



What Reality TV Teaches About Execution

Top Chef, Best New Restaurant, and Project Runway are fascinating studies in what motivates people and of execution versus strategy. Top Chef, its recent spin-off Best New Restaurant, and Project Runway involve weekly contests where experienced professionals compete within the context of different challenges. Maybe the meal in Top Chef has to showcase an ingredient, or style of cooking. In Best New Restaurant, the contestants face three challenges, one involving how well they can handle 30 dinners at the same time, another involving a hidden camera that probes how they treat customers, and the third involving a head-to-head competition between two restaurants. The challenges in project runway involve designing an outfit for a particular type of event, or designing a particular style of outfit. In any case, each contest involves an obvious strategic aspect and an obvious execution aspect, and how the interplay of strategy and execution proceeds is instructive.

A panel of judges critiques each contestant, and their deliberations are explorations each contestant's strategy in how well they met the intent of the challenge, and of their execution in the outcome of the taste and appearance of their meal, or of the fit and finish of their garments. These contests are a real world study of how our clients perceive strategy versus execution, and what you see is that a contestant who achieves superior strategy and execution always wins. A contestant who shows superior strategy and flawed execution always loses, and a contestant who shows superior execution and flawed strategy is usually safe. Superior execution wins in every case, and flawed execution goes home in every contest.

The deliberations of the judges are really enlightening as to how our customers are likely view our strategy versus our execution. The judges always pickup and comment on when someone has really missed the point of that week's challenge, but if that person also showed superior execution, the discussion quickly turns to that. The judges are always impressed by superior execution, and it overcomes the deficient strategy, saving the contestant for that week. The deliberations are equally instructive when a contestant shows superior strategy, but flawed execution. The judges always comment on how well someone met the point of the challenge, but they just cannot get over the poor execution. That person always goes home. Contestants with good strategy and execution beat ones with better strategy but flawed execution every time.



The hidden camera challenge in Best New Restaurant also highlights something else we have written in our papers on how essential it is to have an execution environment. We have suggested that you need to look at the outcome of your business each day as the result of numerous decisions that have been made throughout all levels of the business on that day. When you do this, you recognize how essential an execution environment is. Maybe, for example, someone several rungs down the organizational ladder recognized a looming competitive threat and made it clear to those above them. Maybe someone cared enough to check the market assumptions and challenge their realism. Maybe someone took the initiative to recognize and better serve a key client.

I have been struck in watching Best New Restaurant in how accurate this perspective is. The hidden camera often captures wait staff not picking up on a customer's disappointment, or being unwilling to address a customer's request. For example, a customer asked for a change in an item of the meal and was told by the wait staff that the restaurant was not very receptive to doing that. When the restaurant's leadership saw that tape, they were embarrassed, frustrated, and furious. They recognized that customers would not come back if treated like that. Watch Best New Restaurant and you will see this happen every week. Leadership had failed to create an execution environment.

It really is easy to understand why an execution environment is so essential today, and far more essential than in the past. The competition today is fierce, in any field. Everyone is good today at the basics of what they offer. Organizations that are not good at what they offer don't even get to play today. Listen to clients in any business sector and the things they talk about as distinguishing a superior organization is how easy that business is to work with and how well it anticipates and meets their needs, both of which are all about execution.

Spotlight Business Consulting

Spotlight Business Consulting (SpotlightBC) was formed with a mission to provide businesses with consulting that is informed by a focus on execution. What distinguishes businesses with superior performance is the way they execute and overcome ambiguity and insufficient information and insight. Rather than simply apply our extensive experience, we are unique in offering you a contemporary, information-driven consulting process, every aspect of which is informed by a focus on execution.