

EXECUTION AND OPERATING RHYTHMS

Execution as a Discipline

Bossidy & Charan · Sull · Bungay · Wickman

PAPER 01 / 02

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

This paper opens the Execution and Operating Rhythms series in Furtherance's reference library. It treats execution not as the tactical residue of strategy but as a discipline in its own right – the systematic work of turning intent into results. The question it answers: why do capable organisations with good strategies still fail to get things done?

The four contributions here converge on one diagnosis: execution fails less from bad plans than from the gap between a plan and adaptive action. Bossidy and Charan make execution the leader's central discipline. Sull shows the gap is usually misdiagnosed. Bungay names the gaps precisely and borrows a military answer. Wickman packages the whole thing into an operating system for the founder-led firm.

Larry Bossidy & Ram Charan *Execution*, 2002

Executive practice · the discipline of getting things done

CORE THESIS

Execution is a **discipline** – a systematic way of exposing reality and acting on it – and it is the leader's job, not something to be delegated. It is the missing link between ambitions and results, and it is woven into strategy rather than following it. At its core sits **robust dialogue**: the organisation's willingness to surface the truth.

FRAMEWORK

Execution runs through three core processes that a leader must personally connect:

Core process	What it must do
People	Match the right people to the right jobs; build a talent pipeline
Strategy	Set direction that is realistic and tied to people and operations
Operations	Convert strategy into a concrete operating plan with owners

These are driven by a set of leader behaviours – among them:

The leader's essential behaviours	In practice
Know your people and business	Engage directly; do not manage at a distance
Insist on realism	Face facts; reward truth over comfort
Set clear goals and priorities	A few things, sequenced, everyone can name
Follow through	Close the loop; no decision without an owner and a date
Reward the doers	Tie recognition and pay to what actually gets delivered

METHODOLOGY

Distilled from executive practice – Bossidy as a long-serving industrial CEO, Charan as adviser – and written as applied counsel rather than research.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The book that put “execution” on the boardroom agenda and linked people, strategy and operations as one system. The critique: it is anecdotal and memoir-like, light on empirical support, and drawn largely from large US corporations.

Donald Sull *Why Strategy Execution Unravels*, 2015

Strategy execution research · MIT Sloan

CORE THESIS

Most execution problems are **misdiagnosed**. Leaders reach for tighter alignment and more discipline when the real constraints are usually **coordination** across units and the **agility** to reallocate as conditions change. Execution is the capacity to seize the right opportunities, not merely to comply with the plan.

FRAMEWORK

The myth	The reality
Execution equals alignment	Vertical alignment is fine; lateral coordination is what breaks
Execution means sticking to the plan	Adapting and reallocating resources matters more
Communication equals understanding	Repetition is not comprehension; people miss priorities
A performance culture drives execution	Rewarding past performance can punish agility and risk
Execution is driven from the top	Distributed managers make the choices that decide it

METHODOLOGY

Large-scale empirical survey research across thousands of managers and hundreds of companies – a markedly more evidence-based footing than the executive-memoir literature.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

A rigorous corrective to the alignment obsession, foregrounding lateral coordination and distributed decision-making. The critique: the work is stronger as diagnosis than as prescription, and rests on self-reported survey data.

Stephen Bungay *The Art of Action*, 2011

Strategy and mission command · directed opportunism

CORE THESIS

Borrowing from the Prussian doctrine of **mission command**, Bungay argues that three gaps open between intent and outcome, and that leaders instinctively try to close them with more detail, instruction and control – which only makes them wider. The answer is **directed opportunism**: specify intent, not actions, and let people adapt.

FRAMEWORK

Gap	What it is	The counter-productive reflex
Knowledge	We cannot know everything when we plan	Demand more detail before acting
Alignment	People do not do exactly what we intend	Issue more detailed instructions
Effects	Actions do not produce the results expected	Impose tighter controls

Instead: define the **intent** and the boundaries, give people freedom of action within them, and build the capacity to act – briefing and back-briefing so everyone understands not just the *what* but the *why*.

METHODOLOGY

A synthesis of military history – von Moltke and the Prussian general staff – with modern strategy practice.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

A rigorous, historically grounded model of execution under uncertainty; the three gaps are a genuinely useful diagnostic. The critique: the military analogy has limits in civilian organisations, and the model is conceptual rather than empirically tested.

Gino Wickman Traction / EOS, 2011

The Entrepreneurial Operating System · founder-led firms

CORE THESIS

Small and mid-sized entrepreneurial businesses need a complete, simple **operating system**. Strengthen six key components and run the business on a light set of tools and a fixed meeting cadence, and execution becomes repeatable rather than heroic.

FRAMEWORK

Component	The question it forces
Vision	Is everyone aligned on where we are going and how?
People	Do we have the right people in the right seats?
Data	Do we run on a handful of objective numbers?
Issues	Do we surface and actually solve problems?
Process	Is the way we work documented and followed?
Traction	Do we execute with discipline and accountability?

The system is run through a small toolkit – quarterly **Rocks** (priorities), a weekly **Scorecard**, an **Accountability Chart**, and a structured weekly meeting that identifies, discusses and solves issues.

METHODOLOGY

A proprietary practitioner system, delivered through a network of trained implementers rather than derived from research.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Widely adopted by founder-led businesses – precisely the segment a fractional operating leader is called into – because it is complete, concrete and installable. The critique, noted below, is that it is commercial, one-size-fits-most, and thin on independent evidence.

A NOTE ON EVIDENCE

A note on this literature: the execution genre is largely practitioner memoir and proprietary method – Bossidy and Charan write from experience, and EOS is a commercial product delivered by licensed implementers. Sull is the exception, being survey-based. Treat the frameworks as well-tested craft, not validated science, and adopt the tools selectively rather than wholesale.

Synthesis

Contribution	Core idea	Framework	Register
Bossidy & Charan	Execution as leadership discipline	Three core processes	Executive practice
Sull	Coordination and agility over alignment	Five myths of execution	Empirical research
Bungay	Intent over instruction	Three gaps; mission command	History + strategy
Wickman	A complete operating system	Six components; EOS tools	Proprietary method

FOR THE OPERATOR

Execution is a discipline: reality-facing dialogue and linked processes (Bossidy & Charan), lateral coordination and agility over top-down alignment (Sull), intent over instruction (Bungay), and a repeatable operating system for the founder-led firm (Wickman). The common thread for the operator is that plans fail in the gap before adaptive action – and that gap is closed with intent, coordination and rhythm. Rhythm is the subject of the next paper.