

Execution Excellence: *Missing-in-Action*

by Mike Richardson

We hear a lot about “execution” these days, which is encouraging. But strategy and execution are only as good as the traction they create and sustain, on a higher road of a breakthrough journey. Why are we so often disappointed with our investments of time and money in these areas and feel like we are on a lower road than we otherwise could be on?

Because the concept of execution is poorly understood. In their 2002 book, “Execution – The Discipline of Getting Things Done”, Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan put it well, saying:

“For all the talk about execution, hardly anybody knows what it is. They don’t have the foggiest idea of what it means to execute. Most often today, the difference between a company and its competitor is its ability to execute. Execution is the great unaddressed issue in the business world today. Its absence is the single biggest obstacle to success and the cause of most disappointments that are mistakenly attributed to other causes. Execution isn’t just tactics – it is a discipline and a system. Execution **hasn’t yet been recognized or taught as a discipline**, whereas other disciplines have no shortage of **accumulated knowledge, tools and techniques**. The leader who executes assembles an **architecture of execution”**.

In my experience, execution excellence is often “missing in action” in our businesses - we are so mired in action that a unifying architecture of execution excellence is missing. It feels good to be busy, but we can so easily be “busy fools” if execution (and in many cases, possibly strategy too) are missing in the “busyness” of that action. Are we doing “busyness” or “business”? Even in cases where we are doing good work on strategic planning and implementation, we are often overtaken by the dynamic complexity of our journey as a business on a shifting landscape, and execution excellence is still missing in action. We don’t have the organizational agility to keep up and, rather than the desired traction we were seeking, we have some degree of wheel-spin. Often a large degree of wheel-spin.

The key is in **translating strategy and execution into traction**, through a unifying “architecture of execution” for organizational agility. It’s about making sure that Execution Excellence isn’t missing in action or getting lost in translation.

Sherpa Alliance is dedicated to helping profit and growth responsible executives architect breakthrough journeys, by creating traction on a higher road of breakthrough leadership beliefs, behaviors and results. There are three higher order strengths of breakthrough leadership, requiring a journey oriented understanding of the anatomy of the challenge at three levels simultaneously:

[Execution Excellence](#)understanding the anatomy of the **Vehicle**
+
[Executive Intelligence, Intuition & Resilience](#) understanding the anatomy of the **Journey**
+
[Path-Finding](#)understanding the anatomy of the **Road**

= [Organizational Agility](#) Architecting Breakthrough Journeys
the ability to deal with rapidly changing circumstances, while out-executing our competition and stake-holder expectations (of customers, employees, suppliers and shareholders).

Drawing upon real-world experiences, interpreting leading edge research and developing a concept-suite, model-set and tool-box, **In the Driving Seat® is a unifying architecture of execution for organizational agility. We are leading the way in recognizing and teaching this as a discipline and a system, of accumulating knowledge, tools and techniques.** It is a timely, timeless and open architecture of best practices, reflecting the integrated anatomy and DNA of the real-world execution challenge faced by CEOs, Executives and their teams.

