The Four Disciplines of Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals

In the opening pages of *The 4 Disciplines of Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals*, the authors (Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, Jim Huling) make a bold assertion: *When you execute a strategy that requires a lasting change in the behavior of other people, you are facing one of the greatest leadership challenges you will ever meet. With the 4 Disciplines of Execution, you are not experimenting with an interesting theory; you are implementing a set of proven practices that meet that challenge successfully every time.*

From there, they unpack the four disciplines, demonstrating why they are essential to the accomplishment of an organization's top priorities. The disciplines include: 1. Focus on the wildly important; 2. Act on lead measures; 3. Keep a compelling scoreboard; 4. Create a cadence of accountability.

Check out these **Book Notes** to get a glimpse of the leadership wisdom found in this well-argued book.

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Title: The Four Disciplines of Execution: *Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals*

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Book Description:

The Four Disciplines of Execution is about a simple, proven formula for reaching the goals you want to reach as a business or individual. In Covey's experience, the thing that most undermines the ability to execute goals is what he calls the Whirlwind: those urgent tasks that must be done simply to keep an organization alive. As Covey shows, the only way to execute new, important goals is to separate those goals from the Whirlwind.

The Four Disciplines allow leaders to create a strategy that requires a change in behavior, since only by ensuring that everyone on the team understands the goal, knows what to do to reach it and knows whether progress is being made, will a leader produce consistent breakthrough results while sustaining the urgent work of the Whirlwind.

The Four Disciplines of Execution are: 1. Focus on the Wildly Important; 2. Act on the Lead Measures; 3. Keep a Compelling Scoreboard; 4. Create a Cadence of Accountability.

For more than a decade FranklinCovey has been studying what it takes to achieve important goals, and in this book they share success stories from a wide range of companies that have implemented the Four Disciplines to result in greater profits, increased market share and improved customer satisfaction. This way of thinking is essential to any company that wants to not only weather, but thrive in this economy.

Book Quotes:

There are two principal things a leader can influence when it comes to producing results: your strategy (or plan) and your ability to execute that strategy. LOCATION: 239

After working with thousands of leaders and teams in every kind of industry, and in schools and government agencies worldwide, this is what we have learned: once you've decided what to do, your biggest challenge is in getting people to execute it at the level of excellence you need. LOCATION: 245

When you execute a strategy that requires a lasting change in the behavior of other people, you are facing one of the greatest leadership challenges you will ever meet. With the 4 Disciplines of Execution, you are not experimenting with an interesting theory; you are implementing a set of proven practices that meet that challenge successfully every time. LOCATION: 293

Whether you call it a strategy, a goal, or simply an improvement effort, any initiative you as a leader drive in order to significantly move your team or organization forward will fall into one of two categories: The first requires mainly a stroke of the pen; the second requires behavioral change. LOCATION: 296

Behavioral-change strategies are very different from stroke-of-the-pen strategies. You can't just order them to happen, because executing them requires getting people—often a lot of people—to do something different. And if you've ever tried to get other people to change their ways, you know how tough it is. Changing yourself is hard enough. LOCATION: 302

W. Edwards Deming, the father of the quality movement, taught that any time the majority of the people behave a particular way the majority of the time, the people are not the problem. The problem is inherent in the system. As a leader, you own responsibility for the system. Although a particular person can be a big problem, if you find yourself blaming the people, you should look again. LOCATION: 333

One prime suspect behind execution breakdown was clarity of the objective: People simply didn't understand the goal they were supposed to execute. LOCATION: 339

In short, people weren't sure what the goal was, weren't committed to it, didn't know what to do about it specifically, and weren't being held accountable for it. LOCATION: 348

The real enemy of execution is your day job! We call it the whirlwind. It's the massive amount of energy that's necessary just to keep your operation going on a day-to-day basis; and, ironically, it's also the thing that makes it so hard to execute anything new. The whirlwind robs from you the focus required to move your team forward. LOCATION: 357

