performed well in the past and techniques for translating your higher expectations into high-impact behavior that will enhance your direct report's performance.

Chapter Four, "Bridge Builder 3: Hold People Accountable," reviews the reasons why people don't take accountability and why they feel the need to make excuses. It also explains why we don't consistently hold people accountable and why we should.

The chapter provides easy-to-use tools to help you manage accountability and increase the likelihood that your direct reports and team members will take responsibility for their actions and the impact of those actions.

Chapter Five, “Bridge Builder 4: Involve the Right People in Making the Right Decisions,” describes the psychological and cognitive processes that impact how we process and react to information and that determine the choices we make. The factors that impact our judgment and the quality of our decisions are also explained. I’ve also provided practical techniques for avoiding the pitfalls of a lack of relevant information, poor information processing, impulsive reactions to what appear to be familiar situations, overly emotional responses, and risk aversion.

Chapter Six, “Bridge Builder 5: Facilitate Change Readiness,” explains why it is so hard for us to change our behavior and what you can do to enhance your direct reports’ and team members’ readiness for change. What top-performing companies do to prepare for and implement change are reviewed and the characteristics of the most effective change managers are also discussed. Tools you can use to assess the level of change readiness in others and techniques to move people to the next level are provided.

Chapter Seven, “Bridge Builder 6: Increase Coordination and Collaboration,” explains why we would rather compete than collaborate and what you can do to create a climate in which people are motivated to cooperate and work effectively together. You’ll find specific techniques that will help you increase the likelihood that people will work effectively together, within teams and across organizational boundaries, to achieve department and business unit objectives.

I hope you will find this book helpful as you navigate the ups and downs of our turbulent economy. The good news is that the tips and techniques it contains are research-based, grounded in logic, and easy to follow.

Effective execution is about the consistent application of practical common-sense actions—it's not “glamorous” or “sexy.” It was my goal to write a book filled with practical, nitty-gritty, nose-to-the-grindstone advice you can start using right away. I hope I got it done. And once you've put the content into practice inside your organization, I hope you'll be able to say the same.

Closing the Execution Gap

