



The 4 Disciplines of Execution: Achieving Your Wildly Important Goals

By Chris McChesney, Sean Covey

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What happened? The “whirlwind” of urgent activity required to keep things running day-to-day devoured all the time and energy you needed to invest in executing your strategy for tomorrow! *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* can change all that forever.

The 4 Disciplines of Execution (4DX) is a simple, repeatable, and proven formula for executing on your most important strategic priorities in the midst of the whirlwind. By following The 4 Disciplines:

- Focusing on the Wildly Important
- Acting on Lead Measures
- Keeping a Compelling Scoreboard
- Creating a Cadence of Accountability

leaders can produce breakthrough results, even when executing the strategy requires a significant change in behavior from their teams.

4DX is not theory. It is a proven set of practices that have been tested and refined by hundreds of organizations and thousands of teams over many years. When a company or an individual adheres to these disciplines, they achieve superb results—regardless of the goal. *4DX* represents a new way of thinking and working that is essential to thriving in today's competitive climate. Simply put, this is one audiobook that no business leader can afford to miss.

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Editorial Review

Review

“*The 4 Disciplines of Execution* offers more than theories for making strategic organizational change. The authors explain not only the ‘what’ but also ‘how’ effective execution is achieved. They share numerous examples of companies that have done just that, not once, but over and over again. This is a book that every leader should read!”

—**Clayton Christensen, Professor, Harvard Business School, and author of *The Innovator’s Dilemma***

“What Six Sigma and Lean are to manufacturing, *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* is to executing your strategy. 4DX is a practical methodology that can solve every leader’s #1 challenge: execution.” (Ram Charan *Co-Author of the Best Selling Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done and the au*)

“Many of the foundational values of Marriott are embodied within *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*. By utilizing this process inside our organization, our leaders and teams have been able to set and achieve extraordinary goals, which have had a significant impact on making 'Our Guests' Experience' truly remarkable. Any organization can create these same kinds of breakthrough results if they apply the principles and processes taught in this book!” (J.W. Marriott, Jr *Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Marriott International, Inc.*)

“The State of Georgia had unprecedented success as a result of implementing the principles outlined in *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*. We certified hundreds of leaders to take the disciplines to every department, achieving unprecedented results in customer service, quality improvement, and cost reduction. These execution principles are a must for any government agency that is seeking to be world class.” (The Honorable Sonny Perdue *Governor of Georgia, 2003-2011*)

“Customers are loyal to a brand when they can trust it to deliver a consistently outstanding experience. This requires the commitment of everyone up and down the organization to innovate new ways to economically delight customers, so they become promoters. *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* offers a proven process for engaging the hearts and minds of every employee toward this vital goal. I highly recommend this book to any leader committed to making customer loyalty a mission-critical goal.” (Fred Reichheld *Bain Fellow, Inventor of the Net Promoter® System and author of: The Ultimate Question 2.0*)

“In a business world where the essence of leadership centers around strategy, this book highlights the true requirements of any organization to focus on the principles of execution. At The Ritz-Carlton, I believe the only way to strengthen operational excellence is through flawless execution. The application of Focus, Leverage, Engagement and Accountability, as discussed in *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*, are key to our success and make exceptional reading for today’s business leaders.” (Herve Humler *President and Chief Operations Officer, The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company*)

“*The 4 Disciplines of Execution* book contains principles and processes that do indeed work. I do believe that 'execution excellence' is the ultimate competitive differential of this decade. As we have partnered with FranklinCovey to apply the methodology and process globally throughout our organization, it has not only had a significant impact on our organization’s business results, but it has been transformational for me as a leader, both personally and professionally.” (Jeff Simmons *President, Elanco Animal Health, Eli Lilly and Company*)

“We believe that *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* are the keys to growth and success. For years we have struggled with creating focus for our people. We have used priority sheets, standards of performance measures, and others. We have fallen in love with the concepts of “whirlwinds and WIG!” When you read this book you will never look at work, or life, the same!” (Danny Wegman *Chief Executive Officer, Wegmans Food Markets, Inc., #1 on Fortune magazine’s 2005 list*)

