The Work of Leaders
How Vision, Alignment, and Execution Will Change the Way You Lead

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Authors’ Bios:

Julie Straw oversees Inscape’s network of more than 1,800 trainers, coaches, and consultants and has guided development of this book from the reader’s perspective.

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Susie Kukkonen leads all product development efforts at Inscape and juggled the writing of this book with a full-tilt product development schedule.

Barry Davis oversees both marketing and product development for Inscape, and his passion for innovation means that he doesn’t understand the phrase, “But that’s how we’ve always done it.”

Author’s big thought: Comprehensively researched, thought-provoking, and eminently practical VAE: The Work of Leaders stimulates fresh conversations and new perspectives regardless of the leader’s knowledge or experience. It’s an opportunity for leaders at all levels of learning to reflect on how they approach each step of their work along a “leadership continua” and helps leaders take action with personalized tips and strategies that give clear direction and are easy to apply.

Introductory chapters introduce the steps of the VAE process, defines, demystifies, and contextualizes each, and sets up the three key “drivers” for each step. Subsequent chapters address each driver in detail.
Chapter Notes:

Chapter 1: Welcome to the Work of Leaders

- The authors asked more than 5,900 training participants in which skill areas they would voluntarily spend their time attending training.
- Not surprisingly, people are most willing to attend training that has direct, concrete applications in their world—“technical knowledge related to my job.” A close second with 81 percent: “Leadership skills.” In fact, when they asked people what training would greatly increase their effectiveness at work, the number one answer, by far, was also leadership skills.
- Managers are more interested in attending leadership training than management training.
- This information has to be accessible if it’s going to make a real difference in anyone’s work. So that’s what the authors set out to do—make leadership accessible. In essence, their goal was to study all of the most respected thinking and research on leadership, focusing on common themes and major breakthroughs, and follow up with their own research, gaining clarification on the most promising ideas.
- To come up with a truly comprehensive view of leadership, they included writers from a broad range of perspectives.
- The goal was to pull out a simple structure that still captured the richness within all of this thinking.
- They moved on to verify and build on what they had earned. They wanted clarification on these big, important ideas.
- As many as 3,500 people a day complete one of their online assessments, many of whom were gracious enough to help out with their leadership research.
- Their business gave them the opportunity to quickly test hypotheses, look at the results, then test some more.
- Ultimately, the VAE model in this book was created in ten stages of development.
- Throughout this book, they are able to provide the results from dozens of studies that they conducted over the past five years with hundreds of thousands of participants.
- They wanted to take the mystery out of leadership and spell out a leader’s responsibilities as clearly as possible. The result was a leadership model of Vision, Alignment, and Execution—what the authors call the VAE model.
- Leaders have three fundamental responsibilities: They craft a vision, they build alignment, and they champion execution.
- There’s a lot of skill that goes into each of these responsibilities. That, in fact, is what the rest of this book is about.
- Here are some quick definitions:
  - Crafting a Vision: imagining an improved future state that the group will make a reality through its work
  - Building Alignment: getting to the point where everyone in the group understands and is committed to the direction
Championing Execution: ensuring that the conditions are present for the imagined future to be turned into a reality

- All three are part of a dynamic, fluid process.
- There is, a great deal of complexity in doing the work of a leader, but the true value of this model is that it lays out a manageable, realistic framework to guide the process. The goal is to provide straightforward explanations of where you might choose to target your personal development efforts.
- Leadership development, like any personal development, is about energy. Where do you put your energy and how much do you put in? This book is about where to put your energy. You decide how much.

Cornerstone Principles of the Work of Leaders

- The VAE model approaches leadership as a one-to-many relationship, as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of management.
- The Work of Leaders is done by leaders at all levels. Whether you are a senior executive or a leader on the front line, the process of leadership follows the same path.
- The Work of Leaders is a collaborative process, but the journey to become an effective leader is a personal one. Some of the skills and best practices outlined here may come to you more easily than others.

