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Business Leader Magazine - October 2007

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## Leadership Initiating Action: The Tao of Execution

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"Fire, Ready, Aim" is rapidly becoming the action sequence as the pace of daily decision-making efforts outstrips the readiness of some leaders and organizations to respond. The heavy pressure for real-time responsiveness to the complex needs of customers, vendors, regulators or employees is causing many leaders to increasingly respond before they are ready.

CEOs around the globe are aggressively attempting to change this sequence and determine new ways to become more agile. Being agile means being a master of change poised to seize upon opportunities and initiate innovation.

This article is the fourth in a series designed to help leaders adapt and thrive in this environment by understanding the latest strategies and drivers of organizational agility. How fast are the rules changing in your market? How innovative or opportunistic are you? Are you able to respond fast enough to win and grow?

### The Tao of Execution

According to Wikipedia, Tao is a 500 B.C. Chinese symbol normally translated as meaning wisdom for the "way" or "path." A common theme in Taoist literature is that fulfillment in life cannot be attained by forcing one's own destiny. Instead, we must become completely adaptive to nature's path, because the only constant in the universe is change.

The Tao of execution can be boiled down to three simple words: Focused, fast and flexible. They represent what we should strive for as the natural operating style for our leaders and organizations.

World-renowned professor Don Sull of the London School of Business points to the importance of building adaptive capability for agile execution vs. relying on long-term strategy. His premise is that our future horizon has become so foggy with increased globalization, uncertain markets, hypercycle consumerism and periodic geopolitical instability that organizations are more likely to "win by focusing on execution and not strategy alone."

The fog of the future makes it essential that employees understand core mission priorities while leaders build adaptive skills to sense and respond, rapidly deploy, plug and play, and perform other capabilities found in agile organizations.

### No Substitute for Focus

Although there has been an explosion of technology tools to help improve personal and corporate productivity in this real-time world, there is no substitute for focus and the basic understanding of what differentiates your business.

Oscar Monahan, senior partner at Greensboro-based A3 IT Solutions, emphasizes the importance of truly "understanding the core value equation and priorities" as the agenda for your business. Take Apple and its revolutionary iPod phenomenon, which was developed as a result of a continual focus on consumer lifestyles and a dedication to finding the patterns and trends in its core franchise.

Focus might be the most overused and least understood word in today's business vocabulary, yet it remains the largest lever for increasing speed and responsiveness. The 2006 American Management Association study, "The Keys to Strategy & Execution," clearly demonstrates the high correlation between financially successful organizations and those with high ratings for "clarity of mission and message." When leaders keep consistent focus on the vital few priorities and align the appropriate resources to match, the conditions for success are in place.

### Why is Fast Important?

"The only dependable advantage is a superior capacity to reinvent your business model before circumstances force you to," wrote Gary Hamel in his 2003 Harvard Business Review article, "The Quest for Resilience."

The world has become dominated by the real-time expectations of consumers and customers worldwide. We all expect to have it our way all the time, and increasingly via self-service.

Expect this trend to continue and expand throughout the business-to-business world, and to be one of the forces driving speed and the future need for reinvention.

Organizations that are able to adapt and adjust like a NASCAR driver weaving through a crowded track will be well-positioned to succeed. In his new book, "The Age of Speed," Vince Poscente suggests that "in order for organizations to become faster and more aerodynamic, they must identify where they have drag." What are the factors causing resistance to speed or drag in your business?

### The Flexibility Model

Organizational flexibility and resilience are important qualities to be able to sustain competitiveness. These characteristics emerge in organizations wherein leaders consistently reinforce and build a culture with an expectation for organizational agility as well as continual communication of mission, values, and feedback on where corrective action is needed.

When employees understand an organization's mission and experience the empowered freedom to act in positive pursuit of excellence, they will find the adaptive solutions — or paths — to success and will live the Tao of execution as well. The benefit will be the delight of customers, shareholders, co-workers and ourselves as we operate with greater harmony and



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