

**The 4 Disciplines of Execution: Achieving your wildly important goals**  
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If you have an MBA or have taken business classes, what did you study more—execution or strategy? When we ask leaders this question, the response, once again, is immediate: “Strategy!” It’s perhaps not surprising that the area with which leaders struggle most is also the one in which they have the least education. Once you’ve decided what to do, your biggest challenge is in getting people to execute it at the level of excellence you need.

Whether you lead a small work team or a whole company, a family or a factory, no significant result is achievable unless people change their behavior. As every leader knows, getting the commitment of hearts and minds, the kind of commitment that will endure in the midst of the daily grind, is not easy.

One prime suspect behind execution breakdown was clarity of the objective: The further from the top of the organization, the lower the clarity. Lack of commitment to the goal was another problem. A staggering 81 percent of the people surveyed said they were not held accountable for regular progress on the organization’s goals. 87 percent had no clear idea what they should be doing to achieve the goal.

In short, people weren’t sure what the goal was, weren’t committed to it, didn’t know what to do about it specifically, and weren’t being held accountable for it. There were problems as well with lack of trust, misaligned compensation systems, poor development processes and poor decision-making.

Leaders seldom differentiate between the whirlwind (the day to day activities) and strategic goals because both are necessary to the survival of the organization. The goals you’ve set for moving forward are important, but when urgency and importance clash, urgency will win every time.

Executing in spite of the whirlwind means overcoming not only its powerful distraction, but also the inertia of “the way it’s always been done.” If you ignore the urgent, it can kill you today. It’s also true, however, that if you ignore the important, it can kill you tomorrow. The challenge is executing your most important goals in the midst of the urgent!

The 4 Disciplines are rules for executing your most critical strategy in the midst of your whirlwind.

Initial research was with nearly thirteen thousand people internationally across seventeen different industry groups & internal assessments with five hundred different companies. Over the years, we’ve added to this foundation by surveying almost three hundred thousand leaders and team members.

## **Discipline 1: Focus on the Wildly Important**

Basically, the more you try to do, the less you actually accomplish. This is a stark, inescapable principle that we all live with. You start by selecting one (or, at the most, two) extremely important goals (Wildly important goal-WIG) instead of trying to significantly improve everything all at once.

When you narrow the focus of your team to one or two wildly important goals, the team can easily distinguish between what is truly top priority and what is the whirlwind.

## **Discipline 2: Act on the Lead Measures.**

All actions are not created equal. Lag measures are the tracking measurements of the wildly important goal. Lead measures are quite different in that they are the measures of the most high-impact things your team must do to reach the goal. They measure the new behaviors that will drive success on the lag measures. A good lead measure has two basic characteristics: It's predictive of achieving the goal and it can be influenced by the team members. Acting on the lead measures is one of the little-known secrets of execution.

## **Discipline 3: Keep a Compelling Scoreboard**

The highest level of performance always comes from people who are emotionally engaged and the highest level of engagement comes from knowing the score—that is, if people know whether they are winning or losing. This players' scoreboard is quite different from the complex coach's scoreboard that leaders love to create. If the scoreboard isn't clear, the game you want people to play will be abandoned in the whirlwind of other activities.

## **Discipline 4: Create a Cadence of Accountability**

Unless we consistently hold each other accountable, the goal naturally disintegrates in the whirlwind. Team members must be able to hold each other accountable regularly and rhythmically. "What are the one or two most important things I can do in the next week (outside the whirlwind) that will have the biggest impact on the scoreboard?" The secret to Discipline 4, in addition to the repeated cadence, is that team members create their own commitments.

Keep in mind:

- A few new activities are vital to achieving that goal
- That the team needs to track those activities carefully

- That the team needs to account for their commitments weekly

1. The team knows the goal (Discipline 1)
2. The team knows what to do to achieve the goal (Discipline 2)
3. The team knows the score at all times (Discipline 3)
4. The team holds themselves accountable regularly and frequently for the results (Discipline 4)

Nothing is more motivating than belonging to a team of people who know the goal and are determined to get there. We believe the principles of execution have always been focus, leverage, engagement, and accountability. Understanding them has never been the problem. The challenge for leaders has been finding a way to implement them, especially when the whirlwind is raging.

While it might seem instinctive to you to have a lot of goals, the more you have the fewer you will achieve with excellence. If you want to achieve a certain goal, don't focus on the goal itself but on the lead measures that drive the goal. People who try to push many goals at once usually wind up doing a mediocre job on all of them.

Many of our goals are important, but only one or two are wildly important. We call them WIGs. They are the goals we must achieve. Our finest effort can only be given to one or two wildly important goals at a time.