Part 1: VISION

Chapter 2: Introduction to Crafting a Vision

- This is what leaders do when they craft a vision. They create a high-definition image of their world when all the work pays off.
- When we limit the crafting of vision only to a chosen few at the top—the visionaries—and assume that only the grandest of visions counts, we get an insufficient view of how vision works. Every day, people in leadership roles at all levels and in all kinds of businesses craft visions of how things can be better.
- Consider that:
  - Most people can learn how to craft an effective, compelling vision.
  - Most great visions involve contributions from a wide range of people.
  - The art of crafting a vision can be understood and practiced.
  - Leaders at all levels are responsible for crafting a vision.
- These are the assumptions for vision within the VAE model. This model is decidedly not about creating visionaries. It’s about developing your leadership skills so you can pilot the vision-crafting process.
- Experienced leaders see vision as critical to a leader’s work.
- One of the biggest differentiators between those who are skilled leaders and those who are unskilled leaders, between those who are really leading and those who are leaders in name only, is their effort and ability to craft a compelling vision of where they want to take their groups.
• Leadership is all about change. The leader needs to have a crystal-clear vision of where the group is headed.
• When leaders lack a clear vision of the group’s future, they are feeling their way through the execution process, relying on day-to-day revelations.
• They’re much less likely to realize when priorities are misplaced or when opportunities are passing them by.
• Truly great vision elevates our work. It sparks our imaginations. It touches on our human need to do something of value with our lives.
• Visions are designed to inspire us. If we list the contributions of a strong vision, we quickly recognize that they are uplifting in nature.
• A vision can help us stand out from our competitor. A powerful vision can help everyone understand how whatever you do is differentiated from what your competitors do.
• A vision provides purpose. Everyone’s work becomes essential and meaningful.
• Vision drives the creation of goals. It’s much easier to identify the necessary milestones to get there.
• Vision is every leader’s business, no matter where they are in the hierarchy. This is one of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of leadership. After the top-level leaders craft a vision, then it’s the responsibility of leaders at all levels to craft a vision for their teams supporting that top-level, organizational vision. And at each level, vision is equally important and must be well-crafted and appropriately communicated.
• Like nesting toys, a division leader’s vision must support the organization’s vision, but be relevant for her division. A department leader’s vision must support the division, and so on.
• Every member on your team can be encouraged to develop his or her own vision.
• Crafting a vision is a dynamic, fluid, living process within an organization or team that benefits from multiple perspectives.

Chapter 3: Crafting a Vision Through Exploration
• Curiosity is one of the first casualties of responsibility. Not having enough time was, by far, the number one explanation.
• People want their leaders to broaden the scope of the group’s options, to look beyond the here-and-now. To uncover possibilities, both hidden and obvious. To explore the “What if’s.”
• Not every direction is going to be a good one, but this is just exploration. It’s about taking time to step back and think beyond the normal constraints that we unknowingly put on ourselves.
• The real key to exploration is making it a priority.
• Here are two specific disciplines that will help you make the most of your time and effort. They are remaining open and prioritizing the big picture.

Remaining Open
• Many of us are less inclined to remain open to the possibilities ourselves. We’re under pressure to make decisions and execute.
Our neurons are wired to reward closure. Some of us crave closure more than others do. It’s about a need to get rid of the uncertainty and ambiguity of not knowing.

When you have a strong need for closure, you’re much more likely to run with the first good idea or solution that you generate.

Remaining open doesn’t mean you’re indecisive. It’s about making a conscious decision to invest time in exploration. It’s not that you can’t make up your mind—it’s about not making a decision too early.

**Strategies for Remaining Open**

- First, give yourself permission to set aside some specific time to let your mind wander, to think about the possibilities have faith in the process—form a habit and give it time to pay off.
- Next, resist the temptation to run with the first acceptable lead you generate. Allow time to simply toy with an idea.
- Research shows that your mind is still working on problems even when you’re not consciously thinking about them. This is why it’s so important to give the process time.
- Finally, don’t reject an idea just because you aren’t sure how it will be implemented. Being caught up in the logistics at this point can keep you from exploring a full range of possibilities.

**Prioritizing the Big Picture**

- There are both fundamental questions leaders could consider when defining the big picture. The most straightforward and useful we know of are the “Six Critical Questions” in Patrick Lencioni’s book, *The Advantage*.
- Lencioni’s six questions for leaders are:
  1. Why do we exist?
  2. How do we behave?
  3. What do we do?
  4. How will we succeed?
  5. What is most important right now?
  6. Who must do what?

**Strategies for Prioritizing the Big Picture**

- Clear view of the big picture is only possible when you understand your context. Spend time outside your day-to-day responsibilities. Talk to your customers. Talk to your customers’ customers. Talk to other teams in other departments. Talk to vendors. Ask any of these people about their experience working with your organization. What changes are they excited about? What are their frustrations? What are their pressure points?
- Once you have a grasp of how the outside world sees your team or organization, spend time with your group defining your own big picture.
- Learn to resist the temptation to shut down conceptual conversations as a waste of time. You’re developing theories of how the world works and why it doesn’t always work as well as it should.
Explore the big picture now and you’ll have a chance to deal with the particulars later. In fact, as you continue to explore the idea, many of the concerns might work themselves out anyway.

