

The Paralysis of Analysis ...When a Strength Becomes a Weakness

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Over-thinking can lead to inaction

As a/e design professionals, we share some enormously valuable and needed strengths that enable us to acquire and apply the advanced technical knowledge and skills needed to successfully practice in very complex and challenging technical disciplines. People with natural talents for logical and analytical thinking are drawn to our professions. Powerful skills are developed around these talents that are applied in the workplace to achieve superior performance and propel career advancement. We are the thinkers, the problem solvers, the planners and the designers of the built environment which includes virtually everything we see and touch around us that nature has not directly created. In fact, we even manage much of what exists in the natural environment. Despite all of our wonderful talents and strengths that are the hallmarks of our profession, we also share a common Achilles heal; we often overuse our thinking strengths and we fail to act expeditiously.

Doing a plan of action is the first action

"Fire, ready, aim!" is a sarcastic variation of a well-worn axiom about the planning and implementation process. This variation is often used to describe people who act rashly or prematurely without adequate thought and planning. Many mistakes and catastrophes can be attributed to people taking action without adequate planning. Unfortunately, the world is filled with other problems that are attributable to the failure to act. *Procrastination* is the negative label we often apply to "over thinking". People in positions of leadership roles who fail to act in a timely fashion are often labeled as indecisive. However, making a decision to act and acting on a decision that's made are two different issues because both can create major problems in life and be caused by a myriad of different reasons e.g. fear of failure, inability to predict future conditions, overriding priorities, inadequate resources etc..

Although procrastination, failure to act expeditiously, indecisiveness and over-thinking are all broad life issues, the remainder of this article will focus on how this general issue affects the a/e businesses. We examine how this business-sector may suffer more from this malady than others and what a/e businesses can do to combat this problem.

A/e design professionals... the blue collar planners

Many if not most a/e design professionals are good blue collar planners. We are good at developing detailed action plans that identify the steps needed to complete a project or task and the logical sequence for carrying out these steps. However, fewer of us in this profession are good at thinking outside the box and dealing with an unpredictable and unknown future environment. Consequently, too many a/e design firms either ignore and avoid developing long-range, strategic business plans or languish in the process of developing them because of the inherent uncertainties of the future. Out-of-the-box thinking is needed to deal effectively with a changing and unpredictable business playing field. In many cases where this failure occurs early in the planning process, the failure to act expeditiously is rooted in the failure to have an appropriate plan of action. Firms can be blindsided by changes and events that have often been in the making for a long time but not recognized. Unfortunately, when faced with real time crises that require

immediate responses, firm leaders have no choice but to fire, ready aim. Although in many crises a failure to act means certain failure, the failure to plan before acting escalates the chances of failure exponentially.

Plans v Action Plans

Having a plan and having a plan of action are often two different things. One of the greatest frustrations for a business leader is to invest much time and resources to develop a great plan that never gets implemented. We often use the imagery of plans that sit on the shelf to describe this persistent problem. Despite the tremendous wisdom, effort and enthusiasm that goes into developing many plans, they are not implemented. Why does this keep happening? One common reason is that the plan does not incorporate a plan of action. That is to say that there is no specific strategy, process, timetable, to do list, system for progress monitoring and measurement, personal accountability, performance rewards or non-performance penalties, funding the plan, etc. A/e design firm leaders too often do not apply the same blue collar planning and management skills to running their businesses that enable their firms to be highly successful in performing their projects. What many a/e firms' business plans lack in implementation is good, old-fashion project management.

Applying a basic discipline we practice every day... Project Management

Good project management starts with a good plan of action, which is a work plan that includes a detailed scope, schedule, budget and staffing plan. Accountability is assigned for performing the work according to the plan starting with the Project Manager. The work is assigned to the team according to their specific capabilities and their availability to perform the work according to the prescribed schedule. Resources including staff time and financial resources are allocated to perform the work. Throughout the project, the project manager is responsible for monitoring the status and progress of the job and taking actions to perform the project on-time and in-budget. It is a common sense model that is applied over and over again every day in virtually every a/e design firm albeit in some much better than others. However, it is rarely applied effectively to implement a/e design firm business plans and it is a great mystery to most why not.