Leaders seldom differentiate between the whirlwind and strategic goals because both are necessary to the survival of the organization. However, they are clearly different, and more important, they compete relentlessly for time, resources, energy, and attention. We don't have to tell you which will usually win this fight. LOCATION: 360

The whirlwind is urgent and it acts on you and everyone working for you every minute of every day. The goals you've set for moving forward are important, but when urgency and importance clash, urgency will win every time. Once you become aware of this struggle, you will see it playing out everywhere, in any team that is trying to execute anything new. LOCATION: 362

Executing in spite of the whirlwind means overcoming not only its powerful distraction, but also the inertia of "the way it's always been done." We're not saying that the whirlwind is bad. It isn't. It keeps your organization alive and you can't ignore it. If you ignore the urgent, it can kill you today. It's also true, however, that if you ignore the important, it can kill you tomorrow. In other words, if you and your team operate solely from within

the whirlwind, you won't progress—all your energy is spent just trying to stay upright in the wind. The challenge is executing your most important goals in the midst of the urgent! LOCATION: 371

Let's summarize what we've said so far. First, if you are going to create significant results you will eventually have to execute a behavioral-change strategy. Stroke-of-the-pen moves will only take you so far. Second, when you undertake a behavioral-change strategy you will be battling the whirlwind—and it is a very worthy adversary, undefeated in many organizations. LOCATION: 390

The 4 Disciplines of Execution aren't designed for managing your whirlwind. The 4 Disciplines are rules for executing your most critical strategy in the midst of your whirlwind. LOCATION: 393

Here's a quick overview of the 4 Disciplines.

- Discipline 1: Focus on the Wildly Important
- Discipline 2: Act on the Lead Measures
- Discipline 3: Keep a Compelling Scoreboard
- Discipline 4: Create a Cadence of Accountability LOCATION: 408

Basically, the more you try to do, the less you actually accomplish. This is a stark, inescapable principle that we all live with. LOCATION: 409

Discipline 1: Focus on the wildly important requires you to go against your basic wiring as a leader and focus on less so that your team can achieve more. LOCATION: 415

Discipline 2: Act on the Lead Measures…This is the discipline of leverage. It's based on the simple principle that all actions are not created equal. Some actions have more impact than others when reaching for a goal. And it is those that you want to identify and act on if you want to reach your goal. LOCATION: 427

Whatever strategy you're pursuing, your progress and your success will be based on two kinds of measures: lag and lead…Lag measures are the tracking measurements of the wildly important goal, and they are usually the ones you spend most of your time praying over…Lead measures are quite different in that they are the measures of the most high-impact things your team must do to reach the goal. In essence, they measure the new behaviors that will drive success on the lag measures, whether those behaviors are as simple as offering a sample to every customer in the bakery or as complex as adhering to standards in jet-engine design. LOCATION: 433

A good lead measure has two basic characteristics: It's predictive of achieving the goal and it can be influenced by the team members. LOCATION: 435

Acting on the lead measures is one of the little-known secrets of execution. Most leaders, even some of the most experienced, are so focused on lag measures that the discipline to focus on the lead measures feels counterintuitive. LOCATION: 440

Don't misunderstand. Lag measures are ultimately the most important things you are trying to accomplish. But lead measures, true to their name, are what will get you to the lag measures. Once you've identified your lead measures, they become the key leverage points for achieving your goal. LOCATION: 442

Discipline 3 is the discipline of engagement. In principle, the highest level of performance always comes from people who are emotionally engaged and the highest level of engagement comes from knowing the score—that is, if people know whether they are winning or losing. LOCATION: 447

Discipline 4 is where execution really happens. The first three disciplines set up the game, but until you apply

Discipline 4, your team isn't in the game. It is based on the principle of accountability: that unless we consistently hold each other accountable, the goal naturally disintegrates in the whirlwind. LOCATION: 458

