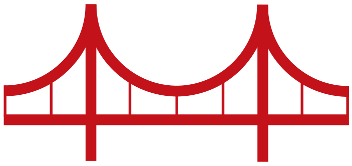
Five "Bridges" to Getting Things Done

If your organization is like so many others it seems to have all the ingredients for success firmly in place. A well-thought-out vision … a realistic strategy … skilled, highly engaged employees, quality products and services, strong customer relationships. So, if you're doing so many things right, why can't you deliver consistent results? The answer is "the execution gap." If an organization can't execute, nothing else matters — not the smartest strategy, not the most innovative business model, not even game-changing technology, and for many companies there is a clear gap between intent and execution.

So if vision, strategy, commitment, skill, quality and customer service don't lead to successful execution, what does? There are five characteristics and competencies, "The Five Bridges," that enable people to traverse the execution gap. These bridges differentiate the companies that are consistently able to get things done from those that aren't.



What differentiates the results-getters from the can't-get-it-done'ers? It's not strategy or vision or quality or any of the other usual suspects. There are five, research-based "bridges" that set companies up for success.

1. The ability to manage change. Change is inevitable. We all know that. However, despite their sincerest efforts, many companies can't seem to "operationalize" that knowledge and turn it into positive action.

Just as people can get stuck in a rut, so can businesses. Dell developed "the Dell Way," and its reluctance to veer off the beaten path cost it its customers. The company was able to attract computer shoppers to its website with low-cost offers that required the buyer to add options in order to have the best computer (which raised the price), but eventually Dell was overtaken by an array of online outlets and retailers that showed buyers they didn't have to pay extra for a "custom-made" computer.

Then, Dell made its problem worse by cutting costs to maintain market share. One area that suffered was customer service, which had originally been one of the company's biggest strengths.

2. A structure that supports execution. Successful organizations strike the right balance between centralization and decentralization. Many companies go to great lengths to develop an exciting vision, create a realistic strategy, and get employees engaged. But, they assume the current organizational structure and systems will support the new strategy. Often, it's just not true.

And structure isn't just about efficiency; a good one enhances accountability, coordination, and communication. Plus, it ensures that decisions are being made as close to the action as possible. These are all key components to getting things done.

When Mark Hurd became CEO of Hewlett-Packard, he was frequently asked if he thought H-P's purchase of Compaq had been a good idea. The question is irrelevant, he said: What's done is done, and the job now was to find a way to make the combination work. He did that when he reorganized the company into three divisions, each with its own sales force (with the heads of the divisions responsible for sales). Hurd also reorganized H-P's IT functions. Instead of having 85 data centers, he centralized them into three. It was the opposite of the way the company had been organized before, but it ensured the organizational structure would be better aligned with the business strategy.

3. Employee involvement in decision making. Some leaders believe that involving employees in decision making is a sign of weakness. Others fear giving up control. In reality, the world is too complex for any leader to go it alone. To make good decisions, you must seek out the perspectives of a wide range of people — and who knows the closest-to-the-ground issues better than the employees? Involving employees in decisions gets them focused on generating solutions to problems rather than complaining or waiting to be told what to do. It creates a valuable sense of ownership.

When the National Basketball Assn. tried to introduce a new basketball, it forgot to involve the league's players in the decision. There's no reasonable explanation for this *faux pas*. Asking the players would have improved the the ball and the acceptance of the "new ball" decision. Instead, the NBA ended up with a ball that players refused to use because they felt it was difficult to handle when it was damp and it would actually cut their fingers. Because of the player backlash, the NBA had to scrap its "improved" model and return to the ball the players preferred — the one they have been playing with for decades.

4. Aligning leader actions, company values, and priorities. No company should ever have two sets of values and expectations, one for the leader(s) and one for the employees. When leaders say one thing and do another, business suffers. Of course, we all know that leaders' behavior is relevant. Still, it might surprise you to learn exactly how much execution depends on how consistent your behavior is with organizational values and priorities.

First, if you're a leader, employees pattern their behavior after yours. Second, if the way you behave signifies that "we are all in

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this together," people are more likely to be motivated and go the proverbial extra mile. When you expect employees to behave a certain way (e.g., better customers service, decreased waste) or ask employees to focus on certain priorities (e.g,, cost containment or innovation), you'd better do the same.

The CEOs of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler shocked members of Congress and the American public when they flew private jets to Washington, DC, for a hearing in 2008. After all, the purpose of the trip was to seek government assistance for their companies during a serious recession and the worst downturn in automotive sales in their history.

5. Company-wide coordination and cooperation. Most employees have good intentions. They want to cooperate with colleagues and coworkers. Yet, ensuring that decisions and actions are coordinated across organizational boundaries requires more than faith and words alone. It takes shared goals, clear communication, and well-defined roles.

In addition, people must be held accountable for doing what they're supposed to do. That takes two things: clear performance expectations and systems that encourage and reinforce appropriate employee behavior.

Many people were surprised when Toyota, a brand known for its quality and reliability, recalled over 6 million cars due to a faulty accelerator pedal. How did this esteemed brand produce such a PR disaster?

Toyota used to work with one supplier for each part, but when a fire at one supplier's facility caused 20 plants to shut down for five days, the automaker decided it needed a second source as a back-up. For the accelerator, Toyota failed to ensure the parts it was receiving from the two suppliers were identical.

Analysts chalk this failure up to a bureaucracy that could not accommodate the company's rapid growth. They also point to an overly aggressive focus on profits — one that led executives to ignore principles that had contributed to its previously untarnished reputation.

These are the five critical "execution bridges." Without them, you'll have a tough time achieving your company's goals. The more bridges you have in place, the more likely you are to meet thos goals — and the lack of any one of these bridges could derail your efforts. And, as the Toyota breakdown illustrates, these bridges are not permanent. In fact, they are quite fragile. Once you've built them you must watch over them with vigilance, and work hard to maintain them over time.

Execution is not a single-point event; it's an ongoing process. But since your ability to execute well and consistently is the very fabric of success, there is no better place to focus your time and energy.

Richard Lepsinger is president of OnPoint Consulting and he has had a 25-year career as an organizational consultant and executive. His most recent book on executive leadership is *Closing the Execution Gap: How Great Leaders and Their Companies Get Results* (Jossey-Bass/A Wiley Imprint, June 2010, ISBN: 978-0-4705313-0-3, $45.00.) It is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers. Contact him at rlepsinger@onpointconsultingllc.com, or visit www.onpointconsultingllc.com.

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