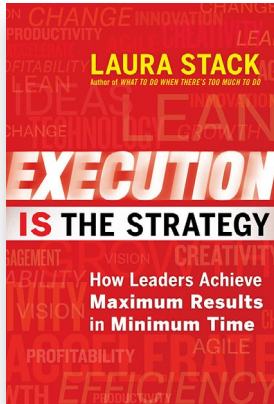


# EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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# Execution IS the Strategy

## THE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

Here's the reality: You are General Custer, and five thousand Indian ponies are bearing down on you from all directions. Your troops don't know what to do. Dust fills their eyes—and yours. If you want to avoid a massacre, don't put down this book. In it, you'll learn how to arm your troops more effectively and execute strategy on the front lines because you can't fire their guns for them.

Today's leaders lean on their team members—the troops on the front lines—to help them make solid, reliable decisions on how to best execute the objectives that advance the ultimate organizational strategy. Hence the title of this book: *Execution IS the Strategy*. This strategy builds on four basic premises.

### 1. Interdependency

Strategy and tactics are part of the same over-arching process, with an inherent relationship. A *goal* (a *strategic objective*, a *strategic priority*) is something you want to accomplish within a specific time frame. *Strategy* is your long-term plan or alternative method of accomplishing that goal. *Tactics* are the short-term actions required to fulfill a selected strategy. *Execution* is the process of moving from the statement of a goal to the completion of a tactic. Efficient execution is the shortest distance between a goal and a check mark. Effective execution is the most profitable outcome of the distance

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between a goal and a check mark. Efficiency and effectiveness aren't always the same thing. In this book, you'll note my bias toward efficiency, and in most cases I'll assume you have an effective strategy. I am not a strategist; I am an efficiency expert.

## **2. Fluidity**

Strategy must be more flexible in its tactics now than in the past. As a leader, it's important to articulate the organization's strategy clearly so you must be specific in your definition of what constitutes "success." That said, the strategy itself must be extremely fluid in its tactics so that the frontline workers are encouraged to determine how best to achieve it. You'll realize better results if you create an agile culture full of flexible, strategic thinkers who remain focused on the overall goals and roles they play in achieving them. They must be willing to both entertain and implement new tactics for doing so, even with minimal warning.

In today's business world, leaders usher in change by fostering risk-taking and creativity. Leaders set the priorities and workers tell them how to get there. Leaders will re-engage in the process of execution only if they see something going in the wrong direction. As a leader, it's up to you to design a culture in which your people are willing to step up and take that initiative. Your team needs the tools, training, and guidance to be free to determine how to best achieve well-defined success criteria.

## **3. Speed**

Strategy must be executed more quickly than ever before to be effective. Achieving maximum results requires faster goal-setting and organic strategic execution. Your commitment to fostering agile, adaptive execution will make it easier to reshape organizational priorities in the moment. Here's what leaders must tell their team members: "When you think of a great idea or come face to face with a new opportunity, don't wait three weeks to tell me about it in our next meeting. Get on the phone with me now." Empower your team to act quickly! Never be too busy to hear about an idea or an improvement.

## **4. Validity**

Strategy must still be appropriate and strong, or none of the first three premises matters. The best leaders have a vision for the future, which arrives daily. To quickly implement great ideas, you must do two things well. (1) Identify the strategic priorities that will drive the business forward, and (2) Take action on them quickly by leveraging your people and resources. A huge caveat: You still must have a viable strategy, one that can actually achieve quantifiable goals within your constraints of time and cost. You also need to keep an eye on how well it's working, so you can refine your course as needed. The bottom line is simple: there is no shortage of good ideas. It's not about who has the best ideas. It's about who executes their good ideas best.

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After more than twenty years of helping leaders create high-performance cultures and accelerate growth, I've identified four crucial factors that must be in place for a leader to execute strategy, efficiently forming the **L-E-A-D** Formula outlined in this book. The four keys to efficient strategic execution—*Leverage, Environment, Alignment, and Drive*—represent the real-work implementation of interdependency, fluidity, speed, and strategy as they relate to on-the-spot, flexible strategic execution.