The cadence of accountability is a rhythm of regular and frequent meetings of any team that owns a wildly important goal. These meetings happen at least weekly and ideally last no more than twenty to thirty minutes. In that brief time, team members hold each other accountable for producing results, despite the whirlwind. LOCATION: 460

The 4 Disciplines work because they are based on principles, not practices. Practices are situational, subjective, and always evolving. Principles are timeless and self-evident, and they apply everywhere. LOCATION: 504

Just as there are principles that govern human behavior, there are principles that govern how teams get things done, or how they execute. We believe the principles of execution have always been focus, leverage, engagement, and accountability. LOCATION: 509

The first discipline is to focus your finest effort on the one or two goals that will make all the difference, instead of giving mediocre effort to dozens of goals. LOCATION: 557

The inability of leaders to focus is a problem of epidemic proportions. LOCATION: 564

Practicing Discipline 1 means narrowing your focus to a few highly important goals so you can manageably achieve them in the midst of the whirlwind of the day job. LOCATION: 569

Simply put, Discipline 1 is about applying more energy against fewer goals because, when it comes to setting goals, the law of diminishing returns is as real as the law of gravity. LOCATION: 571

"Improving our ability to multitask actually hampers our ability to think deeply and creatively…the more you multitask…the less deliberative you become; the less you're able to think and reason out a problem," says Jordan Grafman of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke in the USA. LOCATION: 593

Nothing is more counterintuitive for a leader than saying no to a good idea, and nothing is a bigger destroyer of focus than always saying yes. LOCATION: 633

In determining your wildly important goal, don't ask "What's most important?" Instead, begin by asking "If every other area of our operation remained at its current level of performance, what is the one area where change would have the greatest impact?" This question changes the way you think and lets you clearly identify the focus that would make all the difference. LOCATION: 681

The second discipline is to apply disproportionate energy to the activities that drive your lead measures. This provides the leverage for achieving the lag measures. LOCATION: 853

Discipline 2 is the discipline of leverage. Lead measures are the "measures" of the activities most connected to achieving the goal. LOCATION: 855

While a lag measure tells you if you've achieved the goal, a lead measure tells you if you are likely to achieve the goal. While a lag measure is hard to do anything about, a lead measure is virtually within your control. LOCATION: 861

For example, while you can't control how often your car breaks down on the road (a lag measure) you can certainly control how often your car receives routine maintenance (a lead measure). And, the more you act on the lead measure, the more likely you are to avoid that roadside breakdown. LOCATION: 863

Let's drill down into the distinction between lag and lead measures. A lag measure is the measurement of a result you are trying to achieve. We call them lag measures because by the time you get the data the result has already happened; they are always lagging. LOCATION: 879

Lead measures are different; they foretell the result. They have two primary characteristics. First, a lead measure is predictive, meaning that if the lead measure changes, you can predict that the lag measure also will change. Second, a lead measure is influenceable; it can be directly influenced by the team. That is, the team can make a lead measure happen without a significant dependence on another team. LOCATION: 883

We strongly believe that understanding lead measures will be one of the most important insights you take from this book. LOCATION: 890

The lesson in this story is that lead measure data is almost always more difficult to acquire than lag measure data, but you must pay the price to track your lead measures. LOCATION: 1076

Disciplines 3 and 4 are designed to help the team put energy into moving the lead measures. However, the real impact and beauty of good lead measures in Discipline 2 is that they truly connect your team to the achievement of the WIG. And, ultimately, it's the front line of an organization that creates the bottom-line result you're after. LOCATION: 1121

The third discipline is to make sure everyone knows the score at all times, so that they can tell whether or not they are winning. This is the discipline of engagement. LOCATION: 1143

If the lead and lag measures are not captured on a visual scoreboard and updated regularly, they will disappear into the distraction of the whirlwind. Simply put, people disengage when they don't know the score. When they can see at a glance whether or not they are winning they become profoundly engaged. LOCATION: 1148

There are four questions we always ask when determining if a scoreboard is likely to be compelling to the players:

1. Is it simple?
2. Can I see it easily?
3. Does it show lead and lag measures?
4. Can I tell at a glance if I'm winning?