"Business is all about execution", so say some respected experts

The discussion so far has been focused on having plans and implementing them. Successfully leading and managing a/e design firms involves this issue to be sure. However, it also involves taking action in a much broader perspective of daily decision-making and actions throughout the firms. A recent best-selling book on organizational leadership and management entitled Execution - The Discipline of Getting Things Done, written by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan. Bossidy is Chairman of Honeywell International and a former protégé' of Jack Welch retired Chairman and CEO of General Electric. Charan is a highly regarded business advisor to Fortune 500 firms. Bossidy and Charan define *execution* as:

1. The missing link.
2. The main reasons companies fall short of their promises.
3. The gap between what a company's leaders want to achieve and the ability of their organizations to deliver it.
4. Not simply tactics, but, a system of getting things done through questioning, analysis, and follow-through. A discipline of meshing strategy with reality, aligning people with goals, and achieving the results promised.

5. A central part of a company's strategy and its goals and the major job of any business leader.
6. A discipline of requiring a comprehensive understanding of a business, its people, and its environment.
7. The way to link the three core processes of any business - the people process, the strategy, and the operating plan - together to get things done.

Having and picking the right people... the leader's responsibility

One of the many excellent management principles identified in this book is that "Organizations don't execute unless the right people, individually and collectively, focus on the right details at the right time". Having the right people is not just picking the right people. It is also having the right people available in the organization to pick from. This requires both hiring the right people to work in the firm and developing the right people who work there. Bossidy and Ram contend that the one job that no leader should delegate is, "having the right people in the right place(s)." They identify numerous examples of CEO's of highly successful organizations including Jack Welch who focus on and dedicate substantial portions of their time understanding the job requirements for key positions and roles in their firms. They recruit the very best talent to fit those roles and coach and support them to be successful. Too many a/e firm leaders are too focused on the numbers and the things in their businesses and not nearly enough on the people who make things happen.

Fighting against procrastination... having a sense of urgency

Having the right person in place involves a myriad of different considerations and job requirements. However, one universal quality that speaks to what this article is all about is a sense of urgency. People who have a sense of urgency generally have a bias for action and they have the initiative to take action when it is necessary, even without being directed to do so. In another best-selling contemporary management book titled, "The Present" the author, John Spencer (who also authored the *Who Moved My Cheese*) writes about procrastination and how it can undermine and destroy the careers of bright, talented, well-meaning and otherwise successful people and how we can all combat this pervasive problem. For some people, action comes naturally and a sense of urgency pervades life and sometimes even causes us to *fire*, ready, aim when proper planning is needed first and there is no crisis. However, for the rest of us (especially us heavy thinkers in the a/e design field) we need to work on our sense of urgency and fight the good fight against procrastination. John Spencer offers some good advice to us in his book as follows:

1. *Be in the present. When you want to be happier and more successful, focus on what is right now. Respond to what is important now.*
2. *Learn from the past. When you want to make the present better than the past, look at what happened in the past. Learn something valuable from it. Do things differently in the present.*
3. *Plan for the future. When you want to make the future better than the present, see what a wonderful future would look like. Make plans to help it happen. Put your plan into action in the present.*

The final thought... create a strong *culture of action*

Here is one final thought on taking action in your a/e design firm. One of the biggest reasons for overthinking, procrastinating and failing to execute is the fear of failure. Highly successful a/e design firms typically have a strong culture of self-initiative, action, execution and their employees have a sense of



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urgency. They have a much lower fear factor of failure than their less successful competitors. This culture will occur only if it is overlaid on a healthy culture of tolerance, support and rewards for those who create and execute plans of action and who take well-intentioned actions to respond to crises without fear of being singled out for blame when their actions don't succeed. Those organizations do not listen or tolerate the criticisms by the Monday morning quarterbacks who see better solutions from the sidelines, often in hindsight. If your a/e firm suffers from paralysis of analysis or more broadly lacks a sense of action and a bias for action, perhaps a change in culture is a good place to start.

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