One reason you may drive your team to take on too much is that, as a leader, you tend to be ambitious and creative. Another reason you might lead your team to go after too many goals is to hedge your bets. If your team pursues everything, then it seems likely that something might work.

Nothing is more counterintuitive for a leader than saying no to a good idea, and nothing is a bigger destroyer of focus than always saying yes. As Stephen R. Covey says, "You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage—pleasantly, smilingly, unapologetically—to say no to other things."

However, the second trap, trying to turn everything in the whirlwind into a WIG, is even more common. Narrow your focus to one or two wildly important goals and consistently invest the team's time and energy into them. What is the one area where change would have the greatest impact?" Your wildly important goal will come from one of two categories: either from within the whirlwind or from outside it

Rule #1: No team focuses on more than two WIGs at the same time.

Rule #2: The battles you choose must win the war. “What are the fewest number of battles necessary to win this war?”

Rule #3: Senior leaders can veto, but not dictate. The senior leader’s choice of the overall WIG brings clarity (top down), and allowing the leaders and teams below to choose their WIGs (bottom up) brings engagement.

Rule #4: All WIGs must have a finish line in the form of from X to Y by when.

Many leaders often struggle to translate their strategic concepts into a single “From X to Y by when” finish line. If a goal is wildly important, surely you should be able to tell if you’ve achieved it or not. A WIG is not a strategy. A WIG is a tactical goal with a limited time frame. That challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.”

Narrowing your focus increases both accountability and the engagement of your team. When a team moves from having a dozen we-really-hope goals to one or two no-matter-what goals, the effect on morale is dramatic.

## **Discipline 2: Act on the Lead Measures**

Discipline 2 then defines the leveraged actions that will enable the team to achieve that goal. First, a lead measure is predictive, meaning that if the lead measure changes, you can predict that the lag measure also will change. Second, a lead measure is influenceable; we strongly believe that understanding lead measures will be one of the most important insights you take from this book.

A WIG of achieving weight loss.

The lag measure will be your weight “Decrease total body weight from 190 pounds to 175 pounds by May 30” (from X to Y by when). This is a good start, but what are the lead measures that will be predictive of achieving the goal and, equally important, that you can influence? You would likely choose both diet and exercise, and, of course, you’d be right. As with most teams, their problem was not that they didn’t know, it was a matter of focus—they didn’t do.

Select the activities you believe will have the greatest impact on achieving the WIG: Consultant and entrepreneur Richard Koch, in business, “The mass of activity will always be pointless, poorly conceived, badly directed, wastefully executed, and largely beside the point.”

Over the years, we’ve seen thousands of leaders learn that an important key to execution is putting disproportionate energy against the leverage points by focusing on moving lead measures. If you have a big rock to move, you’re going to need a lever that is highly predictive and controllable. The bigger the rock, the more leverage you will need.

The lesson in this story is that lead measure data is almost always more difficult to acquire than lag measure data, but you must pay the price to track your lead measures. We're betting that by driving these lead measures we are going to achieve our wildly important goal.

**The third discipline** is to make sure everyone knows the score at all times, so that they can tell whether or not they are winning. A compelling scoreboard tells the team where they are and where they should be, information essential to team problem solving and decision-making. The fundamental purpose of a players scoreboard is to motivate the players to win. People play differently when they are keeping score. When team members themselves are keeping score, they truly understand the connection between their performance and reaching their goal, and this changes the level at which they play.

There are four questions we always ask when determining if a scoreboard is likely to be compelling to the players:

- Is it simple?
- Can I see it easily?
- Does it show lead and lag measures? The lead measure is what the team can affect. The lag measure is the result they want.
- Can I tell at a glance if I'm winning?

The problem is not the absence of data; the problem is too much of it and little sense of what data is most important. We seldom find even a single scoreboard in most organizations that meets the four criteria listed here. When winners are given data that shows that they are losing, they figure out a way to win. With the lights on, they can see what they need to do to improve. In our experience, nothing affects morale and engagement more powerfully than when a person feels he or she is winning. There is great satisfaction that comes from executing with excellence a goal that really matters.

**The fourth discipline** is to create a cadence of accountability, a frequently recurring cycle of accounting for past performance and planning to move the score forward. Great teams operate with a high level of accountability. In Discipline 4, your team meets at least weekly in a WIG session.

This meeting, which lasts no longer than twenty to thirty minutes, has a set agenda and goes quickly, establishing your weekly rhythm of accountability for driving progress toward the WIG. The focus of the WIG session is simple: to hold each other accountable for taking the actions that will move the lead measures, resulting in the achievement of the WIG despite the whirlwind.

