How did you do That?

Driving Growth and Excellence in Organizations

By Sidney E. Fuchs

When an executive takes the reins of an organization there is always a high level of excitement and expectation. If the new situation is a turnaround or transformation, it is essential that the executive set proper expectations with all stakeholders, especially the executive's superiors, employees, and the company's board of directors.

Before starting down the path of tackling a transformation or turnaround, you must first ask yourself if you are suited to do it. It takes enormous capacity, energy and edge. As the leader, your job is to build a team, set the goals, create a winning environment, and drive growth. The best CEOs and executives are those who truly understand their role, surround themselves with smart and capable leaders, are broad in experience, passionate about the business and results, love working with and developing people, and possess an unlimited amount of focused energy.

How did you do That? explores what it takes to lead through difficult times, improve a declining business, and execute a successful turn-around by implementing the right set of tools and techniques to improve an organization's overall performance and quality.

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Introduction

How did you do that? I've heard that question many times over the past decade or so, usually during a discussion on the subject of organizational growth, driving change, and delivering results. Consequently, I decided to take a qualitative approach to analyzing what actions I took and decisions I made to get teams and companies that may have been in last place to first place. More importantly, I examined what I did to enable those organizations to sustain a "directionally correct" trajectory. Just as I studied how to turn around declining organizations, I also focused on understanding what techniques and tools I leveraged to take average or above average organizations and transform them into even higher performing enterprises. Although the foundations, principles, and the successful implementation of management and leadership are required for each turnaround and transformation scenario, I realized that these two situations also require a different set of skills and approaches.

Some Background

Over the course of my career, I have had some incredible opportunities and positions with world-class organizations. I have also been lucky enough to experience various business models and environments – from government, commercial, project management, engineering, product sales, consulting and services, system integrators to private equity. From the point of starting out as an Intelligence Officer with the CIA to my current role as the CEO of a global IT company with over 200 locations worldwide, I have had my share of successes and failures along the way. I learned from each one and in addition to trying not to repeat mistakes, I worked to genuinely understand the cause and factors of my success. I also took advantage of learning from others' successes and failures. On the following page are just a few of the challenges that I have taken on, as well as the outcomes.

- As a 28-year-old CIA officer, led an extensive government and contractor team to successfully build, deploy, and launch a multi-billion dollar, large-scale National Security space system that provided critical communications and intelligence capabilities to US military and intelligence agencies worldwide.

- As a Global Sales Manager at Digital Equipment Corporation and Oracle Corporation, led sales teams that delivered double-digit growth, consistently exceeded sales and performance targets, and doubled revenues in two years, all while price points for hardware and software continued to decrease and competition increased.

- As a Vice President at TASC, Inc. (a company that at the time was a subsidiary of Northrop Grumman, providing high-end engineering and IT solutions and services to the Intelligence, Defense and Federal Government markets), took a $100MM underperforming operating unit that was in decline and turned it into a top performer within two years with revenues over $200MM.

- As the President and CEO of TASC, Inc., took a modestly performing company and turned it into a growth engine as evidenced by increasing the company's revenues from $700M to over $1.2B in two years, all through organic growth. Also increased profit, lowered rates, and improved cash flow.

- As the President and CEO of OAO Technology Solutions, over a period of three years and without any outside investment, took a stalled, $125MM global IT company in the highly competitive, commercial managed IT services market to the next level by building a high performing team, expanding market share, enhancing the business mix, significantly improving financial performance, and reducing debt. Then in 2010, profitably sold the company during one of the world's worst economic cycles.

How I did It

Do you have what it takes?

Before starting down the path of tackling a transformation or turnaround, you must first ask yourself if you really want to do it or, more importantly, if you are suited to do it. Many executives shy away from these situations due to the difficulty, constant strain, and daily grind. It takes enormous *capacity* (the ability to consistently juggle many things well at the same time and not get saturated or overwhelmed), *energy* (sustaining the high level of engagement required to drive change), and *edge* (the ability to take on difficult situations, keep your cool, make hard decisions, and stick to your guns when others may want to see you fail).

Leading and driving organizations also requires the leadership to be comfortable with communicating and engaging with people and to possess a minimal or manageable amount of insecurity. Insecurity in leaders manifests itself in many ways and is generally destructive to organizations. Some traits include defensiveness, arrogance, selfishness, untrustworthiness, lack of decision making and accountability, and the avoidance of difficult situations or decisions.

