



The Art of Adherence

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What is Adherence?

In business and in life, the game is usually won by those who can consistently execute a well-thought-out strategy. In other words, winners stick with it. They practice adherence—the ability to consistently execute.

The word “adherence” appears to have originated in the 1500s from the French word “adherer,” which means “to stick to.” Adherence is the critical link between strategy (knowing) and results (doing). It is the solution to the knowing-doing gap. Winning requires adherence because successful execution of your plan is not a one-time event, but rather steady progress over an extended period of time.

No discussion about the concept of adherence would be complete without mentioning one man who likely knew more about adherence in his day than any other: George de Mestral. George was a Swiss engineer and part-time inventor. A simple incident in 1948 changed the course of his life and led to a common product that is still used all over the world.

While he was out hunting with his dog one day, George found that his pants and his dog’s fur were covered with burdock burrs. He had such difficulty removing the burrs that he became intrigued with the little seeds’ pods.

Later, when he was back home, he examined one under a microscope. George noticed that it was covered with hundreds of tiny “hooks” that allowed it to grab hold of strands of clothing or fur. Inspired by nature’s ingenuity, he conceived the idea for a fastener based on the burr’s design.

After several years of trial and error working with a weaver in France, George perfected the design for his “locking tape.” He called his invention Velcro®, from the French words velours and crochet (meaning “velvet” and “hook”). Velcro was officially introduced in 1960, but it was not an immediate commercial success. It took some time before people began to grasp its many applications. Eventually, it was adopted by industries as varied as aerospace and children’s clothing, making de Mestral a millionaire many times over.

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Today, Velcro is a household name. It is found in everything from sneakers and wallets to blood-pressure cuffs and toys. It was used on the space shuttle and helped hold a human heart together during the first artificial heart surgery. It was even used as a piece of comedic genius in 1984 when late night talk show host David Letterman launched himself from a trampoline onto a Velcro wall while wearing a Velcro suit. He stuck.

It took George de Mestral 12 years from the day he first encountered those sticky burrs to the time he brought his locking tape idea to market, and even longer for it to become a success. Not only did he tenaciously stick to his plan, but the product he planned and then executed literally stuck to him. So when you think of adherence, think of George de Mestral. Perhaps we should dub him “the father of adherence.” He stuck with it long enough to create one of the stickiest materials we know.

The Adherence Equation

So how do you achieve adherence? How can you ensure that you will stick with your strategy long enough to win? Fortunately, adherence is a skill that can be learned. Based on the experiences of winning individuals, teams, and organizations, we have identified three components of adherence.

1. Focus provides the clarity necessary to make decisions that support your most important goals. It results in a clearly defined pathway to success. A sharp focus answers the “what” question – What do you need to do to execute your strategy?

2. Competence is used in the broadest sense of the term. It encompasses all the skills, systems, processes and tools a team uses to achieve its goals. The result is the ability to commit to, measure and hit your targets. Building competence answers the “how” question— How will you execute your strategy?

3. Passion creates a sense of connectedness. It creates a connection between teammates, a connection to our human need for meaningful work and a connection to each individual’s sense of value and contribution. Igniting passion answers the “why” question—Why are you executing your strategy?

The relationship between these three components is best illustrated by a multiplication equation we call the adherence equation:



When you think about adherence this way, the critical role of each component becomes clear. From elementary school math we know that if any multiplier in an equation is 0, then the product is 0. For example, assume that each of the three components—focus, competence, and passion—are rated on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. If any one of the three components is missing, (e.g., focus = 0), then there is no adherence:

$$\mathbf{\text{Focus} \times \text{Competence} \times \text{Passion} = \text{Adherence}}$$

$$\mathbf{0 \times 4 \times 8 = 0}$$

The three adherence components are interrelated, meaning that changes in one affect changes in the others, similar to the way the various systems of the human body affect one another. As you address one component of the equation—or conversely, as you ignore one—you will see direct implications in the other two. Consider what happens with a modest improvement in all three components:

$$\mathbf{\text{Focus} \times \text{Competence} \times \text{Passion} = \text{Adherence}}$$

$$\mathbf{5 \times 5 \times 5 = 125}$$

$$\mathbf{6 \times 6 \times 6 = 216}$$

A modest improvement in each component produces a 73 percent increase in adherence (125 to 216). This underscores the compounding relationship among these components. Focus, competence, and passion are equally important and more powerful together. This interrelationship creates a multiplier effect that can work for you (or against you if the components are not managed). Enhancing one component creates a multiplier effect on your adherence. As we discuss each of the three components, you will see the connections and notice that focus, competence, and passion are not three distinct and separate elements; rather, they are interconnected dynamics that influence and build upon each other.

The Art of Adherence

Achieving adherence is simple but not necessarily easy. It takes skill and creativity to continually nurture focus, competence, and passion in your team. This is why we call it the art of adherence.