Chapter 4: Crafting a Vision Through Boldness

- How can leaders know exactly when it’s time to push beyond their current practices and established models? They can’t. Not with certainty. And this is precisely why organizations need leaders who can craft a bold vision.
- The lifespan of businesses are growing shorter. If leaders don’t advocate for bold visions, we slowly become less and less relevant.
- Any time you’re stretching the boundaries, there will be some resistance.
- In the VAE model, the effective leader understands that disruption to stability is sometimes necessary for growth (or even survival).
- Boldness is uncomfortable, opening the door to failure. If a leader is not able to muster an inner spirit of boldness, it limits his ability to move forward.
- There are two components to boldness. The first is being adventurous, or envisioning a future that stretches the boundaries. The second is speaking out, or stepping up to promote that bold vision.

Being Adventurous

- Adventurous leaders are people who set out to stretch the boundaries beyond what is currently known.
- Only a fraction of the leaders studied describe themselves as highly adventurous.
- This tension between the nature of so many leaders to play it “safe” and the needs of their teams for help in stretching the boundaries is precisely why leaders must make a conscious effort to be more adventurous.

Strategies for Being Adventurous

- Start by creating a good, old-fashioned list that weighs the pros and cons.
- Once you have identified your biggest fear, challenge yourself to confront it.
- Next, consider that being adventurous can have the added benefit of providing an opportunity to demonstrate your confidence in the group’s abilities.
- Finally, understand that you don’t have to go it alone. As you begin to move forward, it’s important to start bringing others on board with your bold vision. This creates an opportunity to share responsibility with the people around you.
- Gain confidence by first proposing your idea to people you feel comfortable with.

Speaking Out

- Speaking out is voicing ideas that may seem unconventional or even impractical at first blush. It’s the willingness to put your credibility on the line when a valuable idea is in danger of being swept under the rug.
- Bold ideas need a champion if they’re ever going to have a chance.

Strategies for Speaking Out

- Speaking out with a bold idea doesn’t necessarily have to be done impulsively or on the spur of the moment. If it will help you build confidence, run your idea by one or two people you feel comfortable with before proposing it to a larger group.
• Don’t apologize for your ideas or back down too quickly. Challenge people to put their skepticism aside for the moment. Instead of focusing on why this can’t be done, focus on how it can be done. Have a plan in place in case you find yourself intimidated by negative reactions.
• Finally, you might as well plan for a little pushback. Assume you will have to deal with resistance.

Chapter 5: Crafting a Vision Through Testing Assumptions
• “Is the idea not ready or the world, or is the world not ready for the idea?” Testing assumptions helps you bridge the difference between the two and testing assumptions is the final driver of crafting a vision in the VAE model.
• Seasoned leaders have learned how to use other people’s reactions to the vision as a litmus test for what’s in store as they work to bring it to life.
• Think of it as an opportunity to enhance, tweak, or understand the vision differently. Ultimately, it’s about making the best decision you can by having the benefit of multiple perspectives.

Seeking Counsel
• Seeking counsel is about inviting people whose skills and knowledge you respect into the process.
• The Purpose is to find out what you don’t know and to anticipate how the vision will unfold.
• By gathering advice from people whose experience and knowledge you respect, you increase the likelihood of creating a vision that will work.
• Look outside your group or organization to find fresh perspectives.

Strategies for Seeking Counsel
• Whenever possible, try to approach people individually rather than as a group so they don’t influence each other,
• Practice listening to their opinions without giving a rebuttal.

Exploring Implications
• The goal in exploring implications is to imagine the effect the idea will have on your organization.
• Exploring implications is about thinking beyond the obvious, while at the same time not overlooking the obvious.

Strategies for Exploring Implications
• The most common form of exploring implications is market research.
• Look at ways you can adapt the use of prototyping and concept testing to give your idea a more thorough examination.
• Ask an unbiased group of people to estimate the outcome, independently and privately, without any influence from the presenter or other group members. Probability suggests that the individual errors and biases will be cancelled out and the median is more likely to be predictive than any single estimate taken alone.
Chapter 6: Summary of Crafting a Vision

- VAE involves skills that can be learned and practiced—in this case, skills around exploration, boldness, and testing assumptions. But in the end, the leader has to apply judgment, asking herself how bold to be and how much to listen to critics and naysayers.

