



Achieving Goals through Thick and Thin

By Richard Martin

Winston Churchill reputedly kept the following aphorism on the wall above his desk: “Never, ever, ever, ever, ever give up.” Great leaders have an uncanny ability to achieve their goals no matter what the obstacles and the situation. This level of adaptability depends on a few principles and techniques, which if adhered to through thick and thin, will contribute greatly to your success.

1. Get clear on objectives and stick to them.

There is an old sailing aphorism that is particularly relevant: Any wind is a fair wind if you don't know your destination. You may get lucky and reach the shores of your favored destination, but chances are that you and your organization will meander aimlessly, perhaps even striking shoals and entering storm-tossed seas. Jim Collins, in his bestseller *Good to Great*, calls this the “hedgehog concept.” This is the ability to identify what you can be the best at and to have the discipline to stick to it through thick and thin. In simple terms, know where you are, where you want to go, and stick to your aim.

2. Create robust plans.

There is a common military saying: A plan is only good until the operation starts. So why bother to plan? Plans have three key benefits. First, effective planning allows you and your people to delve into a situation beforehand so that possible outcomes can be assessed and weighed as to potential impact. If the situation changes, you and your organization will be better able to adapt, because many of the changes will have been foreseen and possibly even addressed beforehand. Second, plans create a common language for everyone involved in the organization's mission. As the situation or the environment you are operating in changes, the plan can be readily adapted and communicated on the basis of a pre-existing common understanding. Third, plans are the basis for sound organization and organizational design. Plans tell you what needs to be done, by when, and with what resources.

3. Ensure flexibility of organization.

The art of organization addresses Who? and How? in order to implement your plans. The basis of efficient organization is twofold: assignment of responsibilities and resources; and common processes and procedures to carry them out. The best way to assign tasks and responsibilities is to list all the discrete tasks and roles and to identify who exactly will be responsible for them. Following that, the resources required to carry out these responsibilities must be assigned according to the priorities of the plan. After the assignment of responsibilities and resources, teams and the organization as a whole must develop common processes to ensure quality, consistency, and accountability. This makes it easy to determine the reasons for success and failure and to either build on that success or to correct the weaknesses. It also creates a clear accountability framework as all responsibilities are assigned to individuals beforehand.

4. Maintain situational awareness.

Information is the lifeblood of any organization. However, one must be careful to use information to better understand the environment and the situation you're in. Organizations often focus on feeding an endless hunger for internal reports, rather than on markets, competitors and societal trends. This is death through bureaucracy. When confronted with an information request, one should ask the following question: Does this request feed the internal information monster or will it contribute to a greater understanding of our environment and clients? If it's the former, then internal processes must be revised or eliminated. If it's the latter, ask yourself if it confirms an existing belief about markets and competitors, or if it challenges it. Information that does not agree with widely-held assumptions and beliefs should be scrutinized closely and given the highest value. The danger is in using information to confirm and rationalize what we already believe, instead of using it to confront a brutal reality head on.

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5. Act, assess, and adjust.

We've all heard of analysis paralysis. The best solution is to act when you are 80 % ready. The final 20 % rarely contributes anything of value, since the situation and conditions it is designed to address will likely change anyway. Furthermore, the effort and cost of attaining "perfection" in plans and organization is usually cost-prohibitive and not worth the additional investment. This doesn't mean you should blindly adhere to plans in the face of changing circumstances. The key is to act, assess the impact of actions, and then adjust the plans to get back on track. What is the litmus test? Ask yourself if continuing on a pre-determined path will get you to your objectives, given changing circumstances and new information. If not, then the plans and organization must be adjusted. Situational awareness plays a critical role in assessing and adjusting actions, but so does leadership.

6. Lead from the front.

It is in times of great change and confusion that world-class leaders truly earn their keep. Military commanders know that they can't command and lead their forces from the safety their command post. The same applies to business and organizational leaders. This is leading from the front. Leaders have to get down and dirty with the troops. It doesn't mean you should be doing your subordinates' work. However, you do have to get out and about, ask questions, probe responses, question clients, observe what is happening and why it is happening. Then you can apply your judgment to the changing situation and be present to motivate employees and collaborators. A knock on effect is that you will show your team that you are not afraid of challenges and that you also don't assume you know everything. This combination of modesty and will is extremely powerful in influencing and motivating others to do their best in difficult situations.

7. Maintain morale.

Morale is one of the most poorly understood organizational concepts today. The term originally comes from the military, where it denotes the willingness of forces to continue the fight until final victory, no matter what the circumstances. This is powerful stuff. Unfortunately, many business and organizational leaders talk about morale, but what they really mean is the mood of the organization. Think of the mood of the American people, and much of the Western world, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. It was not rosy. People were both saddened and angered by the atrocity that had been committed on U.S. soil. However, a majority in the U.S. as well as in many friendly countries rallied and decided that the time had come to do something about such attacks. Thus was born the War on Terror. I give this example not argue for or against the latter, but to show the clear distinction between social mood and national morale. They are clearly different, yet intricately linked.

In the simplest of terms, whether your purpose is to fight a war or to introduce a new product to market, the only way to have the willpower and resolve to achieve your objectives is to maintain superb morale. This can be done in three ways. First, recognize the nobility and value of your goal. Second, recognize the sacrifices and commitments of your people. Third, take care of your people. Nothing undermines morale more quickly than uncertainty about one's own place in an organization, apathy, and uncaring superiors.

These are the key principles to achieving your goals and objectives. World-class leaders have the personal resolve and willpower to create effective plans and the organization to implement their strategies. They energize their organizations through these plans, act decisively and then assess and adjust them constantly on the basis of sound situational awareness and outer directed information gathering.

It is never too late to get a ship back on track or to reassess where you are in implementing your personal and organizational goals. Take the time to list your goals and then compare them to this list of principles. Begin immediately to change your approaches so that you become more purposeful and more effective in achieving your personal and organizational objectives.

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