“The *4 Disciplines*’ practical guidance on goal-setting and measurement resonates with groups of all levels in our organization. Many teams have applied this intuitive approach to build engagement and increase execution and accountability.” (Dave Dillon *Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, The Kroger Co.*)

“*The 4 Disciplines of Execution* helps leaders, teams, and front line employees to narrow their focus and spend their time executing those things that will bring the highest return for their organization and customers. This book is a must read for any leader who wants to achieve that which is extraordinary in their company!” (Diana Thomas *US Vice President of Training and Learning Development, Hamburger University, McDonalds Corporation*)

About the Author

Chris McChesney is the Global Practice Leader of Execution for FranklinCovey and one of the primary developers of *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*. For more than a decade, he has led FranklinCovey's ongoing design and development of these principles, as well as the consulting organization that has achieved extraordinary growth in many countries around the globe and impacted hundreds of organizations.

Sean Covey is Executive Vice President of Global Solutions and Partnerships for FranklinCovey and oversees FranklinCovey's international operations in 141 countries around the globe. As the Chief Product Architect for FranklinCovey, Sean organized and directed the original teams that conceived and created *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* and has been an avid practitioner and promoter of the methodology ever since.

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The 4 Disciplines of Execution

Discipline 1: Focus on the Wildly Important

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.

Execution starts with focus. Without it, the other three disciplines won't be able to help you.



Why do almost all leaders struggle to narrow their focus? It's not because they don't think focus is needed. Every week, we work with dozens of leadership teams across the world and, almost without exception, they acknowledge that they need greater focus. Despite this desire, they continue to find themselves with too many competing priorities, pulling their teams in too many different directions. One of the first things we want you to know is that you are not alone. The inability of leaders to focus is a problem of epidemic proportions.

We also want you to know that when we talk about narrowing your focus in Discipline 1, we are not talking

about narrowing the size and complexity of your whirlwind, although, over time, attention to WIGs might have that effect. Your whirlwind includes all of the urgent activities that are necessary to sustain your business day to day. Focusing on the wildly important means narrowing the number of goals you are attempting to accomplish beyond the day-to-day demands of your whirlwind.



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.



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.



Your chances of achieving 2 or 3 goals with excellence are high, but the more goals you try to juggle at once, the less likely you will be to reach them.



If a team focuses on two or even three goals beyond the demands of their whirlwind, they can often accomplish them. However, if they set four to ten goals, our experience has been that they will achieve only one or two. They'll be going backward! If they go after eleven to twenty goals in addition to the whirlwind, they'll lose all focus. Confronted with so many goals the team members will stop listening let alone executing.

Why is this so?

The fundamental principle at work in Discipline 1 is that human beings are genetically hardwired to do one thing at a time with excellence. You're probably thinking—proudly—that you're great at multi-tasking and can get a lot of things done at the same time. But to the wildly important goal you want to devote your best effort. Steve Jobs of Apple had a big company to run, and he could have proudly brought many more products to market than he did; but he chose to focus on a handful of "wildly important" products. His focus was legendary. And so were his results. Science tells us the human brain can give full focus to only a single object at any given moment. You can't even give your best effort to driving a car while talking on a mobile phone and eating a burger, let alone juggle multiple important business goals at once.

MIT neuroscientist Earl Miller says, "Trying to concentrate on two tasks causes an overload of the brain's processing capacity.... Particularly when people try to perform similar tasks at the same time, such as writing an email and talking on the phone, they compete to use the same part of the brain. Trying to carry too

much, the brain simply slows down.”⁵ If this is true of simple tasks like processing emails and phone calls, think of the impact of losing focus on the goals that could transform your business.

The prefrontal cortex, the brain’s gateway, just can’t handle the daily flood that comes at us, because it is designed to deal with teaspoons rather than tidal waves of information.

