



# RULES MUST BE OBEYED

**JAMIL RASHID** explains how structure and discipline can keep teams focused and get results

**F**or decades sales leaders have wrestled with how to execute strategic sales plans, from breaking into a new market to the implementation of a sales CRM system. Right now, in the age of austerity, many are simply concentrating on hitting target.

When trying to solve execution issues, sales leaders often feel that their staff don't have the level of engagement they would like. The reason we all want more focus is clear – it means more sales, fewer costs and getting more done. What isn't so clear is how to achieve this increased engagement from our teams and how to sustain it. The answer is to take a structured approach.

## KNOW YOUR EXECUTION RATE

Although persuading your staff of opportunities through better focus is not easy, measuring it is. And that is the first step to persuading them.

Beyond having a 'gut feeling', how do you know when there is an absence of engagement? Answer: when strategic plans and activities are consistently not being met. I'm talking about the percentage of things they actually got done compared to the things they said they would do, on time and to cost. It's something called the 'execution rate'. It enables that rather intangible thing called 'focus' to be measured by the number of 'hits' on strategic objectives.

Do you really know how much of what you and your salespeople agree to do actually gets done successfully on time and on budget? Do you really know how many of those activities simply slip quietly into obscurity? Do you know what your execution rate is? And can you say what it is for each of your key teams or people?

In real business life there is a significant disparity between what businesses seek to achieve and what they actually achieve. The

execution rate shows you just how big that gap really is. The majority of the time, the execution rate is very low – often 30% or less. This means that a huge percentage of all strategic objectives fail in some way. Either they never happen or they come in late or over budget.

## GET THE FULL PICTURE

If you only measure against, say, the top five things your team planned to do this year, you won't get the full picture and you won't see where focus is lacking. But if you look at the full range of activities, that is, measure against all of the things you were supposed to achieve every week – week in, week out – then you will begin to see how many objectives are hit and how many are missed. Suddenly, your picture becomes much clearer and you will quickly find out where the opportunities for improvement lie.

## DIG DEEPER

By genuinely knowing and getting your teams focused on their execution rate, you will automatically create a higher level of engagement. This, however, is just the beginning. We need to get closer to the reasons that lie behind better focus.

Every leader I've ever met is wholly committed to their company. They put in long hours, lose sleep about results and performance and worry about how to make their business better. They are passionate and hungry for success. They want to delight shareholders and customers alike. So why is the execution rate so low?

When you look closely, the reason things don't get done, strategic intentions don't get realised, and targets are not met, is because people are wasting time on activity that has no bearing on the strategic objectives of the business, or they are taking too long to do what needs to be done.

The reason why people engage in inefficient ➤

*'Do you really know how much of what you and your salespeople agree to do actually gets done successfully on time and on budget?'*

◀ and irrelevant activity is primarily because they do not have enough clarity and discipline. A structured leadership approach will help you to tackle these fundamental causes of poor execution

### DO THE RIGHT THINGS

Strategy fails because people make illogical decisions and then spend huge amounts of time and money implementing the wrong initiatives. Projects are agreed to and initiatives set in motion without any formalised analysis or structured decision-making process. As a result, too many decisions are made too quickly without being adequately thought through. Moreover, strategy also fails because people veer off course, even after they have identified the right things to do. These things happen because there isn't enough clarity within your business processes to keep them focused and on track. Clarity comprises three key elements: alignment, planning and analysis.

**STRUCTURED ALIGNMENT** – understand how your team is cascading your objectives and help them to define how they will be realised at every management level. Structured alignment focuses firstly on identifying the activities necessary to achieve those objectives, and secondly on examining the rationale behind every key activity, to ensure it is genuinely aligned to those objectives. This helps to eliminate irrelevant activity. Put in place a process so that alignment can be constantly checked – it is not a one-off activity.

**STRUCTURED PLANNING** – agree a method for planning with your team. This is crucial for good execution. Then get everyone to develop highly visible, detailed plans at all levels. Good planning is about applying consistency, structure and detail. This enables people to spot when they're going off course.

**STRUCTURED ANALYSIS** – implement a simple and common analysis process. This will ensure that strategic plans and all key decisions are driven by evidence and data, not assumption, 'gut feel', experience or incomplete facts. Make sure that all key staff use this common process. Although it is fine for them to use their own tools where needed, ensure you agree a minimum standard that must be followed in the decision-making process. Whilst you can never prove everything, structured analysis encourages everyone in the business to question key decisions and link back to evidence.

When these three elements are in place, things should start becoming clearer. But for a fully focused workforce, there needs to be engagement.

### GET 'BUY-IN'

If sales managers ignore key personnel in the decision-making process, they will rarely achieve the results they hoped for. It doesn't matter how smart the manager is or how brilliant the decision. It doesn't even matter if the decision is based on clarity of thought and is rational and data-driven. Unless they involve the salespeople who are going to execute that decision, they will weaken the outcome. This is a key reason why strategy fails.

This means nothing can be achieved in isolation. Every

leader and manager knows this and yet the people who are charged with executing the strategic objectives are rarely adequately involved in the selection and planning of those initiatives. As such there is no 'buy in'. Without buy-in, tasks just don't get done, they get done inefficiently or badly, or people veer off course and engage in irrelevant activity.

All managers will say that they involve their people. But what they generally don't say is how they are involving, how often they are doing so and how consistently. In addition, your idea of engagement and someone else's idea of engagement may be two entirely different things. So establishing a common understanding is imperative. You must therefore define rules for engagement so that everyone understands exactly what it means for your business.

Another reason leaders and managers shy away from engagement is because they assume it will take too long. Already pressed for time, they choose instead to instruct and dictate. Or, worse, they will instruct some people and engage others, and this inconsistency further fosters cynicism and reduces buy-in and staff morale.

Structured engagement requires getting your people together and coming up with rules for engagement. It is this process of discussion and exchange that creates genuine involvement and lets everyone in your team and organisation know that you are serious about agreeing a set of rules with them, not for them.

Engagement is critical to long-term success and requires commitment and courage to see it through. You can't create rules and then promptly break them – especially if you are the leader. The commitment you show to the process will lead directly to increased execution rate and to real focus from your teams.

### MAINTAIN DISCIPLINE

The final level of focus comes through discipline. Strategy fails because people are undisciplined both in what they do and how they do it. Having great plans is essential to success but planning, on its own, doesn't work, because it is only one half of the process. The other half is disciplined measurement against those plans. It is this part that is almost always missing.

By adopting structured leadership you are delivering an important message about your principles and how your business operates. In the same way that environmental standards or quality standards set a benchmark for performance, your 'structured leadership standards' will create a benchmark for improving execution rate, which can be duplicated up and down the business. With these standards, you will be able to see where discipline issues exist. Without standards, it's too easy to drift into inefficient or irrelevant activity.

We often assume that great people make great companies, but great systems are the real reason for success. The processes within great companies are consistently clear and disciplined and in that environment everyone is fully engaged.

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