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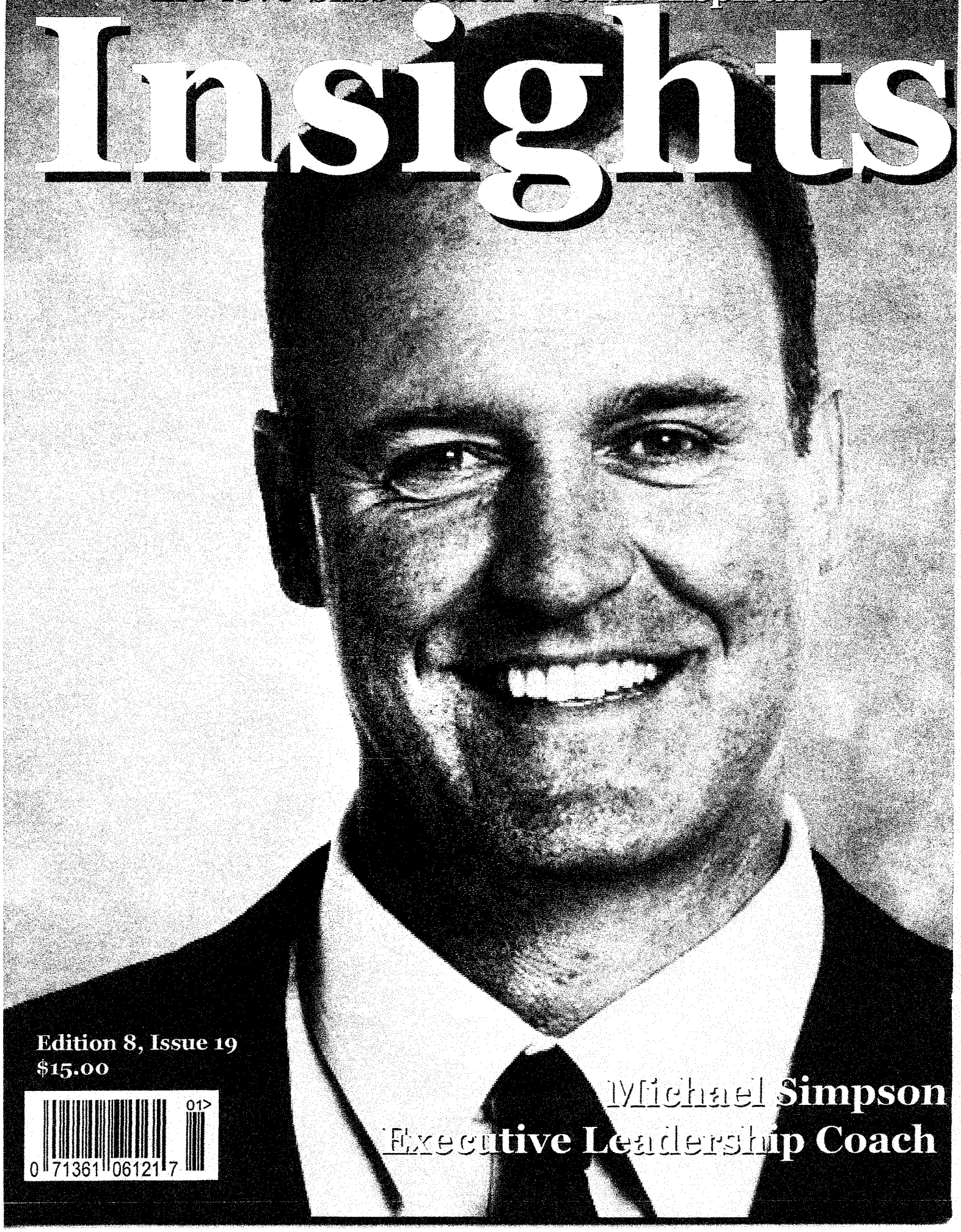
Insights