In our culture of multitasking, according to Professor Clifford Nass of Stanford University, “The neural circuits devoted to scanning, skimming, and multitasking are expanding and strengthening, while those used for reading and thinking deeply, with sustained concentration, are weakening or eroding.”

What’s the consequence? “Habitual multitaskers may be sacrificing performance on the primary task. They are suckers for irrelevancy.” (Another term for the primary task is the WIG.)

“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.⁶

Of course, you don’t have to overload the brain. You can leverage the brain’s capacity to concentrate superbly on one wildly important goal at a time, while still being aware of the other priorities. There’s no better illustration of this principle than an airport control tower.

Right now more than a hundred airplanes might be approaching, taking off, or taxiing around, and all of them are very important, especially if you happen to be on one of them! But for the air traffic controller, only one airplane is wildly important right now—the one that’s landing at this moment.

The controller is aware of all the other planes on the radar. She’s keeping track of them, but right now all her talent and expertise is solely focused on one flight. If she doesn’t get that flight on the ground safely and with total excellence, then nothing else she might achieve is really going to matter much. She lands one airplane at a time.

WIGs are like that. They are the goals you must achieve with total excellence beyond the circling priorities of your day to day. To succeed, you must be willing to make the hard choices that separate what is wildly important from all the many other merely important goals on your radar. Then, you must approach that WIG with focus and diligence until it is delivered as promised, with excellence.

That doesn’t mean you abandon all your other important goals. They’re still on your radar, but they don’t require your finest diligence and effort right now. (Still, some of those goals might never be worthy of your finest diligence and effort—some of them never should have taken off in the first place!)

People who try to push many goals at once usually wind up doing a mediocre job on all of them. You can ignore the principle of focus, but it won’t ignore you. Or you can leverage this principle to achieve your top goals, one at a time, again and again.



CONVENTIONAL THINKING

4DX PRINCIPLE

All of our goals are Priority 1. We can successfully multitask and succeed at five, ten, or fifteen important goals. All we need to do is work harder and longer...

Many of our goals are important, but only one or two are wildly important. We call them WIGs. They are the goals we must achieve. Our finest effort can only be given to one or two wildly important goals at a time.



THE LEADER'S CHALLENGE

So, here's the big question: Why is there so much pressure toward expanding, rather than narrowing, the goals? If you understand the need to focus, why is it so difficult to actually do it?

You might say that, as a leader, it's because you can always see more than a dozen existing things that need improvement and another dozen new opportunities you'd like to be chasing on any given day. On top of that, there are other people (and other peoples' agendas) that can be adding to your goals, especially if they are from higher up in the organization.

However, more often than any of these external forces, there's one real culprit that creates most of the problem: you. In the words of the old cartoon, Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Although the tendencies that drive you to the higher side of the scale are well-intentioned, in a very real sense, you are often your own worst enemy. Being aware of these tendencies is a good place to start. Let's examine a few of them candidly.

One reason you may drive your team to take on too much is that, as a leader, you tend to be ambitious and creative. You are exactly the kind of individual organizations like to promote. The problem is that creative, ambitious people always want to do more, not less. If this describes you, you're almost hardwired to violate the first discipline of execution.

Another reason you might lead your team to go after too many goals is to hedge your bets. In other words, if your team pursues everything, then it seems likely that something might work. It also ensures that, if you fail, no one can question the level of effort your team gave. Even though you know that more is not better, it looks better, especially to the person above you. So, you may resist the increased accountability for results that would come with fewer goals and instead rely on the sheer volume of effort to drive your success.

However, the greatest challenge you face in narrowing your goals is simply that it requires you to say no to a lot of good ideas. 4DX may even mean saying no to some great ideas, at least for now. 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.

What makes it even harder is that these good ideas aren't presented all at once, wrapped in a nice little bundle so that choosing among them would be simple. Instead, they filter in one at a time. Alone, each idea seems to make so much sense that it's almost impossible for you to say no, so you fall into a trap of your own making.