Leading organizations through change is the equivalent of "three yards and a cloud of dirt." You have to grind it out every day and stay focused on what needs to be done. Having intestinal fortitude and stamina is critical and, as the process moves forward, you must find every chance to celebrate incremental, demonstrable success to keep momentum going.

Start with the end in mind

When taking on a leadership role, you must decide where you want the organization to be in terms of brand/reputation, culture, scale, market, structure, vision, investment, mission success, etc. If the goal is a turnaround, then perhaps the end state is to show improvement in G&A or indirect costs, pipeline growth, reduced attrition, or an upgraded management team. If the objective is a transformation, then the end state could be higher top line and bottom line growth, new customers, a faster ops tempo, or improved quality. Whatever the target, the end state must be clear as all plans and metrics will be derived from this ultimate objective.

You can't make the end state or vision something like "…to be the leading provider of services in our market." That statement says absolutely nothing about where you want to go and how you plan to get there. As a leader, you need to provide the insight, direction, and guidance so your team understands the ultimate objective.

Whatever the target, the end state must be clear as all plans and metrics will be derived from this ultimate objective.

It is important to understand that there is no "steady-state" in business. You are either moving forward or moving backward. If you choose to do nothing, then you are actually moving backward and the future is predictable.

Another area to consider at this stage of the game is how you want the company to be viewed externally or what you want the company's brand recognition to be. This could include engineering expertise and quality, technological innovation, delivery expertise, operational efficiency, or customer success. Whatever brand or identity you eventually create should be independent of the leader, because you want to create an identity for your organization without putting your name on it.

Diagnose before you decide

Before you start making changes, you need time to understand what is going on behind the scenes–the obvious and not so obvious. Culture, sacred areas, preferences, history, relationships and true power centers need to be understood and taken into consideration. Find internal champions who share your same vision and mission and leverage them to deliver key messages and execute your goals.

You must also have an external perspective based on an understanding of your customers, competitors, partners, peers, and the market. This will tell you where you are strong and where you are weak (such as pricing, technology, quality, or responsiveness) and provide clues as to where you should focus your efforts.

I firmly believe that, once you hit the six- to nine-month mark in a new leadership role, you own the situation and can no longer blame past leaders for the organization's problems or current condition. Therefore, don't wait too long to start taking action.

You do need to take some time to appreciate and understand the overall situation; but, by no means, should you fall into "analysis paralysis" and delay taking the necessary action in a timely manner.

Setting expectations – under promise and over deliver

When an executive takes the reins of an organization, there is always a high level of excitement and expectation. Whether the new situation is a turnaround or transformation, it is essential that the executive continually set proper expectations with all stakeholders, especially the executive's superiors, employees, and the company's board of directors.

All too often the new executive has been heralded as a savior and expected to work miracles in a very short amount of time. It is important to remember that the problems that forced the company into a turnaround mode did not happen overnight, so the time to fix these problems must be reasonable. The leader who accepts this challenge must make an assessment of what will be required.

I have been asked during the interview process how long I think it would take to turn around an organization or prepare it for sale. I've always responded that I need some time to assess the situation and get back to them with a plan and timeline. There were a few times when I was forced to give an answer and my response was very broad, such as "it may take anywhere from one to three years to get us on the right path."

> *It is critical to always "under promise and over deliver."*

It is critical to always *"under promise and over deliver."* Setting proper expectations from the start will give you and the team some room to breathe, make accurate assessments, bring new talent on board, try some changes through trial and error, and recover from any false starts. The worst thing you can do is to promise to have things fixed by a certain date, especially if that date is unrealistically short. This may sound like common sense, but I've seen it happen time and time again and at all levels in the organization.

Whether it is a turnaround, delivering a report, or winning a new contract, always set the proper expectations. I'm not advocating "sandbagging" or being dishonest, but I am encouraging you to not put yourself into a situation where a commitment you have made turns into a hole from which you must dig yourself out.

When you are taking an organization to a new level, a temporary drop in performance is to be expected (see Figure 1). This drop is generally caused by issues such as new management, M&A activity or customer/economic environments, etc. Successful change initiatives address this as a part of the plan and take advantage of this time period to make some early adjustments, complete the assessment, and develop a plan.   Again, it is important to communicate that this dip is temporary and is to be expected while you get your hands around the situation.

