

Government
Executive

How to Be a Better Manager

OCTOBER 2017 EBOOK

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Introduction

MANAGEMENT IS HARD. For every good manager, there are many other mediocre and poor managers. Just take a look at the Office of Personnel Management's annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey to get a sense of the disconnect many rank and file federal workers feel with their supervisors and managers. The Partnership for Public Service analysis of the most recent data noted that "Effective leadership has continuously been one of the lowest-rated workplace categories, and 2016 followed this trend with a score that was lower than all but rewards and advancement."

In the following pages, contributors to *Government Executive's* Excellence in Government website explore some of the ways federal managers can hone their skills and bridge the gap too many workers feel with their agency's leaders.

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Keep Your Eyes on the Goal

BY JOHN KAMENSKY

Ten things to consider for successfully implementing major initiatives.

FAILED INITIATIVES hog the headlines, but successes in government rarely see daylight. However, the federal government recently managed to quietly and successfully implement a key element of the DATA Act: It took a website of financial data from across the government [live](#) and nothing bad happened. What lessons were learned that could be applied to other large-scale, governmentwide initiatives in the future? A panel sponsored by the National Academy of Public Administration recently explored this question.

First, some background: [The Digital Accountability and Transparency Act](#) was passed in May 2014 and the executive branch was given three years to implement its key provisions. One key deadline was to post federal agency spending data on a [single website](#) by May 9, 2017.

The law requires all federal spending data—including, for the first time, transfers of funds between agencies—to be posted on at least a quarterly basis. That involves more than \$3.8 trillion in annual federal spending that the public will be able to track from congressional appropriations all the way down to local communities and businesses for



the first time. The scale of this initiative was huge and required significant engagement with stakeholders, including public transparency and advocacy groups as well as many professional communities within the government.

Implementing the DATA Act successfully looked to be daunting in the beginning. Executive branch agencies were skeptical about its value and there was little funding to help them implement the legislation. However, there were some bright spots facing those charged with implementing the law, chiefly that the top leaders responsible in both the Office of Management and Budget and the Treasury Department—David Mader and David Lebryk—were seasoned executives who had previously worked together, and trusted and respected each other.

The panelists described 10 factors that they attribute to the initial success of launching the first reporting cycle of the DATA act on May 9, a launch date set in law three years earlier:

1. **A mandate.** There were clear legal requirements and timeframes for agencies set [in the statute](#). Having a law in place was critical to making progress and motivating agency compliance.
2. **Experienced leadership.** OMB and Treasury are jointly accountable under the law for implementation, and the leadership of both were on the same page.

Lebryk (Treasury) and Mader (OMB) knew each other and had previously worked together. This relationship, and their willingness to stick their necks out within their own respective organizations for each other, cascaded down within their teams.

3. **An inspiring vision.** The top leaders created a common strategic intent/vision for the overall project—“Better data, better decisions, better government”—that helped guide the effort overall.
4. **A solid business case.** Because of agency antipathy to a mandate that was perceived as costly busywork, the leadership of the DATA Act implementation initiative set out to make a business case for why this initiative is important. For example, they created a common sales pitch to agency chief financial officers, explaining how implementation of the law could elevate their role and give them the data needed to better inform decisionmaking.
5. **A governance structure.** The implementation team created a three-part governance structure to ensure effective execution. This included a small executive steering committee, comprised of OMB and Treasury officials; an interagency advisory committee, comprised of representatives of the business and functional communities that have stakes in DATA Act implementation (such as the Chief Financial Officers Council); and

senior officials at each agency accountable for certifying the data submitted to Treasury.

