Disciplined Execution is a topic that I believe is drop-dead crucial for all business people.

How important is Disciplined Execution relative to the vision and goals of a business enterprise? Simply put, there are few things that I think can even match its importance.

Disciplined Execution is the answer to “How can we maximize the impact of our strategic initiatives?” It’s the answer to “How can we get the most out of our resources?” Disciplined Execution is the answer to “How can we realize our full potential?” And finally, Disciplined Execution is the answer to “How do the best get even better?”

The truth is that few achieve consistently Disciplined Execution. It demands of us a fierce desire and focus and an unrelenting will to achieve it. But it’s certainly achievable. So how do you get it? How do you get all there is to get? I’ve broken the answer to that question into Six Keys to Achieving Disciplined Execution.

These Six Keys are applicable to every aspect of an overall business. And no matter how mature or successful your business is, applying these Keys will enable you to achieve breakthrough performance gains.

Before I talk about the first of the Six Keys, I’m going to whet your appetite with an example of what world-class execution looks like.

Peyton Manning—the quarterback of the Indianapolis Colts and the Most Valuable Player of the 2007 Super Bowl. There are few leaders, regardless of industry, that better exemplify what it means and what
it takes to execute at the highest level than Peyton Manning. And he
does this under constant intense scrutiny and while facing a type of
competitive pressure that few of us will ever experience.

So how does he do it? Sure, as he humorously remarked in a TV
commercial, he’s “6’5” with a rocket arm.” But that’s only a minor part of
the story. There’s a long list of NFL & would-be NFL quarterbacks with
equal or greater physical gifts. I believe what sets him apart can be boiled
down into two things:

1. He works at execution like nobody’s business. In the history of
the NFL, only a few QB’s have even rivaled the extent to which he
consistently prepares himself and his receivers to execute the game
plan.

2. He never lets up. And I mean NEVER. He’s never satisfied by his
previous best effort, even if it’s never been equaled by anyone else.
He’s constantly working, constantly refining, constantly focused on
the pursuit of flawless execution. Of course he never achieves truly
flawless execution, but the drive to get as close as possible makes
him an execution icon.

For the specific purpose of this article, it’ll be helpful to have a simple
but spot-on definition of Disciplined Execution. At its core, Disciplined
Execution is:

\[
\text{Consistently doing the right things in the right ways in}
\text{accordance with your mission, vision and values}
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Now with that definition in mind:

**The first of the Six Keys to Achieving Disciplined Execution is:**

**Be unreasonable...Be unreasonable** when setting
performance and behavioral standards and expectations.

I’m a big advocate of being *unreasonable* in terms of business leadership.
The great thinker and writer George Bernard Shaw said long ago that:
“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

It’s Mr. Shaw’s inspiring version of the unreasonable man or woman that I’m talking about here because I believe that Mr. Shaw absolutely hit the nail on the head.

Was Jack Welch reasonable when he declared that GE would become #1 or 2 in every market they serve – no matter what? Mr. Welch was clearly out of his mind. And then GE became #1 or 2 in every market they served.

Was Walt Disney reasonable when he declared that they would build a pristine Magic Kingdom that would deliver happiness to everyone who entered? At the time that Mr. Disney envisioned what would become Disneyland, the image of the amusement park industry was a brand manager’s dream—filthy, unsafe and deceptive.

In fact, the inspiration for Walt Disney’s vision came while he sat on a bench watching his young daughters at an amusement park. On that bench, he began to think about how much better it could be. Looking back, it’s a wonder he wasn’t locked up for having such radical ideas long before he could finish the job.

In the 1940’s, about a decade before Disneyland opened, some very unreasonable thinking was bubbling up in Northern California. At that time, an academic institution by the name of Stanford was a very fine university but was not on the short-short list of the very best of elite American universities. On the other side of the country, Harvard was definitely on that short-short list.

Stanford’s top leadership put a deep stake in the ground about the long-term brand they would build. They declared that they would become the “Harvard of the West.” Once they did this, it guided all of their thoughts & actions from that day forward.
So what happened? They not only achieved this overarching goal in-full many years ago, today there are even those who dare consider Harvard the “Stanford of the East.”