**Leverage** explores how to employ the concept of leverage to apply a stronger force as a leader, strengthen your “levers” (employees), and improve your “fulcrum.” Do you have the right people and drivers in place to achieve your strategic priorities and allow you to execute your strategy when the rubber hits the road? If not, you have a talent/resource issue.

**Environment** explores the importance of shaping an agile, responsive organizational culture, encouraging change hardiness in your team members, and engaging employees. Do you have the organizational atmosphere, practices, and culture that will allow your employees to easily support your strategic priorities? If not, you have a cultural/engagement issue.

**Alignment** shows you how to convince team members to care about your goals, define what those goals will be, and determine how to get there. Do your team members' daily activities move them toward the accomplishment of the organization's ultimate goals? If not, you have a communication/productivity issue.

**Drive** focuses on your team's path to productivity. It includes how to remove obstacles from their paths, speed things up, and remove time wasters. Are your organization's leaders, teams, and employees agile enough to move quickly once the first three pieces of this list are in place? If not, you have a speed/agility issue.

Keep in mind that leaders should work with their people to build effective business strategies in real time. You may not have time for strategic planning as such, but you should always make time to build an organizational culture that's adept at strategic execution because execution really *is* the strategy that will propel your organization forward in today's fast-paced business arena.

## KEY 1: LEVERAGE

*Leadership Role:* Engineer (Build It).

In the strictest mechanical sense, a lever is a simple machine with a rigid beam that pivots on a fulcrum or fixed hinge to magnify an input force, so the resulting leverage or output force can move heavy objects.

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The concept of leverage fits equally well in the workplace where applying it can facilitate smooth, on-the-spot strategic execution. You can leverage physical and financial assets, experience, skill sets, specialized knowledge, and relationships to get the right people in the right roles. This means using the right tools to squeeze every bit of productive work from your team. It's also the epitome of learning to do more with less—a powerful principle in today's resource-poor workplaces.

An efficient organization is one that operates with leverage already in place:

- The Effort/Input Force = the leader (you).
- The Lever/Beam = the worker (employee or team)
- The Fulcrum/Pivot = the enabler (tool or resource)
- The Load/Object = your organization (what you're trying to move with your strategy).

The interaction of these components is said to create leverage. Depending on the strength of your strategy, the leverage created (the output force) can move the object (your organization). If the interaction of this simple machine with its component parts creates enough leverage, your organization will move where you want it to go.

You'll find it well worth the effort to develop or acquire the authority to leverage your resources and assets at will. Why? Having the ability to apply the right amount of force at just the right time allows you to take advantage of fast-moving opportunities that may knock only once.

## 1. Maximize Your Input Force

Modern leaders can't afford to be autocrats, because by the time they decide on a strategy, it's usually out of date. No single individual can keep up with everything in real time. Instead of trying to, the intelligent leader delegates his or her authority as effectively and widely as possible, encouraging both risk-taking and creativity. That allows the team to transform the organization from within.

Think of it this way: as a leader, you work for your team members. You articulate and guide the team's mission and vision. The modern leader exists less to tell people what to do than to urge them to do what they already know they should. Rather than controlling every worker's daily activities, you serve as a nucleus for your team members to rally around. You're a catalyst triggering ideas and action, allowing people to succeed without getting in their way.

As the leader, you shape the overall vision for your team, communicate and agree on tactics, and let your team take it from there. Don't adopt a purely hands-off approach, but don't micromanage

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either; that's a recipe for catastrophe. Your people need the freedom to do their jobs as they see fit. Trust them to tell you what they need to do to achieve your vision. That's where true leadership lies—not in straitjacketing your people with inflexible rules and hidebound strategies.

## 2. Strengthen the Beam

To move more weight with a lever, you either have to apply more input force, improve or reposition the fulcrum to magnify the output, or strengthen the beam so it can handle more strain. To strengthen the beam of your organizational lever, you need the right people in place, armed with the right skills needed to execute in the moment.