*Use these tips and reminders to guide your process.*
- Choose the scope of the vision that fits your current leadership role and the needs of your group and organization.
- Find the right balance. You’ll need to balance boldness and exploration with testing assumptions.
- Trust the process. Remember that crafting a vision is a dynamic process that benefits from multiple perspectives.
- The important thing is to be patient and stick with it.
- Make sure to set reasonable goals and expectations for yourself and your team.
- Don’t forget to appreciate the milestones and to celebrate the clear vision that’s essential to your long-term success.

Part 2: ALIGNMENT

Chapter 7: Introduction to Building Alignment

- Building alignment is the act of gaining buy-in for your vision and it’s absolutely critical in moving from imagination to reality.
- Building alignment means ensuring that each and every person understands his or her role in making the vision a reality.
- Effective leaders approach building alignment with deliberation, even passion. They know that it’s going to take everyone’s energy to make a vision happen.
- Effective leaders also understand that alignment is not something to check off a to-do list. Alignment is a dynamic, ongoing process that requires continual monitoring and realigning as conditions and needs change.
- By staying plugged in, effective leaders can quickly tell when alignment begins to wane, and they can then give the time and energy needed to revive it.
- Building alignment happens on both an emotional and a rational level.
- When both rational and emotional needs are met, when leaders reach the head and heart, true alignment goes beyond enthusiasm, beyond agreement, beyond understanding goals. True alignment changes the way team members view their actions; they embrace team decisions and organizational actions as if they were their own.

The Importance of Building Alignment

- There are three reasons why building alignment is important to organizations and teams:
  1. Alignment conserves time and energy. Taking time for alignment is an investment that will pay for itself many times.
2. Alignment provides a forum for questions and concerns. Because alignment opens the doors to healthy exchanges, it gives everyone in the organization or team an opportunity to feel a sense of ownership in the vision.
3. Alignment unites and excites people around a vision.

Chapter 8: Building Alignment Through Clarity
- Providing clarity involves a delicate balance between keeping it simple and addressing real-world complexities. This means sharing enough specifics to anticipate basic questions without drowning the listener in details. You need to concisely describe the vision, explain the purpose behind it, and give the specifics of how it affects your audience.
- Two practices to help you boost your clarity: explaining your rationale and structuring your message. As simple as they seem, we find they are often overlooked.

Explaining Rationale
- People respond to simple explanations. The mere presence of an explanation is powerful on many levels.
- Usually, the more unpopular or demanding a change is, the more important it is to give people a solid reason.
- There’s one time in particular that explaining one’s rationale is most important—in times of uncertainty or great change.

Strategies for Explaining Rationale
- What you are aiming for here is transparency. When there’s transparency in an organization, people at all levels feel they have access to essential information, and they’re more likely to trust what you’re saying.
- Next, work to shift perspectives and look at the situation from your listeners’ point of view to make sure it makes sense to them.
- Finally, monitor people’s reactions for comprehension. This is where you need to slow down, pay attention to body language, and read between the lines. If you sense confusion, take time to ferret out any areas of misunderstanding or uncertainty.
- You need to rely on the reactions of the group to know whether or not you are being clear.

Structuring Messages
- If you want the benefits of clarity working for you, you have to take time to structure your message.

Strategies for Structuring Messages
- First, start by finding your “headline.”
- Test it out on a couple of people to make sure it communicates what you’re intending, and refine as needed.
- Next, nail down your talking points.
- The part that often takes the most work is balancing the big picture and the details.
- Finally, once you’ve found your message, refer back to it often and consistently.
Chapter 9: Building Alignment Through Dialogue Building

- Through dialogue, the leader establishes a two-way conversation, in contrast to the one-way communication needed for clarity.
- It involves suspending judgment and stretching to connect with the other person’s point of view. This requires openness and active listening.
- Skilled leaders use dialogue as an opportunity to give people a voice, to gain buy-in and begin to build engagement.
- Effective leaders are aware of just how much value can be gleaned from the input of the people they lead. This awareness is supported by another core leadership trait—humility.
- Humility allows leaders to benefit from other perspectives, because they realize they don’t have a monopoly on insight.
- Dialogue is an art, but it’s also a skill that can be developed by practicing two key behaviors: exchanging perspectives and being receptive.

