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COLUMN

Moving Swiftly with Focus & Flexibility The #1 Job of Business Leaders

By Holly G. Green

If you were to compile a checklist of attributes for great leaders, it would probably include the following:

- **Visionary:** John F. Kennedy's powerful statement, "We will put a man on the moon by the end of this decade," is a classic example of great leadership through a compelling vision.
- **Great communication skills:** Ronald Reagan's ability to inspire others through passionate oratory earned him the moniker "The Great Communicator."
- **Focus:** During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln saved a nation (and changed the world) with his relentless focus on keeping the United States whole.
- **Courage under fire:** When things looked their bleakest for England in the early days of WWII, Winston Churchill rallied the country with his personal courage and bulldog tenacity.
- **Charismatic:** Despite his other character flaws, Bill Clinton had a charm and charisma that attracted people to him in droves.
- **Strategic thinker:** The business landscape is full of great strategists who have guided their organizations to positions of market leadership. Steve Jobs of Apple and Gordon Moore of Intel come to mind.

If you asked people which of these attributes is most important for a business leader to have, most would probably say "strategic thinker." With so many competitors in every market and with change happening in the blink of an eye, it takes a great strategy to come out ahead. It takes someone who can look around, make new connections, and connect the dots faster.

But creating a winning strategy is only half the battle. In fact, it may be the easier part. Leading effectively in today's business environment requires the ability to think strategically and to implement according to that strategy. And that's where many leaders and entire organizations are falling short.

The #1 job of today's business leaders is to focus on both strategy *and* implementation. This represents a huge difference from a generation ago, when it often took several years for a good strategy to unfold. These days, speed, the rapidity of change, and universal access to information have created a whole new set of demands that require daily attention to ensure that the strategy unfolds properly.

The challenge for business leaders is finding a way to balance their energy and attention across both strategy and execution. You can help your clients by coaching them to develop tools that will create the same sense of urgency around strategy and focused implementation that they normally devote to putting out all the "emergencies" that occur throughout the day.

These tools can be as low-tech as a sticky-note reminder or as sophisticated as an automated "task ping" from their PC or laptop – anything that keeps them focused on the activities necessary to turn their plan into reality.

To develop more focus around implementation, encourage your clients to pause for a few minutes and plan out their time for the week ahead. Segment it into separate activity blocks, such as collecting data on strategy X, hands-on work on initiative Y, feedback sessions, customer meetings, communication events, etc. The goal is to get them thinking about where they are spending their time and how much of it correlates to actually achieving their strategy.

Next, have your clients review the percentage of time they allocate to each activity block and ask: Does this align with getting us to our destination? Am I ignoring or missing critical areas? Are there areas taking up too much of my time for the anticipated return? Of all the activities I am doing right now, what will have an impact a year from now?

Spending all their time contemplating the future might work for think tanks and ivory towers. But in the business world, it's the day-to-day actions (communicating, providing feedback, realigning behaviors, recognizing others, etc.) coupled with strategic thinking and doing that equates to success.

Many leaders can come up with a winning strategy. It's the follow-through and focus on getting the right things done that separates the great leaders from the good ones. Don't just run, run in the right direction!



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