



# **Mastery of Execution**

## **“How to Get Better at Everything You Do”**

by Miles Kierson and Gary Tomlinson

On a call with a successful CEO who had been a client in the past, he was asking, “What’s the big deal about execution all of a sudden?” We went on for a while saying how important execution is to an organization when we realized that what we were doing was insufficient. Finally, we asked the CEO, “What if you took on the challenge of getting better at execution, and you did get significantly better – what would you be better at doing?” There was a long pause, and then the CEO said, quietly, “Everything.” Another pause, and then the CEO said, “I get it now.”

We’ve seen over the last year or so that more and more executives, as well as managers, are getting it now. Our work with clients, especially over the last decade, has enriched our own learning and has radically shifted our view about the whole subject of execution. We believe sharing what we’re learning will speed up what we feel is an inevitable process toward the dawn of the “Age of Execution.”

### The light came on

We help companies learn to execute better, and as a focusing mechanism we are certified to use an execution management system called KeyneLink, created by Keyne Insight. It is a brilliant system with a software enabler and it works. Organizations get immediate results from adopting it and if they stick to it, year after year they will get better and better at executing as an organization.

What we realized, though, is that after two or three years, it's as if the honeymoon is over. The interest in continuing KeyneLink wanes, our clients tend to change how it's used to make it more comfortable for them, and the power of it diminishes. The client company drifts toward a return to "the way it was." We, as KeyneLink consultants, asked ourselves, "What are we missing?"

Finally, the light came on: We realized that our attention, as well as our clients' attention, had been on getting better at the execution management system. Getting better at this system is natural and beneficial, but it's not the point of all of this and we realized it was insufficient to keep the momentum of the journey going. We needed to expand and explicitly establish the context of the journey. Implicitly, it was *learn this execution management system and you will get better at execution*. This is true, but it led to a point where although the clients learned how to use the system successfully, it wasn't enough to hold their attention and more importantly, their commitment. The unspoken conclusion seemed to be, "We're good enough at the system, so let's move on to other things." In order to keep the momentum going, the context of our work had to be communicated. We had to begin with the end in mind, but the end wasn't getting good at the system; it was mastering execution. This means that an organization knows how to plan, engage, and implement both the daily activities of the enterprise itself and the activities that move the organization forward (i.e., the strategic plan). *The context is the journey to mastery of execution.*

### Imagine this!

Take a moment and picture your place of work, and then imagine it in the future, say, five years from now. You have achieved something that is so rare today we don't even know if it exists: an organization that has mastered execution. The employees have taken execution on and have reached a point where they are setting new standards for excellence in execution, and, rather than resting on their laurels,

they are continuing this journey of getting better and better at it. Can you imagine what that would be like?

This is what we imagine:

- *Year after year, you tell your board of directors what you will accomplish in those initiatives that are most important to the growth of the company, and your results at the end of the year are evidence that you mean it. You do not achieve everything; rather, you achieve most of it. These are not easy, slam-dunk goals. They are stretch goals, a fact that explains why you don't accomplish 100% of them (because if you did, your goals weren't stretch enough). You went from achieving 25% of them several years ago to consistently achieving at least 75% of them.*

*Examples of what this could mean:*

- *Sales goals are reached or exceeded and thus revenues grow year after year.*
  - *Employee retention is best in the industry.*
  - *You are among the best in the industry in safety.*
  - *Customer satisfaction and loyalty are very high.*
  - *Reliability is excellent.*
  - *Market share is gaining consistently.*
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- *Employees know what the key initiatives are and know the part they play in the accomplishment of them, and they are held accountable for their own goals that contribute to the organizational ones. They know they will be continually expected to innovate and find new ways to perform better, and they have come to expect and appreciate the opportunity for learning and growing and being creative. They work hard, but not longer hours than*

*before they began on this journey to mastery, and their work seems more like play because they are inspired.*

*As a result:*

- *Employee surveys reflect high engagement and satisfaction percentages.*
  - *The company consistently ranks high in “Best Places to Work” lists.*
  - *Turnover is low, especially of high-valued employees.*
  - *People line up to get a job there because they have heard how life-changing it is to work in that kind of environment.*
  - *The workplace is more joyful.*
  - *The value of your company is growing.*
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- *You have a dynamic strategic planning process that is supported by the organizational ability to adopt change and to implement. “Implementation is everything” is a key phrase at the company. You constantly take on new projects which are expected to contribute to the customers and to the company, and it is clear that the ability to execute makes all of this possible. Market changes are anticipated, welcomed, and dealt with smoothly and profitably.*

*What this translates into:*

- *Strategic thinking and planning are part of the flow of business, rather than activities that demand unusual attention occasionally.*
- *Strategies are implemented.*
- *If a strategy turns out to not be as successful as you thought it could be, you’ll know that sooner than later and can adjust.*
- *Agility is the new normal.*

What you just read is our imagination at work. It’s our idea of what the future holds for the company that takes on the journey to mastery of execution. What is

your idea of what that would mean? Another way to ask the same question is this: If as an organization you got better and better at execution every year – if you took on execution as a potential core competency – what would your company look like a year from now, five years from now, ten years from now? We promise you if you really think about it, you'll begin to crave what you imagined. You'll want it.

