

Predictable Results in Unpredictable Times

You are exposed to the improbable only if you let it control you. You always control what you do.

—Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Every summer a colorful crowd of cyclists race each other in what is billed as the greatest human endurance test of all time—the Tour de France. On the flat, sunny terrain, they bunch up in a peloton, or platoon, some jockeying for the front, some coasting along in the slipstream of a rider inches ahead. But they mostly stay together. When the going is relatively easy, the peloton speeds along at a predictable pace.

Then comes the severe test of the mountains. Uncertain weather hits. Improbably, even in July the Alps can produce freezing rain and sleet. By contrast, the desert-like Mont Ventoux in the south of France is heatstroke waiting to happen. As the cyclists climb thousands of meters, the peloton strings out. Riders tire and drop away. Teams fall inexorably behind.

It's in these extreme conditions that the great teams take the lead.

At times, your team or your company or your organization will face extreme conditions, with steep terrain and dramatic changes in climate. No one can

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see beyond the next hill.

Even in a turnaround, there's no likelihood of an easy ride—we've moved into a world where the measured risks of the past seem

tame compared to what we face today. Future crises might be more severe than anything we've experienced. From here on, everyone agrees, we may be "in the mountains."

That's when the great leaders will move into view.

Great leaders are different. They anchor themselves in principles that are certain and solid, even in an uncertain and fluid environment. They know the world is unpredictable. Still, they get predictable results.

How do they do it?

Before we go there, let's consider the reasons why so many competitors falter and drop out when they hit the mountains. It isn't usually a lack of strength or ability—most Tour de France participants are superbly conditioned or they wouldn't be there.

The Tour is actually a team effort, and losing teams lack the disciplined execution of the winners.¹ Winning team members must be able to trust each other without reserve to do their jobs precisely. They must be constantly focused, actively taking every opportunity to move the strategy forward. Otherwise, an accumulation of small mistakes will mean disaster.

Long experience with thousands of private and public entities around the globe has taught us that this lack of discipline makes all the difference “in the mountains.” At FranklinCovey, we have studied the team disciplines of more than 300,000 people in 17,000 work units in 1,100 organizations. We have interviewed most of the people in 5,000 of these units. We combined interview results with financial, operating, and customer-loyalty data from a large number of “matched pair” organizations. This combined research has helped us understand the factors that truly differentiate top performers from lesser performers, the Lance Armstrongs from the also-rans.

Four Hazards of Unpredictable Times

Like the Tour de France cycling teams, companies trying to navigate in unpredictable times face four key hazards:

- Failure to execute
- Crisis of trust
- Loss of focus
- Pervasive fear

Failure to execute. You’ve thought through the crisis. You have your strategy. Now the question is, can your teams execute? Will they? Some people in your organization are getting it done. Some aren’t and probably never will. Then there’s the great middle—how much more could they contribute if they performed more like those who are getting it done?

Crisis of trust. Levels of trust drop in uncertain times. Securities markets plunge due to crises of confidence. People lose confidence in their own organizations. On

an uncertain road full of pitfalls, everyone decelerates: it's not called a "slowdown" for nothing.

Loss of focus. You have fewer resources, fewer people, more confusion. People try to do two or three jobs at once. A person trying to do two jobs has half the focus of a person doing one job, and half the likelihood of doing either job well.

Pervasive fear. Economic recession causes psychological recession. People fear losing jobs, retirement savings, even their homes. It's "piling on." And it costs you. Just when you need people to focus and engage, they lose focus and disengage.

As you probably recognize, these four hazards occur together in times of turmoil. They reinforce each other. A crisis of trust stirs up fear. Fear and anxiety lead to a loss of focus. And a loss of focus puts strategy execution at risk. In such times, you simply can't afford to execute your strategy with anything less than precision.

To succeed "in the mountains," like the great cyclists, you must anticipate these hazards. You can dodge the hazards and win if you:

- Execute priorities with excellence.
- Move with the speed of trust.
- Achieve more with less.
- Reduce fear.

Execute priorities with excellence. The winning companies have "simple goals repeatedly revisited, together with clear targets and strong follow-through, including the measurement of results."² As with any great team, all team members know the

goals and their roles in carrying them out. And they execute precisely.

Move with the speed of trust. Low trust slows everything down and raises costs. That's why the economy, your clients, and your cash flow slow down in times of turmoil. But when trust levels rise, everything speeds up and costs go down. The winning organizations are capable of quick action "with the agility to respond ahead of, or at least stay even with, rapid changes in the new economic environment."³

Achieve more with less. Of course, everyone is trying to do more with less, but the real question is "more of what?" Shouldn't it be more of what your key stakeholders truly value and less of what they don't want? The winning companies focus totally on value—they are not just cutting back, they are simplifying, reducing complexities that customers and employees don't value. Instead of having everyone do two or three jobs, they focus on doing the job that key stakeholders really want done.

Reduce fear. The root of psychological recession is the sense that people have no control over what happens to them. Winning organizations help people break through that hopelessness and focus on what they can impact. Much of the fear is caused by unclear direction, by a less-than-compelling purpose. Entrusted with a mission and strategy they can believe in, they channel their anxious energy into results.

If there's one thing that's certain about life, it's uncertainty. The great teams, like the great cyclists, perform consistently and with excellence, regardless of the conditions. This small book is about getting predictable results

in good times and bad—whether you believe “this time is different” or not. The reason? You can rely on these four principles. They just don’t change. And they will never let you down.

In this book, there’s a chapter on each of these four essential principles, together with a plan to help you apply them.

One of the best ways to learn from this book is to teach its principles to someone else. It’s a commonplace that the teacher learns far more than the student. So at the end of each chapter, you’re invited to find someone—a co-worker, a friend, a family member—and teach him or her the insights you’ve gained from the chapter. You can follow the “Teach to Learn” guide provided or make up your own.