We believe all leaders facing this challenge should have this quote prominently displayed in their offices:





We can't overemphasize the importance of focusing on only one or two WIGs at once. It's counterintuitive, but it must happen.

Before Apple was named company of the decade in the United States by multiple sources,⁷ then COO Tim Cook (now CEO) said this to the company's shareholders:

"We are the most focused company that I know of or have read of or have any knowledge of. We say no to good ideas every day. We say no to great ideas in order to keep the amount of things we focus on very small in number so that we can put enormous energy behind the ones we do choose. The table each of you is sitting at today, you could probably put every product on it that Apple makes, yet Apple's revenue last year was \$40 billion."⁸

Apple's determination to say no to good ideas has had devastating consequences for their competitors. We once worked with a manufacturer that competed directly with Apple's iPhone. When we met with the leader responsible for creating a new interface to compete with the iPhone (How would you like that assignment?), he was more than a little discouraged. "It's really not fair," he said, shaking his head. "Between our domestic and international operations we make over forty different phones. They only make one."

We couldn't have said it better ourselves.

As Stephen R. Covey says, "You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage—pleasantly, smilingly, unapologetically—to say no to other things. And the way you do that is by having a bigger 'yes' burning inside."

Once you understand the importance of saying no to good ideas in order to keep your team's focus narrow, you can avoid the first of two focus traps. However, the second trap, trying to turn everything in the whirlwind into a WIG, is even more common. Once caught in it, you try to turn everything in the whirlwind into a goal.

Within the whirlwind are all of your existing measurements for running the organization today, illustrated below as dials. It's perfectly appropriate for your team to spend 80 percent of their time and energy sustaining or incrementally improving the whirlwind. Keeping the ship afloat should be job one, but if they are spending 100 percent of their energy trying to significantly improve all of those dials at once, you will have lost your focus.



In the organizational whirlwind, people track countless numbers—finances, customer satisfaction scores, product life cycles, and so forth. A new, wildly important goal can get lost in this storm.



Applying even pressure to all these dials is like trying to make holes in a piece of paper by applying even pressure with all your fingers. You can't press on any one dial with enough force to drive a change in human behavior. Many of the dials require dozens of changes in human behavior in order to move them. Focusing on one WIG is like punching one finger through the paper—all your strength goes into making that hole.

Unless you can achieve your goal with a stroke of the pen, success is going to require your team to change their behavior; and they simply cannot change that many behaviors at once, no matter how badly you want them to. Trying to significantly improve every measure in the whirlwind will consume all of your time and leave you with very little to show for it.

So, beyond avoiding these two focus traps—refusing to say no to all the good ideas and trying to make everything in the whirlwind a goal—what should you do? Narrow your focus to one or two wildly important goals and consistently invest the team's time and energy into them. In other words, if you want high-focus, high-performance team members, they must have something wildly important to focus on.



While you don't lose track of the numbers in the whirlwind, Discipline 1 requires intense focus on one number—the measure of success on the “wildly important goal.”



IDENTIFYING YOUR WILDLY IMPORTANT GOALS

A wildly important goal (WIG) is a goal that can make all the difference. Because it's your strategic tipping point, you're going to commit to apply a disproportionate amount of energy to it—the 20 percent that is not used up in the whirlwind. But how do you decide which of many possible goals should be your WIG?

Sometimes, the choice of a WIG is obvious, but at other times it can be confusing. If you try to select your WIG by asking yourself what's most important, you may find your mind running in circles. Why? Because the urgent priorities in your whirlwind are always competing to be the most important and a very good argument can usually be made for choosing any one of them.

To illustrate this problem, imagine the leadership team in a manufacturing plant having this conversation: “I'm telling you, quality is the most important thing and it should be our WIG!” says one person. “Well don't forget, it's our production that pays the bills around here,” says another. “I'm sorry, but I disagree with both of you,” says a third. “Safety has to be the most important. Have you ever had one of your people seriously hurt in an accident? If you had, you'd agree.”