As equal as people may be in the eyes of the law, it would be a mistake to assume or assert that all people are the same. Certain abilities come more easily for some people than for others. We simply can't doubt the existence of the elusive quality called talent. Recently, the *New York Times* reported that, all else being equal, the "profoundly gifted" tend to do better in life than their less-talented colleagues. That makes sense, but so do the studies suggesting that, in the long run, hard work and practice can overcome a lack of natural talent—and can often take people farther and higher than talent alone.

It can't be denied that talent does provide an edge, but more than talent is required to maximize success. True high performers exhibit a fearless, ambitious, action-oriented and—above all else—results-oriented approach that no one can easily fake.

## 3. Improve the Fulcrum

A fulcrum is the hinge or pivot a beam acts against to multiply the input force. Equipping your team members with the right tools, such as computers, software, and the internet, can strengthen their leveragability. A business fulcrum may also consist of anything from specific productivity approaches to professional relationships.

While delegation is a prerequisite for productivity at the leadership level, certain activities aren't worth your team's time. For instance, when the copy machine breaks down, your highly paid Linux coder shouldn't be attempting to fix it. Hire someone else to do it! Many companies outsource information technology, customer service, and accounting. You can outsource almost anything and you should, because outsourcing simply makes sense because it allows you to concentrate on your core business.

Provide your team members with the tools they need to succeed. Think beyond your desk to a team-first functionality. Develop new partnerships, seek alliances, take advantage of outsourcing, and maximize your vendor relationships. Finally, be careful about what you cut. Short term cuts that seem

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viable now could be disastrous in the long term. Rather than resort to any drastic measures, find ways to increase your team's productivity. Even though it took me a year and a half to earn my MBA, I can summarize the issue for you in one sentence. To succeed, a business must make as much money as it can and save as much money as possible.

## **KEY 2: ENVIRONMENT**

*Leadership Role: Mechanic (Fix It).*

Effective execution depends on establishing a productive, supportive work environment. In turn, a successful work environment depends on workplace culture. A company's culture guides discretionary behavior. It's defined by what happens when the CEO leaves the room.

Ideally, you should encourage an organizational environment in which employees strive to "own" their jobs in the best sense of the word. They take initiative to align themselves with overriding strategic goals, pitch in enthusiastically, collaborate gracefully, and innovate without permission or fear of reprisal.

- Are you creating a culture that helps employees feel confident, capable, and in control of the outcome of their work?
- Are you building an atmosphere that encourages and accepts change?
- Are you engaging and empowering people to do their work, without excessive oversight?

These critical environmental factors ensure commitment to the company core mission and vision, which results in greater productivity over the long term. So get ready to fix anything preventing your team from achieving your goals.

## **4. Shape the Culture**

Workplace culture largely depends on the unwritten ground rules and the attitudes of the members of that culture. Ideally, the underlying mood is positive, responsive, and energetic. Despite what celebrity pundits might claim, you can't just say you want your culture to be agile, accountable, and top-quality, and then expect it to happen. What matters most is the synergistic combination of attitude and action in the workplace.

One of the strongest drivers for employee engagement is an employee's relationship with his or her manager. On a day-to-day basis, you want to motivate your team in positive ways by walking the talk,

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leading by example, and making your personal integrity obvious and clear. Let team members know what you need them to do and when they've done it right (as well as when they haven't).

Culture is not a goal to be mandated; it's the outcome of a collective set of behaviors and unwritten ground rules you've inadvertently created or enabled over the years. Dedicate yourself to developing and rewarding desired behaviors, and let those rules guide your team as they meet change head on. Their weapon becomes instant execution, because they know exactly what to do.

## 5. Encourage Change Hardiness

You have to come to grips with the inevitability of change. Nothing lasts forever. To survive in business, you and your team must identify, understand, and respond to ever-accelerating change. Like it or not, change will always happen. Given enough time, all things transform, wear down, fall apart, or burn out.

Denying and resisting change only causes pain. Adaptation to change represents an essential life skill which is the key to living without fear as you move forward to achieve your goals. It allows you and your team to respond creatively to the evolving environment. It also helps you maintain control rather than simply letting change happen.