6. **A full-time program management office.** The leadership team created a program management office in Treasury with staff dedicated to implementing the law. Deputy Assistant Secretary Christina Ho was charged with leading this team. She recruited a mix of talent, including former congressional staff, former staff from the Sunlight Foundation advocacy group, former Recovery Act staff, contractors, and detailees from other agencies and 18F, the internal government digital consulting team. Team members saw themselves as problem-solvers, not process-focused.
7. **External pressure.** Several congressional sponsors of the legislation remained actively engaged. The House held hearings and the bipartisan oversight and interest was critical to the success of the project. External advocacy groups, notably the DATA Coalition, provided expertise and public oversight. This external attention was seen as useful. In addition, the law included statutory requirements for GAO and the agency IG to assess progress and the quality of the data. These actions helped focus agency attention.
8. **A robust communications strategy.** Individual members of the leadership team and the PMO invested a lot of time and effort in consulting with a wide

range of stakeholders, both inside and outside government. For example, the team proactively held regular calls and meetings with external stakeholders, not just meetings with agencies and an online collaboration webpage, an open beta site.

9. A data-centric approach. Ho put in place an implementation approach that allowed agencies to map the required data from their existing systems and submit the data to Treasury based on a standard format rather than expecting agencies to build new financial systems. This lower-cost approach minimized IT system modifications, which was key to the project's success and significantly reduced the burden and costs to agencies. Ho sought counsel from the experts at 18F and the U.S. Digital Services to help advise and build support for the data-centric approach.

10. An open implementation strategy and agile methodology. The key reason Treasury met the deadline, according to panelists, is because it strategically chose to implement an [agile development approach](#), instead of a traditional waterfall development approach, and to leverage existing resources to the greatest extent practicable. Unlike the traditional waterfall approach, which requires defining the requirements up-front, the more incremental agile method allows for

making decisions and changes based on evolving circumstances.

The Treasury PMO team felt the [agile](#) implementation approach was “revolutionary.” This was the first governmentwide project where the agile approach had been applied, and it took a leap of faith within the government community, along with vision. For example:

- The PMO team typically did not seek permission to do things. They just did them.
- Every two weeks, there were new deliverables, then adjustments based on user feedback.
- The PMO team focused its approach on user-centered design, where they consulted widely and frequently with agencies, the public, and stakeholders.
- The PMO team used an open development approach, where the code is open source and anyone can look at it and offer tweaks.

The law included significant amount of oversight requirements during the implementation phase (which was not common in other governmentwide laws). This caused agencies to better document what they were doing. For example, there were over a dozen GAO progress audits during the implementation. Because the project used agile techniques, the Treasury

PMO team was able to pivot quickly to respond to recommendations from both GAO and agency inspectors general.

Within the IG community, the Treasury IG took the lead, in concert with the cross-agency Council of the Inspectors General for Integrity and Efficiency. The IG community had to learn Agile methodology, develop their own guides and conduct training so there wouldn't be different IG interpretations of progress across agencies.

While there has been a significant amount of progress, it wasn't easy. The door opened on May 9 for the public's new view and use of federal spending data, but there is more to do between now and 2022, according to [a report for the DATA Foundation](#), when the Act is to be fully implemented. ■



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Engagement Isn't Just a Buzzword

BY ALLISON ABBE

■
Employees need to feel connected, especially during uncertain times.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT, as measured by the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, has shown signs of recovery since 2013, when sequestration and pay freezes took a toll on morale, but the current political climate may make further improvements more challenging. Federal workers face several sources of uncertainty and change, including a recent hiring freeze, proposals to cut benefits and employment protections, and changes to mission and priorities under the Trump administration.

Employee engagement in these conditions is not just about making workers happy or providing them with incentives. Multiple theories and decades of research in psychology and other behavioral sciences have provided insight into what motivates people; from this work we can identify a core set of psychological needs that drive people. Employees aim to meet their core needs across different life domains—work, home, hobbies, and education.

