The ACTIV^{2}E Leadership Model, Part 6

Execution

In this, the last essay on ACTIV^{2}E Leadership, we'll wrap up by talking about execution. Everything else we've discussed is important, but ultimately means nothing if we can't execute; that is, accomplish the mission or goal. Proper execution: mission focused, humane, and accomplished with excellence and integrity are the goals. But there are also pitfalls.

Pitfalls in Execution

Execution is the place where we all want to be – it's where the difference is made, the product is built, contract signed, mission gets completed. It's also the place where the mistakes are most visible.

Pitfalls in execution fall into three categories: a lack of proper planning; a failure to prioritize actions and events: confusing the important with the urgent; and dumping: the automatic delegation of workload without thought – delegating overwhelm.

Lack of Proper Planning

Being knee deep in a project is no time to remember you forgot a piece. It's like going on a car trip through the desert and learning you haven't filled the car with gas or the spare tire with air when you find yourself stuck on the side of the road.

Now, some may say that lack of planning (and the other pitfalls we'll discuss) is an issue of management, not leadership. We disagree for two reasons. First, management skill is critical to leadership because just as leadership makes management human; management of the mission or goal makes leadership relevant. What's the use in bringing everyone together to achieve a goal if you don't have the management chops to figure out how to get there?

The second reason is that one uses leadership skills early in the planning process to focus the group and guide the dialogue. Sometimes we tend to rush through the planning process because we want to "get to work." Yet the planning process is the most important part of the work. It makes the goal and endpoint clearer, brings together the resources, people, and time needed to complete the task, and identifies potential conflicts before they interfere with the actual work.

There are several reasons why planning can be incomplete, but most can be grouped into three categories: ineffective time management, not considering all variables, and a lack of teaming between departments.

Ineffective time management

Ineffective time management can hurt efforts during every step of the project, but in the planning process it strikes in the forms of: planning too late and being rushed to meet the next deadline, or not accurately figuring the amount of time required to perform a task in the execution phase.

You have to allocate adequate time to plan your efforts. While the project may not have a lot of time to be accomplished from notification to completion and rollout, the answer to compensating is giving adequate time for planning – not skimping on the planning time to build time into production. Big mistakes happen when you move that fast, and you end up giving back more time in fixing the problems than you gain from trading time from planning to production. Doubt me? Think of the Edsel, the Apollo 1 spacecraft, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

The other way ineffective time management can hurt you is when you low ball how much time it takes to build a piece of the project. Lean operations are a necessity in CAP, but when lean becomes the goal and not a means, your focus is lost. This is especially important for what's known in PERT charts as the critical tasks. (PERT stands for Program Evaluation Review Technique and a PERT chart is a project management tool used to schedule, organize, and coordinate tasks). Critical tasks are those which if not completed are show stoppers for the project. Adequate time for these tasks is vital.

When calculating time on task, it's important to calculate the likely time spent, not the minimum time. Why? "Murphy's Law." Murphy loves me, I'll bet he loves you too.

Not considering all variables

This is a "gimme." It's pretty logical to assume that this would be on the list. Yet we all still do it. Projects have become more complicated, time is more compressed, and we practice bad habits – like failing to communicate with all players and failing to write everything down. Often we have to make assumptions about what is needed or what will happen based on incomplete or inaccurate data, and sometimes we just figure that since we've done it (even skated) before so we can do it again, and just don't pay attention. The space shuttle Challenger accident in 1986 was caused in part by this phenomenon.

Lack of teaming between departments

Lack of cooperation or teaming between departments can be a sign of poor leadership between the managers involved. Nothing is done in a vacuum, and today's missions, goals, and projects are not accomplished by one department alone. It's never worked that way.

The role of the bosses in this case is to encourage teamwork, modeling it among themselves for the benefit of the members as much as for the efficiency of the operation, and creating an environment where cooperation is natural and easy.

Managers who do not do this waste their members' time by forcing them to work separately. This leads to duplication of effort, missed pieces, and incomplete tasks. In the end nothing fits.

Failure to Prioritize

Hand in hand with lack of proper planning is the failure to prioritize tasks. Prioritizing is critical because it simply creates an orderly work flow with the resources available, and everyone knows what gets done and the roles they play.

