

# Executive Challenges:

## Execution of Growth Strategies and Organizational Transformation

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## SUMMARY

Growing a business is a daunting task for many, if not most, executives. While growth is considered fun, and what executives dream of being engaged in, achieving sustainable growth is another story. For example, meaningful growth requires leadership skills, not simply management know-how. While executives may bristle at this assertion, their angst is based in the assumption that they are already skilled leaders—typically, nothing could be further from the truth. They likely are skilled managers, but they equate management capabilities with leadership capabilities. Therein lies the problem.

Successful growth strategies, by definition, require transformation of the organization, which can only happen with strong leadership. Strong leadership is ultimately needed throughout the entire organization and must start as a model from the very top.

## INTRODUCTION

Executing growth to create sustainable value creation is a primary role of executives. Given the criticality of this mission, they need to be well versed in designing and executing growth strategies. But, that is not always the case. The low success rate in accomplishing this goal is well documented, mainly due to an executive's shortcomings as a transformational leader, one who drives dramatic change. The issue is that most executives assume leadership is merely an extension of management. That is, a skilled senior manager is automatically a good leader.

**Meaningful growth requires leadership skills, not simply management know-how.**

Too often, executives rely on the same management style that drove their career success as they climbed the corporate ladder. They just keep doing “more of the same,” guarding the status quo instead of disrupting it in order to achieve growth. If more management is the secret to continued growth, it would already be happening. Why would executives back away from the hard work of transformation if that is the key? Perhaps, they simply do not see the opportunity.

For many executives, there is great pressure from colleagues to “not rock the boat,” avoid controversy, assure the bonus numbers are hit for this year, etc. As for transformational change, it is the old story about “kicking the can down the road to let the next person deal with it.” Such behavior is more transparent a problem than executives might think—managers, employees and other stakeholders in the business see it as a clear obstacle to change.

For the most part, executives simply do not know how to lead an organization through transformational change. Given this lack of experience and knowledge, their reluctance to step out and truly lead is understandable. Yet, it does not have to be that way. We now know enough about leading transformational change, so that any executive who is willing to learn and take risks can succeed.

There are four areas of personal development required for executives to execute growth and transformation:

1. Developing a leader mindset
2. Being a leader in the face of all the challenges along the way
3. Leading the strategic thinking required in growth strategies
4. Addressing the challenging organizational dynamics that will occur

## 1. DEVELOPING A LEADER MINDSET

Developing a leader mindset involves consciously choosing to be a committed learner and acknowledging that authentic leadership is much harder than it looks on the surface. It involves a willingness to develop leadership skills and learn “on the field” by doing, rather than simply reading books or sitting in a classroom. It also means unlearning old ways of being in order to be an effective leader. The expression “**change leader, change yourself**” clearly applies. In the process, distinctions must be made between acting in ways that are best for the business vs. what is best personally. This can hugely impact the development of the person as a leader and their credibility within the organization.

### Choosing to be a leader

Choosing to be a leader is a profound decision, and consciously deciding to become a *transformational* leader even more so. Yet, one cannot become a leader of strategic growth and transformation without intentionally making such a choice. From my experience, it often leads to vulnerability, as the executive discovers how little they actually know about leading others. Some can experience deep feelings of failure and, in extreme cases, become ostracized within their own organization. It is by no means an easy process.

Executives unwilling to make this overt choice, either lacking the emotional strength or mindset required to take it on, consequently do not fully develop the skills to be a leader. Even if the word “leader” is in their job title or role description, they can still lack the attitudes, capabilities and distinctions of real leadership. This deficit is not surprising given the limited scope of most MBA and professional education programs, where leadership is at best a small part of the curriculum. This dearth of leadership development

and training is common in even the most prestigious institutions of higher learning. For example, John Kotter estimates that only about five percent of the curriculum at Harvard Business School focuses on leadership<sup>1</sup>. New grads, therefore, cannot be expected to enter the workplace with any significant prior training in leadership. It is then up to organizations to instill leadership qualities at all levels, not just executives. Again, the success rate is not as high as it should be, with many corporate leadership development programs missing the mark.

