

The Obvious Secret

Overcoming Inertia and Achieving Results



“We spend so much time talking action and not enough time taking action... If there is something, anything that you want to change in your life, then make a decision and do something about it. And if that doesn’t work, then do something else And if that doesn’t work, then do something else And if that doesn’t work, *then do something else...*”

The Naked Coach, page 32

The Big Idea

Why do so many managers understand so much about leadership, teamwork and business, and work so hard, yet so often fail to achieve their goals or feel fulfilled?

Despite their many benefits, the combination of organizations, work and people can often generate inertia and a reluctance to change. (For example, executives unwittingly use plans, analysis, meetings and presentations as substitutes for action rather than to inspire achievement.) This situation is all the more remarkable when you consider two points: 1) results and achievements are highly-prized both by people and organizations, and 2) the failure to achieve desired results rarely results from a shortage of effort or will.

So, what is the secret to overcoming inertia and achieving results?

The answer is simple: *you*. This is good news. If the only potential pitfall is one that you know intimately and can control, then your chances of succeeding are greatly

increased. The view that you have it within you to make progress and succeed may appear simplistic or counter-intuitive. What about the myriad other things that affect you and your organization that you cannot control, such as: customers, cash flow, competitors, the economy, legislation, unforeseen developments? The list is almost endless. Surely these are the real causes of caution, lack of progress or failure?

Well, these are certainly the factors behind business fortunes but they’re not the most significant when trying to achieve results. The truth is that you can’t control the world, you can’t control the economy or market (regulators will prevent that), your customers or even the people who work in your business. While you may be able to influence all of these forces, the only one you truly control is *yourself*.

There are several simple principles and techniques that will help you to succeed – overcoming inertia and achieving results. These are highlighted in this checklist.

Making It Happen

Several practical techniques will help you develop your success and enable you to encourage others to succeed.

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Organisations can get trapped by success so that when their situation changes they simply repeat the action of the past – and these may be inadequate for the future. Sound familiar? Know the solution?

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Apply the basic principles

- Write down your goals and review them regularly – start committing to them.
- Reduce or remove the fear of failure by:
 - a) realising that it is often simply what you believe it to be – we legitimise failure in our minds simply by thinking about it;
 - b) recognising that you have a fear, and
 - c) acknowledging that fear and putting it in context.
- Emphasise choice, not change. Change is always with us, what matters are the choices we make when confronted with change.
- Make conscious, considered decisions between the choices you face. The alternative can often be indecision, drift or inaction.

Show that talk is no substitute for action

Companies that don't accept talk as a substitute for action often do one or more of the following:

Promote people who have a real-world understanding of the organisation's processes (usually because they have performed them themselves).

- Build a culture that values simplicity (and does not reward complexity), uses simple, clear and direct language, and values common sense.
- Use action-oriented language.
- Follow up to ensure that decisions are implemented.
- Refuse to accept excuses for why things won't work – encourage employees to view their objections as challenges to be overcome.

Act and teach others how to act

Too many companies value conceptual frameworks, graphic presentations and words, but with little value on *action*. Why are so many efforts at changing and improving things approved in the boardroom and never implemented?

For example, Honda puts employees into suppliers' organisations so they can see how the suppliers make parts and what work methods they use. Being closely involved with their suppliers has helped Honda improve their business.

Test, experiment, learn – and avoid paralysis by analysis

Too many companies are frustrated by *analysis paralysis* – the feeling that plans must be complete and bullet-proof before any action is taken. The more successful companies encourage action to foster learning by doing. In many of these companies it is believed that an 80% solution today is better than a 100% solution months or years from now.

Former Continental Airlines COO Greg Brenneman spoke of the airline's turnaround: "If you sit around devising elegant and complex strategies and then try to execute them through a series of flawless decisions, you're doomed. We saved Continental because we acted and we never looked back."

Accept errors – they show that people are learning

Thomas Edison tried thousands of materials for light-bulb filaments before discovering tungsten. When someone asked him how he overcame so many failures, he said that he never failed – he just learned.

Remove fear

If people fear that any new idea that doesn't work perfectly at the first attempt will result in punishment or dismissal, they'll never try anything new. The first step is to challenge anyone, anywhere, who humiliates others. Companies that drive fear out of their organisation use some of these approaches:

Rapid prototyping – this is a design method used in manufacturing in which new ideas are tried and relatively inexpensively and plans modified based on results. Failure of a new idea is seen as part of the learning process, not as something to be feared.

Rewarding employees who deliver bad news, rather than shooting the messenger. After all, if the company doesn't know about a problem, it can't solve it.

Punish inaction, not unsuccessful action. An unsuccessful action should be viewed as a learning experience.