The result is frustration and confusion, along with an inevitable (and paradoxical) loss of focus.

The problem in this conversation is that the leaders are asking the wrong question.

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.

Remember, 80 percent of your team's energy will still be directed at sustaining the whirlwind, so ignore the temptation to worry that by making one or two goals most important, your team will ignore everything else. And once you stop worrying about everything else going backward, you can start moving forward on your WIG. In the words of Discipline 1, you can focus on the wildly important.

Your wildly important goal will come from one of two categories: either from within the whirlwind or from outside it.

Within the whirlwind, it could be something so badly broken that it must be fixed, or it could be a key element of your value proposition that isn't being delivered. Poor project completion time, out-of-control costs, or unsatisfactory customer service are all good examples. However, it could also be an area in which your team is already performing well and where leveraging this strength could result in significant impact. For example, increasing patient satisfaction in a hospital from the 85th percentile to the 95th percentile could increase your revenue dramatically.

Outside the whirlwind, the choices tend to be about repositioning yourself strategically. Launching a new product or service, either to counter a competitive threat or seize a huge opportunity, could be a WIG that would make all the difference. Remember that this type of WIG will require an even greater change in behavior, since it will be completely new to your team.

Whether your WIG comes from within the whirlwind or outside it, your real aim is not only to achieve it, but also to then make the new level of performance a natural part of your team's operation. In essence, once a WIG is achieved, it goes back into the whirlwind. Every time this happens, the whirlwind changes. It isn't as chaotic, chronic problems are resolved, and new performance levels are sustained; in essence, it's a much higher performing whirlwind. Ultimately, this is what enables your team to pursue the next WIG from a stronger foundation.

Sometimes, choosing your WIG is about more than selecting the aspect of your business where the greatest results are desired; it's about a WIG so fundamental to the heart of your mission that achieving it defines your existence as an organization.

We got to work with the new president of a large thrift-store chain just as he was asking himself these questions. His predecessor had put the company on a firm financial and operational footing, updating marketing and advertising, the look and feel of the stores, and the accounting procedures. When we got into the WIG discussion, some of his reports thought this emphasis needed to continue. Others wanted more emphasis on hiring more disabled workers. Still others argued that their top WIG should be growth. The range of choices was baffling.

To help the team find common ground, the new leader asked everyone to ponder the mission of the organization: "To promote self-reliance among the disabled and displaced." With the company in a solid financial and operational position, could it be that the area where they now wanted the greatest results might be more directly related to their mission?

Gradually, a WIG emerged from this experience; one they had not even considered before: "Help disabled workers find jobs outside our organization that can sustain them." While they couldn't hire every disabled person in their region, they had the operational capacity to train thousands in the retail business and find better jobs for them, so that they could escape from dependency. The organization's new measure of

success? “Increasing the number of disabled people placed in sustainable jobs.”

This WIG transformed the organization. They helped thousands become self-reliant and find a new sense of self-worth, while sustaining the day-to-day financial and operational results that made their mission possible.

FOCUSING THE ORGANIZATION

Up to this point, we’ve talked a lot about narrowing the focus as it relates to you and your team. This in itself is a huge challenge. Narrowing the focus for an entire organization or even a large portion of an organization, however, is a much bigger challenge. Although we’ll cover this in more detail on page 235, we want you to gain a high-level understanding of the rules for applying Discipline 1 organizationally before we move into Discipline 2.

Rule #1: No team focuses on more than two WIGs at the same time. This rule acts like a governor on an engine. When you are deeply into the 4 Disciplines of Execution there may be dozens or even hundreds of WIGs across the entire organization, but the key is not to overload any single leader, team, or individual performer. Remember, they are all dealing with the incessant demands of the whirlwind. Keep this rule in mind as you consider the remaining three rules. If you violate this one, you will have lost your focus as an organization.