A primary culprit for this lack of development goes back to the basic misconception and confusion around leadership vs. management. The two words are used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. There needs to be an awareness of the differences between leadership and management, along with the intentional choice to become a learner about leadership and being willing to do whatever it takes. It cannot be assigned to staff or delegated to subordinates. The prospective leader must be willing to “stand naked” in front of the mirror of self-reflection and discover all that is unique about being a leader. It involves a bold confrontation with the unfamiliar and the unknown. Otherwise, this confusion of terms will persist, continuing to damage (or prevent altogether) the design and execution of growth strategies and transformations.

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## Personal change

Perhaps no area is as intense and challenging for executives as making a personal change. To be effective in inspiring others and leading effectively, executives must be willing to go first, to model the change they want to see in their people and organization as a whole. Executives must continually ask:

- What changes do I need to make in order to empower and inspire others?
- What personal changes have I been unwilling to make?

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<sup>1</sup> Kotter, John. The Key Differences Between Leadership and Development.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEfgCqnMl5E>

- Where am I likely to “sell out” and do what is best for me, rather than what is best for the organization?

Gandhi is quoted as saying, “If we are to change, first we must change”. Clearly, this applies to leaders in their own development; but, unfortunately, it is often not the path taken. Instead of asking, “What changes do I need to make personally, so that I can inspire others in my organization?” too many executives ask, “What I can do to reduce any question of involvement on my part?” In other words, “How do I make sure that I am not asked to make any personal changes or sacrifices as part of this strategic execution?” The difficulty is that in order to inspire others, executives must “get in the water of change with everyone else.” Not only that, they should be the first to jump into the water and assure others that not only is it safe, but the water feels “just fine!”

If an executive thinks they can successfully execute change while avoiding personal involvement, they are deluding themselves and doing a disservice to those they are supposed to lead. They should be expected to deal with the demanding challenges of personal change and transformation before expecting it of others. The executive’s reaction to challenges of personal change is a clear communication of commitment— to employees and other stakeholders, impacting how agreeable they will be to meaningfully engage in implementation and achieving results.

Execution and transformation projects move about as fast as the development of the executives who are accountable for them. If an executive is open to challenges, learning and personal change, the transformation moves right along. If they are resistant to acknowledging and facing the challenges, organizational change will invariably be thwarted, if not completely stopped. Further, if the executives are committed to learning during the transformation and making whatever personal changes are required for the business to succeed, others in the organization will respond in similarly remarkable ways.

The intense requirement for personal change and leading by example often comes as an unpleasant surprise. With executives positioned to be protected from the daily grinds of executing strategies, isolation is one of the biggest threats to their becoming effective leaders. Of course, many executives would argue this point, explaining away and justifying their being removed from and out of touch with the challenges faced by their employees. However, they cannot remain insulated from the challenges to personal/emotional maturity and leadership that invariably come while leading a transformation effort.

I have seen many cases in which executives attempt to “stay above the fray” and outsource to internal and external individuals what they themselves should be doing. When things get tough, it can be tempting to run back to the office for safety and security, under the guise of being too busy or needing to tend to other matters; thus, missing the opportunity for meaningful leadership in order to feel more comfortable. However, just the opposite is what’s needed. It is in the executive’s best interest to be out there with those that matter most, e.g., customers and front-line employees who best understand the problems facing the execution of strategies, providing assurance and direction as major changes are being executed within the company.

## Enlightened self-interest

Executives continually face the dilemma of choosing between what is in their personal self-interest vs. what is best for the organization and stakeholders. Leaders who inspire others will most often choose the latter over focusing on their bonus and career advancement. If asked, employees will provide vivid details and examples of executives acting to “fatten their own wallet at the expense of others.” Executives who are perceived by employees as “flagrantly self-serving” are surprised to find that employees do not trust them and are unwilling to enthusiastically support their leadership. This rolls downhill to the point that front-line employees do not see credible and inspirational managers and conclude that whatever these managers are espousing is ultimately a matter of the executive’s self-interest, rather than what is best for the organization or them. Unfortunately, these are the same employees on whom success of project execution depends. In these situations, extraordinary results are not achieved, and the strategies tend to flounder.