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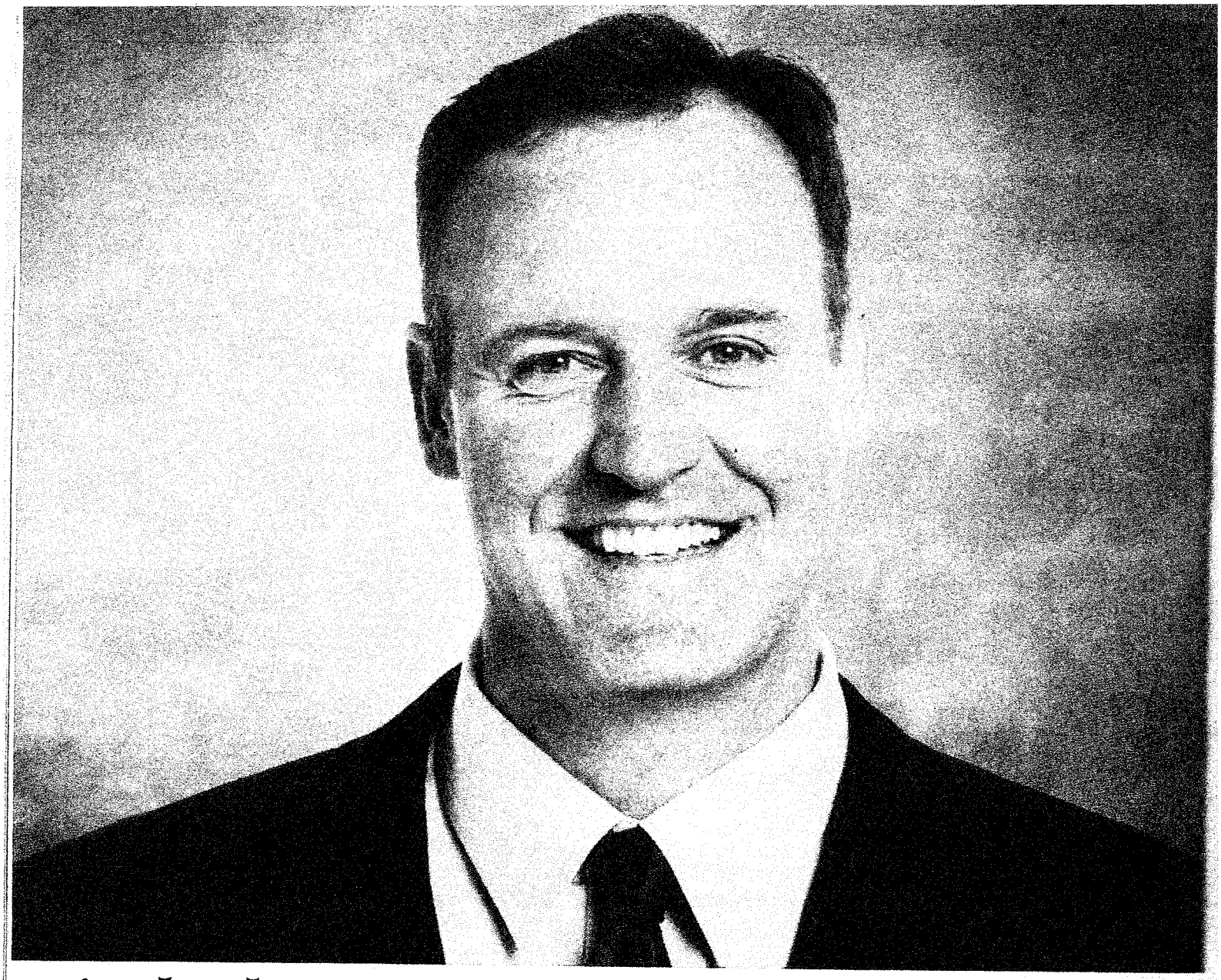
Michael Simpson
Executive Leadership Coach



Michael Simpson

is a Senior Consultant and Executive Coach for the Franklin Covey Group Leadership and Execution Practice based in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the United States. Michael is currently the Global Director of Franklin Covey's Executive Coaching Services in partnership with Columbia University.

For twenty-five years, Michael's practical business experience and career has been in corporate leadership, management consulting, and executive coaching. Michael has held executive level management positions for two leading technological companies as Vice President of Sales and Marketing, and Vice President of Business Development.

I: What inspires you, Michael?

MS: Obviously, I'm inspired on a number of different levels, but I would say personally I enjoy spending time with my wife and my four boys. I'm inspired by them — truly learn a lot from them; I really feel blessed to have a great family.

