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Vision

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Momentum

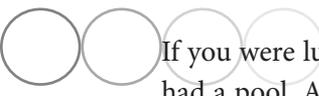
Structure

Feedback

Championing Execution Through Momentum

The speed of the leader determines the pace of the pack.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON



If you were lucky as a kid, someone in your neighborhood had a pool. And even though the in-ground ones were usually the first choice, there was one advantage to those circular above-ground pools—you could make a whirlpool. When all the kids walked in the same direction for about five minutes (especially the big kids), you'd have a really strong current. After that, it took on a life of its own. Try and swim against it. Then swim as fast as you can with it. It's fun. That's what it's

like working in an organization with momentum—it's still work, but it's fun.

Of all the drivers in the VAE model, momentum is perhaps the most intuitive. Anyone who watches sporting events or has ever been on a successful team knows what it feels like. When things start going well, you just seem to get all the breaks. So who wouldn't want to have momentum on his side?

Indeed, the case for momentum is well documented. For decades leadership gurus have touted it in one form or another. Since Tom Peters popularized the idea of a “bias for action” in his 1980s blockbuster *In Search of Excellence*, it's become a well-recognized core principle of successful organizations. Perennial best-selling author John Maxwell calls momentum “a leader's best friend,” with one of its virtues being the ability to accentuate the positive, making success seem more certain and challenges more manageable. With momentum, the focus isn't on the pain of what people are doing, but on the satisfaction that the eventual outcome will bring. Maxwell also reminds us that it's harder to *create* momentum than to keep it going. This observation is probably familiar to most of us. If there is one thing we can relate to from high school physics class, it's Newton's first law, commonly called the “Law of Inertia.” This is the idea that a body at rest tends to remain at rest, and a body in motion tends to stay in motion. You might also remember that the larger the “body” (or group, in the case of an organization), the more energy it takes to start it moving. Fortunately, physics also dictates that, once they do start moving, larger objects are harder to stop as well. So it might be a challenge to get things rolling, particularly for large organizations. But once

you're on the good side of inertia, it generally feels like the wind is at your back.

The other commonly noted need for momentum occurs during times of organizational change. John Kotter, the renowned expert on leadership and change, amassed more than thirty years of research showing that 70 percent of major change efforts in organizations fail. Remarkably, more than 50 percent of those failures occur at the first step in Kotter's Eight-Step Process for Leading Change, "Establishing a Sense of Urgency." In times of change, complacency is not easily overcome. And Kotter reminds us that, to create a lasting sense of urgency, leaders need to appeal to both the head and the heart.

Peters, Maxwell, and Kotter all sing the praises of momentum, albeit with somewhat different language and emphasis. But one thing they clearly agree on is that momentum is the leader's responsibility. It is the leader who makes sure that a passion for achieving the vision is transferred to the rest of the group. And while there are skills involved, momentum actually starts with the mindset of the leader, who consciously chooses the pace and recognizes that creating a sense of urgency is vital.

The leader has to make the call about what's reasonable in setting goals—putting a stake in the ground for what the group is going to accomplish and making sure the goals are challenging enough without being impossible. Momentum isn't rushing for the sake of rushing. It is fluid, ongoing motion—the shared drive to do things sooner rather than later. Momentum comes from a mentality that the work we do contributes directly to our success and that we are eager to accomplish our goals every step of the way.

At the same time, leaders have to remember that momentum is about carrying the team forward in an agreed-on direction—toward the vision. We need to be conscious about keeping that forward motion, and when the vision evolves, we have to keep people aligned.

Experienced leaders know that they cannot build and maintain momentum alone. Leaders at all levels must see initiating momentum as their responsibility and work to establish a culture of momentum. They see to it that this mindset is transferred to everyone on their teams. How does this transfer happen? In this chapter, we'll break down how skilled leaders set and communicate high expectations for momentum through the two drivers of momentum in the VAE model—*being driven* and *initiating action*.