In contrast, there are those executives who practice “enlightened self-interest.” They appreciate that their future success is based on their credibility with employees and other stakeholders. This credibility comes from being concerned about the interest and needs of others, and not being perceived as greedy or untrustworthy. Such executives and managers are able to inspire employees and other stakeholders and, therefore, they are much more likely to achieve extraordinary results in execution.

## 2. BEING A LEADER IN THE FACE OF CHALLENGES

Leadership occurs on the field of play, where often the most challenging aspects of being a leader are more nuanced. The first challenge is committing to achieve results without knowing all the details of how those results will be achieved. By definition, growth strategies and organizational transformation involve committing to results beyond what

the organization is currently accomplishing. Significant growth involves commitment to results previously seen as “impossible.” This is why transformation is required.

Commitment to a future that is different than the past requires that executives relinquish control of much of their personal agenda. There must be a clear commitment to doing what is needed to accomplish breakthroughs in growth and organizational transformation. Trying to attach personal agendas to such commitment complicates the situation and may well destroy the opportunity. It’s like trying to drive across the country in a car with the parking brake on. Eventually, the brakes will give out and the trip will be sidelined.

## Commitment to a result without knowing all the details of how it will be achieved

For many executives, another large challenge is committing to accomplish results through their organization without knowing exactly how these results will be achieved. They commonly face questions like, “Are you able and willing to trust others with the how?” and “Are you trapped by wanting to know all the details, even if that is a distraction?” Too often, the answer is “No.” To further complicate the situation, the executive’s refusal to trust others is usually apparent, yet they attempt to cover it up with management double-talk. While such maneuvers may seem logical to managers, it comes across as foolish or nonsensical to employees in the business.

When an executive begins the process of transformation, there is a need to articulate a future and the actions required to achieve that future—without being able to identify all the ways in it will be achieved. It can occur to members of the organization like a leap of faith. Trusting others to develop and implement the how’s of execution is atypical and may feel unnatural, even though managers probably have done it in the past. Executives tend to dismiss prior success as a “fluke,” rather than as evidence that you can commit to a future and results without having all the details.

Too often I see executives become stopped in their leadership by an unwillingness to articulate a future and commit to results prior to having all the details sorted out. This derails the action in two ways. First, the opportunity to create the future is not acted on in a timely manner. Second, the opportunity to engage others is diminished since the executive insists on having the answers first.

Executives often complain that the execution plan seems piecemeal. While that may be accurate, what stands the test of time is the commitment of others in the organization to identify ways to accomplish the results, even if the executives do not fully engage with

those employees. In some instances, the solution is sufficiently technical that the executives could not know the details. Ironically, the executive's role is to see that results get accomplished through others, so that the evidence of success is the grins of those who have accomplished the result. There is no requirement that the executives be deeply engaged in the details and know all the answers, and often that would serve as a deterrent to success.

## Relinquish control over personal agenda

Another large challenge facing executives is relinquishing control over their personal agendas. Executives are faced with the daunting question, "Are you willing to relinquish your personal agenda and desires if that will enable the organization to be more successful, and those around you more effective as leaders?" Too often, executives attempt to finesse this question, rather than meeting it head on. The consequence of these awkward "finesse moves" is floundering.

Floundering by executives during execution and transformation is usually a sign that the executive has been unable, or unwilling, to let go of a personal agenda item. The mighty struggle occurs because the transformation is going one way and the executive wants it to go in a

different direction for purely personal reasons. That is, the natural flow of the strategic execution is taking the action in a particular direction and the executive is attempting to fight against the flow for reasons that are not apparent to others. Onlookers essentially say, "We wish we could help you with that one, but what you are attempting to do makes no sense to us." Often, the executive's reasons are flagrantly self-serving, including looking good to other executives, hoping to position themselves for a promotion and trying to make a fortune from bonus and stock option payouts.