First, the WIG session should be held on the same day and at the same time every week (sometimes even more often—daily, for instance—but never less often than weekly). It is truly amazing what you can accomplish by the simple discipline of meeting around a goal on a weekly basis over an extended period of time.

We have asked hundreds of thousands of employees in various industries around the globe to respond to the statement: “I meet at least monthly with my manager to discuss my progress on goals.” To our surprise, only 34 percent can respond positively to this statement, even when the review is only once each month, let alone weekly (the best practice of high-performing teams).

Discussion in the WIG session is limited solely to actions and results that move the scoreboard. Keeping your WIG sessions to twenty to thirty minutes is a standard to strive for. Any team in any function can learn to conduct fast, efficient sessions centered on the wildly important goal in place of protracted meetings covering everything under the sun.

Here’s the three-part agenda for a WIG session

- Account: Report on **commitments**.
- Review the scoreboard: Learn from successes and failures.
- Plan: Clear the path and make new commitments.

A WIG Session is a short, intense team meeting devoted to these—and only these three—activities. The purpose of the WIG Session is to account for prior commitments and make commitments to move the WIG scoreboard. You and every member of your team are accountable for moving the metrics on the scoreboard. You accomplish this by committing each week (in the WIG session) to one or two specific actions that will directly affect your lead measures, and then reporting to each other in the next week’s WIG session on your results.

The team members are not asking themselves, “What is the most important thing I can do this week?” Instead, they are asking a much more specific question: “What can I do this week to impact the lead measures?” The commitments represent the things that must happen, beyond the day to day, to move the lead measures.

Keeping weekly commitments drives the lead measures, and the lead measures drive achievement of the WIG. By keeping their weekly commitments, team members influence the lead measure, which in turn is predictive of success on the lag measure of the WIG. Without the steady rhythm of accountability of Discipline 4, there will always be things the team members know they should do, but never actually do with real consistency.

Each commitment must meet two standards:

- First, the commitment must represent a specific deliverable.
- Second, the commitment must influence the lead measure.

If the commitment doesn't directly target the lead measure, it won't advance the team toward achieving the WIG. It often takes three to four weeks before a team establishes an effective rhythm in which they learn to stay focused on the WIG and avoid talking about the whirlwind. Instead of accountability to a broad outcome you can't influence, it's accountability to a weekly commitment that you yourself made and that is within your power to keep.

The question you ultimately answer in a WIG session is, "Did we do what we committed to each other we would do?" Authority alone at best yields only compliance from a team. 4DX produces results not from the exercise of authority but from the fundamental desire of each individual team member to feel significant, to do work that matters, and ultimately, to win.

The constant weekly energy applied against the lead measures creates a unique form of accountability that connects the team directly to the goal, again and again. Think of 4DX like the operating system on your computer. Most teams go through five stages of behavior change.

#### Stage 1: Getting Clear

- Be a model of focus on the wildly important goal(s).
- Identify high-leverage lead measures
- Create a players' scoreboard
- Schedule WIG sessions at least weekly and hold them

#### Stage 2: Launch

#### Stage 3: Adoption

Recognize that adoption of the new 4DX process will take time. Adherence to the process is essential to your success on the WIG: be respectful but diligent about sticking with the process. Otherwise, the whirlwind will quickly take over.

#### Stage 4: Optimization

#### Stage 5: Habits

Coach Adolph Rupp said, “Whenever you see a man on top of a mountain, you can be sure he didn’t fall there.”

### **Installing Discipline 1:** Focus on the Wildly Important

Many teams have multiple goals—sometimes dozens, all of which are priority one. Of course, that means that nothing is priority one.

Step 1: Consider the possibilities Top Down and Bottom Up: Ideally, both the leader and the team participate in defining the WIGs. Gather as many ideas as you can reasonably capture. Our experience shows that the longer and more creative the list of possible WIGs, the higher quality the final choice.

Step 2: Rank by Impact. Identify the ideas that promise the greatest potential impact on the overall organizational WIG.

Step 3: Test top ideas

Is it measurable? A game without a clearly measurable score will never be a game that matters. Time invested in a game without a score is time lost. If the WIG depends too much on functions that only the leader performs, the team will quickly lose interest in the game.

Step 4: Define the WIG

- Begin with a Verb
- Define the Lag Measure
- Keep It Simple

Earlier, we shared the startling fact that 85 percent of working adults cannot tell you their organization’s most important goals. Most organizational goals are vague, complex, and pretentious. Focus on What, Not How The WIG should focus exclusively on what the team plans to achieve. Make Sure the WIG Is Achievable Create a WIG that is both worthy and winnable. Like a compass, the WIG provides clear, consistent direction toward a result that’s wildly important.