**Exchanging Perspectives**
- People think pay is going to make them more satisfied. Research shows that the factor that had the highest correlation with job satisfaction was “a chance to have my opinions heard and considered.”
- The authors asked more than 16,000 people to tell them about the leaders they enjoy working with most. The leaders who consistently rose to the top were those who genuinely listen to other people and take others’ input and ideas seriously. So if you want to become a leader that people like to follow, you couldn’t find a better place to start.

**Strategies for Exchanging Perspectives**
- First, it’s important to give people a safe place to open up. Create an environment that’s relaxed and informal. Choose a time and place where people won’t feel rushed or threatened.
- Next, remember that there are advantages to exchanging perspectives one-on-one. While leadership involves leading a group or organization, gaining buy-in is sometimes best one at the individual level.
- People are more likely to participate in a genuine exchange if they don’t have to worry about the reactions of others around them.
- Finally, practice reflective listening. This is about summarizing what someone said, using your own words. You’ll discover that, when you accurately and non-judgmentally summarize other people’s messages, they will often take it as an invitation to dig deeper.

**Being Receptive**
- Being receptive is about the vibe you’re sending out during the conversation.
- Results-oriented leaders are often those who struggle the most with the receptivity needed to gain alignment. It’s really hard to be challenging and receptive at the same time.
- Challenge kills vulnerability. When leaders encourage (or even reward) vulnerability, people can express their true doubts and concerns. They don’t need to worry about how
they’ll be perceived. They don’t have to worry about tap dancing around the leader’s ego.

- When vulnerability is absent, people protect their ideas and their territory. The group’s plans and goals don’t benefit from candid conversation because the interpersonal takes are too high.

**Strategies for Being Receptive**

- First, make sure your tone of voice and your body language verify your receptiveness.
- Next, don’t immediately try to counter what someone else has said. Be careful not to debate or battle for your own side.
- Being receptive involves empathy and emotion, and it doesn’t mean at you have to try to fix everything. Sometimes people just want to be heard.
- Actively look for signs of people just telling you what you want to hear; then encourage more honest feedback.

**Chapter 10: Alignment Through Inspiration**

- It’s only a select group of people who see inspiration as their thing.
- Inspiration may take a little more deliberate effort for those who aren’t naturally captivating and magnetic, but it certainly is something we have control over.
- Inspiration helps leaders gain buy-in. The goal here is to breathe life into the vision so that people are galvanized and become emotionally committed.
- Leaders tend to see themselves as significantly better at rallying people than their followers see them.
- When we break inspiration down to its essence, we’re talking about bringing positive energy to your group and your goals. In the VAE model, there are two components that help with this: being expressive (the energy) and being encouraging (the positivity).

**Being Expressive**

- Being expressive is conveying your thoughts or feelings in a way that reaches people on an emotional level. Even the most reserved leader can find a way to express and instill genuine feeling.
- Being expressive is believing in the vision and helping people see the real, deep meaning behind their tasks. It’s part of your job as a leader to express belief in the eventual outcome, to transmit that sense of importance.

**Strategies for Being Expressive**

- First, you need to be clear in your own mind why you’re passionate about the vision.
- Identify and label what your passion feels like. Paint an irresistible picture for yourself. By connecting with your emotions, it will be easier for you to convey your optimism.
- Next, be specific. Be authentic and real, and people will be able to connect with what you’re saying. The key is to tie specific results back to a big picture that you’re asking everyone to invest in.
- Remember that, just as when you communicate for clarity, your body language and mood may speak louder than your words. The moods, opinions, and actions of leaders rub off on their followers.
**Being Encouraging**

- By definition, being encouraging means giving support, confidence, or hope to someone. The goal is to make people feel good about the work they’re doing, the team they belong to, and the goal they’re aiming for.
- Giving encouragement is proactive. We are telling people that we believe in them and that we will succeed. And by giving this sort of support up-front, people will be more likely to feel like they matter and align with the vision.
- It’s necessary to give up some emotional safety as a leader. It can be tough, but showing optimism and hope is a crucial part of gaining alignment.

**Strategies for Being Encouraging**

- First, give people a common aspiration, something that the whole group can latch onto and be inspired by.
- Move beyond the competitive mindset to seek out a set of common values and use them to define a “noble cause.”
- Next, consider adding a rallying cry, built on your common aspiration. Like all marketing, make it clear, simple, and easy to remember.
- Finally, consider your audience. What motivates you might not encourage others. If you want people to feel inspired, you have to offer something that will speak to them. Offer a source of encouragement that they will care about.