The art of adherence is a lot like growing Indian Thorny bamboo, which is native to Asia. Like many bamboo species, when this particular seed is planted, it requires the right amount of watering, sunlight, care, and feeding. It takes up to two years of this kind of careful attention for the bamboo to build a strong root structure, which is not visible aboveground. However, once the sprout finally breaks through the earth, the Indian Thorny bamboo can grow up to 100 feet in a month!

When you consistently sharpen focus, build competence, and ignite passion, you build a strong foundation for adherence. Initially, you may not see many tangible results. But rest assured that things are happening beyond your sight. Adherence is growing. Leaders and team members begin to stick with it, to execute their plans consistently. Your team builds momentum as it adheres to its plan and achieves small goals that lead to bigger goals. The required effort decreases over time as actions become habits. Momentum continues to build, resulting in a self-reinforcing cycle of achievement. Then, seemingly overnight, your results will multiply.

Mastering the art of adherence is a primary job of every leader at every level of the organization, and the adherence equation is designed to help you do just that. It offers a proven way for you to consistently execute your plan.

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The Role of Strategy

The quality of your strategy is certainly important in order for your team to win. However, it is not the primary factor in seizing victory. The primary factor in winning is adherence. Winning is achieved through adherence. Winning depends less on a brilliant plan than on consistent actions.

While it may at first seem counterintuitive, research shows that adherence is indeed more important than the quality of your plan. Fortune magazine and the Hay Group studied the issue of strategy execution. The researchers found that virtually all the companies in the study:

- Saw strategy as important
- Had detailed implementation plans
- Used strategy to help identify what to stop doing.

All the companies seemed to talk the “planning and strategy talk.” However, these factors were not what differentiated the companies in the study from those that made Fortune’s Top Ten Most Admired list.

The characteristics that were unique to the Top Ten Most Admired Companies and separated them from their industries peers were:

- Roles were clearly defined for executives, managers, and employees (focus).
- Leaders were held accountable—both personally and for their team (competence).
- Performance measurement was continuous and aligned with the strategy (competence).
- Business visions and purpose were communicated deep into the organization (passion).

The researchers concluded that for the top 10 companies, strategy execution was not an exercise—it was the focus of everything they did: “Even in highly competitive and rapidly changing environments, most admired companies are distinguished by their success in executing against strategic plans.” In other words, they had strong adherence to their plans. These companies knew how to create a strategy; but more important, they achieved superior results because they knew how to stick with it.

What this tells us is that although a solid strategy is important, it only gets you in the game. Adherence to the strategy is what propels you into the winner’s circle.

This is consistent with our observations over 25 years. Winning teams develop solid strategies (not always great ones) but they spend lots of time and energy to ensure they adhere to their strategies. One way to express this relationship between strategy and adherence is this:

Strategy + Adherence = Level of Achievement



focus x competence x passion

This equation shows that strategy has only an additive impact on your achievement level, whereas adherence has a multiplier effect on achievement. For instance, if you have a mediocre strategy (say a 4 on a scale of 0 to 10) and your adherence is average (focus = 4, competence = 5, passion = 6), your achievement level would be:

Strategy + Adherence = Level of Achievement

$$4 + 120 = 124$$



$$4 \times 5 \times 6$$

Now assume that you really work on your strategy and make it great—say a 9 out of 10:

$$9 + 120 = 129$$



$$4 \times 5 \times 6$$

All your efforts to improve your strategy would result in a modest increase in achievement from 122 to 129.

But now let's say that you put that same effort into adhering to your original strategy (even though it was a mediocre one) instead of focusing on improving the strategy itself.

Even if you slightly improve on every component of adherence by only 1 point (focus = 5, competence = 6, passion = 7), your achievement level gets a significant boost:

$$4 + 210 = 214$$



$$5 \times 6 \times 7$$

Because of the multiplier effect, this small improvement in each component of adherence results in a greater than 72 percent increase in achievement level (124 to 214), and this is with a mediocre strategy. Imagine what would happen if you improved your adherence even a little bit more.

This is why an average strategy with strong adherence tends to produce better results than a brilliant strategy with minimal adherence. So, spend more effort on adherence than on tweaking your strategy.

We certainly do not recommend blind adherence—sticking with a bad strategy at all costs. Winning organizations are keenly attuned to their marketplaces and are flexible enough to adjust strategies when necessary to address changing market conditions. However, leaders frequently tinker with strategy in ways that are counterproductive. For example, new leaders typically feel pressure to “make their mark” on the team or organization. So a common reaction of these leaders is to shift strategic direction, regardless of whether the previous strategy was working.