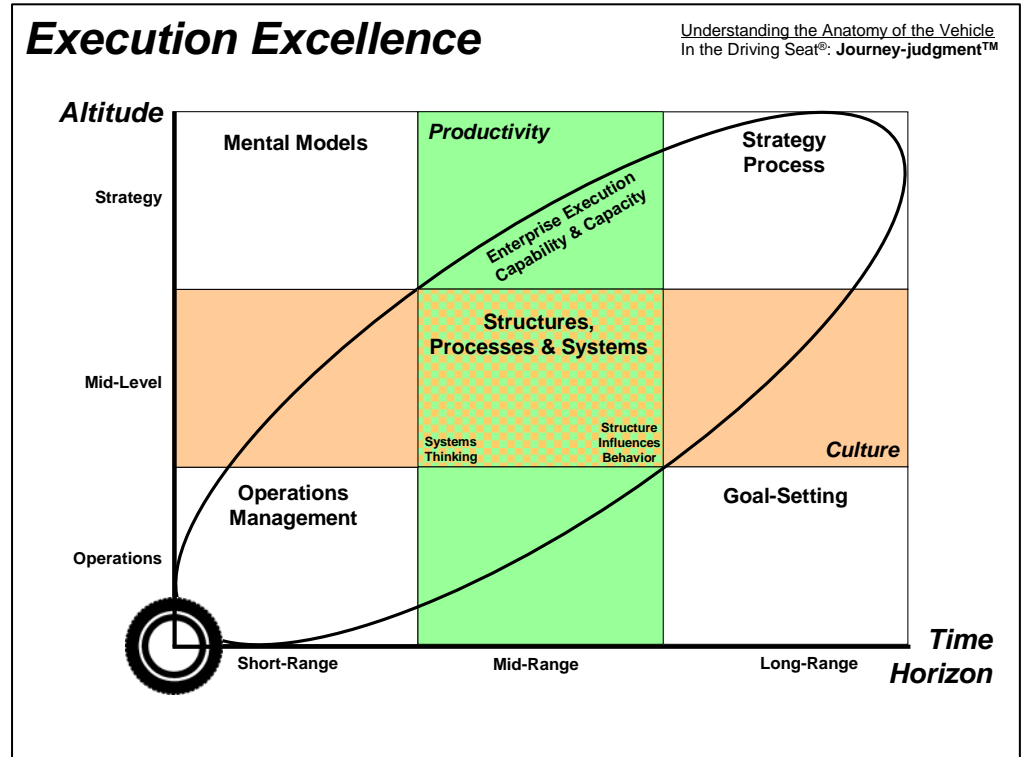
The higher order strength of Execution Excellence requires an understanding the anatomy of the business and leadership vehicle which is fit for our journey challenge, embodied in the In the Driving Seat®: Journey-judgment™ model.

Imagine yourself in the driving seat of your business, looking down the road, and let's take a longitudinal cross section through your brain. You need your whole brain to be engaged, with both sides contributing to the conversation inside that frame - the linear, analytical and convergent left-side of the brain and the non-linear, creative and divergent right-side of the brain. We need both actively engaged to be making good judgments inside of two dimensions: the altitude of things (from operational to strategic) and the longitude of things in terms of time-horizon (from short-range to long-range). These dimensions are common to all businesses, expanding and contracting depending upon the type of business we are in, the nature of our industry and the phase of our journey. Inside of this frame of reference, Execution Excellence is made up of the following moving parts:

Strategy Process. Notice that I don't use the term, "strategic planning." Fundamentally, if your experience is anything like mine, I believe those words conjure up all the wrong memories of long-winded word-smithing exercises, fat planning books and poor follow-through. Instead, imagine a more dynamic and ongoing process of strategy, in which you are progressively designing the future you want to have.

Operations Management. My experience in many businesses is that "operations management" is still quite a foreign concept, often mistakenly translated as "crisis management." Excellent operations management prevents the need for crisis management.

Goal-Setting. Setting goals taps into the power of intention, translating high level strategy into goals at ground level, grounded in specificity, achievability and track-ability.



Culture. Culture is a small word for a big thing. It conveys "how we do things around here" and the norms of behaviors which we want to observe and those which we don't. How many of us pay more lip service than we should to really working on culture, norms and behaviors, and the underlying building blocks of core values? When I first became a CEO, I wish I had known then what I know now about how to leverage the pivotal role of core values in a business. Culture un-bundles into two components - our "short-range culture" and our "long-range culture":

Short-range culture.

How well does your culture deal with the short-range pressures of operations management, crises and continuous improvement? Is your culture prone to "short-termism" and perennial problems, without the attention to detail to implement lessons learned and continuous improvements that would ease things in the mid-term?

Long-range culture.

How well does your culture deal with long-range thinking as part of your strategy process and goal-setting? Does your team tend to be just going through the motions, lacking real commitment and accountability for advancing strategic initiatives, especially when nobody's looking over their shoulder? Do they scramble just before the next strategy review sessions to window dress the progress they are (or more likely, are not) making?