Employees are already motivated; the challenge for government leaders is to harness that motivation and direct it toward organizational goals. These core needs include:

- **Uncertainty Management.** Research indicates that people strive to make sense of and predict events in their environments. Simply knowing what to expect is reassuring. Even under very negative and stressful circumstances, people can often cope and adapt if they know what to expect.
- **Purpose and Meaning.** People strive to make sense of their world and feel that their actions are worthwhile. Opportunities to express one's values, contribute to a greater shared purpose, or enhance the wellbeing of others are ways to meet the need for purpose.
- **Autonomy.** People inherently enjoy having choice. Self-directed behavior provides the sense that individuals are the causal agents in their own actions, not dependent solely on external constraints.

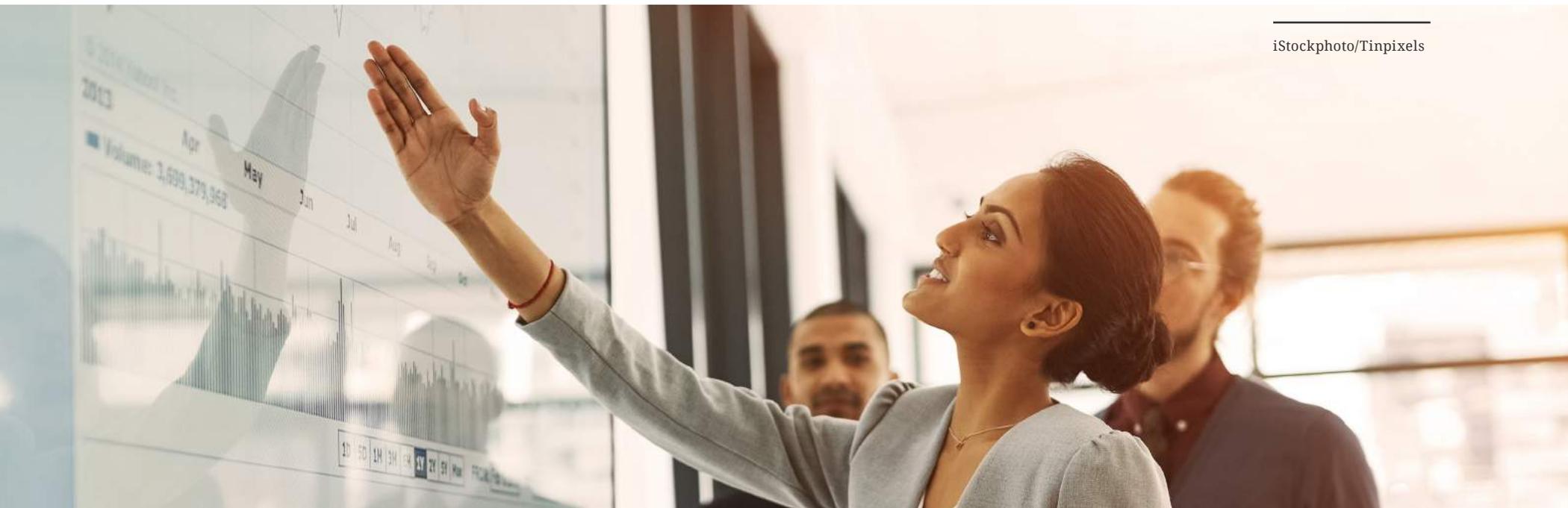
- **Relationships.** People need connection with others. This need is fulfilled by sustained relationships that provide a sense of warmth, acceptance, and consideration, not by superficial contact.
- **Mastery.** People have an intrinsic need to feel competent and capable. To meet this need, individuals pursue activities that are challenging and provide opportunities for success.

Based on the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results, the Government Accountability Office has identified a set of [drivers of employee engagement](#) in the federal workforce. These drivers center primarily on three of the needs identified above: autonomy (measured as satisfaction with involvement in decisions), relationships (measured as satisfaction with support for work-life balance

and employees of different backgrounds), and mastery (measured as satisfaction with feedback and opportunities for development).