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Customers and employees will invariably question the motives of such an executive when their actions seem inconsistent with what appears to be in the best interest of the business. If the executive attempts to explain their desired actions, the explanation needs to be very sound and laid out in enough detail that others can see the logic and appreciate the validity of the proposed steps. If the executive says something like, "I'm here to create value," without details to demonstrate how the value will be created, employees will probably chuckle to themselves that he/she has seen another "oracle" and dismiss the statements of the executive.

Relinquishing one's own personal agenda in order to do what is best for the business and others will go far in creating credibility for the executive as a leader. This credibility is essential for future engagement of the employees in taking bold actions.

### 3. LEADING WITH STRATEGIC THINKING

Leadership not only requires involvement and action, it also involves setting examples for outstanding strategic thinking. This thinking entails challenging closely held assumptions about customer relationships, the uniqueness of products and services, position in the markets, etc. Breakthroughs in action first begin as breakthroughs in thinking. Often these breakthroughs involve asking seemingly dumb questions, which upon reflection, reveal a huge blind spot in previous thinking. Only when blind spots are revealed can new thinking sprout.

#### Flawed strategies

The failure rate of strategic execution is about the same as other change efforts. While the specific numbers vary between studies, for this conversation, let's say about two-thirds fail to achieve the desired results. The reasons given for these shortcomings are familiar: lack of clarity of the strategies, lack of buy-in from the middle of the organization, front-line indifference, etc. Most executives will say, "We had a great strategy, but lousy execution." Donald Sull<sup>2</sup> refers to this as a "cop-out" and asserts that the real problem is the strategy, itself. Often, the strategy is too complex to be understood and remembered by those in the organization whose actions are essential for success. Sull recommends that strategies be focused and simple. This advice seems so obvious that one wonders how come it is not followed.

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Consider that overly complex strategies occur due to the lack of leadership from executives and managers. That is, standing up and announcing that the strategy is simply too complex to be remembered by the rank and file employees. A strategy has little chance of being successfully implemented if it is too complicated for employees to understand.

The reluctance by executives to call "time out" in the midst of developing strategies is understandable. Challenging the ever-increasing complexity of a strategy in development

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<sup>2</sup> Sull, Donald. Simplify Your Strategy. Harvard Business Review video.

is not a career-enhancing move in most organizations. In many companies, the process of developing the strategy takes on a “life of its own” and is time boxed. Given the limitations of timing, there is strong pressure to let the process continue without challenging the viability of the strategies. Often, there is awareness of the limitations of the strategy, and hope persists that someone will step forward to challenge it, so that changes can be introduced. But, once the point is reached when the Board presentation books are being put together, it is simply too late. The flaws in the strategies then become embedded in business plans, which of course will be challenging to achieve.

Perhaps the biggest flaw in strategies that I see is the belief that they are complete when approved by the Board and/or senior executives. One executive described the way it works in his company, saying, “We put the strategy presentation in nice binders that are presented to the Board for approval. After the strategies are approved, we put the binders on our credenzas, where they remain untouched until it is time for the next strategic planning cycle.” He described the strategy documents as “*credenza-ware*.” This flaw is based on the assumption that the strategy is accurate and complete if it has been “approved.” The fallacy is that there is essential information about the strategies that cannot be gained until execution begins. The thinking about strategies must assume that there will be critical information gained later in the execution phase and design the strategic execution process accordingly. Sull describes this as a linear approach to strategy<sup>3</sup>. In a corollary, Neilson et.al.<sup>4</sup> found that a critical success factor for executing strategy is based on how effectively information flows from the front line of execution back to the decision makers in headquarters.

## Insisting on having “all the answers prior to taking action”

Existing management practices will not always allow an executive to commit to an outcome with the caveat that the people will be trusted to figure out how to actually implement the changes to produce these results. Business traditions are so addicted to knowing the details of “how” that opportunities are many times missed while waiting for the complete answers to be revealed. Leaders of execution often find that they must break this cycle and empower employees to begin action, even before having as much knowledge of information as they would like. The challenge facing leaders is, “Are you up to breaking

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<sup>3</sup> Sull, Donald (HBR video)

<sup>4</sup> Neilson, Gary L., Karla Martin and Elizabeth Powers. The Secret to Successful Strategy Execution. Harvard Business Review. June 2008.



this cycle of not acting until all the answers are known?” They would be if they understood that successful execution often involves initiating action toward a result before knowing all of the details for how it will be achieved.