Rule #2: The battles you choose must win the war. Whether it’s a military conflict, or the war on hunger, cancer, or poverty, there’s a relationship between battles and wars. The only reason you fight a battle is to win the war. The sole purpose of WIGs at lower levels in the organization is to help achieve the WIGs at higher levels. It isn’t enough that the lower-level WIGs support or align with the higher WIGs. The lower-level WIGs must ensure the success of the higher WIGs.



For example, a provider of Internet financial services we worked with knew they had to increase revenues from \$160 million to \$200 million by fiscal year end in order to fulfill the expectations of their investors. A new outside-sales team committed to provide \$8 million of new revenue and the major-account division committed to the other \$32 million.

What about the other major division—the technology team? What role did they play in this revenue WIG? Did they have any role at all? At first, they felt left out of the WIG.

After some careful research, they determined that the most impactful lower-level WIG they could set for themselves would be to improve their record for continuous, uninterrupted service. This was a major criterion new customers would use to choose a provider—perhaps the most important criterion. As it turned out, this group had to fight the key battle in achieving the WIG, which in turn cleared the path for the other divisions as well.

Once the top-level WIG is chosen, the next question is critical. Instead of asking, “What are all the things we could do to win this war?”—a common mistake that results in a long to-do list—ask, “What are the fewest number of battles necessary to win this war?” The answer to that question determines which and how many lower-level WIGs will be needed to achieve the top-level WIG. As you begin to choose the battles to win the

war, you have begun to both clarify and simplify your strategy. This process will be covered in detail on page 94.

Rule #3: Senior leaders can veto, but not dictate. The highest levels of execution are never reached when the strategy is devised solely by the top leaders of the organization and simply handed down to the leaders and teams below. Without involvement, you cannot create the high levels of commitment that execution requires. While the senior leaders will undoubtedly determine the top-level WIG, they must allow the leaders at each level below to define the WIGs for their teams. This not only leverages the knowledge of these leaders, but also creates a greater sense of ownership and involvement. Simply put, they become more engaged in a goal that they choose themselves and that supports a worthy organizational goal. Senior leaders then exercise their right to veto if the battles chosen are not going to win the war.

Implementing Discipline 1 enables an organization to quickly turn a broad strategy into clearly defined WIGs at every level. It is not solely a top-down process, but neither is it exclusively bottom-up. Through this process, the senior leader's choice of the overall WIG brings clarity (top down), and allowing the leaders and teams below to choose their WIGs (bottom up) brings engagement. In the process, the entire organization mobilizes around the focus that matters most and takes ownership for driving the result.

Rule #4: All WIGs must have a finish line in the form of from X to Y by when. Every WIG at every level must contain a clearly measurable result, as well as the date by which that result must be achieved. For example, a revenue-focused WIG might be: "Increase percent of annual revenue from new products from 15 percent to 21 percent by December 31st." This from X to Y by when format recognizes where you are today, where you want to go, and the deadline for reaching that goal. As deceptively simple as this formula may seem, many leaders often struggle to translate their strategic concepts into a single from X to Y by when finish line. But once they've done it, both they and the teams they lead have gained tremendous clarity.

Typically, however, goals lack this kind of clarity. We constantly see goals like these that no one can achieve because there's no finish line; no way of telling whether you completed the goal or not and where you stand at any given point:

- From a major global retail company: "Improve inventory processing."
- From a British publisher: "Develop and strengthen new and existing client relationships."
- From an Australian tourist authority: "Influence effective tourism workforce development in Queensland."
- From a European investment firm: "Successfully convert our portfolio to a life-cycle strategy."
- From a multinational agribusiness company: "Identify, recruit, and retain the best employees."

These goals lack the measurement that can tell the team when they've won the game. "Improve inventory processing?" How much? "Strengthen new client relationships?" How do we measure "stronger"? "Successfully convert a portfolio to a life-cycle strategy?" How will we know if we've done that?