Execution Momentum

► Being Driven

It was the first morning of the annual ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) conference before the opening keynote. In the convention center lobby, we ran into Jan, one of the most successful consultants we work with. Most people were chatting, drinking skim lattes, and waiting for the giant expo hall to open. Jan was refining a two-page list of the things she was going to get out of the conference—that day. “Wow, that’s an amazing list. You are ambitious,” we commented. “I grew up poor,” she responded. “I never waste an opportunity.” Never wasting an opportunity—that’s driven.

In a nutshell, drive is pushing yourself and others forward. People who are driven believe things could always be better, and they’re eager to prove it. There’s an impatience

about them—but in a good way. We know a boss with a sign outside his office that reads, “Impatience is a virtue.” You pick up on that pretty quickly. Everyone knows that we never waste an opportunity. At the extreme, this can lead to burnout or resentment, but when it’s done right, it makes work more engaging. It creates that current that you want to swim in, and you feel like you’re a part of something that’s alive and dynamic.

Driven leaders aren’t just personally ambitious; their ambition is infectious. In fact, it may be more apt to call it “driving.” They send the message that they want to keep things moving, and they’re willing to press people, to say, “Come on guys, we need to pick up the pace.”

But pushing people can be uncomfortable and can create tension that many of us would prefer not to deal with. This can be particularly tough for those who are more low-key—the classic Type B personality. These leaders may have high standards, but they don’t always communicate that. The message is more often, “Hey, just do your best. You’ll get it done when you get it done. That’s cool.” The result? You may end up with a few go-getters on the team, but for the most part people settle into complacency. They set their sights on comfortable—and usually achieve it.

This can also be more of a problem for novice leaders. In fact, our research shows that inexperienced leaders may find it more difficult to drive people to push themselves harder. Experienced leaders not only know this is part of their jobs, but they’ve grown much more comfortable playing this role in the group.

New leaders need to remind themselves that people genuinely want a leader with high standards. Our research shows that there is a positive correlation between being a

leader who sets high expectations and being a leader people say they like working with, and between setting high expectations and being respected as a leader in the organization, as indicated in Table 13.1.

Table 13.1. Ratings of Leaders Who Set High or Low Expectations

	Among leaders who set high expectations	Among leaders who set low expectations
Percentage of people who said . . .		
He/she is a good leader.	86	12
He/she is respected as a good leader in the organization.	82	13
I enjoy working with him/her.	91	42

Leaders recognize that people tend to live up or down to whatever expectations are set about how quickly things can be accomplished. Then how do we become driving leaders without becoming tyrants? How do you, as the leader, gain the confidence to push people to be the best versions of themselves?

Strategies for Being Driven

A fast-paced organization doesn't have to be a stressed-out organization—being driven can actually increase both productivity and satisfaction.

First, as Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner describe in their classic best-seller, *The Leadership Challenge*, remember to “Model the Way.” In other words, never ask your people to work any harder than you are working or to maintain a level of sustained energy that you aren’t committed to yourself. As the authors remind us, “No one will believe you’re serious until they see you doing what you’re asking of others. Leading by example is how leaders make visions and values tangible.” While practicing what you preach is always the right thing to do, it’s really not optional in driving momentum. It’s unrealistic to expect that followers will move faster or push harder than their leaders do.

Next, commit your team to deadlines related to external events, for example, a major conference or the end of the fiscal year. An external commitment is always harder to break—someone else is waiting, counting on you. A lot of us like to have a cushion. We hedge our bets and create some wiggle room on our timelines. Of course, it’s only prudent to expect unforeseeable delays and obstacles, but an appropriately tight outside commitment creates a bit of tension. It’s useful tension, however, and it’s shared by most highly successful teams. The fear of failure blends with the passion to win, creating strong momentum.

Finally, be aware of how much time you take between meetings on a project. Here’s a typical scenario: The group meets and identifies some next steps. Toward the end, someone says, “Okay, let’s meet next week to keep this moving.” Maybe there’s a good reason to wait until next week, but usually this is just the expected pace—we wait a few days between meetings and decisions. But let’s do some simple math. If a decision or project is going to take five meetings and we wait a week between meetings, that’s five weeks. If we

have those meetings every day, that's one week. We just saved four weeks. Now we know that all of us have a lot on our plates, but as the leader, you are in a position to say, "Wait, why can't we pick this up tomorrow, or better yet, later today?" It may take a while, but eventually this pace trickles down to others. There's an unspoken assumption that we don't wait around.

