Get in Gear

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Foreword

Some of you have probably experienced a point in your career when your candor and honesty are no longer appreciated in your organization. I had reached that point at Perrier Group of America when I met Sean Ryan.

It was the mid-1990s, and our CEO brought Sean in as a consultant to help spark a turnaround at our organization. I was a regional training director at Perrier and was instantly impressed with Sean and his ideas. He had an absolute belief in the work and in people's ability to do the work.

Many of Sean's ideas at the time would evolve into the Strategy-Execution-Results (SXR) process that you will read about in this book. The upshot is we were targeting work that would result in the organization's communicating better, having a consistent understanding of the company's goals and transforming from working as individuals to working as a team.

When Sean was recruiting a handful of employees for his team, to the surprise of the company's top executives, he asked me to join him. My habit of saying uncomfortable truths out loud, which they considered at best a mixed blessing, was exactly what Sean prized.

Working with Sean was unlike anything I had done before. We built organization development programs such as Service Quality Assessments, Leadership Forums, 360° Feedback Loops, and Performance Development Process during my four-plus years with him, much of the work was informed by the thousands of internal interviews we did across all levels and functions of the company. This 360° perspective allowed us to help Perrier leaders develop a deep understanding of their culture, values, and goals and how widespread they were shared throughout the organization and then build solutions that leadership could leverage to move the organization forward.

I eventually moved on to lead several organizations, but I can honestly say that a huge amount of what I know about how to lead and run a company I learned in the years I worked with Sean.

In my career, I've worked with countless people brought in from the outside to swoop in, diagnose what's ailing us, and solve the problem. Sean stands out because even though he's there to teach, he's always listening and watching to see what teams and individuals can teach him.

I can't tell you how many times we would be in the middle of a multi-hour group exercise that had a specific objective – when someone would make a comment that Sean recognized as critical. He was fearless with these, willing to take the group on a detour, exploring what was behind that comment, and, more often than not, leading to the discovery of a hidden truth.

Maybe it was a tension between two people that was affecting everyone else, and nobody was willing to say anything about it. Maybe it was a clue that there was a disconnect between the company's intended culture and its real one. These detours were unplanned gems, and they often ended up being the most impactful part of Sean's work.

You don't capture those moments unless you have the quiet confidence to let the people you're leading steer the ship at times, trusting that they have the knowledge and motivation to solve their problems once you help them see what they're up against and the tools at their disposal. That's Sean's approach. He is fully aware of the many, many ways people can screw up, yet he's also the most optimistic person I know.

It's hardly surprising, but Sean proved to be a very patient and thorough teacher. When I joined his team, I didn't have a lot of experience with this kind of work. But he had what I would call highly misplaced but motivating confidence that I could do it. He had a calming and energizing presence. In his dealings with his team, Perrier executives, and the entire organization, he emphasized how to think, not what to think.

He was the first person I worked with who didn't just handle my questions. He *embraced* my questions. Sometimes, he'd respond, "That's a great question. Why don't you try to find an answer," which would launch me on a rewarding mini-journey.

Eventually, I left Perrier for a position at Aftermarket Technology Corporation, which put me on a path, after two mergers, to lead Fedex Supply Chain. Sean remained a valuable adviser and partner in my work over the next 20 years.

When our company, which had become GENCO, was merging into Fedex, I asked Sean to help us through the critical transition. On the one hand, we needed to preserve some of the GENCO culture, to assure our teammates that a part of the company they'd always known and loved would remain. On the other hand, we needed to integrate into Fedex's culture and methods, so the entire company could operate as a single team. Fedex Supply Chain, which was being created with the merger, had not yet developed a clear set of strategic priorities.

Sean was the perfect person to help us on our journey. We set up two multi-day meetings and began by having everyone list their top three-to-five priorities, a process Sean will introduce you to in this book. We honed our strategy, aligned around our critical priorities, built our business cases for resources and investments needed, and aligned our team around ownership of actions and results. We determined how we were going to execute the strategy and how we were going to measure it. The work was instrumental to a successful integration, a cultural transformation, and dynamic growth of the business.

Sean doesn't need big stage settings like the launch of Fedex Supply Chain to make an impact. One evening, when I was still at Perrier, Sean and I were having dinner, and we got to talking about what I might want to do next and the steps I'd need to take to get there. He took notes on the back of a napkin and gave it to me at the end of the meal. It's still the best career development plan I've ever received, and it informed my career decisions for the next several years. I think I may still have the napkin somewhere.