The point of the Stanford story is the same as can be gleaned from the Jack Welch story and the Walt Disney story. Our futures are predominately determined by two things:

1. The magnitude of our ambition
2. Our level of commitment to relentlessly executing our way to it

All *extraordinary* organizations begin with such unreasonable ambitions that win the hearts and minds of an organization’s people.

But the real secret to the success of Jack Welch, Walt Disney and the leaders of Stanford is what they did after they declared their audacious goals. They were just as unreasonable when translating their seemingly outrageous goals into what people were *expected to do* and *how* they were expected to do it. They understood that this was crucial in order for their organizations to make the leap they envisioned. They knew that it was these expectations that would drive the performance and behavior of the organization to the desired results.

With Key #1, a foundation for Disciplined Execution is established by setting the bar unreasonably high.

The second of the Six Keys to Achieving Disciplined Execution is: **Get everybody on the Same Page.**

Sadly so, this is where most organizations trip not too long after leaving the starting blocks. “Everybody on the same page” means that the performance and behavior of the *entire* organization is inspired and guided by the same goals. Every individual exception to this reduces efficiency and effectiveness—and undermines the organization’s drive to realize its full potential. Worse yet, these individual exceptions negate some of the forward momentum made by those who *are* on the right page.
The two most important things that leaders need to do to “get everybody on the same page” are:

1. Frequently communicate their vision
2. “Show the way” by consistently role-modeling the desired performance and behavior

The first of two powerful examples that personify what getting “everybody on the same page” is all about comes from Bill Belichick, the Head Coach of the New England Patriots. How does he do it? The answer is primarily three-fold.

First, his process for screening potential team members is unwavering in its criteria. He might take a skilled player who was problematic elsewhere, but he won’t take a player if he’s not confident the player will live up to the standards and expectations once he’s become a New England Patriot.

Secondly, every new member of the Patriots is immediately immersed in the Patriot values and ways by both coaches and teammates. This is never left to chance.

And last, once you know what page a Patriot is supposed to be on, you’re either on it, or you don’t play and you’re not a Patriot for long, no matter who you are. The result of all this is an exceptionally tight knit organization that’s at or near the top of the NFL pecking order every year, even when their overall talent level is below that of many of their competitors.

The second example is from the gold standard of upscale department stores. It’s probably not news that the Nordstrom brand is all about elite service. What you may not know is their powerful but simple mechanism for getting “everybody on the same page.”

It’s impossible to sustain their brand without getting “everybody on the same page.” This is so because customers who expect elite service expect it every time—without exception. The only way to meet and exceed such
expectations is by getting “everybody on the same page” to prevent any cracks or breaks in the brand.

Their industry-leading success in doing this is largely based on an incredibly simple customer service philosophy coupled with highly empowered front-line personnel. Both aspects are articulated in their legendary one-page Employee Handbook. It says, and I quote: “Our #1 goal is to provide outstanding customer service.” It also says, “Rule #1 is to use your good judgment in all situations,” followed by “There will be no additional rules.” The result of the one-page handbook is clarity of purpose few companies achieve. The result: “Everybody on one page, based on one brand. And a cult customer following who enthusiastically pay above premium.

With Key #2, momentum is accelerated by getting “everybody on the same page.”

The third of the Six Keys to Achieving Disciplined Execution is: Pay attention...Pay attention to how things are being done in the day-to-day aspects of organization performance.

Setting unreasonable standards and expectations and getting everybody on the same page is just the beginning. In order to achieve Disciplined Execution, organization leaders must then continuously pay attention to how the organization is actually doing things day-to-day vs. standards & expectations. This is necessary for the organization to achieve mastery of the key activities in support of its competitive strategies.

It’s not enough to evaluate performance in regular review meetings. Too much of what’s behind the numbers is missed or glossed over. Many of the most valuable opportunities to gauge and refine an organization’s performance and behavior happen real-time in the course of the day-to-day activities that are the lifeblood of the organization.

