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In the last month's Agora Times we looked at how the year is coming to an end and how we should be putting a plan that we can execute (Planning to execute) to for the coming year. In this edition of the document we take a look at how to execute that plan or a strategy to success (VA Executing your strategies to success-ES2S). You might notice that this is Vantage Agora's tag line and the corner stone on which we have built the company. If anyone of you can gain from this concept then our effort to pen these processes would be well worth.

The problem:

Let us go through the problem again. We have talked about how we good companies have an innate structure to execute their plans to success. We have established how to put a detailed Annual Operating Plan (AOP) that you can execute through the course of the year. Now that let us talk about executing the AOP to success.

The conventional B-school way of executing a plan is limited to only things like project planning tools, BI tools, or Insurance dashboards that are customized based on the needs of the organization. This leaves a void in both the tools and road-map for everyday business leaders. In the last five years of exploring and researching on this subject we have been told that executing a plan to success is more than science and more of an art! The fact that there is a business book called "What the witch doctors say" (a disgruntled saga of an author who believes that no strategy can ever be implemented successfully) tells us that there is really no prescribed way to handle 'the execution of the plan to success'. Another book called "Execution" points us in the right direction but does not go into the details how you should execute to a plan on a day to day basis. This is left to the individual leaders to figure out for themselves. Obviously all this is not is good enough. What we need is a dependable, generalized approach/process for every manager can use to implement a plan on the shop-floor successfully.

Great! Let us jump right into it. Let me try and explain a few of the situations that we have faced as a Insurance Outsourcing company or people. Then we can come up with a standardized approach to overcoming these problems.

Example 1: The CEO of a mid-market company confessed "Harsha, I have hired some of the best people in my business good people, but every time they join my organization they all become a bunch of nay Sayers. I just can't understand why every time I have a plan to get this company to the next step by executing a strategic plan they seem to dissuading me not to do it or telling me why it will fail. It is almost as though they don't care about the success of the organization or their owner careers. Sometimes not even that, they just don't want any change at all. Do they not understand that it is their company and they grow when the company grows?"

Example 2: One of the people that I met, a leader of fortune 100 company, confessed to me that he had problem with his team and wondered why people took such a long time to implement initiatives. He wondered why all his efforts were watered down by the time they became a reality. He told me that his own trick to contain this problem was to hire the best and make sure that he set such high standards that even if he gets out 75% of the expected results the strategic initiative(s) would work fine. He also confessed that most people were burnt out and he had high attrition problems.

Example 3: Others have confessed that they have a mission statement and solid strategy to implement it. But are hindered every step of the way because executing the plan is sucking the

blood out the management team. One of the CEOs told me, "Harsha, the best way to get things done is to give the same initiative to three of my best people and have an internal competition with the organization". My response got me into trouble when I told him "This is also the best way to kill your company and de-motivate your people".

Example 4: Still others have confessed that it is a serious lack of accountability at all levels. They felt that their teams understand what needs to be done and how to go about doing it but they don't want to do it. In many cases leaders suspecting this behavior have gone back and over loaded their employee with a number of initiatives all of these that have come to a naught. So much so that many of these companies have died just for the reason that leaders are flooding the company with so many conflicting ideas.

These organizations had a lot of things going right for them. The leaders were highly innovative, energetic and were giving their 100%. Yet most of them have failed as an organization because they did not put together a process that everyone in their organization could follow and execute the strategies to success.

These experiences have made Vantage Agora to think deeply over the years, and to develop appropriate and realistic solutions.

The solution:

We have listed the process that we use within VA and have implemented in other companies that have yielded results.