Unsuccessful or reactive change initiatives typically lack clearly defined goals and/or decision points that allow the owner to measure progress and fine tune the plan as required. When this is the case, the initiative loses momentum, direction, and increases the chance for going down the wrong path. Successful or proactive change initiatives set several milestones where incremental and demonstrable success can be measured and rewarded and where the strategy can be adjusted as required. These milestones or "gates" ensure the change initiatives are on course and providing the desired results at key points.
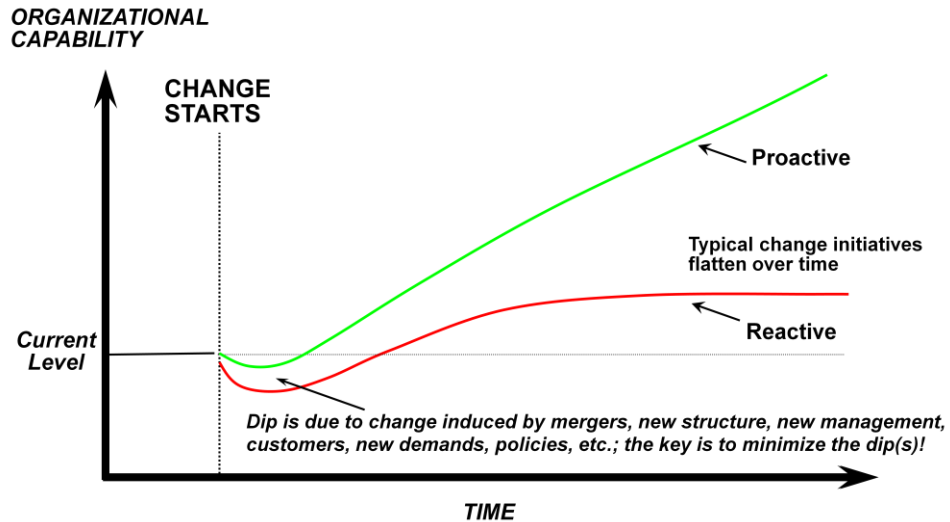
How did you do That?

ORGANIZATIONAL
CAPABILITY

CHANGE
STARTS

Proactive

Typical change initiatives
flatten over time

Reactive

Current
Level

Dip is due to change induced by mergers, new structure, new management,
customers, new demands, policies, etc.; the key is to minimize the dip(s)!

TIME

*Figure 1. Improving an organization's capability may require a
temporary decrease in performance while changes are in progress.*

It's all about people….but don't become a hostage

It is absolutely true that all business is personal and that it is all about the people. You need to be genuine with your teammates and build good working relationships. However, this doesn't mean that you should ever be held hostage by them.   Employees and teammates must be aware of boundaries, values, what is acceptable and non-acceptable behavior in the workplace, and standards for performance. It takes more than just being a good performer – it also takes being a good employee (see Figure 2), which means that employees must represent the company in the appropriate manner and abide by the policies and guidelines that have been established. I've always said that there is no "sitting on the fence" and that your employees have to be either in the company and live its values or be out of the company.

On several occasions I have seen where some "hotshots" think they are so valuable that they can do whatever they like and the company won't do anything about it for fear of losing them and, with them, special skills or customer relationships they may have.   The worst thing you can do in this situation is to cave in. However, the problem started long before the situation presented itself as these employees tend to have the "only relationships" with key customers (easily fixed by ensuring that you or someone else also has relationships with key customers or stakeholders) or special skills (quickly resolved by building a bench of special skills – if they are truly critical to your business). No matter what, each situation must be handled individually. Just be aware that once you allow yourself or your company to be held hostage, it is very likely that others will try a similar approach. In this situation, consistency in how you address the situation is very important.
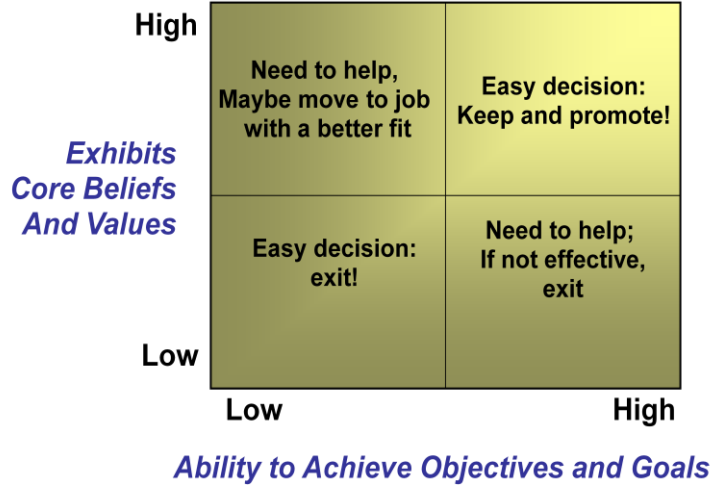
How did you do That?