Agencies should maintain these drivers, but should also consider focusing on core needs that may be affected by the prospect of change. Those core needs include uncertainty management and purpose, as well as autonomy. Below are some examples of practices to better meet these needs in federal employees.

Communicating Purpose. According to the GAO analysis, one driver of federal employee engagement is communication from management. In times of change, effective communication can safeguard employee engagement when it both reduces uncertainty and provides a sense of shared



purpose. To enhance a sense of shared purpose, leaders should communicate how employees' roles fit into the larger organizational vision and how employees' contributions are making progress toward that vision.

Non-Monetary Recognition. Another means of reinforcing a sense of purpose is through recognition. Unfortunately, forms of recognition with extrinsic value, such as a bonus or the additional status associated with a promotion, can undermine employees' intrinsic motivation for the work. When done right, recognition shows that the work was appreciated and impactful. This can be accomplished by recognizing direct contributions to the organization's overall mission, as well as the smaller contributions that make day-to-day operations go smoothly.

Employee Voice. When organizations undergo change, employees sometimes feel a loss of autonomy. In these circumstances, it becomes even more important to give employees a voice in decision making. Ideally, employees will have input to substantive decisions about the work itself, such as whom they work with and how they accomplish their tasks. But other channels for employee voice and autonomy are also helpful, such as employee-led committees on social activities.

Fairness and Accountability. Fairness in personnel practices is generally accepted as a critical goal, both for legal compliance and to enact organizational values, but it also helps employees manage uncertainty, especially under circumstances that are beyond agency leaders' control. Applying consistent standards for promotion and holding employees and managers accountable for performance creates predictability. This, in turn, allows employees to direct energy toward their work that may otherwise be spent trying to figure out the hidden rules for getting ahead.

Uncertainty and change can be unsettling, but leaders can mitigate the negative impact through actively addressing their employees' core needs. Leaders should assess how well their organization already employs the above practices and identify actions for improvement. The more that agencies can provide employees with opportunities to meet core needs at work, the more engaged employees will be, even in dynamic times. ■

Overcome Your Public Speaking Fears

BY DANNIELLE BLUMENTHAL

Repeat as needed: Your presentation is not about you.

FOR SOME PEOPLE, [public speaking is more terrifying than death](#). If that's you, then your presentations are probably terrible. It's not that you don't know your subject matter. You likely know it better than the back of your hand.

It's not that you aren't prepared, either. Most likely you've not only studied up, but probably spent a little too much time hitting the books before your big Ted Talk or senior staff briefing.

The truth is that while some of us are naturally more theatrical than others and more comfortable in the limelight, presentation skills can be learned.

So why are you so bad at public speaking? Why is your audience changing the channel, at least mentally, for 99 percent of your talk? The issue is a basic flaw in your thinking. Please, repeat the following four words: *It's not about me*. Say it again: *It's not about me*.

If you get up there thinking about yourself, your talk will have zero impact. Or worse.

The reason great speakers affect us so much is that they are totally swept up in the power of their message.

It is impossible to focus on yourself and also put the spotlight on a topic that matters. Fear of public speaking is a sign that you're definitely making this mistake. Your negative emotional investment is a gigantic red flag, signaling that your talk is wrapped around your ego.

The next time you have to give a talk, subtract yourself from the equation.

You can prepare to do this in a very simple way—start videotaping yourself. You don't have to publish the videos on YouTube or Periscope or anywhere else. You should, however, practice the art of speaking into the camera, on a regular basis, and then play back the video, to see what you look like while talking.

The point is not to evaluate your performance as a speaker. It's also not to gauge whether you know what you're talking about. Rather, it's

about getting used to the fact that you actually look pretty bad on video.

Once you accept it and get over that fact, and also manage to swallow your many flaws as a speaker, you'll get past your preoccupation with self altogether.