**Chapter 11: Summary of Building Alignment**

- Building alignment is the most people-centered part of the VAE model. It’s about how you, as a leader, interact with others, how you communicate with and listen to others, and how you and your co-workers affect one another.
- Each driver of alignment—clarity, dialogue, and inspiration—is about connecting with your team. Clarity leads to understanding. Dialogue facilitates involvement and ownership. Inspiration promotes emotional commitment.

**Part 3: EXECUTION**

**Chapter 12: Production to Championing Execution**

- You can create an environment that leads to more effective execution. As the leader, you can instill a sense of the possible in an organization or team, and a personal and tangible feeling each contribution is a step toward realizing a vision.
- Execution is making the vision a reality. One that takes the imagined future and turns it into a real accomplishment. Execution is how organizations and teams take all the good ideas and turn them into results.
- Successful execution of a vision can’t happen without the deep commitment and active championing of leaders.
- A champion is:
  - A **defender** of the time a team needs to work through solutions
  - A **proponent** of a better structure or plan to help people achieve
  - An **advocate** for the work and workers, praising and offering feedback
A lobbyist for adequate resources and ongoing support
A booster who provides the necessary momentum, drive, or resources

Championing execution is as much about establishing and defining your credibility as an effective leader as it is about helping the organization or team achieve the vision.

Leaders who are deeply committed and actively engage understand that execution is a process, not an endpoint. They know their involvement is absolutely essential for three key reasons:

i. Championing execution is a tangible sign of the leader’s commitment. Leaders who champion execution persevere; sticking around to ensure the promise is fulfilled, rather than moving on to the next best thing. They make sure certain people have the resources they need to persist and the environment that allows them to stay focused.

ii. Championing execution assures the development of concrete strategies. When a leader champions execution, he makes sure that a priority is placed on developing strategies and is fully present in the process.

iii. Championing execution gives people a sense of achievement.

Championing execution is, perhaps, the most obvious step in a company’s process. In spite of this, it is often the most overlooked aspect for leaders in the VAE model.

The role of all leaders, at all levels, is to make sure the strategies, people, and cultures are in place for the vision to become reality.

At whatever level you lead, you are still championing execution, creating the environment that allows everyone to work successfully toward realizing the vision.

Chapter 13: Championing Execution Through Momentum

Of all the drivers in the VAE model, momentum is perhaps the most intuitive.

It is the leader who makes sure that a passion for achieving the vision is transferred to the rest of the group. And while there are skills involved, momentum actually starts with the mindset of the leader, who consciously chooses the pace and recognizes that creating a sense of urgency is vital.

Momentum comes from a mentality that the work we do contributes directly to our success and that we are eager to accomplish our goals every step of the way.

Leaders have to remember that momentum is about carrying the team forward in an agreed-on direction—toward the vision.

Experienced leaders know that they cannot build and maintain momentum alone. Leaders at all levels must see initiating momentum as their responsibility and work to establish a culture of momentum. They see to it that this mindset is transferred to everyone on their teams.

Skilled leaders set and communicate high expectations for momentum through the two drivers of momentum in the VAE model—being driven and initiating action.

Being Driven

Drive is pushing yourself and others forward. People who are driven believe things could always be better, and they’re eager to prove it. There’s an impatience about them—but in a good way. When it’s done right, it makes work more engaging. It creates that...
current that you want to swim in, and you feel like you’re a part of something that’s alive and dynamic.

- Driven leaders aren’t just personally ambitious; their ambition is infectious.
- Inexperienced leaders may find it more difficult to drive people to push themselves harder.
- Experienced leaders not only know this is part of their jobs, but they’ve grown much more comfortable playing this role in the group.
- Leaders recognize that people tend to live up or down to whatever expectations are set about how quickly things can be accomplished.

**Strategies for Being Driven**

- Leading by example is how leaders make visions and values tangible.
- Next, commit your team to deadlines related to external events, for example, a major conference or the end of the fiscal year. An external commitment is always harder to break.
- Finally, be aware of how much time you take between meetings on a project.

**Initiating Action**

- The essence of initiative is taking responsibility for change when you have the option to look the other way or kick it down the road. It is the assumption that you will make it happen, and not some other mystery person in some other department at some other time.
- The leader pushes down that first domino—acts rather than reacts.
- Initiating requires outward energy on a regular basis, and that can be pretty tough. However, as leaders, we must find the energy to champion new initiatives and model a stance that says we’re not only open to ideas for improvement, but we thrive on them.
- At a minimum, this is about initiating around difficulties that arise during execution. It’s taking the initiative to pursue the next step or to explore what seemed a little off n the last step. And it’s doing this proactively.