Productivity. Productivity is another small word for a big thing. It's about effectiveness, efficiency, priority management, time management, project management and many other related concepts all wrapped into one. How many of us pay more lip-service than we should to really working on our personal productivity process and that of our people? Productivity un-bundles into two components - our "operational productivity" and our "strategic productivity":

Operational Productivity

How productive are you in handling day-to-day workflow and crises management at an operational level? Do you end up feeling overwhelmed, hijacked by the tyranny of the urgent and never seeming to be able to devote enough time and attention to the important, but not urgent, priorities?

Strategic Productivity

How productive are you at a strategic level and, in particular, in your strategy review sessions? Do you have a good approach, framework and set of tools, which minimize confusion, word-smithing and frustration? Does your team feel like these sessions are productive in creating traction or do they feel like they are unproductive wheel-spin. Do they relish or dread the next strategy review session?

Structures, Processes and Systems. These comprise the core infrastructure of your business, like the gear-box in the transmission system of your car. Infrastructure facilitates the intersection of productivity and culture and this is where we often experience growing pains. Things can start to break down if our infrastructure can't keep up with the increasing detail complexity and dynamic complexity of our growth. This is where we notice a dysfunctional conflict creeping in between productivity and culture – we might still manage to get an awful lot done but we don't seem to be having as much fun doing it. There is more friction, stress and upset. Many businesses can be pretty successful in a pretty dysfunctional way – but how much more successful could you be if your company was more functional? This is where systems thinking and an understanding of how "structure influences behavior" are pivotal. If we have been keeping up with our infrastructure, we facilitate a system and a structure with which productivity and culture hum along beautifully, at a level of high performance teamwork. We manage to get an awful lot done and we have a lot of fun doing it.

Mental Models. In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge says, "You don't have mental models, you are your mental models". They help us make sense of the world - mental models are our world view, our theory of things, the paradigms we hold. They are very strategic (paradigm shifts can often be the most strategic things we work on) and, whether we are conscious of them or not, they operate in the present; the here-and-now; the very short-range. That's why this component is in the top-left corner of the model. In my experience, if we are perennially experiencing wheel-spin as a business or with regard to some aspect of our business, it's often because we are stuck in a used-up, out-of-date and disabling mental model. And often we don't even realize it.

Enterprise Execution Capability and Capacity. This is how it all comes together, as the capability and capacity of your enterprise to execute. Like the transmission system in your car – from your hands on the steering wheel, feet on the pedals and whole-brain engaged (both the analytical left-side and the creative right-side) of your strategy process, down through the gear-box of your infrastructure, down through the running gear of your operations management, down to creating traction between the rubber and the road. If there is any degree of disconnect anywhere in there, then we have more wheel-spin than we should have, less traction than we could have and, by definition, we are on a lower road than we otherwise could be on. This is the "architecture of execution" which Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan talk about in the quotation above from their book *Execution*. Execution is the whole thing. Top right to bottom left - it's not, "have a strategy and now go execute it". It's the overall capability and capacity of your enterprise to execute. This is your agenda as an "executive," whether you are the CEO or part of the executive leadership team of a business.

A greater understanding of the anatomy of the business and leadership vehicle which is fit for our journey challenge offers us the opportunity to be more consciously working on these moving parts as a system. The more we can get them to be working in unison and alignment with each other, the more we develop Execution Excellence for organizational agility. In my experience, many organizations are not as conscious as they need to be and they are paying a price with some lack of agility as a organization.

See the booklet entitled [Organizational Agility & Architecting Breakthrough Journeys](#) to understand how this integrates with the rest of the In the Driving Seat® concept-suite, model-set and tool-box. Applying these concepts, models and tools will help you create more traction on a higher road of breakthrough leadership, beliefs, behaviors and results. You will become more agile as an organization and more able to be architecting breakthrough journeys, broadly and deeply throughout your organization. Travel well.