



Closing the Execution Gap

Tired of not accomplishing your school improvement plan? Try this instead.

By Sean Covey and Lynne Fox



Execution, or the ability to accomplish goals and plans, is one of the greatest challenges organizations face. Businesses, government agencies, nonprofits, and schools are generally competent at developing strategies, but they often struggle to execute those strategies and produce concrete results.



Our company, FranklinCovey, has studied the topic of execution within all types of organizational settings for more than 15 years. In 2012, we distilled our collective learning into a book titled *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*.

Our research has taught us that there are two types of strategies. The first type, which we call “stroke of the pen” strategy, is easy to execute because it involves a one-time decision. Consider, for example, a company acquiring a new business or a district selecting a new curriculum. These strategies are accomplished with a “stroke of the pen.”

The second type of strategy, however, involves a change in human behavior. Consider, for example, a company trying to get frontline employees to provide better customer service, or a school encouraging teachers to build stronger relationships with students. The execution of these strategies is dependent on workers doing something different than they had before. It is in the execution of these strategies that we find a significant “execution gap.”

The 4 Disciplines of Execution® (4DX®) is a methodology that helps organizations close the execution gap. It is based on timeless, universal principles of human effectiveness, and on deep insights into why organizations fail to achieve their objectives. 4DX has been used in tens of thousands of organizations worldwide, including schools, districts, and state-level education departments. In fact, the *Leader in Me* community of schools uses them on a daily basis. The four disciplines are described in detail on the following pages.

DISCIPLINE 1: Focus on the Wildly Important

DISCIPLINE 2: Act on the Lead Measures

We advise principals to narrow their focus to between two and three “wildly important goals” each year.

How many goals can an organization accomplish at a time with excellence? In our experience, no more than two or three. Most organizations, however, have dozens of goals they are pursuing concurrently. An average school improvement plan, for example, may contain many goals, with no clear prioritization of which are most important. For example, if you ask members of a typical school’s faculty or staff to identify the one or two most important goals their school is trying to accomplish, chances are you will hear a variety of answers.

To address this lack of focus, we advise principals to narrow their focus to between two and three “Wildly Important Goals®” (WIGs®) each year. While each person within the school may be pursuing individual goals as well, elevating a few schoolwide goals helps everyone align their actions toward the highest priorities.

WIGs should be specific and measurable. We recommend writing them in the format “From X to Y by When,” where X represents where you are today and Y represents the target you hope to achieve within a specific time frame.

DISCIPLINE 1 IN ACTION

A school wants more students to read at or above grade level. After considering its curriculum and an available formative assessment tool, the school chooses to focus on reading levels and begins to align grade-level teams, classroom teachers, and students toward the goal.

School WIG: Increase percentage of students reading at or above grade level from 60 percent to 75 percent by December 2018.

Grade-Level WIG: Grade 3 will increase the percentage of students reading at or above grade level from 40 percent to 75 percent by December 2018.

Class WIG: Mrs. Smith’s third-grade class will help 100 percent of students achieve their academic WIG and thereby increase the percentage of students reading at or above grade level from 50 percent to 75 percent.

Student: I will improve from reading level D to reading level F by December 15.

Once schools have narrowed their focus to just two or three WIGs, the next step is to understand which key behaviors will help them accomplish those goals. These behaviors, which we call “lead measures,” *lead* to the accomplishment of the WIG, or the “lag measure.” If Discipline 1 is about focus, then Discipline 2 is about leverage.

The following example illustrates the difference between lead and lag measures. Imagine a man with a WIG to “drop from 180 pounds to 170 pounds by August 1.” One hundred seventy pounds is the lag measure—the ultimate target. To achieve that target, however, he must identify strategies that, if implemented consistently, would *lead* to his accomplishing the lag measure. These are his lead measures. In this example, diet and exercise would be prime candidates for lead measures.

Because it’s not always clear how to accomplish a lag measure, identifying lead measures can take time, experimentation, and insight. We recommend concentrating on only two or three lead measures at a time for each WIG.

DISCIPLINE 2 IN ACTION

The classroom teacher brainstorms with colleagues to identify lead measures for the reading level WIG, such as:

- Increase differentiated practices during reading lessons.
- Create intervention and enrichment groups that meet twice a week.
- Schedule one extra guided reading session per week with at-risk readers.

The student who had the WIG to “improve from reading level D to reading level F by December 15” will work with a teacher to identify lead measures such as:

- Read every night for at least 20 minutes.
- Share what I read with my parents or a reading buddy.

DISCIPLINE 3: Keep a Compelling Scoreboard

Have you ever been playing a sport casually when someone suggests keeping score? Immediately, the exertion and determination levels increase for all involved. People naturally want to perform well and win, and a scoreboard keeps track of this performance. The scoreboard at a high school basketball game, for example, can tell you whether your team is winning or losing, what the gap is, and how much time is left.

The same principles apply to goal achievement in schools. Using a scoreboard to track progress toward the school's WIGs and lead measures allows teachers and students to visualize their progress and motivates everyone to perform at their best. Most importantly, it viscerally shows students that work and effort lead to accomplishment.

DISCIPLINE 3 IN ACTION

School Scoreboard: The school may put a scoreboard in a public area, using bar graphs to demonstrate how the entire school is improving each quarter in its reading level WIG.

Grade level: Grade-level teams generally review scoreboards in private, in an area that's inaccessible to everyone but grade-level teachers and administrators. Such privacy allows them to track the growth of small groups and individual students on scoreboards that can be color-coded by student, grade, intervention strategies, etc. These scoreboards allow the teams to see patterns, collaborate to find solutions, and make every child visible.

Classroom Teachers: A classroom teacher may have two types of scoreboards:

- Private scoreboards showing the WIGs and lead measures for their class. These allow them to track the progress of the group as a whole and each child individually.
- A classroom scoreboard designed to motivate students to work together and individually to accomplish their WIGs.

Student: The student uses a private notebook to track his or her efforts on the lead measures and progress toward the WIGs.

DISCIPLINE 4: Create a Cadence of Accountability

The final discipline promotes continual progress by helping teams develop a "cadence of accountability" that is regular and consistent. For example, the first 15 minutes of staff or grade-level meetings could be devoted to reviewing the progress toward WIGs and lead measures, celebrating growth, adjusting as necessary, and making future commitments. Imagine identifying WIGs and lead measures, developing scoreboards to track progress, and then never talking about it again. A cadence of accountability ensures people feel accountable for their efforts and results.

DISCIPLINE 4 IN ACTION

Classrooms and teachers: Hold weekly or biweekly meetings to review the scoreboards and discuss progress toward WIGs and lead measures.

Students: Some schools have established "accountability buddies" so that students can check up on each other and motivate each other to accomplish their goals. Schools can also involve parents by having students share their WIGs and scoreboards at parent-teacher conferences or on a more regular basis.

Achieving strategic goals that require changes in human behavior is never an easy task, but following some simple guidelines can help you succeed.

1. **Focus** on a few critical goals.
2. Identify and carry out **high-leverage** activities to achieve those goals.
3. Use scoreboards to increase **engagement** and monitor progress.
4. Hold people **accountable** through regular check-ins.

As you apply the timeless principles embodied in *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*, you will discover greater capacity to both accomplish your school's objectives and help your students learn goal-achievement skills they can use throughout their lives to accomplish their own great purposes. 📌

AUTHORS

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