

Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done by Lawrence Bossidy | Book Summary by Paul Minors

INTRODUCTION

Who is this summary for?

Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done by Lawrence Bossidy and Ram Charanis a 3-part examination of what it takes for companies to succeed through strategies, processes, leadership and ultimately, execution. It is this which sets successful companies apart from those that fail. An ideal read of any leaders looking to amplify their team's execution and results.

About the author

American born Lawrence Bossidy considers himself a businessman and author. Graduating college with a degree in economics, Bossidy took on a job in finance at General Electric. Bossidy stayed with the company for the next 34 years and eventually became the CEO from 1979-1981. He was part of the company for some of their most significant years and saw them double their assets. Bossidy went on to be chairman and CEO of AlliedSignal Corporation and determined to help people learn he wrote this book in 2002. Bossidy lives with his wife in Connecticut and has nine children.

In this summary

Bossidy's book has three main parts which we will summarise in detail. The first part; Why Execution is Needed will cover the concept of execution as a discipline and how execution must be at the core of a companies culture. The second part; The Building Blocks of Execution will cover leader behaviours and creating a framework for cultural change. Finally, part three; Three Core Processes of Execution will cover the people process, the strategy process, and the operations process.

BOOK SUMMARY

PART ONE: WHY EXECUTION IS NEEDED

Failure

Bossidy explains that when a company appears to be failing or breaking down the blame is often placed on the CEO. It's assumed that the strategy the CEO had in place was wrong and is to blame. However, Bossidy stresses that often the strategy itself wasn't wrong, but it wasn't executed effectively. And this is where things start to fall apart. To be successful, you need more than just an excellent strategy, you also need excellent execution.

"Without execution, the breakthrough thinking breaks down, learning adds no value, people don't meet their stretch goals, and the revolution stops dead in its tracks. What you get is a change for the worse, because failure drains the energy from your organisation. Repeated failure destroys it."

Leading and execution

Bossidy identifies execution as 'the missing link between aspirations and results'. He believes that if you can learn how to connect the two, then success will follow. It's important to note that execution is a discipline and needs to be practiced by company leaders at all levels. It's not just a single component but it needs to be part of all strategies and goals. Without this, companies will fail to deliver.

It's so important that a business leader knows how to execute well. You can be a leader full of ideas and aspirations but without the ability to execute well, these ideas will amount to nothing.

Bossidy identifies three key points to consider when thinking about execution:

1. Execution is a discipline, it's a critical component of the strategy.
2. The business leader is responsible for encouraging and promoting execution.
3. Execution needs to be at the core of an organisations culture.

Discipline

"Tactics are central to execution, but execution is not tactics. Execution is fundamental to strategy and has to shape it. No worthwhile strategy can be planned without taking into account the organisation's ability to execute it."

Bossidy explains that you should think of execution as a process. Always be asking how and what, ask questions and remain accountable. Part of executing means that you need to be in a position to understand the business environment and the organisations capabilities. You need to be able to make assumptions and forecasts. Execution requires the ability to link strategy + operations + people who are going to execute the strategy. If these links aren't clear and synchronised then the execution won't be streamlined or effective. Therefore, Bossidy explains that there are three processes that are critical to effective execution: the people process, the strategy process, and the operations process.

Business leaders

Bossidy stresses the importance of having a great business leader who is totally committed to the company and has a clear understanding of the business and the current business environment. Without this commitment, a leader will not be in a position to execute strategies.

Bossidy explains that business leaders have three key roles when it comes to the execution. They must select the people who will also be managing the strategy and execution. The leader is responsible for setting the strategic direction and ensuring that everyone involved understands the goals. They are also in charge of coordinating operations. Bossidy stressed the importance of having the leader do these jobs, they are not something that should be delegated to a lower colleague.

"Leading for execution is not about micromanaging, or being "hands-on," or disempowering people. Rather, it's about active involvement—doing the things leaders should be doing in the first place."

Culture

Bossidy, like many other authors, stressed the importance of culture within a business. Bossidy explains that execution needs to be a core part of this culture, it needs to be the norm and something that all employees understand. A leader who executes is someone who is constantly analysing the gap between the actual results

and the desired results of any strategic plan. By learning from this gap they can take their knowledge onto the next project and make significant improvements.