One organization that epitomizes this level of “paying attention” quietly
became an industry leader when almost no one was looking. I’m talking about Harrah’s Entertainment. Harrah’s has grown to become the world’s largest provider of branded casino entertainment. Their CEO, Gary Loveman, was recently named Best CEO in his industry for the fourth year in a row by *Institutional Investor* magazine. That’s every year he’s been Harrah’s CEO.

Harrah’s distinguishes themselves through Disciplined Execution. New employees are often surprised by management’s insistence that nothing be left to chance. Each aspect of a property’s service delivery—the average time to greet a customer or to deliver a drink—is measured and reported on a weekly basis.

What are the results of this mindset and commitment?

In 2006, *Casino Player* magazine’s annual reader survey revealed Harrah’s properties winning 82 of the 168 possible “Top Three” rankings across 56 categories.

And their financial track record includes rapid growth coupled with stellar bottom-line financial performance, especially in this decade. Last year, their financial performance ultimately led to one of the largest leveraged buyout offers in history. That offer is awaiting approval as of this writing.

With Key #3, mastery of the key activities in support of the organization’s competitive strategies is attained by “paying attention.”

The fourth of the Six Keys to Achieving Disciplined Execution is: *Be constructively intolerant…Be constructively intolerant about performance and behavior variances related to Disciplined Execution—EVERY TIME.*

In order to realize its full potential, an organization must be “constructively intolerant” of performance and behavior that’s counter to its aspirations. This means that the organization must *refuse* to accept
less than the performance and behavior that is necessary. It’s crucial that this unwillingness be absolutely consistent—no exceptions. It may sound harsh—but it’s not. Such consistency breeds confidence. And it says “This is who we are and this is how we do things.”

It’s important that the intolerance for performance or behavior variances be “constructive.” To illustrate what I mean I’ll compare the approaches of two football coaches. Coach A yells at a struggling receiver in practice and tells him to catch the ball or he’ll find someone who will. Then the coach moves on to yell at someone else who’s screwing up. In the same situation, Coach B stops play and provides specific coaching to the receiver about how to fix flaws in his technique that were causing the problems. Both coaches are intolerant of less than what is needed but Coach B approaches it more constructively and gets faster and better results. Coach B will also be in a better position than Coach A to know when someone simply isn’t capable of doing what’s asked.

Despite its recent market challenges, one of the best-executing big companies of the past quarter century is Dell. Launched by Michael Dell in 1984 with only $1,000 in starting capital, Dell grew to $50B in little over 20 years. In contrast, Compaq was launched 2 years earlier with $100M in capital.

Dell’s phenomenal success can be traced to a great business model + unreasonably high expectations + an execution-obsessed culture that symbolizes “constructive intolerance.” “Constructive intolerance” is so ingrained in their DNA that Dell Managers who try to spin or hide problems or who aren’t urgent about fixing them can’t survive. The execution-obsessed culture won’t accept them.

Regarding Dell’s recent earnings slippage, Michael Dell reassumed the role of CEO on January 31st, 2007 and vowed to get the business back on track. And what did he say would be his overarching strategy for achieving that? Mr. Dell was right on cue. He said that the key would be “to…improve execution.”
Another leader who represents the ideals of good execution in general and “constructive intolerance” in particular is John Wooden. His resume as the former coach of the UCLA Bruins basketball team is unequaled. 10 NCAA Championships in 12 years. Seven in a row.

Coach Wooden certainly recruited many great players but so have many other coaches. What set him apart was his “constructive intolerance” of variances to the principles of behavior that he believed would lead to success.

One of the countless times that Coach Wooden demonstrated this is when the great Bill Walton showed up for the first practice of a season with both a hair length and beard not meeting team standards. Walton had just come off a year in which he was the centerpiece of an undefeated team and had been the NCAA Player of the Year. Walton figured he had the leverage to test the principles of the legendary coach.

When Coach Wooden immediately addressed the issue with him, Walton told him that he didn’t have the right to tell him how to wear his hair or whether he could have facial hair. Coach Wooden said “you’re absolutely right Bill...and...I have a lot of respect for people who stand up for the things in which they truly believe...and we’re going to miss you Bill.”