Caravanning is the term used in Europe to describe a small travel trailer being pulled behind an auto. There are caravan parks in which people can “camp out.” Caravanning is great fun because the family heads off to the countryside, if not another country, without knowing what they will find, or what will happen along the way. Caravanning exposes one to the weather, making a camping trip quite unpredictable. Imagine an adult saying, “I am unwilling to go caravanning unless I can be guaranteed that the trip will go just as we planned it, and that the weather will be perfect. You would say that person is being completely unrealistic. Yet, that is often what executives and managers expect in a strategic execution. It is impossible to know what will happen when camping and traveling, and much of the charm is adapting and experiencing what comes with the unexpected. Strategic executions are the same. Too often, execution is weighed down by unrealistic expectations imposed by executives who insist on knowing how everything will be done. Stereotypically, these executives had previous training as accountants or engineers. They live with the illusion that the world can be orderly and are determined to impose this on those around them. Obviously, these folks are not a big fan of chaos theory in physics or performance art. While well meaning, this unrealistic expectation for how the world should work creates a major drag on those attempting to innovate and implement.

Breaking the vicious cycle of “we must know and control the how’s” will substantively enable strategic execution. It is like trading in a wheelbarrow for a dump truck. The truck can produce much greater results in speed and weight carried than a wheelbarrow.

## Empowering others to think strategically

It is important that an execution leader continually ask, “Are others being empowered to think strategically?” “Are they actively inquiring into how to create value with the strategies?” and “Are they being innovative in thinking about execution?”

In many companies, strategic thinking has been replaced by mathematical and statistical analysis. Therefore, it’s crucial that a leader ask, “Has analysis replaced strategic thinking in my business?” and “Are our people able to include analysis and data as simply part of the thinking process, rather than a substitute for strategic thinking?”

The challenges of thinking strategically begin with thinking about the future. I use the term **Invented Future** to distinguish a new strategic context for the business. This new

context is starkly different from what is predictable, given the current and past performance. I call this the Default Future. It is default because that is the current setting and is what will happen without any intervention by leaders. This step of Inventing or Future Making is a crucial step in strategic execution. Why strategic thinking is so important is that there is nothing in the past to argue for this new, invented future. It is literally made up. I find this is often a sticking point for some, who insist that the future must be given by the past. This thinking assumes we can know the future by projecting forward what has happened in the past. While this is more comforting than the discomfort of “not knowing,” it is not accurate or useful. The harsh reality is that the future does not yet exist and cannot be known. Nor can it be analyzed or assessed. Nor can the future be accurately predicted.

While we develop predictions for the future when we develop strategic plans and business plans, in reality what we are doing is making an educated guess as to what might happen and then committing to take whatever actions are needed to deliver results akin to what was promised in the plans. In reality, plans are promises of what will be done in the future. I like Dwight Eisenhower’s quote, “Plans are nothing: planning is everything.” The act of creating in planning for the future will enable executives to see new possibilities.

Most execution projects have a document called a *plan*, but it is actually not a valid plan. Rather, it is the sum total of analyses and studies, which creates the illusion of truth or validity. A plan should be constituted of the actions required to produce an impact and ultimately a result. The plan should demonstrate a clear line of sight between actions and results. When that line of sight is clear, the enthusiasm and intensity of people engaged in implementation will soar!

## Assume management alone is enough for execution success and organizational transformation

Executives tend to falsely assume that better management is all that is needed for successful execution and transformation. For many, this occurs as “conventional wisdom;” nonetheless, it’s a foolish assumption. It is as if a developer who has poorly built a track of new houses in a bad neighborhood pretends that all he needs to do is plant trees in front of each vacant house. While many of the best neighborhoods have tree-lined streets, simply adding trees to an ill-conceived development does not make a great neighborhood. Rather than following traditional, control-oriented management approaches that mask underlying issues, execution leaders must be willing to step out and lead. Top-down control by executives and managers is probably the single largest reason execution projects fail.