Execution Momentum

► Initiating Action

As most of us have experienced, certain people seem to have a passion for dwelling on what is wrong with the system. They sigh with exasperation at the people who make the rules—the people who are so out-of-touch. At the end of the day, however, people with this mentality are resigned to trudge along in their broken, unjust worlds. They're victims of the incompetent, ignorant people with real power.

Okay, now contrast that picture with the following. Another group of people sees an inefficiency or a way that their jobs could be done better, and they assume the responsibility to make the change happen. They're not Pollyannas. They can clearly picture the obstacles and resistance they'll have to wade through. Their assumption, however, is that (1) it is their duty to see these changes through and (2) with enough effort, they will make it happen. It is a deep-seated mindset. They see themselves as empowered to change their worlds.

What's the difference between the first scenario and the second? The people in the second are leaders, and those in the first are not. The essence of what we are talking about

here is initiative—taking responsibility for change when you have the option to look the other way or kick it down the road. It is the assumption that you will make it happen, and not some other mystery person in some other department at some other time.

The leader pushes down that first domino—acts rather than reacts. This means jumping on opportunities when they present themselves instead of just passively waiting for the directives to trickle down. Even when executing, when the vision is in place, you still need some of that entrepreneurial spirit, someone who is identifying and seizing opportunities to do things better. For example, let's say that in the middle of executing on your vision, there's a reorganization in your department. Upper management has thought through the big issues and you certainly have the option to simply go with the flow. But as the leader, you spot an opportunity to build a partnership with IT that was never possible before. Changes to corporate policy mean that you have access to a wider range of vendors. You recognize a small window to advocate for getting rid of red tape that has held your team back for years. This is initiating above and beyond the original plan.

Still, this doesn't come naturally to all of us. Initiating requires outward energy on a regular basis, and that can be pretty tough. However, as leaders, we must find the energy to champion new initiatives and model a stance that says we're not only open to ideas for improvement, but we thrive on them. At a minimum, this is about initiating around difficulties that arise during execution. It's taking the initiative to pursue the next step or to explore what seemed a little off in the last step. And it's doing this proactively, before what seemed "a little off" becomes a major derailment. Let's take a

look at a few ways you can make initiating action a bigger part of your leadership repertoire.

Strategies for Initiating Action

There's one factor above all others that keeps leaders from taking on more initiatives: they're already busy. If they have unscheduled time during the month, it's likely to be swallowed up putting out fires or dealing with unforeseen complications. If new initiatives are going to make it onto your plate, you need to challenge your priorities. You need to step back and say, "What are the most important things we could be doing to make a difference right now?" As a leader, you need to see this as part of your job, as important as any other part.

If initiating doesn't come naturally to you, work to develop a habit of focusing on the most important challenges or goals your team faces. It doesn't take much time, but it does require a conscious effort. Find a specific time to check in with yourself every morning before you arrive at work. Make it part of your routine, perhaps before you climb out of bed, while you're brushing your teeth, or as you walk the dog around the block. Ask yourself a simple question like, "If we only have time for one thing that's not on the schedule, what's the single most important thing we can do today to reach our goals?" Don't be discouraged if you don't accomplish these daily goals. Be patient and keep at it every day. It's a great way to remind yourself of your responsibility as a leader to push your team forward.

Finally, start to redefine "above and beyond" as the new normal. Recognize, and perhaps even over-recognize, instances when people are proactive. This is where we come

back to expectations. Help people see taking on new initiatives as part of their jobs. Perhaps go so far as writing it into their quarterly or yearly objectives. And most important, if someone has an idea for a change, take it seriously. Genuinely listen and make sure he knows that his resourcefulness and gumption are not only appreciated, but seen as crucial to the group's success.

Tips for Momentum

- Lead by example—never ask people for more momentum than you are willing to take on yourself.
- Commit your team to deadlines related to external events.
- Reduce the time between meetings on projects.
- Challenge your priorities to make time for initiating action.
- Focus on choosing the single most important new initiative every day.
- Recognize proactivity and help people see new initiatives as part of their jobs.