**Strategies for initiating action**

- If new initiatives are going to make it onto your plate, you need to challenge your priorities.
- As a leader, you need to see this as part of your job, as important as any other part.
- Develop a habit of focusing on the most important challenge or goals your team faces. Make it part of your routine. Ask yourself a simple question like, “If we only have time for one thing that’s not on the schedule, what’s the single most important thing we can do today to reach our goals?”
- Reduce the time between meetings on projects.
- Finally, start to redefine “above and beyond” as the new normal. Recognize, and perhaps even over-recognize, instances when people are proactive.
- When someone has an idea for a change, take it seriously. Genuinely listen and make sure he knows that his resourcefulness and gumption are not only appreciated, but are seen as crucial to the group’s success.
Chapter 14: Championing Execution Through Structure

- In their book *Execution: The discipline of Getting Things Done* by former chairman and CEO of Honeywell International Larry Bossidy and world renowned management consultant Ram Charan, they are relentless in their determination to dispel the misconception that leaders are supposed to be visionaries who conceive brilliant ideas and insights and then leave it to the managers to accomplish the job.

- The authors of this book include providing a plan that brings together people, strategy, and operations as part of the VAE leadership model.

Providing a Plan

- Providing a plan for moving from Point A to Point not only assures that the right people will be doing the right things at the right time, but it also allows those people to know when they will be needed and when they will be free contribute to other activities outside the project.

- A plan ensures that everyone is on the same page and provides a common foundation for the team to refer back to and rely on.

- As a leader, your contribution to creating the plan and the level of detail the plan requires are dependent on your leadership role, as well as on the experience of your team and the type of work they’re undertaking.

- Every leader is still responsible for making sure the right level of planning happens.

- What’s important is that the plan provides a sufficient structure for the work at hand. Leaders need to understand the value such structure brings and set aside the time required to create robust and realistic plans.

Strategies for Providing a Plan

- One of the most effective ways to gain a team’s buy-in is to involve them in the planning process.

- If the activities being planned are unfamiliar to the team, it’s important to find people who have been there and done that. They can offer insight into the amount of work involved, how long it might take, and what it might cost—and even point out what could go wrong.

- Next, as you begin to map out the plan, encourage everyone involved to ask this question about each step: “If we are successful doing this, will it materially help to close the gap between where we are and where we are trying to go?” By consistently applying this discipline, you will be able to keep plans robust and sharply focused.

- Finally, remember that planning is an iterative process.

- As a leader, it’s important to stay plugged in to the planning process so you can provide the resources and time needed to allow this messiness to be worked out. Doing so increases the likelihood at the team will produce consistent—and desired—results.

Analyzing In-Depth

- Analyzing in-depth is really about appreciating the true purpose of the execution and having a firm handle on all the moving parts.

- To build a solid, reliable structure, doing an in-depth analysis of the execution challenges is essential. And the bigger the project, the more difficult it is to anticipate all of the contingencies.
• The ability to anticipate the cause-and-effect mechanisms that play out during execution is a key part of successfully executing a plan. It involves doing research when issues arise. It means looking at the root causes of problems and finding the essence of what has gone wrong—and what has gone right, for that matter.
• As the leader your level of involvement will vary based on your particular leadership role, on your team’s experience, and on the type of work being done. You must have a strong sense of what’s involved.

Strategies for Analyzing In-Depth
• Leaders can—and should—involve the team.
• First, create an environment in which there is a consistent and timely communication across functions.
• It helps to have a shared understanding of how the pieces are connected. If a change is required or there’s a problem, people must know what else could be affected, rather than thinking exclusively about their own domains.
• Next, challenge yourself and your team to think critically about what might happen on the project, as well the root causes of people, strategy, and operations issues at do arise. Think of risks—then either eliminate them or plan what to do if they occur.
• Finally, be deliberate about allowing plenty of time for planning and analysis.
• Leaving time to build an effective structure—to create a realistic plan and do the appropriate analysis—will ultimately increase the likelihood of achieving that goal and will make the path to it much smoother.