Although Bossidy has pointed out that execution is the responsibility of senior leaders, it doesn't mean that everyone in any organisation should practice the skills. By learning the skills of execution at any level, you will be making strides in advancing your career and eventually reaching that senior leadership role.

It's the combination of people as individuals and as a collective that aid execution. If you can get everyone moving in the same direction and at the same time then successful execution is much more likely. Bossidy explains that any leader that lacks the discipline of execution, isn't really a leader at all. They must strive to be rigorous and consistent with their actions and encourage all team members to practice the discipline of execution.

PART TWO: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF EXECUTION

Building block one: seven essential behaviours of a leader

1. The first essential behaviour a leader needs it to know the people and the business. It's so important that a leader is in touch with who they work with and the current business climate.
2. Realism is the second behaviour that a leader needs. Rather than avoiding the truth a great leader needs to embrace the truth. And if this means identifying and acknowledging weaknesses then be as real as possible.
3. Leaders need to be setting goals and priorities. It's a good idea to focus on a few key goals that the entire team can focus on. Don't overcomplicate things with too many goals or priorities.
4. Being someone that always follows through is important for a leader, it means that people will believe what you say and take you seriously. Never be someone who has a lot to say but never puts anything into action.
5. The fifth behaviour a leader must have is the ability to reward people. In doing so you encourage your team to work hard and achieve results. Consider bonuses, pay rises or stocks.
6. Pass on knowledge, always be expanding other peoples capabilities. Someone that you work with may be the leader one day so it's important to share as much knowledge as possible.
7. Leaders need to be strong characters who know themselves well. Accepting and acknowledging your own weaknesses and working to improve these is a great trait for a leader. It's important that leaders are self-aware, have humility and are authentic.

Building block two: cultural change

Bossidy explains that companies often focus on changing their strategy and structures. But they fail to work on the people, the beliefs, and behaviours of those that they work with. He emphasises that cultural change is just as important (if not more) as strategy and structure.

Bossidy identifies that companies who make an effort to change their culture often fail because they don't find the direct link between culture and business outcomes. When the changes are so disconnected, they are not likely to succeed. A business needs to understand the deep connections between company culture and business outcomes.

"To change a business's culture, you need a set of processes— social operating mechanisms. These will change the beliefs and behaviour of people in ways that are directly linked to bottom-line results."

Change peoples behaviour

By changing people's behaviours, you are having a direct impact on the results they produce. So it's important to ensure that the behavioural changes you encourage, promote a positive outcome. Bossidy explains that the first step is to clearly identify and communicate what results you are after. Then have a discussion about how those results are going to be reached. And finally, you reward people when the goals are reached. In the scenario where you and your team do not reach the end goal adequately, assess what happened and ask how can you learn for next time. It's all about creating a culture of getting things done.

Actions

Bossidy explains that behaviours are the outcome of beliefs being turned into action. The results are a direct result of the behaviours. When Bossidy talks about behaviour, he's not referring to it on an individual level. He's talking about collective behaviour from groups in corporate settings.

"You cannot have an execution culture without robust dialogue. One that brings reality to the surface through openness, candor, and informality. Robust dialogue makes an organization effective in gathering information, understanding the information, and reshaping it to produce decisions. It fosters creativity—most innovations and inventions are incubated through

robust dialogue. Ultimately, it creates a more competitive advantage and shareholder value."

Building block three: The job no leader should delegate

Bossidy explains that there is one job that no leader should ever delegate, and that's ensuring that the right people are in the right job. It's absolutely critical that leaders fully understand the importance of having the right people in the right roles. After all, it's the people that are responsible for generating the results and outcomes. These are the people that make decisions every day and take actions towards either success or failure.

Bossidy explains that consistently successful businesses always have a leader who is dedicated to selecting the perfect people for the perfect roles. This isn't a task that can be rushed or overlooked. It takes time and dedication when selecting the right employees but it is always going to be worth it.

Development

Further to selecting the right people, Bossidy emphasises the importance of developing people within your company. Whether it be providing experiences, learning opportunities, feedback, coaching education or training. It is critical that everyone is always learning and developing. This encourages them to stay motivated, stay on track and better themselves and their work.