Sharing failures. When leaders share their failures, they give permission to others to fail and encourage them to try. These leaders learn from, and even celebrate, their mistakes – especially when trying something new.

Finally, avoid individual measurements and rewards that set people against each other. These practices take the focus away from the real opposition: external competitors.

Does your organization treat mistakes so harshly that people continuously analyse and discuss plans instead of taking action?

Successful companies encourage risk-taking and give confidence to employees to try new ideas without an overwhelming fear of retribution should they fail.

Measure action

Many companies are awash with data measuring every conceivable action. Amid so many measures, employees spend far too much time focused on the numbers and how they'll look rather than on actions that can help improve the business and meet overall goals. More successful companies focus on a few key measures of company performance, believing that if those key measures are met, everything else will fall into line. Spend time measuring and understanding the most important things.

Coach using GROW

Coaching helps colleagues realize their potential and succeed.

Coaching conversations can be seen as having four main phases focusing on an individual's: *goals, reality, options* and *will*.

Setting *goals* for the overall coaching relationship and for the session.

Exploring the current position of the learner: the *reality* of their situation and their concerns.

Generating *options*, strategies and action plans for achieving the goals outlined above.

Having the desire, determination and *will* to succeed. This means deciding what is to be done, by whom, how and when, and whether sufficient will and determination is present to see this through.

This is known as the GROW model, and the central element is that responsibility for setting the goals rests with the coachee.

Question and challenge

Non-directive coaching relies on the ability to question – it is an essential skill and the essence of coaching.

The main objective of a coach is to help the coachee improve their position by learning, achieving a goal, making a decision, resolving an issue or simply improving their understanding, all by using effective questioning rather than by simply presenting a solution or the coach's viewpoint. This is because questioning is much more likely to produce a result for the individual as they have focused on the issues and considered their own solutions.

Some of the most useful or typical questions to use during a coaching conversation include (these questions be used as part of the GROW process):

- What are you trying to achieve?
- How will you know when you have achieved it?
- Would you define it as an end goal or a performance goal?
- If it is an end goal, what performance goal could be related to it?
- Is the goal specific and measurable?

- To what extent can you control the result? What sort of things won't you have control over?
- Do you feel that achieving the goal will stretch or break you?
- When do you want to achieve the goal?
- What are the milestones or key points on the way to achieving your goal?
- Who is involved and what effect could they have on the situation?
- What have you done about this and what have been the results?
- What are the major constraints in finding a way forward?
- Are these constraints major or minor? How could their effect be reduced?
- What other issues are occurring at work that might have a bearing on your goal?
- What options do you have?
- If you had unlimited resources, what options would you have?
- Could you link your goal to some other organisational issue?
- What would be the perfect solution?

Show leadership and vision – be positive, energetic, thoughtful and enthusiastic

Successful leaders create a positive learning environment that not only helps employees learn but also helps them apply that learning to their work to make a positive difference in business results. They lead by example and teach others how to act.

Key Concept: Overcoming Active Inertia

Donald Sull, Harvard professor and author of *Revival of the Fittest*, believes managers get trapped by success, a condition he terms *active inertia*. This is when managers

respond to disruptive changes by accelerating activities that succeeded in the past. Firms fall back on the sure-fire weapons of the past. However, this can often mean the firm simply digs itself further into a hole.

How active inertia works

1. A firm correctly discerns gradual shifts and developments in their external environment, but then fails to respond when they see these changes coming.



2. Managers get trapped by success, often simply responding to the most disruptive changes by accelerating and repeating activities that succeeded in the past.



3. The source of active inertia is a company's success formula, the unique set of strategies, resources, processes, relationships and values that collectively influence managers' actions.



4. With time and repetition, people stop considering alternatives. The individual components of the success formula grow less flexible. They get stuck in the past...

Active inertia can be overcome by changing people's commitments and priorities. If active inertia grows as a result of the company's current commitments – its strategies, processes, relationships and values – then changing these commitments will make the company less likely to fall back on the status quo.

However, changing people's commitments and focus is not risk-free. Making it work depends on the company's financial cushion, competitors' likely response, and management's ability to lead the changes.

Avoiding The Pitfalls

Decision making pitfalls

The way that people think, both as individuals and collectively, affects the decisions that they make, in ways that are far from obvious and rarely understood. John Hammond, Ralph Keeney and Howard Raiffa writing in the Harvard Business Review recognised the following traps in decision making (see John S. Hammond, Ralph L. Keeney and Howard Raiffa, *The Hidden Traps in Decision-making*, Harvard Business Review, September-October 1998).

