

THE X-GAP

CLOSING THE EXECUTION GAP

William M.
Duke

THE X-GAP

CLOSING THE EXECUTION GAP

Way back in 1885 Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, famously demonstrated something everyone already knew; that people start forgetting what they learn as soon as they learn it. In his “forgetting curve,” he demonstrated that humans forget half of what they learn within an hour of learning it and a full 2/3 by the following day. Since, psychologists have discovered that there are many ways to improve retention and memory. But, if memory is so fragile, what is its impact on execution – getting the things done that you and your team should do? Execution errors and failures continue to plague teams and organizations. These failures create an execution gap; a gap between what an individual or team plans to do and what it actually does. Just as retention rapidly degrades after learning, so does execution after planning. What can be done?

Planning is a form of team learning. When approached collaboratively, planning is a knowledge creating and problem solving process. And, planning can create much detail that is difficult to manage – and therefore, execute. Great execution requires 100% retention in the team learning process. Without such a perfect level of retention, execution will falter. But, just as there are techniques to improve individual retention after learning, there are techniques to improve team execution after planning. One of these is the Execution Gap Meeting, or X-GapSM.

In principle, the X-Gap is simple – get the team together at regular intervals during the execution of a plan or project, address the progress of each individual task that must be performed, and take action before progress falls behind.

In *Teambuilding: Proven Strategies For Improving Team Performance*, recognized as the authoritative work on the fundamentals of team building, the authors note the importance of regular interventions within teams to prevent regression like that of the Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve. Furthermore, they note that regression is more effectively halted when regular interventions are held to focus on tasks as a team rather than on a one-on-one, supervisor-to-subordinate basis. It sounds simple, but in practice holding an effective X-Gap requires discipline.

One of the greatest challenges to leading an X-Gap is controlling the discussion and keeping it on task. Fundamentally, the X-Gap is a transparent means of applying peer pressure to enhance performance. So, participants have a tendency to provide excuses and open up lengthy discussions to distract the group from individual accountability. X-Gap leaders must fight this tendency. Leading an effective X-Gap requires a commitment to four basic principles – focus, resolution, action, and frequency.

1 First, X-Gap Meetings should be short and focused only on the tasks required. An X-Gap meeting is not an opportunity for open discussion, complex problem solving, or the exchange of general information. It has only one item on the agenda – the review of all due and open tasks within the plan. In an X-Gap, the leader convenes the meeting on time and proceeds task-by-task through the plan by asking each task owner to report their progress. Responses should be succinct. Completed tasks and tasks that are in progress but not yet due, are simply “completed,” “on track,” or “Green.” Tasks that are in progress but some uncertainty exists about the capacity to complete them as planned are “yellow.” Tasks that are past due or have encountered some critical obstacle that must be addressed are “critical” or “red.” The latter two classifications are the target of the X-Gap. The X-Gap leader’s purpose is to identify and isolate those “yellow” and “red” category tasks for further review.

THE X-GAP

CLOSING THE EXECUTION GAP

2

The second basic principle of the X-Gap is to take action to resolve uncertainty, ambiguity, and any other obstacles. Once execution gaps are exposed, the leader should make decisions and possibly reallocate resources in order to close those gaps. Some explanation and discussion is usually necessary. Therefore, X-Gap leaders must remain on their guard against unproductive, rambling discussions. Those responsible for the task targeted for discussion should succinctly explain the issue to the team and state what they believe they need in order to accomplish the task – to close the gap. This need is usually stated as a request for resources or a decision from the leader. Teams will tend to want to have an open discussion about the matter at this point. But, the X-Gap leader must contain the discussion to only a few minutes. If the team is allowed to take too much time, then there will be less time to address other “red” and “yellow” tasks. As a rule of thumb, any task that requires more than 2 minutes to explain and discuss should be referred to a separate discussion to take place after the X-Gap Meeting. Leaders must keep the X-Gap Meeting focused and moving along smoothly so that all the relevant tasks within the plan are addressed.

3

Third, X-Gap Meetings should identify specific actions that must take place unless all tasks are completed or on task as planned. Leaders should take care to either clearly indicate the actions that must take place as a result of the task review process, or indicate how and when decisions or other resolutions will take place and who is responsible for them. If additional resources are required, who will acquire them and by when? If further deliberation is required to achieve a decision, when will this take place and who will be a part of the discussion? Never allow an X-Gap to conclude without clarity around next actions.

Participants should be prepared to answer the question:
“What do you believe is required to move forward?”

4

Finally, X-Gap Meetings should be a regularly occurring event that aligns with the team or organization’s overall Execution Rhythm. If the team holds an X-Gap every Monday morning at 10 am, for example, the team will be able to anticipate, participate more fully, and prepare more thoroughly. Preparation is the key to a successful X-Gap. Team members report to the X-Gap at their pre-designated time and place with a complete status of their assigned tasks in the plan. This means being prepared to respond to its overall status as well as providing both a succinct description of a status that is “yellow” or “red.” Participants should be prepared to answer the question: “What do you believe is required to move forward?” Of course, there are often certain dependencies outside an individual team member’s control that may be the underlying cause. Hence, the purpose of the X-Gap is to expose these issues and address them appropriately as a team. Good preparation also means that, for anyone unable to attend the X-Gap, someone else can stand in for them and provide a status of the task and discuss what is needed to move forward.

The X-Gap must be led. As a teacher leads a classroom and utilizes techniques to help students improve retention, a leader should utilize techniques like the X-Gap to improve execution.

William M. Duke is a retired Naval Officer and Master Practitioner of the Flawless Execution® methodology. He is the co-author of The Debrief Imperative (Premiere, 2011) and Down Range: A Transitioning Veteran’s Career Guide to Life’s Next Phase (Wiley, 2013) and serves as Director of Learning & Development for Afterburner.

AFTERBURNER

ACCELERATING PERFORMANCE THROUGH FLAWLESS EXECUTION®

Afterburner Inc. is a performance improvement training firm that empowers organizations around the world with the simple, scalable methodology of Flawless Execution®. A team of more than 60 current and former elite military professionals, Afterburner has ranked on the Inc. 500/5000 List of America's Fastest Growing Companies four times and has been featured in leading publications like *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Businessweek*, *Newsweek*, *Slate* and *Sports Illustrated*, and has appeared on CNN, ABC, CNBC, Fox News, HLN and Bloomberg News.

To learn more about Afterburner's innovative approach to building elite teams with Flawless Execution®, visit www.Afterburner.com or call (888) 982-6764.

- ▶ High-energy Keynotes
- ▶ Team Building
- ▶ Seminars Strategic Workshops
- ▶ Leadership
- ▶ Training Onsite
- ▶ Consulting Executive Coaching