**Installing Discipline 2:** Act on the Lead Measures You will use lead measures to track those activities that have the highest leverage on the WIG. The team can manageably act on the lead measure, which in turn will move the lag measure. Often, lead measures simply close the gap between knowing what to do and doing it. Here are the steps for arriving at high-leverage lead measures.

Step 1: Consider the Possibilities & Stay solely focused on ideas that will drive the WIG. Don't drift into a general discussion of good things to do rather than things that will impact the WIG, or you will end up with a long list of irrelevancies.

Step 2: Rank by Impact Narrowing the focus to a few lead measures permits stronger leverage.

Step 3: Test Top Ideas

Test them against these six criteria:

- Is it predictive?
- Is it influenceable?
- Is it an ongoing process or a "once and done"?
- Is it a leader's game or a team game?
- Can it be measured?
- Is it worth measuring?

The ideal lead measure is an action that moves the lag measure. Only the behavioral habits the team develops can drive permanent improvements. Remember, lead measures connect the team to the WIG, but only if it's the team's game to play. If the WIG is truly wildly important, you must find ways to measure the new behaviors.

Step 4: Define the Lead Measures Are we tracking team or individual performance? Are we tracking the lead measures daily or weekly? What is the quantitative standard? Choose numbers that challenge the team without making it an unwinnable game. What is the qualitative standard? Does it start with a verb? Is it simple?

The deliverable for Discipline 2 is a small set of lead measures that will move the lag measure on the WIG.

TRY IT:

1. Write down the Wildly Important Goal and lag measure
2. Brainstorm ideas for lead measures.
3. Brainstorm methods for measuring those ideas.
4. Rank in order of impact on the WIG.
5. Write your final lead measures.

### **Installing Discipline 3: Keep a Compelling Scoreboard**

The team won't play at their best unless they are emotionally engaged—and that happens when they can tell if they are winning or losing. People play differently when they are keeping score. A coach's scoreboard is not a player's scoreboard. When the scoreboard becomes personal, they become engaged.

Design the Scoreboard. Is it simple? In the midst of the whirlwind, simplicity is the key to keeping the team engaged. Can the team see it easily? Does it contain both lead and lag measures? The scoreboard must answer not only Where are we now; but also Where should we be (Remember, 85 percent of team members we surveyed could not name their most important goals!).

Can we tell at a glance if we're winning? Design the scoreboard so that in five seconds or less the team can determine whether they are winning or losing. This is the true test of a players' scoreboard.

- Build the Scoreboard
- Keep It Updated
- We can tell if we're winning or losing at a glance
- The deliverable for Discipline 3 is a scoreboard that keeps the team engaged. People disengage when they don't know the score.

**In Discipline 4**, you put that game into action as everyone becomes accountable—to each other—for high performance.

Installing Discipline 4: Create a Cadence of Accountability. Without consistent accountability the team will never give their best efforts to the game. Discipline 4 asks teams to meet frequently and regularly in WIG sessions in which each member of the team makes personal commitments to drive the lead measures. The purpose of the WIG Session is to account for prior commitments and make commitments to move the WIG scoreboard.

- Account: Report on last week's commitments.
- Review the scoreboard: Learn from successes and failures.
- Plan: Clear the path and make new commitments.

Why hold WIG sessions?

The sessions keep the team's focus on the WIG despite the constant whirlwind of other urgent demands. The sessions enable team members to learn from each other about how to move the lead measures. If one person succeeds, others can adopt his or approach. On the other hand, if a course of action isn't working, the team finds out early.

The sessions give team members the help they need to keep their commitments. If someone runs into a barrier, the team decides how to clear the path. The sessions enable the team to adapt on the fly to the changing needs of the business.

The session ends with a just-in-time plan that addresses challenges impossible to foresee through annual planning. The sessions provide an opportunity to celebrate progress, reenlist the energies of the team, and reengage everyone.

“What are the one or two most important things I can do this week to impact the team’s performance on the scoreboard?” You want the team to do a few things with excellence, not a lot of things with mediocrity. Invest your finest attention and effort in those commitments that will make the biggest difference.

Weekly commitments create a sense of urgency that helps you stay focused when your whirlwind is raging. Every commitment must be directed at moving the lead and lag measures on your scoreboard. The more specific the commitment, the higher the accountability for it. Don’t mistake whirlwind urgencies for WIG commitments.

“How will fulfilling this commitment impact the scoreboard?”