High

Need to help, Maybe move to job with a better fit	Easy decision: Keep and promote!
Easy decision: exit!	Need to help; If not effective, exit

Exhibits Core Beliefs And Values

Low

Low   High

Ability to Achieve Objectives and Goals

Figure 2. Employees must be solid performers as well as good corporate citizens.

Business is a team sport

The most important trait an effective executive has is the ability to identify, hire, and retain talent. Building high performance teams is a must if you are going to turn around or transform the organization. Having the world's best vision and plan is useless if you don't have an outstanding team that can lead and deliver. While at TASC, I worked with my HR department to create a program called the *TASC Leadership Experience*. The goal was to take our high performers through a focused program that would give them exposure to various leadership and management training, tools, and other leaders. We also ran the program using the cohort model in teams of 15-20, with the goal of networking with future leaders from various parts of the company.

As I stated, business is all about people, so it was vital that our up-and-coming leaders were connected and building the key relationships required to move the company forward.

Once you have the talent in the company, the job of developing and promoting that talent begins. Companies that have robust succession planning practices (and actually follow them) and a tendency to first look inside when filling key positions generally produce stronger leadership teams and better business results. I have been in companies where there was a laborious succession planning process that took months to complete, but the recommendations that resulted from that process were never followed. The company leadership promoted friends and rewarded time of service over performance and potential. When this happens, the high potentials leave and look for greener pastures.

Having the world's best vision and plan is useless if you don't have an outstanding team that can lead and deliver.

Succession planning should include an honest analysis of an employee's strengths and development areas, potential positions in the company, and recommended training and development programs. I've also integrated incentive compensation, training and educational opportunities, and rotational assignments to the succession planning process to ensure we were making investments in the right people and for the right reasons.

Welcome to the fish bowl

When you are an executive, you are constantly being scrutinized, measured, monitored, and assessed. This is especially true if you are new to an organization and even truer if you are leading change within that organization. I call this phenomenon "living in a fish bowl" because everyone from all directions can see what you are doing at all times.

People are not only watching what you say, but how you say it, how you act, how you react, your body language, how you dress, and how you carry yourself. I can remember a situation many years ago when I was a vice president of a large company and in the middle of a turnaround. I was walking down the hall of my building deep in thought with my head down, when one of my employees walked past me and asked how I was doing. I responded "I am doing okay," at which point she stopped, looked me square in the eye, and said "Okay? You're supposed to be doing great!" It was at that moment that I realized people in the organization were taking their cues from me even when I least expected it. If they read that I am having a down day, they will interpret that as things are not going well and that will spread in a matter of hours throughout the organization.

Leading change is about evolving the culture while navigating through treacherous waters.

As a leader, you must always be positive and constructive in your words and actions. You must be outgoing and engaging with people in order to calm their fears, inspire them, and make them feel as if you are in control no matter what the challenges are. I've seen people in executive positions be more comfortable sitting in their office analyzing spreadsheets than being externally focused on customers and employees. Leading change is about evolving the culture while navigating through treacherous waters. This is impossible to do from your desk.

The same goes for after hours. I've seen too many careers and respect for a leader lost because of how executives handle themselves outside of work. Just because you are technically "off the clock" doesn't mean you stop being a leader or people stop watching your every move. After work parties, golf tournaments, industry events, and social gatherings are political and personal minefields for executives if you are not able to manage yourself appropriately. Once you have lost the respect of your team, your management, and key stakeholders, it is impossible to lead and be effective.