Throughout my time with Sean, it was clear that he had developed a detailed process for bringing about and supporting success with critical change processes in an organization. I was lucky to witness the evolution of that process into this book you're about to read. Over the years, some of the terms may have changed, and Sean has added and subtracted elements as part of his perpetual fine-tuning of the process. But looking back, I can see the heart of SXR in everything we worked on.

This book is the result of a man with a vision who eagerly challenges and refines his ideas in the real world over and over. The result is nothing short of a map to transform any organization, no matter its size or purpose. As Sean would say, it's not a script. There is no list of steps to follow and no magic bullet that one day creates a transformed organization like switching on a light. Instead, this book presents you with a set of principles, guidelines written in English, not consultant-speak, and packed with examples from the hundreds of organizations' journeys that Sean has led. If you take the principles to heart, follow the guidelines and do the work, you will succeed. Just as he did a quarter century ago for me at Perrier, he won't teach you what to think or do. He'll teach you how.

Art Smuck, CEO (retired), FedEx Supply Chain

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Heather, my wonderful spouse and best friend, who supported the crazy idea that I should write a book. Well, at least she didn't laugh hysterically at the thought! Your unending love and support make the journey worthwhile.

My kids, Aidan, Ashlee, and Kellen – my DNA is in you, but your DNA is all over this book. What I've observed, learned, and taught to individuals and organizations manifested itself in your daily experiences. I certainly learned from you and I hope you picked up a few things from dad along the way.

Mom and Dad – may you both be resting in peace. Dad, your humble, quiet leadership should serve as a model for dads and leaders everywhere. Growing up, I often asked my mom how she knew so much. She always responded, "I read a lot." Somewhere along the line I figured out that was a good idea. She often lamented that she couldn't explain to her friends what I did for a living as a "consultant." Now, wherever you are, you can just tell them, "He's an author." Way easier to explain!

Literally all the people I have worked with over the years. I've learned more from you than I could have from a thousand PhD programs at the best universities. Although, some of that is attributable to the fact that the best schools probably wouldn't let me on campus! I learned from all of you – what you struggled with, what drove your successes, what frustrated the hell out of you, and what you found joy in. What I learned from you is woven throughout the fabric of this book.

In particular,

Miller Templeton – you took some nerdy Civil Engineering student at Georgia Tech under your wing and taught me that all this "people stuff" can actually be taught and learned. You've impacted thousands of people in the most positive manner possible.

Rick Tate – nearly 40 years later, in spite of my best efforts to catch up, you've still forgotten more about leadership and organizations than I'll ever know or remember. I will always treasure, and never forget, the hours we spent in your office combing over every leadership theory ever known or developed. Your passion and patience were boundless. (Well, patience was mostly boundless!)

Art Smuck – I was lucky to cross paths with you in my early days working with Perrier. And, later, I was luckier to recruit you to my team there. You continue to be one of the best natural-born leaders I've met while continuing to passionately grow your capabilities at every step along the way. Your combination of caring deeply about the people around you while simultaneously challenging them to be their best sets both a high bar and a great example for others to follow.

All my friends and the people I've had a chance to work with at Nucor. I've met and learned from hundreds of Nucor teammates. It's hard to narrow it down to just a few, but I'll try. I'm incredibly appreciative of the opportunities and support provided by

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All those who came before me who observed, studied, wrote, and spoke about how organizations work: MacGregor, Drucker, Argyris, Peters, Waterman, Blanchard, Senge, Patterson, Brinkerhoff, and literally hundreds of others. In many respects, this book is a great big printed hip-hop song that samples from, and hopefully adds to, that massive body of work about what enables organizations and individuals to perform their best.

To all the clients who have trusted me with pieces of their organization and enabled this crazy Don Quixotic mission – to build great organizations where people can contribute their best every day – to take flight. You allowed me into the inner sanctum to experiment and learn at your expense. I can only hope I've somehow repaid the trust you placed in me.

Author

Sean Ryan is a world-renowned business consultant, speaker, trainer, and executive coach. As the founder of Whitewater International Consulting, he has worked internationally with companies such as Disney, Nucor Steel, and FedEx.

As former Vice President of Learning and Organizational Development for Perrier Group of America, Sean and his team shaped the organizational culture, people systems, and processes, as well as leadership capacity. Their work helped enable a fivefold increase in sales over a seven-year period.

