

4 DISCIPLINES OF EXECUTION

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In the 1960s, the United States was in a “race to space” with the Soviet Union, and the Soviets were winning. The Russians were the first to space when Sputnik launched into orbit. The United States had invested large sums into the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), but the U.S. was lagging behind its prime international competitor. President Kennedy knew something had to change. He set a new goal for the organization by clearly stating:

“I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.” - JFK

President Kennedy revitalized NASA with this one challenge. NASA abandoned multiple other large and expensive projects and focused on this one. On July 21, 1969, Neil Armstrong’s moon landing accomplished President Kennedy’s audacious goal and the rest is history!

Many of us find ourselves in similar predicaments on a personal level. Our list of things to do is so long and overwhelming that we often get stuck and fail to accomplish anything. The things we do achieve often feel haphazard, and we grow frustrated that we could not complete the rest of the items on our list. Organizations can fall victim to this behavior as well. Many of us find our organizations strategically planning to address a myriad of issues. We commit to accomplishing multiple goals without a deliberate approach on how to prioritize and resource these initiatives adequately. Often, the daily minutia of what we do prevents us from executing larger goals. In their book, **The 4 Disciplines of Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals**, Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim



Figure 1 – The 4 Disciplines

Huling describe this phenomenon as the “Whirlwind.” The whirlwind includes all the daily tasks required to do our jobs that prevent us from focusing on our larger goals. The authors describe four disciplines that can help us overcome the whirlwind and more successfully achieve our larger objectives.

DISCIPLINE #1: FOCUS ON THE WILDLY IMPORTANT GOAL

The book calls this the “WIG.” This is one critical goal. Most leaders struggle with narrowing their priorities to a single

objective, but in order to successfully achieve big goals, everything can’t be the priority. Focusing on one goal (or two at the most) will help the team focus their energy most effectively. The process of choosing the WIG is often beneficial since it allows a team to deliberate together before deciding on the chosen goal. By including as many team members as possible, the team can ensure that a diverse set of ideas are considered. It is imperative that the WIG is both challenging, but also achievable. The authors describe several rules to follow when choosing the WIG.

1. No team focuses on more than two WIGs at a time.
2. The battles chosen must win the war. WIGs lower in the organization must serve to achieve the WIGs at the top of the organization.
3. Senior leadership can’t set the lower-level WIGs but they can veto them. People need to be involved in setting the goals to be engaged in achieving them.
4. All WIGs should be in the form of going from X to Y by a certain date.

DISCIPLINE #2: ACT ON LEAD MEASURES

It is important for teams to measure activities that drive results. The authors highlight two types of measures, lag measures and lead measures. Lag measures describe results such as what you are trying to achieve. Lead measures define the supporting activities or sub-goals which can help get to your final results. Consider companies

that sell their products in a grocery store. The lag measures will be their sales and profits. A lead measure could delineate the percent of the company's product that is shelved at eye level to catch the attention of customers compared to the number of items shelved on less desirable shelves. The book further outlines two types of lead measures: small outcomes and leveraged behaviors.

Small outcomes examine results which the team can assess at quick intervals. For example, one such metric could be the weekly patient access metrics for your clinic. This information provides leadership with real time information that can drive decisions to adjust changes to the strategic approach to improve patient access to care.

Leveraged behaviors, on the other hand, track specific activities. For example, scrubbing your list of patients for the next day and identifying patients that can be cared for with a message or virtual visit, thereby opening access for others to come in person. Just as it is important to limit your WIG to one, it is also important to limit the number of lead measures you choose to track. If the initial lead measures identified aren't effective, you can switch to other lead measure metrics as you iteratively work through the process with your team.

DISCIPLINE #3: KEEP A COMPELLING SCOREBOARD

Your team needs to know where they stand. Annual or even quarterly reviews are not good enough. Human nature propels people to compete and engage more seriously when they know the team is keeping score. As in sports, the scoreboard should be visible, should show lead and lag measures, and immediately illustrate whether the team is "winning" or not. The goal is to create a winnable game that plays out in real time. Winning helps morale. The whirlwind does not provide this type of positive affirmation, so a scoreboard for your WIG can help.

As a medical student, I travelled to the hospital at Fort Campbell for an obstetrics rotation. During a visit to the local Family Medicine Clinic, I saw a bulletin board which listed the specific metrics being tracked within that clinic delineated down to the specific providers. At first, I was concerned that the providers would be upset having their names listed alongside their individual metrics in such a public place. But, after talking with a few of the staff in that clinic, I realized that the entire team recognized their role in achieving their clinic's strategic goals and that the information on the bulletin board helped them recognize their progress in real time. The hospital commander at that time had accurately recognized that physicians are motivated and hard working by nature. The scoreboard within the clinic provided a compelling visual aid to help keep motivation levels high among the team.

DISCIPLINE #4: CREATE A CADENCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Discipline four outlines how to execute initiatives to accomplish the WIG. The authors suggest that each team responsible for a

WIG meets weekly at a minimum. These weekly meetings are designed to hold members personally accountable, make tweaks to the team's short-term goals, address problems, adjust strategy, and commit to actions for the next week. The authors highlight two hard and fast rules. First, the meeting is at the same time and place each week and is the priority for that organization. Second, all activities related to the routine "whirlwind" must stay out of the meeting at all cost. The authors go on to describe some useful approaches to running this weekly accountability meeting. The meetings should be short (no more than 30 minutes) and have the same items on the agenda each time. These agenda items include:

1. Account: Individuals report on their commitments from the previous week.
2. Review the Scoreboard: Doing so allows you to learn and problem solve.
3. Plan: Make new commitments for the next week.

The key to success is that each commitment must be specific and deliverable. Commitments to "try to get to" or "to work on" goals are not satisfactory. Each commitment must actively move a lead measure. Attendance and consistency in these weekly meetings are the foundation to successfully accomplishing your most important goals.

WHY SHOULD WE TRUST THIS PROCESS?

In the book, the authors point out that this approach is not simply an academic exercise. They relate that the framework was developed over many years and is based on the direct knowledge gleaned from over 1500 consulting engagements. The four disciplines are deceptively simple, but can drive successful organizational advancement with hard work and commitment.

COMMON PITFALLS:

The authors describe some common obstacles that teams encounter during this process and lay out ways to avoid them:

1. Don't mistake the whirlwind tasks for WIG commitments.
2. Make sure each session has a clear commitment that changes each week.
3. When someone fails to meet their commitment, treat them with dignity and respect, reinforce accountability, don't accept unfulfilled commitments, and encourage performance.

This book gives some very basic ideas on how to accomplish important goals within an organization more efficiently. The rules are hard and, at some point, your team will want to bend them, even just a little. But, by remaining consistently focused on identifying a single important goal, garnering team input and buy-in, and by faithfully committing to regular meetings to review progress and adjust approaches, your organization can also achieve success in its most critical areas.