"When you interview, you have to create a full picture of the person in your mind based on things you can learn by probing them. Then you need to find out about their past and present accomplishments, how they think, and what drives their ambitions."

PART THREE: THE THREE CORE PROCESSES OF EXECUTION

Bossidy has identified three processes that should be at the core of execution. The people process, the strategy process, and the operation process. All are equally important.

The people process

This process is all about connecting the people to the strategy and operations. People are at the core of any business, they are the ones that make decisions and create strategies. It's absolutely critical that the right people understand how to translate the strategy into an operational reality.

Bossidy explains that by having an effective people process you will achieve three different things:

1. You'll be able to evaluate the people you work with.
 - 1.1. A framework will be provided to identify and develop leadership.
 - 1.2. You'll establish a leadership pipeline.

It's important to create the links between the people and the strategy and operations. Establishing this link will encourage people to remain focused and motivated and will keep everyone accountable.

Leaders and those that don't perform

We've already discussed the idea of having a leadership pipeline, this should be dedicated to continuous improvement for the staff. By identifying milestones (both medium and long-term) you will have a system by which you can assess your staff. By assessing how quickly and effectively they meet their milestones you will be in a better position to understand who is better equipped to take on more responsibility.

Bossidy explains that it's inevitable that processes like this will bring attention to the non-performers. In some cases, people who have been promoted will be underperforming in their new role and need to be shifted back or eliminated

altogether. Bossidy appreciates that this can be extremely difficult but it's a necessary part of a leaders job.

Bossidy explains that when the right people are in the right jobs it will become evidently clear. The way everyone works together seamlessly and delivers the desired results will be a clear identifier.

"It's the consistency of practice that develops expertise in appraising and choosing the right people. The people process begins with one-on-one assessments, but when developed and practiced as a total process, it becomes incredibly effective as an execution tool."

The strategy process

Bossidy's strategy process is all about linking the people to operations. He explains that strategies all have a common, ground-level goal: to win over the customers and establish a competitive advantage. And this needs to be done within current financial restraints. So Bossidy asks the question, if it's so straightforward, then why do strategies often fail?

Bossidy believes that a strategic plan needs to be essentially an action plan. This plan needs to be clear and easily understood. Business leaders need to be able to understand what needs to be done in order to reach their goals. In order to establish an effective action plan, you first need to define and understand the critical issue. All good strategies have a critical issue that is the driving force behind it. Bossidy explains that once the plan has been established, you should develop it further by asking the following questions:

- How good are the assumptions upon which the plan hinges?
- What are the pluses and minuses of the alternatives?
- Do you have the organizational capability to execute the plan?
- What do you need to do in the near and medium terms to make the plan work in the long run?
- Can you adapt the plan to rapid changes in the business environment?

Strategic planning

It's absolutely essential that your strategy not only addresses the what but also the how. Without understanding how the strategy will be implemented you will face almost certain failure. Bossidy stresses the importance of defining six or less key concepts and actions behind any strategy. By being able to pinpoint these key concepts leaders will be able to understand and implement the strategy better. Even though a comprehensive strategy may be a lengthy document, you should be able to define the overall essence of the strategy on a single page.

"To be effective, a strategy has to be constructed and owned by those who will execute it, namely the line people. Staff people can help by collecting data and using analytical tools, but the business leaders must be in charge of developing the substance of the strategic plan."

Questions and reviews

Bossidy identifies some key things that a strategic plan must address:

- Understanding existing customers and markets.
- Identifying the best way to grow the business and make a profit.
- What are some obstacles preventing growth?
- Identify the competition.
- Is the strategy realistic?
- Does the strategy have realistic short term and long term milestones?
- Identify each milestone.
- Are there any issues that the business will face?
- How is the business going to make money as a result of this strategy?
- Is the profit going to be sustainable?

Once the strategy has been finalised, the next step is to review it. Here's what Bossidy recommends you consider for a review:

- Raise any questions you have.
- Revisit questions that have been asked previously. Have these been adequately answered?
- Does the team understand the competition completely?
- Does the organisation have the capability to carry this strategy out?
- Is there a clearly defined focus?
- Has the right idea been chosen?
- Can you clearly identify the link between people and operations?