Who are we working for?

I've always said that an organization's three key stakeholders are as follows:

- The Customers – they are the reason we are in business and our mission is to enable their success;
- The Company – they include our shareholders, employees, and our employees' dependents;
- The Community – they include charitable activities and donations, educational assistance, and other programs that assist our community and help strengthen the company to community relationship. As executives, we have a corporate responsibility to give back to the communities in which we live.

Understanding the needs and wants of each set of stakeholders is also essential to ensuring the company remains focused on the mission. They all want something a little different. C*ustomers* want quality of service and innovation at a reasonable price; the C*ompany* wants ROI, competitive compensation, career opportunities, and shareholder value; and the C*ommunity* desires a healthy relationship that is mutually beneficial. It is the responsibility of the leadership to understand these dynamics and how to satisfy these needs. It's only when an organization or company can satisfy the needs of all stakeholders that it can be truly called "high performing."

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On an important note, I've always believed that, not only do the employees depend on me to do my job and make the right decisions, but that their dependents are counting on me as well. When I was the CEO of TASC, I had over 5,000 employees. If you assume that each employee had a spouse plus two children, on average that equated to over 20,000 people who depended on me and my leadership team to do the right things every day to ensure our company's success. That was 20,000 people who relied on us to pay their mortgages, put children through school, help family members, and feed and clothe their families.

Breaking glass required

It is hard to move an organization forward without breaking a little glass. Show me an organization or leader who doesn't do this and I'll show you an underperforming organization, a weak company culture, and an ineffective leader. On the other hand, leaders who cause too much disruption or pain will create chaos, distrust, and low morale. I'm not advocating a "take no prisoners" approach; but, clearly, no one turns around or significantly transforms an organization without making decisions and taking action. There is a right way and wrong way to do it; in the end, you must make hard decisions if you want results.

> *I hold people accountable and no one is more accountable for my organization's performance than me.*

I hold people accountable and no one is more accountable for my organization's performance than me. Some people hate being held accountable and they interpret this as the executive being hard or unfair. There are two reasons why people like the person they work for: first, you pay your employees more than they could earn anywhere else, don't ask them to do anything outside of their comfort zone, and don't hold them accountable; or, secondly, you push and drive your teams harder than they've ever been before and, as a team, you achieve great results and mission success while reaping the rewards. I think most leaders would prefer to be in the second category, but you would be surprised how many people choose to be in the first.

Understand the positions and the players

Are you a quarterback, wide receiver, or linebacker? If you have played American football, then you know how important it is to play your position, stay "home" on certain coverages, and know who you are going to match up against on certain plays. The QB in football must be aware of what the lineman, receivers, backs, and the defense are doing on each play. However, to achieve the end result, the QB knows that his job is to manage the offense, move the ball down the field and deliver points. You'll never see an all-pro QB trying to be a lineman or a receiver. If he is doing this, then who is playing the role of the QB? The team would fall apart immediately. Just like a good QB, a good CEO will make sure he surrounds himself with the best talent available.

As a CEO or executive, you will have a dominant tendency based on your background and interests, whether that is operations, sales, technology, or finance. However, you must also be adequately versed in the other disciplines necessary to run the organization.

As the leader of the business, your job is to build a team with the proper functional expertise, set the goals, create a winning environment, and drive growth. It is impossible to do this unless you understand the roles of the crucial areas such as finance, contracts, business development, legal, etc. What you don't want to do is be in a line leadership role and be narrowly focused on one area while ignoring the others. I believe the dominant traits for successful CEOs are driving vision, strategy and growth; building teams; and ensuring execution. Sure, it would be great to be an expert in all functional areas, but that person doesn't exist.

Boards and sponsors must understand that the CEO needs to be growth-oriented versus singularly focused and have experience in finance, M&A, or sales, for example. *The best CEOs and executives are those* who *truly understand their role, surround themselves with smart and capable leaders, are broad in experience, passionate about the business and results, love working*

with and developing people, and possess an unlimited amount of focused energy.

Playing to win or playing not to lose

How you approach the business is critical. Are you taking a conservative, playing not-to-lose approach or are you going for the win? Some industries, because of their risk adverse culture, tend to be overly conservative and avoid any type of risk at all cost. On the other hand, some businesses are gunslingers with an all or nothing approach. Finding balance between these two extremes is very important to ensuring that your teams take risks, stretch themselves, and accept some failure as the cost of doing business.

