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Getting the Right Things Done Q&A

A transcript of an interview with Pascal Dennis, author of [*Getting the Right Things Done: A Leader's Guide to Planning and Execution*](#).

Q: What is Strategy Deployment?

A: Strategy deployment is a planning and execution system, refined by companies like Toyota, but essentially invented and developed in North America by people like Peter Drucker and Joe (Joseph) Juran.

Strategy deployment entails applying the scientific method to our business problems, and focusing and aligning our activities toward “True North” – our philosophical and strategic objective – and then deploying those activities in a creative, engaging way throughout the organization.

The outcome, hopefully, is a tree of necessary and sufficient activities that involves everybody in improvement. And the beauty of the system is it's neither too rigid, nor too loose – there is play and creativity within it – which I found wonderfully engaging when I learned it at Toyota and have continued to experience that in our consulting work with companies.

Q: How is Strategy Deployment different from other types of planning?

A: It [conventional corporate planning] tends to depend on a small number of people. It tends to be top-down driven. It tends to be overly complicated – flowcharts at some of these ‘enterprise systems’ resemble the drawings to a chemical plant, and as a result it is alienating. Really the last 50 or 60 years in corporate planning has been a difficult time because of this over-complication.

Whereas conventional planning is complicated, done by a few “experts,” top-down driven, strategy deployment is based on defining a philosophical and strategic objective (what we call “True North”), and then engaging everybody in developing hypotheses – activities – to achieving that, and then running the experiments. It's, in the best sense, applying the scientific method to business. And it's fun.

Q: What are some of the obstacles?

A: The biggest obstacle is our mental models, our assumptions about how the world works.

For example, leaders have been conditioned to think as follows:

*My job is to tell people what to do, so I'm uncomfortable
"relinquishing control." I don't trust my people enough to define a
direction, give some guidance, and let them figure it out.*

That's an example of an unhelpful mental model.

Related mental models are that *complexity is profound*. So conventional planning relies on what I call "PowerPoint junk" – 50, or 60, or 100 PowerPoint slides. *"It must be important, look. It must be profound, look how complicated it is."*

Nobody understands what's going on. Whereas the lean mental model is: simplicity marks the end of a process of refinement.

So in summary, thinking and mental models are the biggest obstacle to successful deployment. And in the book *Getting the Right Things Done*, we highlight many different examples of these. Our challenge as Lean Thinkers is to shine a light on those mental models and help people deepen their understanding and extend their thinking, a little more deeply and more wide than they might otherwise have done.

Q: How does Strategy Deployment fit into the Lean approach to business?

A: I have always thought of strategy deployment as the brains and the nervous system of the lean system, or the Toyota Business System if you will, or the other expressions that great companies have derived.

So it helps answer the questions "Where are we going?" and "How do we get there?" and poses questions in a way that helps us pull in the tools that we need.

So, for example, value-stream mapping is an invaluable tool to help us grasp the situation so we can answer the question "Where are we going?" But the key is that strategy deployment helps us decide which tool we need, and where should we focus. So if we've done a good value-stream map, we may have 30 possible kaizen we could do. Let's say it's a macro value-stream map of our suppliers upstream, our factory, our distribution system, and our customer outlets. Of those 30 opportunities, which ones are most important? Strategy deployment tells us; it tells us, for example, "lead-time is the number one thing for us." So that allows us to do triage and focus our activities.

Q: How did you learn about Strategy Deployment?

A: I was very lucky. There was a wonderful fellow named Shin Futukowa at Toyota Motor Manufacturing Canada, where I 'grew up' professionally if you will. And Shin, besides being a brilliant manager and leader, was a master trainer in *hoshin kanri* as it's called at Toyota. He trained managing directors and senior managing directors.

So he was our senior coordinator, our sensei, our management team sensei. So over many cycles – annual PDCA cycles – Shin was there and very kindly and generously answered all my dumb questions, and steered me in the right direction when I was floundering. So, it was just good luck on my part.

Q: Who did you write *Getting the Right Things Done* for?

A: Good question: leaders at all levels.

So obviously executives are responsible for business results. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of families and communities depend on good decisions, and getting the ‘right’ things done. So clearly senior managers are an audience.

But also division leaders, and site managers, and department managers. Managers of specialties – designers, engineers, actuaries, IT professionals. And front-line leaders, group leaders, and team leaders – arguably those are actually the most important.

Q: How are people and companies using your book?

A: I am really gratified that people are using this as a working resource. A fellow this morning showed me his copy and it was full of notes in the margins, and stick notes, and yellow highlighter. And he said, “You know, this is a great book. It’s very useful, you know.” So I see that a lot, and it’s gratifying to me.

When we were writing the book, you [my editor] were a marvelous editor. You insisted on making this useful for people, and rightfully so. So at the end of each chapter we have study questions and reflection questions, which hopefully take people’s thinking deeper, and thereby express a key idea – “learn by do.” You learn by doing this stuff, and every day you get a little bit better. Every month, every week, and then pretty soon you know something.

Q: How is *Getting the Right Things Done* different from other books on business strategy?

A: I think it’s different because I tried to ‘create a video.’ As Shin used to say, “you have to create a video” – in other words, a set of pictures that are so clear, hopefully, that a child could follow them. So this is a ‘video’ of an actual implementation at a company that has very real problems, very real people: how they applied this system of planning and execution, and pulled in lean tools, to transform their business and save their business.

So, I think it’s real. And in addition it’s written in a way that I hope is accessible. I believe in the less-is-more school of writing – the fewer words the better. And I believe in images and pictures, so it’s full of sidebars and images that hopefully are compelling for people – not just a solid block of dry text.

So that’s what we tried to do. The reader will determine whether or not we succeeded.