Chapter 15: Championing Execution Through Feedback
• As a leader, one of your most important roles in execution is to build a culture of transparency and feedback.
• Feedback requires you as the leader to be involved. Leaders, particularly those at the top, often fail to keep their fingers on the pulse of their organizations. Too often, information is filtered and summarized so extensively before it reaches the leader that it becomes almost impossible to develop any meaningful insights that can lead to productive feedback.
• Delivering feedback does not appear to be the norm, and it’s a discipline that many leaders at all levels seem to regard as discretionary.
• The VAE model looks at two aspects of feedback: addressing problems and offering praise. Leaders are more than twice as likely to see themselves as very good at “giving praise” as they are at “addressing problems.”
• Fewer than one in twelve leaders claims to excel at both feedback practices.

Addressing Problems
• What Pixar has done, is to create a culture where candor is the norm. People speak up about problems, and it’s no big deal. Having this sort of culture, however, is a big deal and it’s also rare.
• The number one reason for not speaking up is “political factors,” that entanglement of alliances, self-serving agendas, grudges, prejudices, legacies, and personal insecurities that is so infuriating to people who really want to make a difference.
• To be a truly effective leader, you cannot resign yourself to keep quiet about problems because you’ll need to show tough-minded fortitude. Addressing problems is tough. It means disrupting the harmony.
• Done with respect, addressing problems in a straightforward manner actually enhances transparency.
• As at Pixar, direct feedback can become the norm. People understand that they’re going to screw up occasionally, and that’s okay. Everyone accepts that problems are a part of life.
• As the leader, you don’t blame people or point fingers, but you also don’t sweep problems under the rug—you surface them so they can be solved. By modeling the right way to point out problems and give corrective feedback, you can create a more open, productive culture on your team.

Strategies for Addressing Problems

• Because the goal is a culture of candor, transparency, and trust, you can start by making yourself vulnerable. You’re the role model who demonstrates there is nobility to acknowledging any mistakes and growing from them.
• Next, have regular, semi-formal dialogues about what isn’t working. People need to hear the message that there’s nothing to fear in calling out problems.
• Finally, focus on the problems and not on the people. The goal is to find a solution, not to place blame. The purpose of exploring what went wrong is to help get it right.
• People know that the group wants them to succeed and that continued growth is a huge part of success.

Offering Praise

• We all need to know that we are valuable. More of our motivations, relationships, and insecurities are driven by this simple psychological need than any other. We want to know that we have worth as people.
• When people feel valued by their leader and their group, they internalize the group’s goals, and their work has meaning. Conversely, when people don’t feel appreciated, they slowly remove themselves from the group emotionally.
• The leaders who are able to use praise to genuinely transform their groups actually experience a deep, heartfelt appreciation for the people they lead.
• Being appreciative actually increases a person’s happiness.

Strategies for Offering Praise

• First, it’s important that you don’t assume that people know you appreciate their work. Make a conscious effort to prioritize acknowledging people’s contributions. Celebrate milestones and build recognition opportunities into your plans.
• Next, make sure your praise is genuine. Complimenting people is important, but how it happens should be personal and fit the accomplishment.
• Finally, in order to give genuine praise, keep up-to-date. A compliment has even more meaning when people can see that you’ve invested the time to really understand what’s going on.

Chapter 16: Summary of Championing Execution
• Championing execution is a core piece of the VAE model.
• As the champion, you are always acting in service of someone or something, whether it is your team, your vision, or your customers. Your energy is focused outward is you seek ways to establish momentum, provide structure, and offer feedback.
• Ask yourself these questions:
  o Who or what can I defend?
  o For whom can I be a proponent or advocate?
  o For what can I lobby?

Recommendation: The authors promised to make sense of all the many leadership books that are available. I believe they did just that. This is a wonderful leadership book!

For more summaries like this, go to www.100MustReads.com

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About the reviewer: Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, PhD

Dr. Frumi Rachel Barr is truly an entrepreneur having started and run 5 entrepreneurial adventures prior to following her passion for guiding the success of CEOs and their teams to Scale Up.

Dr. Frumi’s "Why" is to create a safe place for leaders and teams to discuss what matters most. She is known as The CEO’s Secret Weapon. Her Who: Dr. Frumi guides creative, ambitious CEOs who want to grow their businesses so they have more freedom and a fabulous culture. Her how: Dr. Frumi brought the Gazelles 4 Decisions work into her repertoire, and works with companies of all sizes to Scale Up and to create greater alignment, effectiveness and accountability. The Four Decisions focus on People, Strategy, Execution and Cash, using practical tools to create greater revenue and profitability, with greater collaboration and accountability.

Dr. Frumi is the author of a CEO’s Secret Weapon: How to Accelerate Success. The book was ranked top business book of 2012 by ExecRank and has a forward by her colleague Simon Sinek, international author of best-selling Start with Why.