
Thought Piece:

Executor of Will

At a friend's recent wedding, the bridesmaid's speech made reference to the exceptional organisational skills of the bride – to the extent that the owner of the wedding venue, upon meeting the would-be bride for the first time, offered her a job on the spot. This was no surprise to most of us listening, as the person in question is a true 'force of nature' and an extremely capable and successful business leader in her own right. On reflection, I realised that most of the very successful people that I know or have observed, are also exceptional at just 'getting things done'. Some of these people have neither 'conventional' brains nor conventional educations, but all seem endowed with a forcefulness in getting what they want. Crucially, they also seem to have an ability to attract like-minded people to their cause.

Is it the case that the skill itself, that of getting things done, is innate, or can it be taught? Hard to know. It seems to be more innate. That might explain why there is a dearth of good books written specifically about business 'execution' – a fancy phrase for 'getting things done' inside the confines of an organisation. Unlike business strategy or leadership, which now tend to have their own sections in most airport bookshops, business execution seems to be far more nebulous to understand, emulate or indeed articulate. It is one of those phenomena that is hard to describe but as the saying goes, 'we know it when we see it'.

Take Ryanair. It is relatively easy to identify and admire Ryanair's longstanding corporate success, which was built upon a bedrock of consistent execution. As many have shown, it is another thing entirely to successfully replicate that execution track record. We would argue that Ryanair's execution prowess originates from and is fuelled by the 'force of nature' that is Michael O'Leary (Ryanair CEO).

Why are the Michael O'Learys of the business world so rare and hard to copy? Perhaps because business execution is akin to alchemy: turning intangible ideas into real, desired outcomes consistently. While strategy is arguably a low-energy (though not low-value) exercise, execution is by contrast a more active pursuit that demands high energy. Occasionally such alchemy does become entrenched within an organisation and at that stage it might seem to lose its magical mystery. Great execution, when entrenched, looks methodical and efficient – in effect it seems like a machine. That is the point when it is most easy to overlook that such a machine originated from, and often remains reliant on, a 'force of nature' team within the organisation. Forces of nature are by definition organic.

David Barber of Halma once wrote, *"the sequence to achieving long-term growth in shareholder value is: first to establish the mathematical model which meets your needs. Then steadily and systematically to change the group until it comes to conform with your model"*. Barber's latter instruction sounds a lot like execution. The O'Leary approach to such execution takes it up a notch. Rather than merely seeking to "change the group" as Barber put it, O'Leary's route since 1994 was to cajole, corral and even coerce customers to conform with his vision of how a low-cost airline business ought to be implemented in Europe. With hindsight, such conforming required huge discipline, energy and will. Above all, it required force.

Rather than energy or force, however, one might call it ambition or better still, hunger. All those businesses that show great execution tend to have a leader whose scale of ambition or hunger to succeed is very high. O'Leary is rare but far from unique. Think Walton, Schwab or Jobs, or closer to home, Ashley or Wolfson – all endowed with a tremendous hunger and

predisposition to action. Elon Musk once said, *"production is hell"*, and yet he still has an incredible record of getting tangible things done at scale across myriad diverse businesses. Another observation is that an attribute all these leaders share is control – it seems you need control (which typically means being an owner) in order to be able to exert the authority needed to execute in the manner required. Larry Culp (formerly of Danaher) summarised his management style as *"common sense vigorously applied"*. Culp's requirement of vigour seems bang on.

Sounds straightforward, right? Just hire energetic people! Not so fast: a bias to action at the expense of planning or the strict adherence to smart strategy can be ruinous. In our language here, energy applied in the wrong direction is invariably disastrous and notably, executive surveys consistently show that managers typically feel far more productive acting than planning. Buffett makes a similar point on getting the direction right: *"Somebody once said that in looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if you don't have the first, the other two will kill you."*

Of course, it is over-simplistic to attribute all of a company's execution to one person. It's always a team sport. At the end of his great book, *How Big Things Get Done*, author Bent Flyvbjerg offers 11 heuristics on project management. Top of his list? Hire a Master Builder.

"This is the only heuristic cited by every project leader I've ever met. Ed Catmull explained why: if you give a good idea to a mediocre team, they will screw it up. If you give a mediocre idea to a brilliant team, they will either fix it or throw it away and come up with something better. If you get the team right, chances are they will get the ideas right. But who should pick the team? Ideally that's the job of the master builder. In fact, it's the master builder's main job. That is why the role of master builder is not as solitary as it sounds, projects are delivered by teams. So, to amend my advice above: when possible, hire a master builder".

Perhaps we can adapt Flyvbjerg's heuristics in seeking out businesses with great execution. Seek a master builder with tremendous energy and hunger, one that attracts like-minded people and make sure that hunger is directed towards a smart strategy. Simple (but not easy)!