

Execution: As it relates to Curriculum Development

According to a highly successful CEO, practitioner, and author – a man with an admirable history of executing articulated plans in a Fortune 10 company (1) *execution is a discipline and is integral to strategy*, (2) *execution should be a major focus for any leader*, and (3) *execution must be a core element in any organization's culture*. These three prongs speak to the role of execution and bring clarity to an otherwise elusive term. Execution is in many ways enigmatic. On the one hand, everyone thinks of execution as the brass tacks, the bare bones, where the rubber hits the road... it is so very practical. And yet, on the other hand, we struggle to define it, to give it boundary and structure... to put our hands on it.

This is not an unusual dilemma in business, as this enigmatic quandary is something often encountered by Organizational Development and Human Resource professionals when they pursue “learning” or “training” for an organization. To flesh out this ephemeral problem, let's take a common example. If someone were engaged in a particular home project on any given weekend and needed to drill a hole, he or she would require a drill with a drill-bit. Now clearly, the problem that needs solving revolves around the need for the hole itself. The drill and bit are simply means to an end. They are the solution. The person engaged in this task is far less interested in having another tool to hang on the wall of the garage; instead, he or she is needing these resources to achieve the end in mind – the hole. Now, returning to the quandary encountered by OD and HR folks, isn't it common to see them directed by their leaders to pursue drills and bits rather than holes? Such drills and bits come in all shapes and sizes: training materials, e-learning, coaching, assessments, and more. But we mustn't get distracted by the shiny objects. We've got to stay focused on the hole that needs drilling... on the problem that needs solving, or the aspiration that needs reaching. No effective CEO is going to say, “Gee, thanks for these wonderful participant binders, I'm sure they'll do just the trick.” No, no, no. Instead, they'll ask, “Okay, so how are these materials going to solve our particular business problem?”

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Whether an organization's culture needs improving, competition is rising, employees are leaving, departments are squabbling, or markets are shrinking, our focus must remain on the solution itself – not the means and all its trappings.

Our organization is often approached in the midst of a pursuit for drills and bits. We are contacted and someone will ask, “What classes do you offer in Leadership?” or “Have you got any training for salespeople?” Rather than engage with the client on these questions, we'll encourage them to step back a moment and help us understand more foundational issues such as:

1. What problem(s) are you trying to solve?
2. What vision are you trying to attain?
3. What's the size of the challenge you face... is this a multi-million-dollar, multi-year-challenge, or are you simply wanting to improve already excellent processes?
4. What have you pursued or tried already?
5. What would be evidence of success?
6. Who's vested, bought-in, or driving this search for shiny objects?



Solution Speedometer

There are myriad other questions, all of which are instrumental in their own ways, but again – the questions are simply means to that elusive end... the hole itself. Once we wrap our arms around the topography of the challenge, we often share our “Solution Speedometer” with clients and ask them to reflect on it and tell us where THEY see the most promise.

If something is needed quickly (triage situation) and the problem is not particularly large nor unique, an “**Existing, Level 1 Solution**” will often be the right-size drill bit. These solutions are off-the-shelf concepts, best-practices, and lessons-learned that are utilitarian in nature and solve the broadest business problems ranging from interpersonal conflicts, transactional sales dilemmas, supervisory skills, and trust in the workplace.

When a client presents a problem that simply requires a more home-grown feel, or is constrained by dollars and time, we’ll sometimes suggest a “**Tailored, Level 2 Solution**” in order to meet their needs.

When the client describes a very unique culture with island-nomenclature (somewhat “isolated” and “special” and “surely no one else has these unique problems”), these are indicators that we need to ratchet-up the customization and grind the drill-bit in order to make it more acceptable within this culture. These are “**Customized, Level 3 Solutions.**”

Finally, if a client uses language like “competitive advantage,” “very scientific,” “no generic anecdotes, please,” “competency-based,” “sole ownership,” “corporate university,” or “proprietary,” we know we’re entering the “**New, Level 4 Solution**” territory. The speedometer is pegging red, and we’ve got to move quickly to develop a special solution in very little time. This is our forte, and we’re always delighted to see the clients months later when they admire the hole they drilled.

This execution of our content, whether achieved using existing best-practice content or collaborating to create something proprietary is our daily pursuit, and we take great pleasure in seeing it come together in a very practical way. For many traditionalists, “organizational learning” and “knowledge transfer” and the like are very fluffy and touchy-feely words that hold no real meaning. We understand this problem well and succeed consistently at helping others see the hole itself, making the means to the end secondary.

After all, binders collect dust on shelves and e-learning is often untapped... but the business problem that gets solved, and the aspirations that get reached stand as unwavering testaments to the value of those shiny objects that get us from Point A to Point B.