With more than two decades of industry experience, Sean is highly regarded for his ability to guide organizations through complex transformational change in what he describes as "a world of perpetual whitewater." He helps clients formulate winning strategies and then deliver outstanding results through platforms including SXR™ (Strategy→Execution→Results), used by start-ups to Fortune 500 clients.

Beyond the organizational impact, Sean is amazed and humbled by the opportunity he's been provided to learn from the organizations and the hundreds of leaders he's had the pleasure to work with.

When not traveling for business and speaking engagements, Sean lives with his family in New Brunswick, Canada, where he serves as taste tester for his spouse's catering business. He also provides transportation services for his son and his friends, and he boats, skis, and bikes when time and his knees allow.

Introduction: Good Plans, Poorly Executed

You just spent an ungodly amount of time and/or money to develop your new strategy. You've produced a brilliant document that captures the strategy perfectly. Now, take that document, throw it in your desk drawer, and never look at it again.

Nobody in his right mind would do that, right? But if the people in your organization, or on your team, don't understand the strategy and their role in executing it, what's the difference?

The core purpose of "Strategy" is to energize and align people in an organization to propel it forward and help it succeed. A successful strategy should both guide and enable people to execute effectively at every level.

Unfortunately, organizations far too often do a poor job of translating that energy into the results they want or expect. Seventy-five to ninety percent of organizations fall short of achieving the results they expect from their strategies.

THE HIGH COST OF POOR EXECUTION

Most of the time, that's due to poor execution of good strategy. The shortfall is costly. Organizations can improve results by as much as 50% by executing their strategies more effectively. In the worst cases, poor execution of good strategy creates a doom loop. By underperforming, the organizations don't generate the returns they need to reinvest in their customers' experience, products, their team, or technology. So, they ultimately fall farther and farther behind.

I witnessed this firsthand early in my consulting career. We had been engaged to deliver leadership training at a PC manufacturer in California during the burgeoning days of the PC market. This gave us interesting insights into their efforts to execute a strategy to capitalize on the opportunities in the marketplace.

At the time, the PC industry was still quite fragmented. Our client had the fourth or fifth highest market share and a legitimate chance to grow. Their strategy was decent: be at the cutting edge of PCs as new generations of chips were introduced at a very competitive price.

But the execution was not nearly as crisp as it needed to be. The product development team would commit to aggressive timelines to develop the next generation of products. Within that culture, it was required to commit to the timeline regardless of how aggressive or ridiculous it seemed. Products were either rushed to market before they were truly ready and/or delivered late to the market. There was no learning or accountability for missing deadlines. The only sin was not making the commitment in the first place.

Being late to market caused customers to shop elsewhere or caused our client to take lower prices (and lower margins) when they subsequently made it to the market. Rushing inferior products to market drove up costs. It doesn't take an MBA from Harvard or Stanford to figure out that lower prices, higher costs, and poor customer experience = pending failure. They ultimately merged with another company due to this doom loop caused by poor execution of a good strategy.

My personal journey began a little earlier when I started my career at Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) in California. Regardless of what people think of PG&E today, what I experienced was a company going through a massive transformation to be more focused on customers. Employees were generally talented, caring, and committed to doing the right thing. Yet they were rarely fully aligned across the organization. In other words, it wasn't always clear what the "right thing" was.

Everywhere I turned, I found talented, motivated people who wanted to do their best for the customers and the company.

Yet, somehow, time after time, we were inefficient, bureaucratic, and disconnected from our customers. The top executives would come up with an idea, and by the time that idea filtered down to the frontline workers, it barely resembled the original concept. When front line workers had ideas, they somehow got distorted before they reached the managers who could do something about them. Or they never reached that level at all.

There had to be a better way. The search for that better way launched my Don Quixotic journey to help create great organizations in which people could perform at their best.

The journey has often taken on the form of "What problem are we trying to solve?" Or, more directly, "How do we help this organization better engage their employees in the effort to translate their strategy into the results they want?"

The answers emerged, project by project, issue by issue.

Why Can't You Do What I Want?

I was sitting next to a sales manager and across from a production manager. The larger group we were working with had been going at it for a while, and people were getting frustrated just enough to start speaking some hard truths.

Sales manager to the production manager: "Why can't you produce the stuff we can sell?"

Production manager to the sales manager: "Why can't you sell the stuff we can make?"