There is an assumption that employees will do what they are told to do, but this is not the case. What matters is that executives and managers “own” whatever the past is for their business, articulate a new future and engage employees in creating actions to achieve that new future.

## 4. ADDRESSING CHALLENGING ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

Execution of growth strategies and related transformation is unsettling to many people in an organization. It brings out the best, and worst, of individuals and groups. Executives who are leading these changes must remain vigilant in order to complement and reinforce the greatness that is occurring, and step in to address the mischief which is also bound to occur. If an executive does not see the mischief, or chooses to ignore it, the negative consequences will increase. Such inaction is perceived as tacit support. In addition to dealing with accomplishments and mischief, executives must be alert to and stand ready to be in communication when mistakes are made “on the field” of execution.

### Disappearing executive presence

A major mistake made in all forms of strategic execution and transformation is the disappearance of executives once the effort is announced. As an example, in acquisitions, executives work intensely behind closed doors for weeks, if not months, on the deal. At some point, the deal is announced and then what follows is another prolonged period of intense involvement in due-diligence, etc. By the time the transaction closes, the executives are exhausted and need a break. Often, there are serious matters that have not been getting sufficient attention during the period of negotiations, so the executives go off to deal with these important matters. While this is understandable, there is one crucial fact missing... the hardest part of the acquisition, and upon which its success hinges, still remains. The value of an acquisition is either made or lost during post-acquisition integration, which is a form of strategic execution. Consequently, when the executives are needed most, they disappear. This dynamic of disappearing executives also plays out in other forms of growth strategies and transformation. The myth is that the hard work has been done in developing the strategies.

### Confronting and dealing with mistakes

Mistakes are a natural part of implementing meaningful change. If people in the organization knew how to think and work in new ways, they would have already been doing it. So, when groups of people are authorized to do something challenging and

radically new, it's no surprise that mistakes will be made. Enlightened executives will, in fact, encourage teams to experiment and learn from those experiments and the inevitable mistakes. This encouragement helps to fast-track innovative thinking and is key to developing leadership skills of all those involved with execution. For more on this subject, please see a thoughtful piece written by Robert Hausmann, in Harvard Business Review<sup>5</sup>.

A powerful tool for executives to deal with mistakes is what's called "breakdown methodology." A breakdown is an action, circumstance or event that is inconsistent with the commitments of a team. The agreement is that when a team member feels or sees something that is inconsistent with, or an interruption of, the committed actions, the team will stop and explore the perceived breakdown. The power of declaring breakdowns is that it creates a focused inquiry into what is occurring/has occurred within the context of a commitment to creating breakthroughs and momentum. While breakdowns are essential to overall success, there is often initial resistance by team members to go there. The challenge for leaders is to allow breakdowns to occur, and not to create false appearances. It is important that the gaps and setbacks in execution be acknowledged for what they are and be allowed to exist. This opens up the opportunity for authentic dialogs about how to address breakdowns. Such events are usually considered of no use and prematurely discarded, without appreciating the possible value. As an analogy, when preparing a turkey for cooking, there are "extraneous parts" that appear to have no value, e.g., the turkey neck. There is probably no piece of a turkey that's less appealing to look at, and yet the turkey neck can be used to make excellent gravy. What "turkey necks" have you seen happen in implementations that were later used for great affect? If we are put off by first appearances, we run the risk of missed opportunity that may very well impact the execution.

