

The 4 Disciplines of Execution, McChesney et al, (2012/2021)

Discipline 1: focus on the Wildly Important

Basically, the more you try to do, the less you actually accomplish... That's why your first challenge is focusing on the wildly important.

Focus is a natural principle. The sun's scattered rays are too weak to start a fire, but once you focus them with a magnifying glass, they will bring paper to flame in seconds. The same is true for human beings - once their collective energy is focused on a challenge, there is little they can't accomplish.

Discipline 1: focus on the Wildly Important requires you to go against your basic wiring as a leader and focus on less so your team can achieve more. When you implement Discipline 1, you start by selecting ***one goal where you would most like to achieve breakthrough results***, instead of trying to significantly improve everything all at once. We call this a Wildly Important Goal, or 'WIG' to make it clear to the team that this goal is critical and will be given special focus and attention.

If you are trying to simultaneously execute a number of new goals, each of which requires a high degree of engagement to achieve, you will inevitably be frustrated by your results. Even if each goal can be justified, the demands of **The Whirlwind**, (your urgent, business-as-usual, every day work activities) leave you limited capacity for anything new, especially a goal that requires a change in human behavior. Attempting to spread that limited capacity across multiple goals is the most common cause of failure in execution.

The word 'focus' is most often used in one of two ways, and both are critical to Discipline 1. The first is when we talk about narrowing our focus, meaning to limit the number of things we are looking at to a single Wildly Important Goal. The second is when we talk about bringing that one thing into focus, the way you may adjust the lens of a camera until the subject is crisply clear. This is equally important. The Wildly Important Goal must be singular and completely in focus. This is achieved not only by selecting the specific area where you want to achieve breakthrough results (your WIG), but also by bringing it into focus by defining a starting line (your current level of performance) a finish line (your desired improved performance), and a deadline for the WIG (the date by which this level must be achieved)



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For example, instead of defining a WIG as “Improved subscription revenues,” you would define it as “increased revenue from new subscriptions from 3.5 million to 4.5 million by December 31st.”

The process for defining a WIG should not be thought of simply as “this year's process for setting goals.” The WIG represents a breakthrough result that only by applying special treatment. Without this level of focus, you likely won't get the results you want. Focus is the first step, but it's also only the beginning.

Discipline 2: Act on the Lead Measures

This is the discipline of leverage. It's based on a simple principle: not all actions are created equal—some actions have more impact than others. When you are working towards a goal, these are the actions you want to identify and act on at the highest level if you want to achieve a breakthrough result.

Whatever strategy you're pursuing, your progress and success will be based on two kinds of measures: ***lag and lead.***

Lag measures are the tracking measurements of the Wildly Important Goal, or any other measurement that you cannot significantly influence individually. These are usually the ones you spend most of your time agonising over—*revenue, profit, market share, product quality, and customer satisfaction* are all lag measures. This means that when you receive them, the performance that drove them is already in the past. That's why you're agonising; by the time you get the lag measure, you can't fix it—it's history.

Lead measures are quite different. They are ***the measures of the most impactful actions or behaviours your teams must do to reach the goal.*** In essence, the lead measures are the new behaviours that will drive success on the lag measures, whether those behaviours are as simple as offering a sample to every customer in the bakery or as complex as adhering to standards in jet engine design.

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

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*To understand these two characteristics, consider the simple goal of losing weight. While the lag measure is pounds lost, two lead measures might be a specific limit on calories per day and a specific number of hours of exercise per week. The lead measures are **predictive** because, by adhering to them, you can predict what the scale—the lag measure—will tell you in the next week. They are **influenceable**, because both of these new behaviours are within your control.*

Be careful not to confuse what we are calling lead measures with the often-used term "predictive indicator." For example, inches of rainfall might be predictive of crop growth, but it's not something that can be influenced by the team, and this is a critical difference. Both lead measures and predictive indicators predict an outcome, but only lead measures also include being influenceable by the team.

For this reason, lead measures are the most effective element for tracking action critical to WIG achievement.

The number of times preventative maintenance is done could be a lead measure for a WIG, or a lag measure of reducing machine downtime. A reduction in the out-of-stocks count could be a lead measure for the WIG of increasing same-store sales. The number of times call centre supervisors do one-on-one coaching could be a lead measure for a WIG of improved customer service.

Acting on the lead measures is one of the little-known secrets of execution.

Most leaders—even some of the most experienced—are so focused on lag measures that the discipline to focus on the lead measures feels counterintuitive. Don't misunderstand: lag measures are ultimately the most important thing you're trying to accomplish, but lead measures, true to their name, are what will get you to the lag measures. Once you've identified your lead measures, they become the key leverage points for achieving your goal.