Why Are 45-Minute Waits a Bad Thing?

A company operated what are now called theme parks but used to be called amusement parks. And it did a great job. The leadership decided it was time to expand into hotels.

The hotels struggled. Customers loved the company's amusement parks but hated their hotels. We were asked to help find out why.

The "why" turned out to be straightforward. Amusement park customers and hotel customers have *very* different service expectations. An amusement park customer will wait in line for 45 minutes if the ride is good enough. An amusement park customer will overpay for a lousy hamburger, because the next ride will make her forget all about the meal. But if you make a hotel customer wait 45 minutes to check in, you'll never see that customer again.

That wasn't the big revelation though. The big revelation came as we were going over the 75-page report in a group meeting. The CEO made it through a few pages before saying, "This feels like an overdose of chemotherapy." He went from person to person in the group, asking if the other executives were aware of how bad things were going at the hotel. He got a lot of sheepish replies. Turned out, a lot of people knew, but no one was willing to give the CEO the bad news.

How Do We Change a Light Bulb in Less than Six Weeks?

A manufacturer of heavy transportation equipment was having a terrible time with the massive maintenance department of one of its divisions. More than 1,200 skilled tradespeople were working hard at their jobs, but it seemed the company couldn't complete even the simplest task in less than a month.

We suspected the problem lay in the department's organization. Each function reported to its own group – electricians, mechanics, etc. But almost any job required people from a variety of functions. Whoever was responsible for a particular job invariably had to wait for other groups to free up resources to support the job. Those groups, in turn, had to plug their own holes wherever they loaned out a person. So, it would take weeks for the job to get started.

We gathered a group of 70 people from across all functions. We broke them into smaller groups, handed each group some blank paper, and said, "Design an organization that works." After a few tries, the groups converged on groups organized by production line. They put the new organization into action and, almost overnight, they were able to cut response time way down on high-priority work: hours or days versus weeks or months.

When Do We Serve the Bread?

A resort was struggling. The guest experience was poor, and funds and morale were low. We interviewed the resort's food and beverage people, looking for fast, inexpensive answers. I gave an overview at the start of one focus group and asked for any questions before we got started. "I want to know only one thing," a cook virtually screamed at me and the rest of the group. "When do we serve the bread?"

What?

After a little follow-up discussion, it became clear what he was talking about. The resort operator had developed a thick binder that aimed to dictate the proper protocol for any situation. Depending on the situation, the servers had at least eight different options for the optimal time to serve the bread, e.g., with the salad, with the soup, when the customer asked for it, or when Venus aligned with Mars.

If serving bread was this complicated, you can imagine what everyone's day was like at this resort. Simplifying the protocols didn't solve everything, but it was a big step in the right direction.

Finally, the Big Question: How Do We Align Performance at Every Level of Our Organization to Our Strategy?

We couldn't help but notice:

- Almost nobody had goals. Team members couldn't tell us what they were working toward. This shouldn't come as any surprise. How many of us, in our personal lives, really spell out goals, identify what to do to accomplish them, and then stick to them? (Short answer: 3% or less)

  Then, in that small minority of companies where people *did* have goals, many of them based their goals on activities, rather than results. A lot of companies, for example, set goals for their salespeople along the lines of making X number of calls in a week or a month. Suppose every salesperson in the company completed that goal. What does that get you? (Short answer: Lots of action, results only by accident.)
- When we asked people how they were performing ... by far, the most common answer was, "Well, I don't really know, but I'm not getting in trouble so I must be doing okay."
- And we often observed that people are busy. Really.damn.busy! Dozens of people told us that they "feel like pinballs, just being hit from bumper to bumper." Or, "I go home every day exhausted but can't identify a single thing I accomplished." And, when we've asked people what percentage of time they spend working on their top three goals (or, more loosely, "priorities," since so few actually have goals!!), the most common answer is, "Not much."
- Then we get to the paradox of learning and accountability. In a weird twist, in the rush to create accountability for performance, organizations often fail to learn why performance has fallen short. We don't consider whether the goal was right to begin with; or if there were barriers that got in the way of effective performance; or if there are systems, structure, process, or even culture issues that limit performance. We just want to hold someone accountable for the results they were supposed to generate. (Forgetting that, in a lot of cases, people aren't even clear what those results are supposed to be!)

  Yet, when we ask people to describe what accountability looks like in their

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