Effective lag measures look like this:

- “Improve inventory processing by increasing per-year inventory turns from eight to ten by December 31.”
- “Raise our client-relationship score from forty to seventy on the loyalty scale within two years.”
- “Move 40 percent of our customers from fixed categories to life-cycle categories of investments within five years.”
- “Launch the new CRM solution at an 85 percent quality beta rating by the end of our fiscal year.”

If a goal is wildly important, surely you should be able to tell if you’ve achieved it or not. The formula from X to Y by when makes that possible.

In setting a finish line, we often hear the question, “Over what period of time should the achievement of a WIG be spread?” Our answer is, “It depends.” Since teams and organizations often think and measure themselves in terms of a calendar or a fiscal year, a one-year time frame makes a good starting point for a WIG. That said, remember that a WIG is not a strategy. A WIG is a tactical goal with a limited time frame. We’ve seen some WIGs that take two years and some that take six months. The length of a project-based WIG, such as “Complete the new website within budget by July 1,” will usually correspond with the time frame of the project itself. Use your own judgment. Just remember that a WIG should be within a time frame that balances the need to create a compelling vision with the need to create an achievable goal.

SHOOTING FOR THE MOON

In 1958, the fledgling National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had many very important goals like this one: “The expansion of human knowledge of phenomena in the atmosphere and space.” It sounded like many of the goals you hear in business today: “Become world class...” or “Lead the industry...” Although the leaders at NASA had ways to measure various aspects of this goal, they lacked the clarity of a defined finish line. They also lacked the results that the Soviet Union was producing.

But in 1961, President John F. Kennedy shook NASA to its foundations when he made the pronouncement “land a man on the moon and return him safely to the earth before this decade is out.” Suddenly, NASA had a formidable new challenge, the war it would fight for the next ten years, and it was stated in exactly the way WIGs should be stated: “X” is earthbound, “Y” is to the moon and back, and “when” is by December 31, 1969.

Just a glance at this table⁹ shows the difference between conventional organizational goals and a true WIG.



NASA’S GOALS IN 1958

1. The expansion of human knowledge of phenomena in the atmosphere and space;
2. The improvement of the usefulness, performance, speed, safety, and efficiency of aeronautical and space vehicles;
3. The development and operation of vehicles capable of carrying instruments, equipment, supplies, and living organisms through space;

4. The establishment of long-range studies of the potential benefits to be gained from, the opportunities for, and the problems involved in the utilization of aeronautical and space activities for peaceful and scientific purposes;

5. The preservation of the role of the United States as a leader in aeronautical and space science and technology and in the application thereof to the conduct of peaceful activities within and outside the atmosphere;

6. The making available to agencies directly concerned with national defense of discoveries that have military value or significance, and the furnishing by such agencies, to the civilian agency established to direct and control nonmilitary aeronautical and space activities, of information as to discoveries which have value or significance to that agency;

7. Cooperation by the United States with other nations and groups of nations in work done pursuant to this Act and in the peaceful application of the results thereof;

8. The most effective utilization of the scientific and engineering resources of the United States, with close cooperation among all interested agencies of the United States, with close cooperation among all interested agencies of the United States in order to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort, facilities and equipment.

NASA'S GOALS AS OF 1961

“I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.” –John F. Kennedy



Consider the 1958 goals:

- Are they clear and measurable?
- How many are there?
- Is there a finish line for any of them?

So, what kind of results were these objectives driving for NASA? Russia went into space first with satellites and cosmonauts while the United States was still blowing up rockets on launchpads.

Contrast the 1958 goals with the 1961 goal: one clear, measurable WIG.

Now, with its reputation at stake on the world stage, NASA had to determine the few key battles that would win that war.

In the end, three critical battles were chosen: navigation, propulsion, and life support. Navigation posed the formidable challenge of moving a spacecraft through space at eighteen miles per second to a precise location on the moon, which was also moving rapidly in its elliptical orbit around Earth. Propulsion was no less of a challenge because a rocket heavy enough to carry a lunar module had never yet achieved a velocity sufficient

to break free of Earth's gravitational pull. Life support was the most critical of all because it required developing a capsule and landing module that would keep astronauts alive, both for the journey to and from the moon and while they explored the moon's surface.