- *The anchoring trap* is where we give disproportionate weight to the first piece of information we receive. The initial impact of the first information, our immediate reaction to it, is so significant that it outweighs everything else, 'drowning' our ability to evaluate a situation.
- *The status quo trap* biases us towards maintaining the current situation – even when better alternatives exist – due to inertia or the potential loss of face if the current position was to change.
- *The sunk-cost trap* inclines us to perpetuate the mistakes of the past, because the investment involved makes us avoid abandoning decisions.
- *The confirming evidence trap* (confirmation bias) is when we seek information to support an existing predilection, to discount opposing information, to justify past decisions and to support the continuation of the current favoured strategy.
- *The over-confidence trap* makes us overestimate the accuracy of our forecasts. Linked to confirming evidence, it occurs when a decision maker has an exaggerated belief in their ability to understand situations and predict the future.

- *The framing trap* is when a problem or situation is incorrectly stated, undermining the decision making process. This is often unintentional, but not always. How an issue or situation is seen is important in providing the basis for developing an effective strategy or decision.
- *The recent event trap* leads us to give undue weight to a recent, possibly dramatic, event or sequence of events. It is similar to the anchoring trap, except that it can arise at any time – not just at the start – and cause misjudgment.
- *The prudence trap* leads us to be over-cautious when estimating uncertain factors. There is a tendency to be very risk averse and is likely to occur when there is a decision dilemma – when the decision maker feels both the current approach and alternative courses carry risks.

As well as these thinking flaws and coping patterns, there are two potential pitfalls resulting from the culture or environment of the organization: fragmentation and groupthink.

Fragmentation occurs when people are in disagreement, either with their peers or their superiors. Usually, the expression of emerging dissent is disguised or suppressed, although it may appear as ‘passive aggression.’ Dissenting opinion often festers in the background – mentioned informally in conversation, rather than clearly raised in formal situations, such as meetings. Fragmentation is corrosive, hindering effective analysis and decision making, and can worsen when the views of one group dominate. It also feeds off itself in a self-sustaining cycle, as any move to break it is seen as an attempt to gain dominance by one side. It can therefore become locked-in to the organization and be extremely difficult to reverse.

Groupthink is the opposite of fragmentation. It occurs when the group suppresses ideas that are critical or not in support of the direction in which the group is moving. The group appears to be in agreement or certain but is neither. It is

caused by many factors, such as past success breeding a belief of an infallible team and complacency. Groupthink may occur because the group is denied information or lack the confidence or ability to challenge the dominant views of the group. People may be concerned about disagreeing, either because of past events, present concerns or a fear of what the future might hold, therefore seek safety in numbers.

Groupthink is worsened by the fact that groups tend to rationalize the invulnerability of their decision or strategy, and this inhibits critical analysis and dissenting ideas. The effect is an incomplete survey of available options and a failure to examine the risks of preferred decisions.

Groupthink can occur in organizations where teamwork is either strong or weak. As with fragmentation, groupthink is self-sustaining. The longer it lasts, the more entrenched and ‘normal’ it becomes. It can be very difficult to reverse.

...and the solutions

Having explained the pitfalls what are the solutions?

- *Be bold and don't fear the consequences of decisions* – we tend to over-estimate the consequences, good and bad, of our choices. We also tend to discount our ability to make the right choice. This results from ‘loss aversion’: the view that a loss will hurt more than a gain will please. Remember, the worst case scenario might never occur and even if it does people invariably have the psychological resilience to cope.
- *Trust your instincts and emotions* – we have evolved to make good decisions and manage their implementation. Sometimes, quick decisions work best precisely because you have picked up on the key pieces of information quickly and then responded. More time can simply lead to information-overload and other distractions.
- *Be prepared to play devil's advocate* – searching for flaws and failings will strengthen your decisions.

- *Avoid irrelevancies* – irrelevant information distorts our perception, as described in the anchoring trap. The solution is to be ready to question the context of the information. What are you basing your decision on, and is it really relevant?
- *Reframe the decision* – it helps to view the issues from a new perspective.
- *Don't let the past hold you back* – the sunk-cost trap highlights our tendency to stick with previous choices because too much has been invested. Don't: better alternatives may exist.
- *Challenge groupthink* – people are often afraid to comment or to act because of social pressure. This is a poor excuse. Find out what people really think and use that to inform decisions.
- *Limit your options* – this is the paradox of choice: the more options we have, the harder life can be. Choose the most promising options, this can help to remove pressure and clarify your thinking. We are fixated with choices, believing more to be better. In truth, less choice can be more satisfying. Also, it may be worth delegating the decision to someone else better qualified.