Every WIG session needs to account specifically for prior commitments and result in clear commitments for the future. If you let the whirlwind overwhelm your commitments, you’ll never invest the energy needed to progress.

“Whenever we make a commitment on our team, we know we have to find a way to make it happen, no matter what.” Without unconditional commitments, you can’t drive the black into the gray. The gray whirlwind will simply fill in the black commitments. That’s the story of execution breakdown.

This is the purpose of the WIG session: to make commitments intelligently and with the determination to keep them regardless of the whirlwind.

Keys to successful WIG sessions:

- Hold WIG sessions as scheduled.
- Keep the sessions brief.
- Set the standard as the leader.
- Post the scoreboard.
- Celebrate successes.
- Share learning.

Refuse to let the whirlwind enter. Clear the path for each other. Execute in spite of the whirlwind. “What is the one thing you can do this week that would have the most impact on the scoreboard?” The deliverable for Discipline 4 is a regular, frequent WIG session that moves the lead measures.

We believe that two of the greatest drivers of success in 4DX are simplicity and transparency.

Installing 4DX in Your Organization. Experience shows that 4DX is not just another program, but a transformative operating system for any organization. The whirlwind always outweighs the strategic plan. The real difference here is that the leaders are then reporting on their own goals, instead of the ones given to them from above. The 4 Disciplines were an “operating system” that would enable us to sustain our necessary whirlwind while also moving the needle on our most important objectives.

#### Rules for Discipline 1

1. No more than 1 to 3 WIGs per person at the same time.
2. The battles have to win the war.
3. You can veto, but don't dictate.
4. A WIG must have a finish line (from x to y by when). Every successful implementation of 4DX begins when leaders take on the difficult challenge of narrowing the organization's focus.

If every other area of our operation remained at its current level of performance, which one area would we want to improve the most? Your highest-level WIG is a point of laser focus; one to which you will give a disproportionate amount of energy because it requires a change in human behavior. Initiatives that will require a change in people's behavior to successfully implement. These are by far the most challenging in any strategy and the primary target of 4DX. This is the real power of a leadership team determining the fewest possible battles; it enables them to see if their war is winnable.

Potential that exists in even the best-run organizations when they move from a vague strategic intent to a set of specific finish lines. Remember, the greatest challenge is not in developing the plan: It's in changing the behavior of the front-line teams that must execute it while managing the never-ceasing demands of the whirlwind. Your ability to focus the entire organization on what's wildly important might become your greatest competitive advantage.

Embracing a concept is not the same as applying it. Even though the 4 Disciplines are easy to understand, in the end, they are still disciplines. It takes real work to make them an established part of organization's operation and culture.

The 4 Disciplines must be implemented as a process, not an event.

The 4 Disciplines must be implemented with intact teams.

The 4 Disciplines must be implemented by the leader.

Step 1: Clarify the overall WIG.

Step 2: Design the team WIGs and lead measures. Each leader chooses a team WIG that will represent the team's greatest contribution to the overall WIG. When team WIGs are set, leaders then tackle the most challenging part of the 4DX process: defining lead measures for the WIGs. Coming up with predictive and influenceable lead measures is a complex task that often requires multiple attempts.

Step 3: Leader certification.

Step 4: Team launch.

Be on guard against three potential failure points.

- The absence of a goal that really matters.
- The lack of full commitment from the senior leader.
- Certifying leaders at the wrong level.

The two main mistakes leaders make in this process are a lack of participation and a lack of patience.

All leaders are results driven, so they want results as soon as possible. However, they often ignore the fact that WIG success depends upon consistent, ongoing performance against the lead measures. The WIG session must be sacred. Team members must contribute to the quality of the WIG meeting by making commitments that impact the lead measures and WIG success.

As Stephen Covey likes to say, "You can't talk your way out of a situation you have behaved yourself into!"

The primary purpose of the weekly WIG session is to maintain with all your team's players a cadence of accountability.

“Leaders do not get paid for what leaders do. Leaders get paid for what they can get others to do.”

The most important contribution a senior leader can make is to remain focused on the wildly important goal and resist the allure of your next great idea.

A high-quality commitment has three characteristics:

- Specific.
- Aligned.

“What could I do personally this week that would have the greatest impact on achieving our WIG?”

- Timely.

Consistency and accountability are the most powerful drivers of performance. We discovered that 4DX is a profound methodology for achieving any goal of any kind, whether at work or at home. So many of the wildly important things in our lives never get the attention we should give them because they aren't urgent. Peter Drucker observed, “I've seen a great many people who are magnificent at getting the unimportant things done. They have an impressive record of achievement on trivial matters.”