Knowing when to institute change requires a shrewd mind and keen insight. At the end of the day, it boils down to the basic desire to always get better. Conservatism has its place, but business requires calculated risk. You and your team must be willing to try the new and different to improve your results and skyrocket your productivity. In fact, to stay in the lead, you'll have to continuously improve.

## 6. Ensure Engaged, Empowered Employees

Increasing your ratio of engaged employees can be hard work. The task requires not only strength but flexibility and empathy. Yes, this can take a lot of work on your part, but if you end up with competent employees who make you and your organization shine, it'll be worth every bit of effort. Ultimately, employees work hard because they choose to. Anyone with more than a few months of experience in a position knows where the line marking "good enough" lies. If your people lack any reason to do otherwise, most will park themselves just this side of sufficient. They may not be lazy, but until you give them an incentive, why should they work any harder than they have to?

Therefore, one aspect of your job is to encourage your people to spend their discretionary effort on the team. That can take a wide variety of forms, from empowerment and engagement efforts to monetary rewards, time off, praise, and your personal involvement. Make consistent efforts to

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influence team members in positive ways, varying your efforts to see what works best. If you can persuade them to give you more of their discretionary effort, productivity will skyrocket—and you'll be walking on sunshine.

## KEY 3: ALIGNMENT

*Leadership Role: Conductor (Steer It).*

Like a conductor of a symphony, today's leader is out front watching what's going on, keeping everyone on the right track, steering team members toward the organization's strategic priorities, and listening to their best ideas on how to get there. Ironically, the only way to accomplish more is to do less. That is, to cut back on less productive and less profitable activities in favor of what matters most and achieves a greater result. As a leader, you have to take a hand in helping your team members harness their overachiever tendencies in a positive way, so you can maximize productivity and maintain it at a reasonable level.

Alignment means your strategic priorities and the day-to-day operations of your team are synchronized. Their tactics are carrying out your strategies. Begin helping your people internalize the rules of alignment based on thoroughly knowing the goals themselves. It's the day-to-day action that moves the needle, so make sure what the team is doing right now will get you to where you need to be.

Specifically, your team members need to know:

- *Why they should care.* Why is the mission important and compelling to them?
- *What the goal is.* What are they expected to achieve, so they know when they've arrived?
- *How we get there.* Who's responsible for what? What's the timeline for completion? How will you measure milestones and otherwise keep track of progress? What will other team members do to help? What rewards (intrinsic or extrinsic) will they receive? How will you hold them accountable for the desired results?

## 7. Take Your Team on a Mission

Besides collecting a paycheck, what is an employee's motivation for achieving a particular strategic goal? Why should they care? Why not make achieving your organization's goals a mission? Your ability to clearly articulate your strategic priorities depends on understanding why you're here and what you're trying to accomplish. As a leader, communicating your mission involves conveying why you care and why others should also care. So invite your employees to go on a mission with you. Help



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them understand why your organization's priorities are important, whether at the team, department, division, or company level.

Show them why what they do matters. Emphasize how their efforts fit within the overall scheme designed to move the organization forward, however incrementally. Spell out why their success and productivity matter to you and the company and explain the consequences for going off the rails.

At the same time, let them know they will have more freedom to achieve than ever before. This is where the whole "Execution IS the Strategy" concept comes into its own. It allows you and your team to grab the ball on the bounce and immediately drive toward the end zone, without getting tangled up in the web of a long-term plan that's outdated the instant it's published.

## 8. Plan for Goal Achievement

People mistrust or distrust the ambiguous so be crystal clear about what your team members should be accomplishing in their daily activities. When you've communicated your expectations well, you're more likely to get what you want, and everyone is more productive and effective.

Good strategic alignment consists of practices that connect organizational strategy with employee performance as fully and directly as possible. When you properly align your organizational structure, then your employees act as strategic enablers of the company policy, mission, and vision, all working from the same standards toward the same ends. This can only happen when upper management willingly shares its goals with everyone *and* sets up procedures to make sure people stay on track.