We frequently find that when a strategy doesn't seem to be working, even seasoned leaders can be too quick to assume it's the strategy that is faulty rather than the execution. The opposite is usually true; the problem is execution. Constantly tinkering with strategy inhibits success by not allowing the original strategy to take root. On the other hand, leaders who stick with it see results. You can observe this same principle in sports. Winning coaches tend to focus more on improving execution than on shifting strategy in reaction to a bad play, a loss, or a slump.

In 2011, the NBA's Dallas Mavericks were a middle-of-the-pack playoff team (which is not saying much since more than half the teams make the playoffs). There were good odds that they would get knocked out in the first round of the playoffs. That prospect did not faze Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle. He stuck with his simple strategy of good passing, hustle, and team-oriented basketball, even against faster, stronger, more athletic teams. He continued to hone his team's ability to execute its game plan. As a result, the Mavericks were able to beat perennial powerhouses like the Los Angeles Lakers. We ultimately enjoyed watching our hometown team win the NBA championship by out-executing a Miami Heat team that had more youth, speed, and talent.

The ultimate competitive advantage, organizationally or personally—and even in sports—is being the very best at adhering to your strategy. If you do not adhere to your plan—even the very best plan—it is like having a great blueprint for a new house but never building it. It's just a plan, so don't start inviting friends over for the housewarming party yet. If you want to win, a good plan is necessary but not sufficient. You also have to stick with it to make your plan a reality.

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Personal Adherence

Adherence is just as challenging for us individually as it is professionally. We already know that few of us stick with our New Year's resolutions, and we also have trouble sticking with other plans we make throughout the year. For example, of those of us who start a workout routine, about half will quit. Interestingly, the exercise dropout rate is nearly the same as it was 20 years ago despite the growth of the fitness industry.

Likewise, executing our plans is just as important in our personal lives as it is in our professional lives, perhaps even more so. Our personal plans affect our personal well-being, and our well-being impacts virtually every aspect of our lives. Furthermore, our personal lives and professional lives are intertwined. We tend to bring our work home with us and we also tend to take our personal challenges and successes to work.

Personal adherence is crucial for another reason: adherence, like most aspects of leadership, works inside out, meaning that we must start with ourselves. We win from within. Effective team performance begins with effective personal performance, and team adherence begins with personal adherence.

We must lead from the inside out—making personal changes and improvements before we can credibly ask our teams to do the same. The power of role modeling is true in every aspect of our lives. Children mimic their parents’ values, behaviors, and habits. It has been and always will be that way. This is as true in the work setting as it is in the home.

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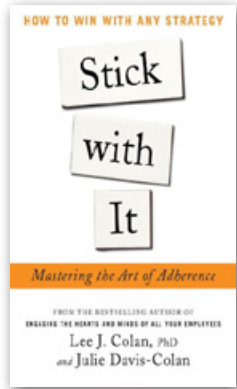
In our work with clients, we occasionally see leaders take an outside-in approach—they attempt to change their teams before changing themselves. For example, they tell their teams to be more focused, and yet they are not focused as leaders. Although an outside-in approach can produce short-term results, it will rarely, if ever, produce long-term, sustained change. In fact, most organizational change efforts fail within the first 18 months for exactly this reason—leaders take an outside-in approach to change. This yields compliance rather than commitment from their teams. And behavior change for the sake of compliance is rarely “owned” deeply enough to sustain high performance.

We must first master self-leadership before we can expect to effectively lead others. Think of self-leadership like this: Every action you take is like a pebble tossed into a quiet pond. Your actions affect others' actions, which create a ripple effect of reactions. There are no neutral actions; everything we do has a positive or negative impact of some sort. This is especially true for leaders. Your team members are watching everything you do. Your actions and attitudes have a direct effect on their actions and attitudes. Whether or not your team members have ever said the words out loud, their mantra is, "If you can't lead yourself, then don't lead me." Winning leaders start with themselves, and they don't have to assert their leadership because others naturally want to follow them.

If you want your team to stick with it, start with yourself. The good news is that the art of adherence is the same regardless of the application—personal or professional. There is nothing mysterious about the way high-performing individuals achieve their results. They don't follow fads or trends. They execute the basics, day in and day out, whether it is how they eat, exercise, learn, invest, serve, read, listen, prepare, or work. The critical difference between winners and the rest is their ability to stick with it.

If you want high and sustained results on the outside, remember that it starts on the inside. Master the art of adherence in your own life first. 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS | Lee J. Colan, PhD, is a high-energy leadership advisor, engaging speaker, and popular author. His 12 books and cut-through-the-clutter tools have been applied by leaders at virtually every Fortune 1000 company and thousands of smaller organizations. Julie Davis-Colan is cofounder of The L Group, Inc., a Dallas-based firm serving leaders since 1999. She is an innovative business consultant and compelling speaker. Julie turns vision and opportunity into a profitable reality. Her passion for leadership and life creates an infectious energy for clients and audiences. To learn more visit theLgroup.com or call 972-250-9989.

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