The truth is that the thing you fear the most is actually very real. You aren't all that good, you have a million flaws, and when you stand up there people know it. It's ceasing to care that allows you to focus on the topic at hand. I happen to have a big nose. It used to embarrass me and I seriously considered a nose job. Now I like to laugh. That's me, that's my schnozz, that's the sun dancing off my wrinkles. It's okay to go gray and to grow a potbelly, too.

What people really do care about is the beating heart inside you. Good intentions, married with clear thinking, is what carries society forward.

Our most pro-social instincts go to work when we see you on stage. Get over your ego and put your message out front. ■

Become a Master Project Manager

BY DANNIELLE BLUMENTHAL

Your main job is the unglamorous but critical work of keeping things functioning every day.

AGILE, WATERFALL, MS PROJECT, EXCEL, or even a plain old Sharpie—you somehow have to manage your work. And most of what we do in our daily lives, if we are in a professional setting, involves a series of projects.

Project management is boring. I know that's what you're telling yourself. "I am a certified project manager" just does not have anywhere near the appeal of something like, "I am the chief marketing officer at YazDeboo" (whatever YazDeboo is, they must make something cool) or "I am a rocket scientist at NASA."

I get that. But if you're doing project management right it is not boring at all because the art and science of it is to simultaneously juggle a lot of different mini-initiatives aimed at specific outcomes, while ultimately shoring up your reputation, which is the value you bring to the table. The outcome of a project affects your brand:

- How you implement a customer relationship management (CRM) platform, for example, leads your customers to view you in a very particular way.

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- Hiring someone is another project. Maybe you didn't think of it that way, but it is. The kind of people you hire and the manner in which you onboard them will ultimately affect your organization's character, and character manifests itself in the values stakeholders see in everyday behaviors.
- Designing or redesigning your organizational chart is another project (and this can be a bear to undertake). But the manner in which you categorize and stovepipe your institutional structures (and all structures must be put into buckets, even if they're very broad) will affect the way you define the work you're doing. Just to give a very basic example, if you put Digital Communications into the IT shop, the output will be vastly different than if IT serves Digital Communications.

Outcomes are shaped by the way you conduct your projects. Your processes either reinforce your company's ability to function as a unified whole (e.g., a recognizable brand with a recognizable vision, mission, culture and values) or they are crisis-driven, dysfunctional and corrosive.

If you incorporate the principles of project management into your projects large and small— following a work breakdown structure, keeping to a schedule, accepting and modulating stakeholder feedback—you create a safe and stable space within which

employees trust that they can do their best work. You're not in crisis mode, and as such, you can grow and flourish without constantly looking over your shoulder.

If you ignore irresponsible, abusive, or corrupt behavior by senior leaders, and ignore the warning signs of trouble, at some point disaster will occur. That disaster will create a cleanup project (or many cleanup projects). And you will naturally attract employees who don't really care about doing things well, but only about covering for messes and looking valuable as they do it. In fact one could say that such employees will actually enable future conflicts, avoiding the unpleasant task of providing negative feedback and instead positioning themselves as "fixers."

Contrary to what most people think, branding is not about ad campaigns and logos. Those are dessert. Your main meal is the unglamorous work you do to keep things functioning every day.

I once worked for a boss who was famous. When I complained about having to do so many dreary things she said to me, "Only a tiny percentage of life is fun. The rest is just horse manure. Roll up your sleeves—plenty of that to go around." ■

It's Not Supposed to Be Easy

BY JOHN KAMENSKY

Core management practices are critical to an organization's success.

Thanks to an executive order by President Trump in March, federal managers spent much of the summer working reform plans and four-year strategic plans to submit to the White House Office of Management and Budget. But impending changes aside, it's worthwhile for managers to stand back and look at whether they're doing the basics right.

A team of researchers led by Raffaella Sadun, Nicholas Bloom and John Van Reenen has done just this in a [new article](#) in the Harvard Business Review. While their focus was on the private sector, their lessons apply in government as well, including this bedrock observation: "Core management practices can't be taken for granted."