No kidding, stop reading now and think about it. Use your imagination. What would your company look like a year from now, five years from now, and so on?

### People get ready, there's a train a'comin'

We don't have concrete data to prove this, but people are awakening to the need to learn to execute beyond what they have so far learned along the way. Remember, *to get better at execution is to get better at everything*. You might even ask yourself (as we have) – “Why isn't everybody rushing to learn this?”

Our answer is two-fold:

- (1) It is ubiquitous. It is so obvious, that it's invisible.
- (2) Leadership often assumes that their job is to create the vision and strategy and it's everybody else's job to implement it. While it makes sense to allow and support others to be accountable, it still is ultimately the leader's responsibility to ensure that it happens. In other words, the leader doesn't just hand it off and forget about it. The leader must lead!

Everything you do at work takes execution. It takes execution to create a strategy. It takes execution to implement a strategy. It takes execution to do all of the things you do in your business – sales, marketing, keeping the equipment running, customer service, and so on. It's all execution.

Can you get better at execution? Yes, you can, but you have to want to first. Most executives and managers want something that takes execution to accomplish – they want to increase sales, they want to reduce errors in manufacturing, they want to get lean, they want to maximize profits, etc. You can get better at anything if you learn to get better at execution. By getting better at execution, you'll be better at executing more sales, higher production, stronger financials and so forth. There are proven techniques for improving execution, simple to learn and to make into daily practice.

The world is slowly waking up to this. There are more books about execution and there are more systems for managing execution and the very word *execution* is popping up all over. Our observation and our prediction tells us that this slow waking up will hit the tipping point soon, and everybody's going to jump on the train. People get ready. The competitive advantage in the coming years is going to go to those organizations whose managers and employees are on the journey to mastery! If you are not ready, you will be left behind.

### How do you get to Carnegie Hall?

Yes, of course: practice, practice, practice. Daily practice. For example, if you want to learn to play the violin, you take lessons and you practice. Of course, you'd have to have the time for both, and we know most of the people who read this article are probably too busy to take on something new like learning to play the violin. But it's important to know that if you want to master anything it takes years and lots of discipline and lots of practice.

But consider this. If you want to learn to master execution, it doesn't take time away from your job. That's because it would be part and parcel to your job. You learn to execute better by practicing, and where you practice is at work while you are working. *While you are learning and practicing you are getting better and better*

*at execution.* While this is going on, your efforts yield greater results and faster and more significant returns on your investment many times over.

### Start with the first step

This could happen, but probably not very often: Somebody walks into a martial arts dojo and says, “I’m new at this but I want to commit to being a master.” The instructors are going to tell that person to “sign up for a year and let’s see how it goes.”

We tell our prospective clients that we are ultimately interested in those executives and companies that want to go all of the way to mastery of execution, but before you commit to the journey we recommend you take these initial steps:

- (1) Hire a consultant or coach who is experienced at organizational execution improvement. To take on execution improvement seriously, you’ll likely need to unlearn what you think you know, make your blind spots visible, and untangle some of the organizational snags. Nobody is brand new at this – we are self-taught which got us this far. To go beyond what you already can do you need a coach (which is true in most things, not just execution).
  
- (2) Be sure the consultant or coach is someone who has a good execution management system. Then commit to that system for a year. A good system will help your organization from the very beginning and you’ll learn how to use it quickly. Keep in mind – and this is how we started this article – the point is not the system; it’s to allow what you learn by using the system to help you get better at execution. At the end of the year you can decide if you are ready to commit to the journey to mastery.

Let's talk about what's next, beyond that first year. It could be you move on to the next level, or it could be you are satisfied with what you have and you don't want to go any further. You have gained – enormously – either way. Your organization is more capable in terms of the basics of execution and you have a system that will keep you on track. The real goal is when you go beyond. If it has been valuable to you, keep working with your consultant/coach. Ask the coach for more practices that you and others in your organization can learn that will keep you getting better and better at execution.

The journey to mastery has no end. Actually, there are no masters. Mastery is a relative term. The point is to have your organization be as good as it gets in terms of its ability to do the things that has it stand out in its industry and in the world.

We leave you with this quote from Ursula K. Le Guin, an award-winning American author of many books:

*“It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end.”*

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