(PTO for Disciplines 3 & 4)

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Discipline 3: keep a compelling scoreboard

People play differently when they're keeping score. If you doubt this, watch any group of teenagers playing a game and see how the level of play changes the minute scorekeeping begins. However, the truth of this statement is more clearly revealed by a change in emphasis: people play differently when they are keeping score. It's not about the leader keeping score for them.

Discipline 3 is based on the principle of **engagement**. The highest level of performance always comes from people who are emotionally engaged, and the highest level of engagement comes from knowing the score—that is, if people know whether they are winning or losing. It's that simple. Bowling through a curtain might be fun in the beginning, but if you can't see the pins fall, it will soon become boring, even if you really love bowling.

If you've narrowed your focus in Discipline 1—your WIG with a lag measure - and determined the critical lead measures that will keep you on course towards the goal in Discipline 2, you have the elements of a winning game. But as of yet, you have only a 'good bet'; it won't feel like a winnable game until there's a compelling scoreboard.

The kind of scoreboard that will drive the highest levels of engagement will always feel more like a players' scoreboard than the more complex coaches' scoreboard leaders typically love to create. It must be simple—so simple that members of the team can determine instantly if they are winning or losing. Why does this matter? If the scoreboard isn't clear, the game you want people to play will be abandoned in the whirlwind of other activities. If your team doesn't know if they are winning the game, they're probably on their way to losing.

Discipline 4: Create a cadence of accountability

Discipline 4 is where execution really happens. The first three disciplines set up the game, but until you apply **Discipline 4**, your team isn't in the game. It is based on the principle of **accountability**; that is to say, unless we consistently hold one another accountable, the goal naturally disintegrates into the whirlwind.

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'Despite the Whirlwind' – this is vitally important. When we make commitments with one another to deliver on actions, there is often an implicit promise, 'I will deliver on this unless something more urgent arises from my day job...' In this process we're saying: we know that the day job is hungry and tumultuous – but we're ringfencing 20% or so of our time on our most strategic actions for winning the game – and that commitment is sacrosanct.

Why is the cadence of accountability so important?

Consider the experience of someone with whom we've worked. They and their teenage daughter made an agreement that she would be allowed to use the family car if she washed it every Saturday morning. They would meet each Saturday to make sure the car was clean. They met on Saturday for several weeks, and everything went well, but then he had to go out of town for two Saturdays in a row. When he returned, he found that the car had not been cleaned. He asked his daughter why she hadn't taken care of her job. "Oh," she replied, "are we still doing that?"

It took only two weeks for the accountability system to break down. If this is the case in a one-on-one situation, think of how much more it applies to a work team or a whole organisation. The magic is in the cadence: team members must be able to hold one another accountable regularly and rhythmically each week.

One by one, team members answer a simple question: ***"What are the one or two most important things I can do in the next week, outside the whirlwind, that will have the biggest impact on the scoreboard?"*** Then, members report on whether they met the previous week's commitments, how well they are moving the lead and lag measures on the scoreboard, and what their commitments for the coming week are—all in only a few minutes.

As a leader, how you launch 4DX with your team is not as important as how you run 4DX with your team. The team must feel this is not only a winnable game, but also a high-stakes game. That starts with how you, as the leader, treat this session. When held with perfect consistency, this session communicates that this is a high-stakes game. This is vital because so many other competing priorities will actually seem more urgent than your WIG on a day-to-day basis.

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However, the real secret to **Discipline 4**, in addition to the repeated cadence, is that **team members create their own commitments**. It's common to find teams where the members expect—even want—simply to be told what to do. However, because they make their own commitments, their **ownership** of them increases. Team members will always be more committed to their own ideas than they will be to directives from above.

Even more important, making commitments to their team members, rather than solely to their boss, shifts the emphasis from professional to personal. The commitments go beyond their job performance; they're becoming promises to the team.

Because the team commits to a new set of objectives each week, this discipline creates a just-in-time weekly execution plan that adapts to the challenges and opportunities that can never be foreseen in an annual strategic plan. In this way, the plan is adapting as fast as the business is changing.

The result: the team can direct enormous energy to the wildly important goal without getting blocked by the shifting whirlwind of change all around them. When your team begins to see the lag measure of a big goal moving as a direct result of their effort, they will know they are winning, and nothing drives morale and engagement of a team more than winning.

People want to win; they want to contribute in a way that matters. However, too many organisations lack this kind of discipline—the conscious, consistent regimen needed to execute key goals with excellence. The financial impact of a failure to execute can be huge, but it's only one of the impacts. Another is the human cost to people who want to give their best and be part of a winning team. By contrast, nothing is more motivating than belonging to a team of people who know the goal and are determined to get there.

The four disciplines work because they are based on principles, not practices. We believe the principles of execution have always been focus, leverage, engagement, and accountability. ... We didn't invent them, and we freely acknowledge that understanding them has never been the problem. The challenge for leaders has been finding a way to implement them, especially when the whirlwind is raging.