Walton decided to exercise his personal freedom by hurrying to get a haircut and a shave.

With Key #4, a winning mindset is forged by “constructive intolerance” of anything that gets in the way of Disciplined Execution.

The fifth of the Six Keys to Achieving Disciplined Execution is: **Be flexible about everything that doesn’t require Disciplined Execution.**

Organizations that are constructively intolerant of performance or behavior that is counter to their aspirations also benefit greatly if they are simultaneously quite “flexible about everything that doesn’t require
Disciplined Execution.”

Not everything organization members do requires Disciplined Execution. In fact, there are many things organization members do that are best left to each individual to determine the best methods relative to their unique strengths, talents and style.

Southwest Airlines is a company that really gets this. While their flight attending crews operate in a machine-like manner when executing a variety of tasks, they are also empowered to be themselves while working and serving their customers. The result is a relaxed and fun environment while you savor your seven peanuts and miniature beverage. When Herb Kelleher, their Chairman, was asked why many Southwest flight attendants sing, he said it was “because they want to.” He said “We don’t…teach people to sing or tell jokes. What we say is, if that is your… personality, feel free to go ahead and do it.”

There are few areas of a business that aren’t made better by harnessing this powerful synergy. An organization that’s constructively intolerant and greatly empowering is a force that no competitor wants to face.

So with Key #5, the benefits of Disciplined Execution are maximized by being flexible in the areas that don’t require it.

The sixth of the Six Keys to Achieving Disciplined Execution is: 
**Behave As-If.**

To realize a vision, organizations need to continuously answer four critical questions relative to the future image they have of themselves:

1. What would we do if we were the organization we aspire to be?
2. What wouldn’t we do that we’re currently doing?
3. How would we think?
4. How would we behave?

Organizations can only realize their potential by consciously and
continuously molding their thinking and behavior to the future image they have of themselves—until the image and the reality are one and the same.

A fantastic example of the power of behaving “as-if” occurred in the days leading up to Super Bowl III, in January of 1969. As the quarterback of the underdog New York Jets, Joe Namath played a huge role in inspiring his team to a historic upset of the Baltimore Colts. And I’m not talking about his dramatic declaration that the Jets would defeat the supposedly unbeatable Colts. I’m talking about what happened from the moment that he made his proclamation, three days before the game, up until the end of the game.

Joe Namath didn’t behave like a guy who brazenly shot off his mouth but was really just whistling in the graveyard to keep his fears at bay. Everything about his behavior and appearance suggested a quarterback who would be on the winning side. He “behaved as-if.” And I believe this had a profound impact on the game’s outcome.

One of my favorite examples of “behaving as-if” ironically features one of the world’s most acclaimed actors. As a young man, Al Pacino committed himself to be an actor. Once he did this, he envisioned everything about the actor he wanted to become. He created a picture in his mind of the whole thing. Not only that he would be a great actor who would win major awards and be famous. That alone wouldn’t be an unusual dream for an aspiring actor. The picture Al created in his mind included every detail that he deemed important. And then he did what inspires me to tell you this story.

From that time forward, he committed himself to thinking and behaving as he thought the man in the picture would. He approached his craft as the man would. He walked and talked as the man would. He read what that man would read and so on. The real test of his commitment was regarding what roles he would pursue and accept when he was poor and unknown. I learned that he wouldn’t take any part that the man in the
picture wouldn’t take. He was steadfast about this no matter how much he could use the money. I think he somehow understood that you can’t fake your way to such greatness. The result: he ultimately became the man in the picture and has sustained one of the movie industry’s longest runs as a top-tier actor.

Think about the ambitious expectations for your own organization. To “behave as-if” means constantly asking yourselves how the organization that soars over that expectation high-bar would think and behave. And you’re asking yourselves that until you look up and realize you’re looking back from the far side of that bar.

Now what does it take to excel at the Six Keys I’ve just shared with you? It takes a lot. It takes a lot of your time and energy. It takes a lot of effort. So is it worth all that?

