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# LEADERSHIP MADE SIMPLE



Leadership is a complex endeavor. Human beings are the most complex things known to exist, so how could leadership be anything less than complex? Humans, have a tendency to address complex problems with complex solutions. Adding complexity to complexity only increases the challenge of leadership. To meet complex challenges, the reverse approach is required – to meet complexity with simplicity.

## The Four Leadership Behaviors

A recent McKinsey and Company study, *Decoding Leadership: What Really Matters* (January 2015), provides new insight on the view that simplicity beats complexity in the realm of leadership. The few skills the McKinsey study lists are needed for front line leaders to be effective, and are insights that military leaders have known intuitively for generations because the hazards and urgencies of combat have proven them indispensable. The study shares four leadership behaviors that account for 89% of leadership effectiveness. They are: (1) solving problems effectively; (2) operating with a strong results orientation; (3) seeking different perspectives; and (4) supporting others. These four behaviors seem complex, but, fundamentally, they can be achieved through the cultural adoption of simple processes and techniques.

Solving problems effectively, requires a process. Operating with a strong results orientation, requires that such a process begin by defining what a successful solution should look like, then using that process to achieve the defined outcome is improved tremendously by applying diverse perspectives and critical evaluations throughout the development and execution of the solution. Finally, supporting others is what leaders and members of a team do in a servant role to aid the whole team in executing the solution they developed. Leaders do this by creating an environment in which team

members are able to operate according to commonly held processes that reduce conflict, increase effective communication, address unplanned and unexpected challenges, and help the team to improve continuously. These behaviors are the essence of high performing teams that demonstrate operational excellence. Furthermore, these behaviors may be guided by simple, highly effective processes.

Flawless Execution is a fundamental leadership model composed of inter-related processes that, when practiced with discipline and commitment, provide effective guidance for leaders and their teams to achieve the four behaviors of effective leadership identified in the McKinsey study. Derived from centuries of military experience and improved through modern psychological research, Flawless Execution reduces the complex challenge of effective leadership to simple tools and techniques that anyone can learn and apply. Although Flawless Execution is composed of an iterative cycle of 4 components – plan, brief, execute, and debrief – the planning process addresses the first three of the four behaviors noted in the McKinsey study.

## Planning for the Mission at the Front Line

Starting with a clear, measurable, and achievable objective at the front line that is also aligned with organizational strategy and vision is fundamental to operational excellence and driving results. The activity and, therefore, the success of the organization occurs at the front line. Like military forces, businesses win by delivering products and services to their customers at the front line. Although a good strategy can mean the difference between winning and losing, strategic plans do not execute themselves. Organizations that fail to cascade long-range vision and strategy down to short-range, impactful objectives that front line teams must carry out, will ultimately short-circuit the drive for results.



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Flawless Execution begins with planning and planning begins with formulating an objective. That is the critical activity that connects vision and strategy to the day-to-day activities that leaders must support in order to achieve the organization's vision. Once the objective is properly defined the Flawless Execution planning process follows five additional problem-solving steps that leaders and their teams use to collaboratively analyze a challenge and develop a course of action. In another study published by McKinsey and Company (The Case for Behavioral Strategy, March 2010) researchers demonstrated that having a good process may be six times more important to positive outcomes as good analysis, but both process and analysis are important. Flawless Execution is a powerful planning model because its processes and techniques enable better analysis. When leaders bring teams together using a common process that enables good collaboration, good analysis arises naturally.

### Diversity of Thought

The third leadership behavior identified in the recent study requires leaders to seek different perspectives. In other words, planning and problem solving require diversity of thought. Including diverse perspectives in a collaborative environment that enables varying ideas to build upon each other without crowding out important perspectives is essential to good planning. The right processes make collaboration among diverse teams much easier. Within the planning process, Flawless Execution promotes simple collaboration techniques known as Teamstorming™ and Red Teaming to introduce diversity repeatedly throughout the planning process.

### Mutual Support

The fourth and final effective leadership behavior cited in the McKinsey study is for leaders to support others. As in the Flawless Execution planning process, the execution phase also consists of processes and techniques that enhance mutual support. Within elite military teams, mutual support is fundamental to successful. Support is nurtured through clearly articulated plans with individual accountability developed through the Flawless Execution planning process. Successful collaboration also builds greater team cohesiveness and awareness of each other's strengths and weaknesses. The briefing process also aids teammates in developing situational awareness of critical tasks where good mutual support can mean the difference between success and failure. But, regularly scheduled X-Gap meetings

– short, team meetings that provide a forum to identify unexpected challenges and reallocate resources during the execution phase of the Flawless Execution cycle – provide critical opportunities for leaders to close execution gaps and provide support to their teams.

Heavyweight champion boxer, Mike Tyson, once said, "Everyone has a plan until you get punched in the face." Similarly, military leaders frequently cite a centuries-old maxim that "no plan survives first contact with the enemy." Why then is planning so important? Furthermore, why are problem solving processes so important to high performing teams and organizational excellence? The act of planning and problem solving as a team establishes a starting point for execution, and a greater sense of team ownership of the objective even though new and often unforeseen challenges may appear. The Flawless Execution processes establish the common mental model that teams need to formulate a solution and act quickly with unified intent when things don't go as expected. Teams that do not possess such effective processes formulate less effective plans and stumble through execution. The result is often failure. The McKinsey study findings come as no surprise to experienced military leaders because the four behaviors it highlights as fundamental to effective leadership are behaviors that have been taught in military academies for many generations.

