



# Elevating Execution Capability

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One of the key issues that comes up in our conversations with senior executives over the past 30 years is how to improve execution capability. The question we get asked time and again is: What does it take to elevate people’s capability to deliver reliable results?

Even with a beautifully crafted change management strategy, corporate work plan, or project delivery approach, there are a few things that senior leaders tend to take for granted that can lead to ineffective execution. When leaders take the time to address these critical issues, however, it makes a step change in business performance not only possible, but sustainable.

## **STEP ONE: The Predictable Future**

This stage is what some might call articulating the “case for action”, and begins with creating a clear picture of the current state of the business. Once you’ve confronted the status quo, you then have an idea of what is predictable without effective intervention. Confronting the good, the bad, and the ugly aspects of what’s predictable is not an easy task, because it requires the discipline of removing one’s hopes, wishes, fantasies, and sometimes nightmares about how the future could be. A useful place to look at to get a sense of what the predictable future holds, are the results that have happened in the recent past. As many forecasting experts such as corporate strategists and business analysts like to point out: past performance is a good indicator of future delivery.

## **STEP TWO: The Value and Impact of Articulating the Success State**

Against the background of the predictable future, you can now contrast the value-add of whatever initiative or intervention you’re taking on. What is it that this intervention would do differently? What pain points would it alleviate? What would be the value and benefit to the business? What does good or great performance look like? As the old analogy says: a candle’s flame set against the sun will be difficult to see, but in a dark room, it will show up brightly. In fact, the darker the room, the brighter the flame will appear. Similarly, the clearer the image of how counterproductive it will be to do more of the same, the more powerfully an extraordinary future can show up. When you engage people in a dialogue about the opportunities that might be lost without effective intervention, this often allows for a conversation that inspires them to distinguish a future state beyond what’s predictable.

## STEP THREE: The Access to Reliable Delivery

The access we've observed that enables people to deliver exceptional performance is engaging people in committing to results they don't know how to deliver. This may seem painfully simple or obvious, but for the most part, people only feel comfortable committing to results they know how to deliver, which perpetuates the predictable trajectory of performance. If you want results beyond that, you need to create buy-in, ownership, and accountability. It's critical: you can't direct, command, order, or instruct people to commit to results they don't know how to deliver. At best, you'll get compliance: people nodding their heads in agreement to avoid a "career-limiting opportunity", then doing more of the same. This is what is sometimes known as the "Corporate Yes": say "yes" to survive the conversation, when you really mean "no", and then do just enough to keep people off your back. Creativity and innovation can rarely be generated and are almost non-existent in this kind of interaction.

So how do you actually get people to commit to results they can't see how to deliver? The key to having people engaged in powerfully executing is to create opportunities for them to push back. Although this may seem counter-intuitive, the more you give people the chance to say "no", the more you create the opportunity for them to choose "yes". Leaders often underestimate the importance of this authentic engagement, but it is a vital aspect of creating accountability and ownership for results people don't already know how to deliver.

As anyone who has led an initiative knows all too well, problems during execution are inevitable. What most often happens when people are asked to deliver something unpredictable is that all the constraints that currently limit performance show up in full force. People relate to these constraints as problems that they would rather not deal with—problems that are threatening to their success, their futures, and their careers. In the corporate arena, the typical response to these constraints showing up is to "de-commit", but to do so without losing face. This could range from re-scoping the project, to complete denial, to gossip about how it was a stupid idea to begin with. These are all normal, ordinary reactions, and often this is where the leader of the initiative is left to be hanged.

Normal and ordinary, however, are not sufficient for delivering unprecedented results. When people have the experience of powerfully choosing a commitment, they naturally take more ownership of what they said they would deliver. As a result, they relate to obstacles that arise, not as problems to resist dealing with or occasions to de-commit, but as opportunities to create pathways to deliver extraordinary objectives. Taking away the option to de-commit (i.e., closing the back door) provides a fertile ground for innovation.

So why do so few interventions succeed in creating exceptional results that are sustainable? In our experience, this happens because leaders whose role is to engage others in causing unprecedented results often take for granted the most critical aspects of engaging their managers, direct reports, and peers. If you can focus on creating a case for action (i.e., why bother investing people's time/energy/effort), creating a compelling future, generating opportunities for people to powerfully commit, and supporting them through the process of dealing with problems as they arise, you'll be positioned as a partner enabling your team to succeed. This, in our view, is the only way to reliably elevate execution capability and deliver sustainable performance.

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