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## Making execution & transformation public

Another challenge faced by executives is making the growth strategic execution and transformation visible and public within the organization. That is, clearly communicating to all employees the Invented Future, the promise of resulting growth, and how these

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<sup>5</sup> Ashkenas, Ron and Robert Hausmann. Leadership Development Should Focus on Experiments. Harvard Business Review. April 12, 2016.

changes will affect the company. This communication is an essential element in engaging the hearts and minds of people throughout the organization. However, it also creates a perceived risk for the executives in case the execution fails. Consequently, some executives attempt to “keep it under wraps” and share information about the execution and transformation on a “need to know” basis. While secrecy is valuable in dealing with matters that could be said to violate governmental policies and standards, e.g., SEC guidelines on discussing earning releases, it is disastrous in execution and transformation. Successful transformations must be “public” within an organization. For more information on this topic, see the document on *Six P’s of Successful Transformation*.<sup>6</sup>

It’s also important to allow setbacks and gaps in execution to be seen out in the open and thoroughly discussed. However, there is a tendency to cover up negative things that happen, even when enough employees know about it that it is not really a secret. This phenomenon can be “jangly,” meaning harsh sounding or unharmonious. It describes the behaviors of executives attempting to avoid the light of day from illuminating their actions, as well as the limited success of the execution. While employees may not use the word jangly, they have other words to describe the actions/inactions of the executives that are more familiar, and clearly harsher!

For many executives, the biggest challenge is to make the execution and transformation visible and public, and yet have threads of consistency and harmony running throughout. There is often a desire to “white wash” the breakdowns and setbacks. Yet, that misses the power of communicating the full story. The breakdowns add useful color and contrast, which makes the effort seem more authentic and real. Similarly, if a pure white stone is used as flooring in a home, it tends to be dull and too plain. However, if the stone has minor veins of color, it makes the stone more attractive. Rather than pretending they do not exist, the exposure of breakdowns actually enhances the execution process by allowing the leader to publicly and powerfully recommit to a successful execution.

## Losing sight of the bigger picture

Another challenge for executives during execution is to keep their eyes on the bigger prize and keep creating the possibility of that Invented Future for the organization. There is often a strong pull to lose sight of the future and get “into the weeds.” While this is understandable, it does not work. It distracts the executive from their leadership role of

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<sup>6</sup> Broussard, William and Robert Chapman. Common Factors Found in Successful Transformations: The Six P’s. www. KingChapman.com. 2018.

engaging and inspiring others to act in extraordinary ways. When this leadership is missing, people in the organization miss it. Just as people wandering in the desert become hyper-thirsty and famished, so too do organizations become desperate when their leaders lose sight of the “prize.”

Executives must also keep the conversation about the Invented Future and power of the transformation alive everyone in the organization. It’s important to remember that all conversations disappear over time. This is frustrating since we think, “I told them...” Yes, you did tell them ... and the nature of human beings is that whatever you told them altered to take on different meanings and/or was completely gone by the next day. Being a source of conversations about the future is essential when the future is not predicted by the past. By definition, growth strategies and transformation are a deviation from past events and performance, so the importance of frequent communication is even more critical.

Executives should also consider that employees are listening with greater concerns and doubts than appear on the surface. Most employees believe that speaking up and challenging executives is fruitless, if not dangerous to their job. Consequently, it is held that the real concerns and issues are not safe for open discussions with execs. Meanwhile, there are behind-the-scenes conversations that are fervently and openly occurring among the employees about previous failed attempts at change and the negative impacts on corporate culture. Such conversations are characterized by dramatic interpretations about executives who “ran for cover” when things went wrong, and how even when these executives lost their jobs due to botched executions, they still leave with large severance packages. The belief is that the sharp end of consequences is usually felt by the front-line employees, rather than executives and managers.

Every executive leading a transformation should understand that while these conversations may not be factual, they should acknowledge them, listen to them and then seek to understand their origins. This is challenging since most executives are more comfortable telling others what they think, rather than listening openly to the experiences and opinions of others. Only when this listening is dealt with can the executive begin to have authentic conversations with their employees. Until then, any communications from the executive will have limited effect.

Executives must also temper their desire to deny and refute employee concerns. Executives leading execution and transformation must deal directly with the thinking by employees that it is not safe to ask questions, and even challenge the actions of the executives.

## Assuming execution and transformation can be managed

Most executives are much more comfortable with management than leadership. They have spent most of their career developing managerial capabilities. There is a strong pull to assume that execution interventions can simply be managed. While management is important, if an execution is to be successful, it must be led. Leadership is the engine, or source, of growth and change.