As an example, I remember when I worked for a large engineering company, I would always be informed during our business reviews that "the competition" was coming after us and trying to take market share. I finally asked "Where is *your* pipeline that shows the competition's market share that we are pursuing?" Soon after, they started to include this in the business reviews and our conversations and actions moved from being from defensive to offensive.

I also drove the organization to pursue contracts and customers that many, including the executives to whom I reported, thought we could never win. We did not win them all, but we did win a substantial number of these new contracts. As a result, the team began to believe and feel that they could win new business outside of our traditional areas. Once you convince people that they can do something they thought was impossible, their confidence, risk tolerance, energy, and assertiveness will increase dramatically. This attitude is the key to generating results and the team must believe in and have confidence that they are deserving and capable enough to consistently win. I've never seen a sports team or business achieve great results when believing they could not win. Also, the team must believe that they have the leader's full support and commitment. If they don't think they have this, they will never step out of their comfort zone and take the necessary risks.

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In addition, having the "first mover advantage" can be a competitive discriminator. You don't want to be overly aggressive or assertive, but you also don't want to be a wallflower. One way to stay out front is to create a winning marketing and branding strategy. Keeping the company on the customers' and community's radar through a variety of PR and community relations initiatives helps to positively position your company and gives your employees an identity in the market. This sense of "identity" also helps to reduce employee turnover.

How did you do That?

Shine your light on the target

Where you focus is where your teams will focus. Spend your time talking about customers, markets, and technology and that's where the focus, money, effort, and nomenclature will head. Talk about cost control, indirect labor, and G&A, and people will spend most of the time managing costs and expenses. Focus on golf, holiday parties, expensive bottles of wine, private jets, private suites at sports stadiums and your teams will begin to lose respect for you. I call this last example "Focused on everything except the bull's eye" (see Figure 3). This means that you must determine what your optimal target is going to be in order to drive the change you want. You must also continually communicate your vision, ideas, and progress to your team. Take every opportunity to drive your messages and strategy. Also answer questions, as this will help push the key themes throughout the organization and allow you to update and tune those messages as required.

> *Where you focus is where your teams will focus.*

Make sure that the targets are based on your vision and end state, such as revenue, profit, market share, win rate, cash flow, DSO, quality, developing people, and customer success. Then build a culture that is manically focused on it. Your messages must be clear, concise, repeatable, and realistic for your teams to internalize the message and execute accordingly. For example, when I became the CEO of TASC, my goal and message was simple; One *Billion and Beyond*. This meant that our goal was to grow to over a billion dollars of revenue and keep going, which we did. We also leveraged the phrase *"The Power of One"* to promote a team environment and a focused approach to running our business.

A clear benefit of being focused is that it allows you to take complex situations and distill them into discrete and manageable parts. I learned this from my days as an engineer when I would be faced with a challenging problem to solve. By taking the system and defining what was critical, such as observables (facts), boundary conditions, initial conditions, and basic laws, I was able to focus on pieces of the problem instead of the entire situation. I also tried to understand what wasn't important to solving the problem in order to ensure that I made correct assumptions and stayed on course. This allowed me to understand key intra and interdependent dynamics, responses, and propagating effects caused by the system's current or future state. The same rules apply to business; if you remain focused on what you know, understand what matters, and can figure out what is causing the situation, you can almost always find an optimal solution and, as a result, manage the outcome to your favor. When you get distracted with things outside of the bull's eye, the right assumptions and answers are hard or impossible to come by.

How did you do That?

*Figure 3. Stay focused on activities that create value (the center)
vs. non valued-added distractions.*

Never confuse activity with results

Having every employee on the same page can generate an incredible rate of return. It amazes me that so many employees in so many companies don't really understand the company's direction, purpose, or plan. In situations where employees don't know what is expected of them, you lose so much energy and capability that it almost becomes an inhibitor.

> *In my opinion, if you can't measure it, you can't manage it.*

I have leveraged a common goal framework at several companies that was reflected in each employee's performance goals, which in turn had an impact on incentive compensation and job promotion. In my opinion, if you can't measure it, you can't manage it.