Remember that you are always competing with the whirlwind and it's a tough adversary. Without a visible scoreboard, the WIG and lead measures could be forgotten in a matter of weeks, if not days, in the constant urgency of your day-to-day responsibilities. LOCATION: 1206

The lead measure is what the team can affect. The lag measure is the result they want. LOCATION: 1215

4DX enables you to set up a winnable game. Discipline 1 narrows your focus to a wildly important goal and establishes a clear finish line. Discipline 2 creates lead measures that give your team leverage to achieve the goal. This is what makes it a game: The team is making a bet on their lead measures. But, without Discipline 3, without a compelling players' scoreboard, not only would the game be lost in the whirlwind, no one would care. LOCATION: 1294

The fourth discipline is to create a cadence of accountability, a frequently recurring cycle of accounting for past performance and planning to move the score forward. LOCATION: 1303

To prepare for the meeting, every team member thinks about the same question: “What are the one or two most important things I can do this week to impact the lead measures?” LOCATION: 1398

In other words, the whirlwind will consume every moment of time and every ounce of energy it can. Parkinson’s Law states: “Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion,” and nowhere is this principle of expansion and consumption of time and energy more true than with your whirlwind. LOCATION: 1494

In his book The Three Signs of a Miserable Job, Patrick Lencioni describes brilliantly three reasons individuals disengage from work. 1. Anonymity: They feel their leaders don’t know or care what they are doing. 2. Irrelevance: They don’t understand how their job makes a difference. 3. Immeasurement: They cannot measure or assess for themselves the contribution they are making. LOCATION: 1513

However, the accountability created in a WIG session is very different. It’s not organizational, it’s personal. Instead of accountability to a broad outcome you can’t influence, it’s accountability to a weekly commitment that you yourself made and that is within your power to keep. And, one-by-one, you report your results not only to the boss, but to each other. The question you ultimately answer in a WIG session is, “Did we do what we committed to each other we would do?” LOCATION: 1536

Think of 4DX like the operating system on your computer. You need a powerful operating system to execute whatever programs you choose to install. If the operating system isn’t equal to the task, it doesn’t matter how beautifully designed the program, it won’t work consistently on your computer. LOCATION: 1647

STAGE 1: Getting Clear. The leader and the team commit to a new level of performance. They are oriented to 4DX and develop crystal-clear WIGs, lag and lead measures, and a compelling scoreboard. They commit to regular WIG sessions. Although you can naturally expect varying levels of commitment, team members will be more motivated if they are closely involved in the 4DX work session. LOCATION: 1718

STAGE 2: Launch. Now the team is at the starting line. Whether you hold a formal kickoff meeting, or gather your team in a brief huddle, you launch the team into action on the WIG. But just as a rocket requires tremendous, highly focused energy to escape the earth’s gravity, the team needs intense involvement from the leader at this point of launch. LOCATION: 1745

STAGE 3: Adoption. Team members adopt the 4DX process and new behaviors drive the achievement of the WIG. You can expect resistance to fade and enthusiasm to increase as 4DX begins to work for them. They become accountable to each other for the new level of performance despite the demands of the whirlwind. LOCATION: 1760

STAGE 4: Optimization. At this stage, the team shifts to a 4DX mindset. You can expect them to become more purposeful and more engaged in their work as they produce results that make a difference. They will start looking for ways to optimize their performance—they now know what “playing to win” feels like. LOCATION: 1779

STAGE 5: Habits. When 4DX becomes habitual, you can expect not only to reach the goal but also to see a permanent rise in the level of your team’s performance. The ultimate aim of 4DX is not just to get results, but to create a culture of excellent execution. LOCATION: 1802