Management is designed around planning and controlling to keep things within bounds. Many will attempt to say, “We have done this before and it is not that big of a deal.” This thinking assumes that events from the past can be used to predict the future. Leadership is needed in execution and transformation because it cannot be planned per se and attempts to control suck the life out of the transformation.

## The future vs. the past

A big challenge for leaders is to keep the execution future-based and not linked to past events. While people are happy when they can understand the future as being like something that happened in the past, it is not useful. It does not serve the person or the execution project to make this connection. Each situation is unique and best created as new and fresh “from the future,” rather than comparing similarities to past events.

Leadership is important in continuing to create that the future is not determined by the past. Executives will hear employees and other managers say, “We tried this before, and it did not work”. This is a signal for executives to recreate for those questioning people what they need to remember, i.e., whatever was tried in the past is not what is being done now. Leaders must clearly articulate how the Invented Future is a brand-new context, as well as what that new context makes possible.

When leading transformation, it is key to spend considerable time with managers, supervisors and other thought leaders in the organization, paying particular attention to keeping the Invented Future distinct from the past. A common occurrence is leadership communications being listened to by employees as, “We tried this in the past, it failed, *but this will be different.*” And under their breath, they may be mumbling, “Sure it will.” As long as an execution project is viewed like, “Here we go again,” employees will not be inspired, and the project will not likely produce the desired results.

Executives must keep demonstrating their own committed leadership and calling for strong leadership from every person in the organization, stressing that the past be left



behind—leaving a clean slate. Only then can meaningful conversations be sustained about the execution project coming from the future. Anchoring project execution firmly in the future enables powerful conversations about the present moment, as well. Leaders need to come from the future and yet be clearly present to employees' current concerns and issues.

Executive leadership is vividly present in the questions and comments they make. A leader who starts deliberations with the question, “What have we done before?” is sending a mixed message that keeps the past alive. In wanting to reassure others, they may send an unintended message, stating, “We have done this before,” which also harkens to the past. What has to be understood is that the secrets to future success lie in the future. While this way of thinking flies in the face of much conventional wisdom, it is exactly the shift in mindset that is needed to produce real change.

## Changing the mindset of staff groups

Executives leading execution often find that in addition to everything else they have to do, they must lead well intended staff groups to act in ways that they are not familiar with. If not, staff persons will often undermine the very efforts they espouse and promote.

Execution of growth strategies and

transformation can be unsettling to most employees. Large change has that effect on us humans. In many organizations the people and groups that are most anxious are staff groups, who tend to be disrupted by changes of all sorts. While this anxiety is understandable, it can be detrimental to the change efforts. The attempts of these staff groups to contribute and influence ends up appearing as control and interruption.

Consider this sports analogy. Zebra-striped shirts are worn by officials or referees in basketball and American football. The striped shirts are easily spotted and set the officials apart from the players. While the role of the referee is to assure a “fair game,” they often become too much a part of the game. It is frustrating when a game is ultimately determined by official's calls. Yet, in many instances, a game does hinge on the accuracy of an official's call. In order to reduce mistakes made, professional basketball and football instituted a video replay system. This technology allows the head official to view at pictures taken of the play in order to determine if the proper call was made. It minimizes

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the mistakes made by overly involved officials, and those mistakes that are attributable to the speed of the game.

In transformations, staff groups are usually like the officials in a game. They are there to assist the game, not to become too involved in it. However, it is easy for these groups to lose sight of their role and seek to influence the outcome. Unfortunately, there is not a video replay system in transformation by which staff groups can validate their calls and involvement. That's where executive leadership comes into play with an objective eye on the ball.

## Conclusion

Executives face unique challenges in inspiring others to act in new and different ways. Often, resolving these challenges will require a personal change by the executive, which may occur as “giving something up,” “making unnecessary compromises” and experiencing some type of loss. Dealing with such challenges is precisely what executives are called on to do if they are to be effective leaders and achieve extraordinary results through strategic execution. This takes both awareness and a conscious decision to embrace strong, forward-looking leadership over past-based management.