What does a strategic plan look like? It doesn't have to be complex, as long as you make all the basics clear: mission, vision, goals, and the pathways you plan to use to get there. It can be as simple as a single-page document. Needless to say, one size does not fit all. Remember, nothing is set in stone. Once you establish a plan, you'll have to be ready to continually make adjustments to mirror the changes in strategy necessitated by real-world (r)evolutions in your industry.

## 9. Measure Your Progress

How do we measure a company's success? What I call the "Check Six Measures" aren't the only way to determine whether you and your employees have succeeded in executing your organizational strategy, but they do offer a good place to start:

*Cash flow.*

For those who view business as a game, money is one means of keeping score.

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## *Budget and schedule.*

How efficiently do your employees do their jobs? Are they on or under budget and do they complete projects on time?

## *Quality of work.*

Who cares if you're ahead of schedule and under budget if the quality of your output stinks?

## *Hours worked per process.*

Balance is important. Would you trust your life to a pilot expected to fly twelve hours straight for ten days in a row?

## *Customer satisfaction.*

Your superiors will let you know if you fail to meet their expectations; if necessary, the general public can be surveyed.

## *Return on investment.*

How healthy is your ROI? Never grab for the brass ring when there's a gold ring farther along the path.

Everyone has a different idea about how to best execute a task, which means that any given team member would probably run a play differently than you would. That's okay, as long as the team reaches the end zone. How the players move the ball down the field isn't nearly as important as scoring. You basically need to tell them, "Here's where we're going, I trust you; you're competent. How will you get us there?"

## **KEY 4: DRIVE**

### *Leadership Role: Bulldozer (Knock It Down)*

As a leader, your greatest importance may lie in clearing the way forward for your team members. This typically involves smoothing out the speed bumps and removing any obstacles that block task execution, particularly the procedural ones. Think of yourself as a bulldozer, or, better yet, as a lineman on a football team protecting the ball carrier as he advances.

In a workplace context, you might guard your people from bureaucratic red tape by taking it on

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yourself, while making sure they have sufficient resources and facilities to get their work done. Your team must drive, push, move, and speed toward the goal with a sense of urgency. You're there to help them maintain the momentum.

How can you eliminate whatever flies in the face of momentum and your team's forward drive? How much faster would your team be if they:

- Learned how to handle email more efficiently?
- Found more time to think strategically?
- Weren't distracted by technology?
- Didn't spend so much time in meetings?
- Stopped being interrupted so frequently?
- Prioritized tasks better and stopped being reactive?

You be the judge—and the bulldozer.

## 10. Remove Obstacles from the Path

Efficiency, as it relates to people in the workplace, is achieving maximum results in minimum time. Time is the most costly component of human capital.

One way to make everyone speed up is for you, the leader, to discover and eliminate any obstacles that prevent team members from moving quickly. As an experienced professional, you already have the proper mindset in place. Tinkering with the system, replacing old parts, and occasionally performing an overhaul to the workflow should be second nature by now.

However, one big time waster you must work to trim is slow decision making. The ability to consistently make speedy decisions lies at the heart of any productivity initiative, especially if it affects an entire team or organization. Some experts argue that all decisions deserve careful consideration and consensus building before they're implemented. I disagree. Granted, critical decisions with high stakes should take more time, but for average day-to-day issues, it's best to make relatively quick decisions.

All teams include someone who makes things easier for others to do their jobs. On a football team, blockers protect the quarterback and ball carriers. In the white-collar world, the team leader removes

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the obstacles, from crushing groupthink, to speeding up decision making, to being a REALIST rather than a perfectionist. As leader, one of your primary titles today should be “Facilitator.”

## 11. Add Enablers to the Equation

If you want your team members to maximize their productivity and ability to execute in the moment, make the process easier by facilitating their technology and methodologies. You can take advantage of simple approaches like the *THINK* method as well as modern technology, such as instant messaging and teleconferencing. Just be sure to strike the proper balance by weighing the pros and cons of any new methodology, and being vigilant in its application.