I’ll make you an ironclad promise. A promise I would never make to you if I had even the smallest doubt about it whatsoever. This is my promise: you will earn three exceptional rewards if you focus on the six keys I’ve shared with you.

№ 1: **You will become even smarter, and more importantly, wiser — every day.**

It’s literally impossible to focus on these six things without becoming even smarter and wiser every day. With every passing day, you will see things you didn’t see before. You will understand things you didn’t understand before. You will solve problems you didn’t even know were problems before.

№ 2: **Your business will perform at unprecedented levels.**

This is a no-brainer. Your business will continuously refine itself and perform better and more efficiently than its previous bests. Your business will become even stronger every day.
№3: **Your top and bottom-line will grow.**

They will grow proportionate to the effort you invest in achieving Disciplined Execution of the right things. Business sense dictates that if you’re committed to a vision that’s better than you are today and you achieve Disciplined Execution of the things that are critical to the realization of that vision—you will grow the business. And since Disciplined Execution *always* yields tremendous gains in efficiency and in doing it right the first time—**your bottom-line will grow even faster than your top line will.**

Here’s an analogy that will connect the dots between the things I’ve shared with you:

Now imagine you’re 23 years old and you’re at a social gathering with many friends. Everybody’s having a great time enjoying each other’s company and the food and spirits.

And then out of nowhere it happens. One of the guys at the gathering accidentally drops an almost full bottle of beer on the floor and it rapidly begins to spill out. Every guy within earshot of this horrible accident has the same primal response—a visceral urge to grab the capsized bottle and turn it right-side up as soon as possible to minimize the tragedy before it’s too late.

One of the guys immediately swoops down with Olympian skill and saves the innocent bottle after only a small amount of the beverage had spilled. All who witnessed the feat admired both his courage and athleticism. Some admired his apparent commitment to conservation. And every one of the men admired him for upholding their *code* in a time of distress.

What was their code? You know what it was. You never, ever waste a drop of beer. Now for our purposes, the great lesson comes from understanding the motivation behind the code. It’s not borne of cost-consciousness or a lack of sufficient current supply of the tasty beverage. They could afford more and they had more than they would need for the
The motivation for the code was borne from their wisdom that a wasted beer is a loss that cannot really be replaced. You can take another from your supply or you can purchase more. But you can never enjoy the one that was wasted. It’s a missed opportunity.

It’s exactly the same thing with business execution. No matter how hard you work and no matter how much you achieve, if you don’t have Disciplined Execution of the right things—you will leave a lot on the table. As with wasted beer, the result is missed opportunities.

But if you achieve Disciplined Execution of the right things, you get the most out of your resources. You get all there is to get. You become the best you can be. And then you become better than that.

Exhibit A of someone who exemplifies this constant drive, no pun intended, is Tiger Woods. Tiger has been widely considered the best golfer on the planet since shortly after he joined the PGA tour as a young man. After already reaching this level, he significantly rebuilt his golf swing—twice! The first time was about 10 years ago and the second time was about four years ago. Think about it. You’re the best in the world. Many think it’s only a matter of time before you’re statistically the best that ever played…and you feel the need to fix your swing!!! There’s only one answer to why someone would engage in such sheer madness. The answer is he’s not trying to be the best—again, he already was—no, Tiger’s on a very different quest. He’s on a never-ending quest to be better than himself.

And what happened after he made the changes to his swing? Both times, once he achieved Disciplined Execution, the best in the world got even better.

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Navigate to the following page to view a printable poster of The Six Keys to Achieving Disciplined Execution
THE SIX KEYS TO ACHIEVING DISCIPLINED EXECUTION

№ 1 Be unreasonable when setting performance and behavioral standards and expectations

№ 2 Get everybody on the same page

№ 3 Pay attention to how things are being done in the day-to-day aspects of organization performance

№ 4 Be constructively intolerant about performance and behavior variances related to disciplined execution—EVERY TIME

№ 5 Be flexible about everything that doesn’t require disciplined execution

№ 6 Behave as-if