The operations process

Bossidy's operations process is all about linking the strategy to the people. As we've discussed, the strategy is designed to identify where the business is headed and how it's getting there. The people process defines who is going to help the business get there. The final piece of the puzzle is the operation process, designed to define the road ahead, the path the people can follow.

"It breaks long-term output into short-term targets. Meeting those here-and-now targets forces decisions to be made and integrated across the organization, both initially and in response to changes in business conditions. It puts reality behind the numbers."

Bossidy explains that an operating plan includes the path to reaching objectives including earnings, sales, margins, and cash flows. It also includes product launches, marketing plans, sales plans, manufacturing plans, and productivity plans.

Everyone involved needs to be responsible for constructing the operations process. This isn't purely the job of a leader. Bossidy identifies synchronisation as a critical part of the execution process. It's important to ensure that all parts of the organisation have a common understanding and know who is responsible for what. By having synchronisation within the organisation you are much more likely to execute the strategy and reach your goals.

Defining the operations process

Setting realistic goals is the first step, and in order to do that, you need to make sound assumptions. Bossidy identifies this as a critical step and encourages you to spend time debating the assumptions. Once you've come to a clear conclusion, you can then move on to set realistic goals. The next step in the process is the building of the operations plan. You begin by setting targets. Followed by developing the action plans, short-term and long-term objectives. Also, spend time developing contingency plans. Finally, everyone needs to agree on the plan and ensure that it's clear and straightforward. Bossidy encourages everyone to have follow-up measures in place to ensure that everyone is staying on track and working on the right steps and the right time. Keep accountability going throughout the process.

"Quarterly reviews help keep plans up to date and reinforce synchronization. They also give a leader a good idea about which people are on top of their businesses, which ones aren't, and what the latter need to do."

CONCLUSION

Key takeaways

- It's so important that a business leader knows how to execute well.
- Execution is a process.
- Always be asking how and what, ask questions and remain accountable.
- Part of executing means that you need to be in a position to understand the business environment and the organisations capabilities.
- Business leaders have three key roles when it comes to the execution: selecting the right people, setting the strategic direction and coordinating operations.
- Execution needs to be a core part of company culture, it needs to be the norm and something that all employees understand.
- If you can get everyone moving in the same direction and at the same time then successful execution is much more likely.
- By changing people's behaviours, you are having a direct impact on the results they produce.
- It's important to ensure that the behavioural changes you encourage, promote a positive outcome.
- It is the job of the leader to select the right people for the right roles.
- It's important to continuously develop the people who work for you.
- Bossidy has identified three processes that should be at the core of execution. The people process, the strategy process, and the operation process.
- The people process is all about linking the people to strategy and operations.

- Having the right people understand how to translate the strategy into an operational reality.
- The people process defines who is going to help the business get to the end goal.
- Establishing this link will encourage people to remain focused and motivated and will keep everyone accountable.
- The strategy process is all about linking the people to operations.
- The strategy is designed to identify where the business is headed and how it's getting there.
- A strategy is essentially an action plan.
- It's absolutely essential that your strategy not only addresses the what but also the how.
- The operations process is all about linking the strategy to the people.
- The final piece of the puzzle is the operation process, designed to define the road ahead, the path the people can follow.

Further reading

Another book dedicated to execution is *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* by Chris McChesney. It's an excellent guide to removing the distractions of the day-to-day tasks in your day job and being able to focus on 'Wildly Important Goals' and execute these excellently. McChesney produces a straightforward and actionable step-by-step guide that could transform the way you and your team work.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey explores a number of paradigms, principles and habits that can help you become more productive, whether that be as an individual, as part of an organisation or a business. Another similar read is *Getting Things Done* by David Allen is arguably the world's most well known book on productivity. The lessons in this book should be considered essential reading for anyone looking to pursue a more productive lifestyle.

Guidelines is my eBook that summarises the main lessons from 33 of the best-selling self-help books in one place. It is the ultimate book summary; Available as a 80-page ebook and 115-minute audio book. Guidelines lists 31 rules (or guidelines) that you

should follow to improve your productivity, become a better leader, do better in business, improve your health, succeed in life and become a happier person.

Action steps

- Download the complete book on [Amazon](#).

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