

## **EXECUTION: The Discipline of Getting Things Done**

by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan

*EXECUTION: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* is a book that inspires action. Its ideas are relevant for anyone who wants to succeed in an organizational environment – whether it is educational, nonprofit, or corporate. By focusing on execution and framing it as a discipline, the authors show how to tackle the source of so many organizational problems that often go unnoticed and unattended.

One of the notable aspects of this book is its widespread utility for all organizational levels – Bossidy and Charan offer advice and guidance that can be used effectively by anyone in any circumstances that require things to get done – timely and well. Leading for execution does not simply involve following a set of directives – on the contrary, it is a way of doing things that calls for a leader to be “deeply and passionately engaged in your organization and honest about its realities with others and yourself.” It is a way of leading that is assertive in getting others to bridge the gap between understanding what should be done and actually following through with the tasks. It is a straightforward idea that nonetheless gets overlooked too often.

To illustrate their points, the authors tell stories of Richard McGinn, a former CEO of Lucent Technologies, Richard Thoman from Xerox, and Michael Armstrong from AT&T – leaders with strong character, intelligence, and vision, who nonetheless were unable to achieve success for their respective organizations. Bossidy and Charan highlight the importance of analytical thinking in transforming conceptual ideas into measurable outcomes, yet they also refer to the process as a significant “emotional challenge.” This idea relates to a larger concept of emotional intelligence and its integral role in effective leadership. Dr. Cary Cherniss from the Graduate School of Professional and Applied Psychology at Rutgers University talked about the attributes of an emotionally intelligent leader during the October 2005 National Student Leadership Conference held at the University. He pointed out that people’s cognitive abilities account for only four to 25 percent of variation in performance – the rest is contributed by other qualities. *Execution* is a book that spells out some of those qualities.

The format and style of the book are reflective of its purpose – getting readers to understand why execution is essential, providing examples of how to create the discipline of execution, and showing how to put the principles discussed into practice. This what-why-and-how-to guide consists of three parts: in Part I, the authors explain the value of execution, which is based on three building-blocks discussed in Part II (the leader’s behaviors, a framework for cultural change, and having the right people in the right jobs). The authors see these building blocks as critical to implementing the three core processes of execution – the people process, the strategy process, and the operations process – outlined in Part III. The essence of each part is briefly outlined below.

In **Part I**, *Why Execution Is Needed*, the authors refer to execution as “a systematic process of rigorously discussing how’s and what’s, questioning, tenaciously following through, and ensuring accountability.” In explaining the need for the leader’s direct engagement with the people and processes in organization, Bossidy and Charan attack a common notion that “the top dog is exempt from the details of actually running things;” they believe that that way of thinking is wrong and “creates immense damage.” To illustrate the point, there is an example of Dick Brown, who took over EDS when it had a culture of little accountability and pervasive indecisiveness. To tackle these issues, he personally went around the world to talk to the organization’s employees, listened to their complaints and suggestions. He then created messages in response that clarified the company’s objectives, issues, and a new leadership style – one of clearly defined decision-making and accountability.

**Part II** of the book talks about seven essential leader behaviors:

1. Know your people and your business
2. Insist on realism
3. Set clear goals and priorities
4. Follow through
5. Reward the doers
6. Expand people’s capabilities
7. Know yourself

The theme of this section is *connectedness* and *immediacy* – a leader needs to be consistently present in the organization, “show up with an open mind and positive demeanor,” and form personal connections with the people. The authors emphasize the seventh behavior, knowing oneself, by telling how “emotional fortitude [that] comes from self-discovery and self-mastery” is necessary for understanding and leading other people. This emotional fortitude would also help one facilitate cultural change and make sure that the right people are doing the jobs that they can accomplish and flourish in best.

In the *Three Core Processes of Execution*, **Part III** of the book, the authors show how the ideas already discussed all fit into making an organization achieve its objectives. Among the three processes, the people process is most important. After all, the people are the ones making the other two happen. The strategy process, in turn, makes the link between people and operations. The authors zero in on what matters in a strategy process review by saying that in evaluating an idea, the leader must assess its feasibility – how realistically it fits into the environment where it will be implemented. The third core process of execution – operations – connects strategy and people. “The strategy process defines where a business wants to go, and the people process defines who’s going to get it there. The operating plan provides the path for those people. ... It puts reality behind numbers.”

A good way to appreciate the value of an operations process is to consider its outcomes:

1. It identifies goals that can be realistically achieved.
2. It encourages substantive learning.
3. It creates opportunities for coaching sessions.
4. It builds confidence and engenders success.

*Execution* offers more than a quick fix to these issues – it inspires a new way of thinking. As Bossidy and Charan point out, 80 percent of learning occurs “outside of the classroom” – and every leader needs to be a teacher, giving the employees the tools they need. In their book, the authors practice what they preach – they give you the tools you need to create the discipline of execution. The next step is all about doing it.