Their research confirms quantitatively that: "Firms with strong managerial processes perform significantly better on high-level metrics such as productivity, profitability, growth, and longevity."

However, they also found that competent management is not easy to replicate. It takes effort, and significant and enduring

investments in people and processes. Over the past decade, the researchers identified a handful of 18 key management practices that seem to be critical to operational excellence, such as setting clear goals and metrics, and choosing the right targets to pursue. They grouped these practices into four areas: operations management, performance monitoring, target setting, and talent management. Statistically, they learned that "their adoption accounts for a large fraction of performance differences across firms and countries."

They interviewed managers from more than 12,000 companies in 34 countries about their use of these management practices, rating each practice on a scale of 1 to 5, where higher scores represent a greater rate of use.

When they focused specifically on U.S. firms, they found, not surprisingly, that some parts of large companies are well-managed, while others are not. Large gaps in basic managerial practices "were associated with large, persistent differences in firm performance." If firms moved from being rated in the

lowest 10 percent to the highest 10 percent of management practices, this would result in 25 percent faster annual growth, 75 percent higher productivity, and increased profits. The bottom line: operational excellence matters.

What causes the differences they found? Some of the variation between firms was driven by external factors, such as the intensity of competition or regulatory issues. But these external factors were not the driving force. Most of the differences could be traced to internal actions in the firms studied. These include:

Inability to see reality. Most managers were under the false belief that their organization was doing fine. The researchers noted that "we found zero correlation between perceived management quality and actual quality (as indicated by both their firm's management scores and their firms' performance), suggesting that self-assessments are a long way from reality."

Hierarchical governance structure. The researchers looked at different kinds of



organizations and found that family-run enterprises, which tend to be hierarchical with little delegation of authority, had the lowest average management scores. They noted that government organizations ranked only slightly higher. In contrast, they found that “higher management scores tend to go hand-in-hand with more-decentralized decision making.”

Lack of good management skills. “Good management practices require capabilities (such as numeracy and analytical skills) that may be lacking in a firm’s workforce, especially in emerging economies,” the study found.

Organizational politics and culture. Even when managers can see their problems, they sometimes are stymied in addressing them by the larger organizational context in which they exist. For example, the researchers point to General Motors’ historical inability to adopt the highly vaunted [Toyota Production System](#) because of long-standing adversarial relationships between management, suppliers, and blue-collar workers. The researchers said that these conditions made it

impossible to introduce the use of trust-based teams and joint problem solving techniques. It’s possible to overcome such barriers, but top leaders need to be visibly present and constantly communicating the value of change.

The researchers also found that “management quality was significantly higher in organizations in which the CEOs dedicated a larger portion of their time to employees than to outside stakeholders.” This is counterintuitive to much of the advice given top leaders, which is to focus on external customers and trends in their industry.

Lessons for Federal Agencies

Many agencies strive for operational excellence—it is often a key goal in many agency strategic plans. Fortunately, there are a number of efforts to gauge and encourage it, including the Office of Personnel Management’s annual [Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey](#), which measures employee engagement; the General Services Administration’s annual [benchmarking survey](#), which compares the effectiveness of services, such as contracting and human

resources across agencies; the Government Accountability Office’s [High Risk List](#), which highlights areas most in need of attention; and a new [Operational Excellence in Government project](#) at Harvard’s Kennedy School, which aims to promote greater operational efficiency.

While there is currently no overarching set of metrics used in U.S. federal agencies to gauge organizational effectiveness, there are models that might serve as an inspiration. For example, New Zealand has developed a [Performance Improvement Framework](#) model that it has used for over seven years. There are corporate models as well, that have international reach such as [Danaher](#), Nike, and Moleskine.

Agency leaders should avail themselves of all these resources. The Harvard researchers were clear: “Core management practices, established thoughtfully, can go a long way toward plugging the execution gap and ensuring that strategy gets the best possible chance to succeed.” ■

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