President Kennedy's speech also included another key aspect of Discipline 1—saying no to good ideas—when he acknowledged that there were many other worthy objectives that the country would not pursue in order to achieve this goal. But, as he asked, “Why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal?... That goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.”¹⁰ In this way, he narrowed the focus of NASA to a finish line whose achievement became one of the most important ventures in human history.

What do you think happened to accountability within NASA when the challenge of putting a man on the moon was publicly announced? It went through the roof. This is particularly clear when you remember that the spacecraft they would use had only a tiny fraction of the computing power of the smartphone in your pocket. Even worse, the engineers and scientists still had no operational technology for winning the three necessary battles. Looking back, you might say human beings had no business being on the moon in 1969.

Now, consider a different question: When accountability soared, what happened to morale and engagement? It, too, went through the roof. Most leaders find this surprising. We tend to think that when accountability is at its highest, the pressure makes morale go down. The reality is the opposite: Narrowing your focus increases both accountability and the engagement of your team.

When a team moves from having a dozen we-really-hope goals to one or two no-matter-what goals, the effect on morale is dramatic. It's as though a switch exists in every team member's head called “Game on!” If you can throw that switch, you have laid the foundation for extraordinary execution. When President Kennedy said to the moon and back by the end of the decade, he threw that switch.

Can you remember what it's like to be part of a team when the game-on switch is activated? It's a remarkable experience. Even though you still have to deal with the whirlwind and its myriad demands, you also have a finish line, something clear and important at which you can win. Even more meaningful, it's something whereby every member of the team can see that their contribution makes a difference. Everyone wants to feel that they are winning and that they are contributing to something meaningful. And, when times are tough, they want it even more.

When we started on this journey years ago, we did not intend to focus on defining or even refining strategy. However, we quickly learned that the line separating strategy and execution is blurry. Applying this first discipline will sharpen your strategy more than you think it will. But what it will really do is make your strategy executable.

Think of it this way: Above your head is a thought bubble, and inside that bubble are all the various aspects of your strategy, including opportunities you wish you were pursuing, new ideas and concepts, problems you know you need to fix, and a lot of “whats” and “hows” to get it all done. Your bubble is complicated and chaotic. It's also completely different from the bubbles above every other leader.

This is why Discipline 1 requires you to translate your strategy from concepts to targets, from a vague strategic intent to a set of specific finish lines. The four rules for implementing Discipline 1, outlined above, give an entire organization a framework for doing this successfully. (For more examples and process steps, see sections 2 and 3.)



Too many organizational goals are hazy and imprecise, leaving people wondering “what” they are supposed to do and “how” they are supposed to do it. Discipline 1 provides clear, unmistakable finish lines so people know exactly what success looks like.



Finally, remember that the four rules of focus are unforgiving. At some point, you will want to cheat on them, even just a little. We know. We often want to do the same inside our organization. However, what we’ve learned is that the rules governing focus are like the rules governing gravity: They aren’t concerned with what you think or with the details of your particular situation. They simply yield predictable consequences.

When you think about it, the principle of focusing on the vital few goals is common sense; it’s just not common practice. In one of Aesop’s fables, a young boy put his hand into a pot full of hazelnuts. He grasped as many as he could possibly hold, but when he tried to pull out his hand, he found the neck of the pot was too narrow. Unwilling to lose his catch, and yet unable to withdraw his hand, he burst into tears and bitterly lamented his disappointment.

Like the boy, you might find it hard to let go of a lot of good goals until you start serving a greater goal. As Steve Jobs often said, “I’m as proud of what we don’t do as I am of what we do.”¹¹ Discipline 1 is about defining that greater goal, and it is a discipline. In Section 2 of this book, we’ll give you more guidance about the exact process of defining an organizational WIG.

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