A strong emphasis on priorities by the boss is important because not everyone may share the same priorities established by the boss. Ideally, everyone gets together and agrees on the way ahead. Realistically that may not be the case. So priorities become a top-down proposition. As the boss, you show they are important, you explain the logic, and you expect performance and reward performance.

A trap that hurts a lot of prioritization efforts is confusing the important with the merely urgent. Plans change, and we expect that, but when this happens, take a minute to figure out if the "popup" extra task that ruins your plan is a make or break "important" task, or a nice to have "urgent" task that in the end has little effect.

Dumping

Dumping is delegating work down to your members without giving thought as to how the task fits the projects, priorities, or workload. It's an easy trap to fall into as a boss because you have people beneath you with whom you can share your load. Dumping is an insidious little trap because as a boss it lets you "feel" like you're accomplishing something when the reality is you really may not be.

Dumping has a devastating effect on your members. The lower one is on the hierarchy, or the "food chain," the harder it is to share workload. It's harder for subordinates to push work laterally and upward than it is for you to push downward. At the same time, delegation without documentation (you not keeping track of what you throw to whom) makes it harder for you to manage workloads, because you lose track. That's when you get nasty surprises, like missing a deadline because the person to whom you passed the task has hit threshold and can't do anymore.

Dumping results in the star performers being tasked to the point where they burn out and leave (do you delegate to mediocre performers, or do you pass work to those you trust?). The stars tend to be tasked more often because you trust them so much, and assume they'll come through for you again. They will do their level best, but eventually even they give their all. Ensure manageable workloads are distributed fairly and evenly among subordinates

The key to execution is to avoid these mistakes or minimize their effects should they occur. By the way, they WILL occur. That's okay. You need to recognize it early, correct it, and move on. How? Be mission focused, humane, and operate with excellence and integrity.

Maintaining Mission Focus

Execution of your plans and programs must, in the end, be mission focused. The sortie must be flown, the fire be put out, the children taught, or passengers brought to their destinations.

Sometimes we get caught in the trap of creating work or crisis. That happens because we lose our mission focus, and get into businesses away from our core competencies or trick ourselves into believing that the department – our piece of the organization – is actually the product.

While it's every member's responsibility to recognize the patterns of the traps and bring it to everyone's attention; it's the leader's responsibility to lead the department out of the traps and back to the mission. This is where communication and involvement play crucial roles. Followers can't refocus the department unilaterally. They need to be able to tell you so you can use your horsepower as the head of the group to help us all put it back together.

Humane

It is true that the mission is paramount, but it's not license to walk over other people – either inside or outside of the organization. The true mark of a leader is being able to balance the needs of subordinates and customers with the needs of the mission, so that subordinates and customers are comfortable with the outcome: mission success.

This is where humane execution becomes important. Always remember that your members have a choice of whether to stay or to leave the organization, even in bad financial times. You can, and should expect a lot from your members. And they will give you a lot, as long as you give them the tools, show them their value, and treat them with respect.

And always remember that your customers (partner agencies and such for example) can go somewhere else too, even if it costs them more. There is ALWAYS a point where the money takes a back seat to being treated well. It doesn't mean you give your customers everything they ask for, because sometimes you just can't. It does mean you treat them respectfully, honestly, know what you can promise, and deliver what you promise.

Excellence and Integrity

Threaded throughout this discussion has been the need to act with excellence and integrity. You expect it from the people who serve you. Your people in turn, expect it from you. Leadership means it's never a question of whether you should do something that might not be safe, moral, or legal. If you have to ask a question in this way, it simply should not be done.

It means some hard choices sometimes. It may mean you may have to discipline or fire a friend because they simply can't do what you ask. It may mean you have to take a stand contradicting your boss when asked to do something that is unethical or illegal. It may mean you have to disappoint some people to accomplish the mission. It may mean you have to choose between your department and the greater good of the organization.

It means you fill the holes the best you can where you find them, and ask for help when you need it. It means you understand your own limitations and those of the department and organization, and are honest about it. Finally, it means you ALWAYS strive to improve.

Wrapping Up

Well, that's it, ACTIV^{2}E Leadership. It's not a recipe; it's a model submitted for your consideration. How you best accomplish this is up to you. There are hundreds of other books on the market to help you find and master the techniques that are right for you. Start reading, because part of your job as a leader is to grow.

Hopefully, ACTIV^{2}E Leadership has helped you to do just that.