1. Execute to plan: Finalize all the initiatives that you are going to take as an organization for at least one calendar year from the AOP that you have created at the end of the year. Make sure that no initiative is started without an initiative document and each initiative has to be in line with the plan that is created at the beginning of the year. This is going to test you as a leader. It will test your consistency of purpose. If you fail and yield to the temptation of reacting and shooting from the hip the entire purpose will be lost and the company will stop respecting you as a leader.
2. Hire right: Hire enthusiastic people with the right 'attitude'. They have to be motivated and disciplined, the rest will follow. A Harvard research has found that 'attitude' to be the biggest factor for success among people.
3. One message: Have only one message at a time across the entire company. In fact, talk only about one step of the initiative at a time across the company. Talk about the initiative with reference to the mission and goals of the company. This will help the entire organization relate to how the initiative is good for the organization and themselves. This sort of consistency of messaging galvanizes the entire organization to the initiative. This message should be driven by everyone in management (Especially the CEO, founders, and top management). This consistency of message is critical for the success executing any strategy (A side note, one way to make a mission statement a reality is to use it in your daily messages, in your public address, in your emails, in your marketing material and in your meetings to help it become a part of the system. Use the mission statement with your team as a sounding board when you are in doubt as a team. A simple rule of thumb would be to talk about the mission statement at least once a day with someone in the organization).
4. Key Result Area (KRA): Make sure that everyone's first KRA is in line with the company's strategic direction or the major initiative. Meaning, everyone in the organization has a KRA that is measurable by an object KPI. Make sure that both the KRA and KPI is in line with the mantra for the quarter. We have seen it time and time again, that this is the key to success. Example, if you want improve the quality levels in the organization, make sure that quality of their teams and products have the most weight in every employees KRA. Including yours!
5. Key Performance Indicators (KPI): Have one tool and only one measurement metrics for the entire organization from the CEO down to the shop floor for ALL activities. Everyone marches by the

same measures and everyone in the organization knows these key measures. Stress on the importance of completing the job. Ensure that people finish their task updates in a timely manner. For each of these KRAs have a clearly defined SLA. We know a lot of companies that implement Kaplans Balance Score Card use KRA and KPI interchangeably. We would like to make the distinction that KRA is the area of result (The "What" of the problem) and KPI is (Where it is measured in the organization). Make sure that everyone in the organization knows their specific KRA and KPI. This is critical to the success of the implementation of the plan.

6. Company Rhythms: To bring credence to the initiative, have a beginning, a regular measurement, and the final closure. Make sure that you have a clear owner for the initiative with written and tangible success and failure criterion. Track the progress if the plan with a project plans. Use visual display techniques of making sure that the progress of the initiative is visible on the walls of the organization. This should list out the success and failure of every project in the organization and measure it in a regular pattern. Have all your meetings start with the operating rhythms for the day, week, month, and year. That will help everyone be on the same page.

7. Feedback loop: If the measure is not going well, make sure that you have a clear way of catching it (This is usually done by having good SLAs on your KPIs. Example, please see the "RYG status" at the bottom of one of VA dashboards) and contingency plans already thought out. Have a feedback loop from the organization on the company initiative and make sure that you communicate back to the organization on your findings. Celebrate successes and talk about how it is being in line with your mission statement and AOP. Create pilots, celebrate success and accept all failures as failure of the management. This will galvanize the company to be open to new initiatives when you want to start them next time.

The trick to executing your plans/strategies to success is that everyone in the organization is oriented towards the goals or the strategic direction of the company. Think of your execution team as an US National Football team (NFL). The best teams have the coaches spend enormous amounts of time making sure that each player is prepared to do the small things correctly when it comes to their line of duty. From the offensive line to the quarter-back moving the right number of steps to the hand signals a water boy makes to the quarterback!

Follow these seven steps along with your corporate dashboards you will certainly be able to get visibility, repeatability and even predictability into your organization.

If you are in the process of preparing the plan, implementing it, or have any questions about this article please feel free to connect with any one of us Vantage Agora.

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As a founder of Vantage Agora, Harsha has been instrumental in the growth of the company since its inception. Harsha has over 20+ years of experience in consulting, running and helping companies and their supply chains worldwide. His work with many companies, has made him a turnaround expert. Harsha has four worldwide patents in the area of supply chain management.

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