The Last Word: Be a Naked Leader

Naked leadership

Imagine if you could simply not fail: What would you do? Where would you go? This is a very powerful and seldom considered question. Too often we are haunted by the prospect of risk and failure. As we grow in seniority and move through our organizations our fear of failure – and our perception of its likely consequences – can grow. To counter this, think about what you did well and what you want to do.

- **Know where you want to go** – overcome your inner critic and rediscover your ability to dream.
- **Know where you are now** – take ownership of your life and be honest about where you are.
- **Know what you have to do to get where you want to go** – widen your choices, but make true decisions, closing off all other options.
- **Do it!** Act with persistence – persistence is incompatible with failure.

Inspiration and vision are essential for people to aspire to excellence, but on their own they are not enough to enable success to be achieved. Practical action and personal commitment are required as well.

Succeeding as a naked leader

What are the essential skills that will help you ensure success? Several practical techniques can help you ensure success.

- *Believe in yourself* – achieving progress and success is about being yourself and being comfortable and confident with your personality and approach.
- *Listen* – research suggests that a person's attention span is a mere seven seconds before attention wanders. One of the biggest compliments we can pay, therefore, is to genuinely listen.
- *Recognise that people have four needs* – they want answers, they want to be liked, they want to be valued and they want time. A significant consequence of these four needs is that people want to be right: specifically, they want to feel that they are correct in what they believe. This desire to be right leads us to sub-consciously seek confirming evidence for our actions and it means that we are often liable to make decisions based on emotion.
- *Show support.* Consider asking the question: If there was one thing that I could do for you, what would it be?
- *Use the four most powerful words* in the world:

1. The name of the person you are speaking with – powerful because it is both familiar and personal, but take care not to overuse.
2. 'Because' – useful as it connects the conscious and sub-conscious mind. It ensures people are listening carefully.
3. 'And' – valuable because it builds on success, unlike 'But' which is disagreeable.
4. 'Would' – effective because it gives power to the other person. The opposite is also true, so 'Should' is a very negative word.
 - *Encourage people to be open and genuine* – do this by listening, making a statement, questioning or using a combination of all three. In particular, strive to get people to talk about their dreams: what they want to do and where they want to go.

The Naked Leader



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Your Action Plan

What are your priorities – what will you do differently to overcome inertia and achieve results?
Here are some ideas to get you started.

Your action	Deadline
<p>Write down your goals and review them regularly – start committing to them.</p> <p>What are your goals? How will they be achieved?</p>	
<p>Reduce or remove the fear of failure by: a) realising that it is often simply what you believe it to be – we legitimise failure in our minds simply by thinking about it; b) recognising that you have a fear, and c) acknowledging that fear and putting it in context.</p> <p>What are your biggest concerns or inhibitions and how can they be resolved or overcome?</p>	
<p>Make conscious, considered decisions between the choices you face. The alternative can often be indecision, drift or inaction.</p> <p>What are the most important choices you face (chose your timescale – today, this month, this year) and how will you make the best choice?</p>	
<p>Emphasise choice, not change. Change is always with us, what matters are the choices we make when confronted with change.</p> <p>What changes do you face (or think are necessary) – what will you do about them?</p>	

Further Information

Books

The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership Powered Company, R. Charan, S. Drotter and J. Noel, Jossey-Bass Inc.

Think on Your Feet – a guide to decision making and problem solving, J. Kourdi, Cyan/Marshall Cavendish

Coaching for Performance, Sir John Whitmore, Nicholas Brealey

Who Moved My Cheese? Spencer Johnson, Kenneth H. Blanchard

Surviving a Downturn, J. Kourdi, A&C Black

Revival of the Fittest: Why Good Companies Go Bad and How Great Managers Remake Them, D. Sull, Harvard Business School Press

Good to Great, J. Collins, Random House

Deep Change, R. Quinn, Jossey Bass

Built to Last, J. Collins and J. Porras, Harper Business

The Balanced Scorecard: Translating Strategy into Action, R. Kaplan and D. Norton, Harvard Business School Press

The Art of the Long View: planning for the future in an uncertain world, P. Schwartz, John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Organizations and on-line information

On-line journal published by Booz Allen and Hamilton at www.strategy-business.com

<http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu> contains information from Harvard Business School Press

The Strategic Planning Society's website can be found at www.sps.org.uk

The Global Business Network is a popular senior-executive organization – see www.gbn.org

The Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Non-profit Management site provides useful links on leadership and management: www.pfdf.org

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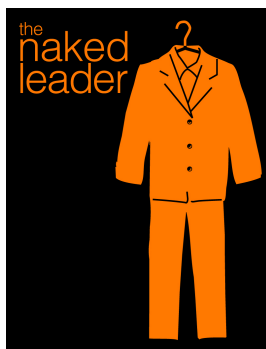
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