



Addressing the Myths About Execution

An article in the March 2015 issue of Harvard Business Review (HBR), *Why Strategy Execution Unravels and What to Do About It* (Donald Sull et al), discusses several myths about execution. Our experience shows how to address these myths.

The first myth, "Execution Equals Alignment," states that there tends to be poor coordination across groups. We have also noted this and address it by starting our consulting with a failure or situation analysis to identify the real underlying causes of a problem. This failure analysis establishes the root cause of the situation in an authoritative way that brings credibility and gets buy-in. Without it, problems defined by experience alone will be viewed as arbitrary.

The second myth, "Execution Means Sticking to the Plan," states that companies are poor at responding to changing market circumstances and to inevitable flaws in the plan itself. Our paper *An Execution Environment* describes the strategy process and the operations and budgeting process as seamless with no handoff. It is naïve to think that all of the market estimates and resource assumptions in a strategic plan are correct, so the operations and budgeting process has to continually test the estimates and assumptions with brutal objectivity so that flaws are recognized and acted upon while options still exist. The second myth discussion also stated that only a small number of managers surveyed believed that their organizations had the resources needed to meet their strategic priorities. Our paper *An Execution Environment* describes how the strategic planning process in an execution environment treats the strategic plan as an action plan, which is a huge change of outlook from the strategic plan being the end result to being a plan that informs the operations and people processes. The strategic plan not only addresses "what," as in typical strategic plans, but also "how," including the resources needed.

The third myth, "Communication Equals Understanding," states that a company's strategy is often poorly understood throughout the organization in spite of what appears to be much communication. Strategic objectives often seem unrelated to one another and disconnected from the overall strategy. Our experience is that this results from the strategic plan being the goal of the strategic planning process, rather than treating the operations and budgeting processes as a seamless extension of the planning. Our paper *How Does the Practice of Science Inform Business Leaders* addresses this issue and discusses the concept of viewing visions, objectives, and



plans as waves that travel throughout the organization, top-to-bottom, bottom-to-top, and side-to-side. This paper discusses the essential role of leaders being engaged and ensuring that their direct reports agree with, buy into, and accept accountability and translate this to their direct reports, so the wave travels throughout the organization. Through challenging direct reports, you confirm that they have bought-in and are poised to propagate the vision, objective, or plan.

The fourth myth, “A Performance Culture Drives Execution,” states that companies having a strong performance culture often have poor execution because of lack of coordination across groups and teams, and that a majority of companies surveyed do not address lack of performance in a timely manner. Our paper titled *An Execution Environment* explains that you need to think of execution in terms of an environment not simply as an act. An execution environment is a mindset that permeates all the processes and the glue that makes them coherent and coordinated. An execution environment is a driver, not an outcome. Lack of performance is a consequence of not selecting, promoting, and assigning people based on their behavior traits relative to those needed to excel in the job as described on our paper *The People Process in an Execution Environment*.

The fifth myth “Execution Should Be Driven from the Top” states that execution emerges from countless decisions and actions at all levels of an organization so execution lies with distributed leaders and is only guided from the top. Our paper *What it Means to Value People in an Execution Environment* calls these people “emotional owners,” and discusses how to recognize, reward, and encourage them. Our paper *What is an Execution Environment?* explains that decisions made at every level of the organization combine to determine the outcomes you achieve, and your processes should be viewed as tools and methods to help ensure that executional excellence is an ingrained and pervasive part of all your processes and activities.

Spotlight Business Consulting

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