The goal framework consisted of the following areas:

- *Customer Success* – Our desire and purpose to help our customers achieve mission success.
- *Achieving Financial Goals* – Delivering our financial obligations to the corporation in terms of sales, profit, cash, etc.
- *Business and Pipeline Development* – Our ability to drive and grow the business; establish our brand, reputation, and market awareness; protect and grow our installed base; ensure our business funnel remains full of new growth opportunities; and strategically align investments in R&D, new initiatives and resources.

How did you do That?

- *Team Development and Leadership* – Investing in our people through programs, education, and opportunities; increasing our leadership bench strength at all levels; and creating a results-oriented and high trust environment;
- *Effective Business Operations* – Managing our daily operations in an effective and efficient manner; exercising sound judgment and responsibility when it comes to cost management; reducing complexity and bureaucracy; and improving our internal business processes.

By using this framework, I could tailor goals under each area as it related to the employee's role and function. Employees' actions and decisions were aligned and, as a result, when I talked about Customer Success, they knew exactly what I was saying and why it was important. Another added benefit of having a common goal framework is that it allows the executive to ensure accountability at all levels. Show me an organization where people are not held accountable and I will show you an organization where there are no clearly defined goals and/or a leader who hates confrontation. Both will kill a business quickly.

If you want to drive the right behavior and focus within an organization, the goals must be tied to the vision and objectives. Also, you must provide your employees the justice and honor of giving them annual performance reviews. Too many executives avoid doing this, especially when it comes time to deliver constructive or less than positive feedback. When you handle this issue correctly, constructive feedback during a performance review session should not be a surprise to the employee. Effective executives look for opportunities to provide both timely praise and constructive feedback as the situation requires, and not just once a year.

Decide to decide

It goes without saying that leading organizations, especially those going through a transformation or turnaround, requires the ability to make decisions and hold teams accountable. This sounds easier to some than others; but, in the end, effective leaders will make timely decisions. Realize that in almost all business situations, the chance to recover and redirect from a wrong decision is available to you. Unless you are in a war zone performing covert operations, in the middle of surgery, or some other life-threatening situation, most "wrong" decisions are recoverable.

The worst thing to do is to not make any decision. I am not advocating being reckless or making ill-informed decisions, but rather combining empirical data and information with your gut and experience to make the call.

It is also critical to realize that if you have built the right team around you as previously discussed, their input and discussion will lead to a higher probability of making the right decision.

Trust is the currency of leadership

You would think that integrity, values and trust were the unspoken tenants of any organization. From my experience, I can tell you that this is not the case. I have worked in a few environments where these traits were AWOL and, in each situation, the organization underperformed and could not attract top talent (and I subsequently exited). As the leader, you must build or maintain a culture where these attributes are cherished and essential components to the organization's DNA. Don't ever kid yourself – people work for money and stay for the culture, mission, and people, but leave because of poor managers. People don't quit jobs, they quit managers. If you're not building a winning and high trust environment, get ready for high rates of attrition and a poor reputation.

…people work for money, stay for the culture, mission, and people, but leave because of poor managers.

I've always believed that trust is the currency of relationships and leadership. Without trust, people just won't take risks, forgive you for your mistakes, or invest in you. It takes a lifetime to build trust and one lapse of discretion to jeopardize it.

Intellectual Curiosity and Feedback

I always get a good laugh from people who get promoted and adopt the attitude of "I've arrived." Nothing could be further from the truth! When you move up the chain and take on positions of greater responsibility, the learning continues and the hard work has only just begun. I consider intellectual curiosity an important advantage for any executive looking to stay at the top of their game and/or want to find new and creative ways to motivate and lead the organization. Reading, taking classes, building networks, and taking positions outside of your comfort zone (such as transitioning from a CIA officer to a sales manager) are all ways to keep things fresh and give you the expanded capacity to bring new experiences and dimensions to your job.

A key component of intellectual curiosity is feedback. I can't recall the number of 360 assessments, team evaluations, and feedback tools I have used to learn about my performance and how it impacts the team and our customers. Each one of these evaluations helped me see where I need to improve and, as a result, allowed me to focus my energy in the right direction.

You would be amazed at the number of senior executives who avoid these feedback situations at all costs, fearing they would be told they aren't perfect or they don't know everything.

How did you do That?