Do your best to trim away anything that doesn’t contribute to your execution, being careful about what you add to your team’s plate. Look for long-term advantages, not short-term profits, and realize you’ll have to remove something for everything you add or you risk stress and overwork.

Finally, when communicating in the workplace, keep your phrasing and delivery as clear as possible to maximize productivity. Be assertive and straightforward; never hem and haw. Use simple language, avoiding jargon when you can. Immediately acknowledge any communications you receive, and get acknowledgment back from those you communicate with. Time is money, so waste as little of it as you can.

## 12. Eliminate Time Wasters

Every day you finish a task, check it off your list, and feel a sense of accomplishment. Great, now what? It’s important to decide quickly what to do next. Decide what to do next by order of priority. Clearly, you can’t measure productivity by the number of items scratched off a list, because if you do, you may never get to the high-value activities at the bottom.

Adopt the battlefield concept of triage for task management. Basically, this means to be willing to drop the lowest-priority items (the “nice to do” tasks) in favor of the top-priority “have to do” tasks. For example, perhaps you must do twenty-one things as part of your job, and five are critical to the operation. You’d focus first on those top five and then work on the remaining sixteen items if you have time. If time runs short, those tasks roll to tomorrow. This is much more preferable than completing the sixteen minor tasks and leaving the top five undone. To get things done, discipline yourself to triage tasks as they arrive because no one else will do it for you.

## Conclusion

It doesn’t matter how good a leader you are if you can’t execute your strategy right now, in the moment, in a way that fits conditions as they currently exist—not as they existed five minutes ago, or five months ago or five years ago. That kind of time lag might have been acceptable once, but today,

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the only logical strategy is the one that facilitates implementing your task, product, service, or offer in the smoothest, fastest, most cost-efficient way possible.

Execution *is* the strategy that will allow you to remain relevant, innovative, and competitive in the global marketplace of modern business. As a leader, your goal should be to produce results in the form that pleases your stakeholders and end users, while being consistently achievable by your employees. Admittedly, bringing those two requirements into equilibrium can be challenging. Not to put too fine a point on it, *but only results matter in the end*. As a leader, it's your duty and privilege to implement and execute strategies that produce maximum results on every level of the business ladder. If we can't profitably produce, no amount of good intentions will help us. If you find yourself choking on your competitor's dust, you can't achieve anything worthwhile unless you change your behavior, both as an individual and as an organization.

We live in an era when last month's smart phone can't run this month's apps. Clearly, the old-fashioned three-to-five year strategic plans don't work anymore. Today's business world is too unpredictable to straitjacket your front-liners with last year's strategies. However, leaders still play a crucial role in strategy, because someone must communicate the goals and priorities to the workers.

The military realized this long ago. The officers don't do the physical work or even decide how to do it; their job is to tell the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to get it done. The NCOs pass the work down the line; whoever the buck stops with has to figure out how to best accomplish the task. The idea is just to do it and not to worry about planning. Despite common misperceptions, the military has never wanted brainless killers who automatically and thoughtlessly execute orders. They want well-trained people who can think on their feet and figure out the best way to accomplish a goal.

The same goes for business, especially as we manufacture strategy yearly, monthly, weekly and even daily on the front lines. Workers must be empowered to take ownership of their jobs, engage without fear of censure, and act on what they know best without waiting for permission from the chain of command. Accept the fact that, despite your leadership role, they're the ones at the sharp end of the stick.

Never blame your people for failure of strategic execution. If you haven't clarified your objectives, how can they know what they need to do in order to achieve maximum results? Don't lose sight of what truly matters in the day-to-day battles. Step in to show them point by point what they must accomplish and why it matters and then take steps to reduce the whirlwind of daily work so they have time to execute the bigger goals. Make them accountable for their results, employing accurate means of measuring performance. Offer the right rewards and, most of all, allow them to adopt flexible operational plans to fit the current reality. Do all of this, and they'll achieve wonders for you. Execution truly is the strategy that will propel your organization to success.