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Book It and Ship It

Planning is essential but success comes from the implementation of your ideas. “Book It and Ship It.”
Make a decision and manage the consequences.



One of the biggest challenges of leadership is moving ideas to action — implementation. I saw this when I had the opportunity to serve on the Board of The Nature Conservancy (TNC). I saw that a disproportionate amount of time was spent strategizing and reorganizing. In the process, I became known for using the phrase “book it and ship it.”

Success is 90% Implementation

In the manufacturing business, “book it and ship it” means, “we’re finished building this. Let’s move on.” It’s a plea to get on to execution. I used it at TNC as a way of saying, “No more dithering. We’ve done our best here; now let’s put the decision in motion and see what happens.” If problems develop, you manage them. But kicking the can down the road over and over just saps energy. While time should be spent on organizing, strategizing, and planning, success comes from the implementation of ideas. Going from planning to doing requires courage and involves risk.

My experience is that you have to cultivate the habit of making timely decisions. You must conduct your due diligence and then trust your instincts. Making good decisions, timed right, is a significant challenge for any organization. Organizations in motion can alter course much faster than those that are stuck in one place. Decisions create momentum.

At Applied Materials, we used to envision ourselves standing on a cliff. One of three things could happen:

1. You give a correct answer to the question, and you stay on the cliff.
2. The wrong answer — you’re pushed off.
3. No answer — you’re also pushed off!

This scenario helps sharpen the mind. Within someone’s area of responsibility, most people will give the right answer most of the time. They just need to decide. Then the team can move forward with whatever is necessary to do “the whole job” — complete the project, hire the person, or secure the donation.



Implementation is in part an attitude: Just do it. That perspective shows a bias toward action and thoughtful completion. Success is only 10 percent strategy. It's 90 percent implementation.

The Cost of Perfect Information

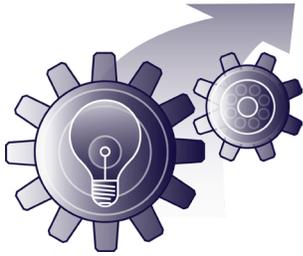
Voltaire said, “Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” That’s sound advice. Time is wasted and opportunities are lost when people become fixated on having perfect information, rather than appreciating that there will never be enough information, nor will there be perfect decisions. That does not mean you agree to pursue long shots or ignore troubling data just to make sure you do something. You always want solid information, whether it’s about your client’s demographics, your program outputs and outcomes, or your nonprofit’s financial condition.

But often people neglect to establish benchmarks and contingency plans and to do an honest assessment of whether the plan is working as the organization reaches (or doesn’t reach) those key milestones. There will always be unexpected twists that can sabotage the best-laid plans, so having a Plan B at the ready is a sound practice. Once in motion, be prepared to adjust and recalibrate to ensure success.

At Applied Materials, we developed some ways of talking about this that empowered our people to keep moving forward at all times, even when it was difficult to predict what the competition would do, or where the economy might go, or whether we could meet an ambitious goal. Given the choice between waiting for complete information and riding momentum, I will take momentum every time.

Clear and proper communication by leadership is the first step in transitioning from decision-making to implementation. Make sure that people are clear on what the big decisions are and the rationale for them — even put them in writing to avoid misinterpretation. Be inclusive by disseminating them to the entire organization. The goal is to have your team gain a greater understanding of each decision, how it was made and by whom, thereby reducing your implementation risk.

Leading a nonprofit demands passion, perseverance, the ability to make decisions and communicate them, and to manage the consequences. When all is said and done, you don’t want to be on the side of more was said than done. “Book it and ship it!”



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Book It and Ship It

FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVES

1. How much time do you spend focused on your team's implementation work versus their strategy development? How do you promote the need to move ideas and action plans forward?
2. How comfortable are you with not having perfect information when making decisions? How does that impact your ability to take risks?

FOR STAFF TEAM MEMBERS

1. What slows down or blocks your ability to make decisions?
2. How do you manage the consequences of decisions that have been made, monitoring them once in action? How do you assess whether course corrections are needed?

FOR BOARD MEMBERS

1. What processes and systems are in place to monitor the implementation of the board's earlier decisions and actions?
2. What is your tolerance for not having "perfect information" to inform the board's decision-making?

FOR INDIVIDUAL DONORS

1. How do you go about assessing whether a nonprofit is successfully implementing its strategic plan? What additional tools or information can you use?
2. What specific types of information do you value and reference when considering where to make a donation or to volunteer your time?

FOR INSTITUTIONAL PHILANTHROPIES

1. When considering grant requests, what emphasis do you put on a nonprofit's projected plan versus its implementation of past plans?
2. How does the quest for perfect information impede your ability to work efficiently with grantees? How can you control risk without perfect information?