To be effective and grow as an executive, you have to have a certain amount of vulnerability and willingness to hear the constructive feedback about your style, strengths, and areas for development. Until you do, you should not expect to adequately mature and grow into your leadership role.

Summary

It is a proven fact for any team – that, in the absence of strong leadership, chaos will exist. Chaos is the enemy of focus and focus is critical to moving forward and improving performance in any facet of life. Someone must be in charge who is willing and, more importantly, able to make decisions, drive towards the future, stretch the company, hold the organization accountable, expand thinking, and demand the absolute best at all times from everyone, including themselves. The same is true for company Boards and owners. If you want your company to dramatically improve or survive, you must have the stomach, tolerance, and commitment to accept what that means in terms of decisions, actions, and outcomes. How many times has an executive taken on the task of fixing a broken organization only to be told "you can do whatever you need to do, just don't fire this person or change this or that"? When that happens, the true ability to drive change is thwarted and your ability to succeed is minimized.

Changing the direction and focus of a company requires leadership, planning, and an incredible amount of decision making and energy to achieve the desired results.

I like to think of underperforming companies as orbiting satellites – bodies in motion on a fixed plane that have been in the same orbit over a length of time. They may be doing their job; but, without continual maintenance and attention, they will degrade and eventually fall out of orbit. While this is ongoing, new satellites will be launched that have more capabilities, different orbits, and more relevant missions that overtake the old satellite's mission (and customers). If the original satellite wants to survive, it must change its orbit to make sure that it is focused on what is relevant and important to its customers. In other words, it needs to reinvent its path, mission, and focus. I know from personal experience that changing the orbiting plane of a satellite requires enormous amounts of energy. It can only be achieved by the team responsible for the planning and procedures and by the satellite's guidance, propulsion, and fuel systems to overcome inertia and build momentum. When you translate this analogy to a company, the principles remain the same. Changing the direction and focus of a company requires leadership, planning, and an incredible amount of decision making and energy to achieve the desired results. It is up to the key stakeholders to decide if they want to remain in the current orbit focusing on the past or move to a new plane where the future lies.

How did you do That?

About the Author

Sidney E. Fuchs
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Sid Fuchs is a leading executive with more than 25 years experience in the Intelligence, National Security, Aerospace and Defense, Federal Government, and Commercial markets with an emphasis on the engineering, development, integration, and operations of mission-critical programs, systems, and technologies. Since 2007, he has been the president and CEO of OAO Technology Solutions (OAOT), a global provider of Managed IT services and solutions to Fortune 500 companies, global outsourcers, and government agencies in over 200 locations worldwide. Mr. Fuchs enabled OAOT's previous owners, J. F. Lehman & Company, to realize an investment return by positioning the company for a successful sale in January 2010 to Platinum Equity, one of the largest private equity firms in the world with over $27B in aggregate portfolio company revenue.

Prior to OAOT, Mr. Fuchs was a corporate officer of Northrop Grumman Corporation and held the position of president and CEO of TASC, Inc. (at the time a Northrop subsidiary providing systems engineering expertise to the Intelligence, Aerospace, and Defense markets) where under his leadership, the business unit grew organically from $450M to over $1.2B in annual revenue in four years. Prior to Northrop Grumman, he was the director of Global Strategic Services at Rational Software, and the Director of Advanced Programs at Oracle Corporation and Digital Equipment Corporation.

Mr. Fuchs is a former Central Intelligence Agency officer, having served at domestic and foreign posts and on assignment with the US Air Force and the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO). He was appointed in 2008 by the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence to the Defense Science board as a member of the Permanent Task Force on Intelligence, and upon nomination by the White House in 2002, he received an appointment by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld to the Board of Visitors, National Defense University.

Mr. Fuchs is the Chairman of the Tower Club Board of Governors and is a member the LSU Department of Mechanical Engineering Industrial Advisory Board. In addition, he is an advisor to several public and private corporations and private equity firms.

He earned BS and MS degrees in Mechanical Engineering from Louisiana State University and has completed several executive education programs. A recognized thought leader, Mr. Fuchs is a published author and speaker on Globalization, Government Markets, Information Technology, Intelligence and National Security, Homeland Security and Public Safety, Professional Development and Education, Leadership, Business Strategy and Operations, and Organizational Change.

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