I would say professionally, if you take the thought from Jim Collins in his book, Good To Great, the whole notion of creating a hedgehog, which is, "What are my greatest passions? What can I be best at in the world? What really helps to support my economic denominator — how do I make money?" I would say my career in both working with corporate and government leaders worldwide, being a trusted advisor, consultant, and executive coach, I got inspired by collaborating with leaders and helping to really influence the influencers worldwide. I find a tremendous amount of passion in this. I think I learn more from those leaders I work with than they probably learn from me.

I: How do you inspire others?

MS: I think inspiring others happens in a number of different ways. The first would be, **what is the need in society, within their organization, or within their team?** Once you get a chance to frame this, if there's a business case around a gap or a need, I would say it's either focused on pain or gain. It could be financial, customer driven, operationally driven, or dealing with and engaging in their culture. I think when you're really looking at helping people get inspired, it's about getting in the context of their world and figuring out a big gap or a big opportunity.

I think second is **helping them understand what they're passionate about.** How can they make a difference, and what is that going to look like for them? I also like to help them understand where their talent lies and really help manage and play to their strengths. How can they set up a team and build a team where they can leverage the strengths, talents, and capabilities of those that are around them? The value of a team is in one word—it's really complimentary. How can you overcome your weaknesses by building a team and strengths around you to make up for those areas where you may have some weaknesses?

Third is the idea of the economic denominator — **how are people going to make money?** What's going to impact their rice bowl? What's going to impact their career? What's going to impact their ability to really advance and expand their role and responsibility professionally? I think where that overlaps in alignment with their values and their conscience, people get really passionate about this whole kind of game of work.

I: Why did you choose this arena for your life's great work?

MS: That's a good question. I was a junior in college and I had just gotten back from studying over in London. There happened to be a ski resort fairly close to my house called Sundance. I was up there on a Sunday afternoon with one of my buddies from college. We were just hanging out and enjoying the setting of the beautiful mountains. I ran into a colleague of mine and he said, "I work for Covey Leadership Center, and I'm really having a lot of fun with that."

I knew this individual pretty well. His name is Ron McMillian, and he wrote the books Crucial Conversations and Crucial Confrontations, and he just finished a book called Change Anything and also Influencer. Ron is a good friend of mine and he was simply telling me about what he was doing. I said, "You know what, I think I'd really like to do that."

I applied at Covey Leadership Center, and was the thirty-fifth employee they hired. With being the thirty-fifth employee hired, I went there in a business development role initially, but the more that I read these books from Rosabeth Moss Kanter from Harvard, Ken Blanchard from San Diego, Warren Bennis from USC, Tom Peters, Stephen Covey, the late Dr. Blaine Lee, and many others — I just couldn't get enough of the information when they talked about organizational behavior, leadership, and management of organizations. The more I read, the more it took me on this journey to think, "This is my voice, and this is really where I want to make a difference."

I: How do you define success as it pertains to leadership?

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MS: I think success can be a little different for each person. At one level, I think it's pretty straightforward that you need to be able to connect people to the mission, the vision, and the values of their organization. I think success is really about getting people aligned around some sort of compelling purpose.

I like the quote, "All organizations are perfectly designed to get the results that they get." I think the function of leadership is really to get that alignment around customer needs, stakeholder needs, alignment of mission, vision, values, and then ultimately for leaders to craft strategy — to craft a series of goals that they can execute and to do so with excellence.

I think success is really defined by having that sort of clarity, having that alignment, and having that discipline to be able to really impact their customers and their key stakeholders in a profound way. I think, at the end of the day, it's not just about picking up a paycheck; it's really about engaging them around some sort of unique or significant contribution to society.

I: What is your most powerful moment of success or life change?

MS: At a personal level, I think it was when I got married. I think that was probably the greatest decision and greatest shift in my life going from independence to interdependence, and I just think about how that's impacted me as a human being and personally in every aspect of my life. I feel like that's probably been one of the greatest experiences and events of my life.

Certainly there are milestones along the way where you have professional successes, and you have accolades or things that happen on the business side where you get recognized that I think those are really enjoyable as well.

I: What at the three most important personal tips that you could share for achievement and fulfillment in leadership?

MS: I like Jack Welch's statement in his book Winning where he says, "The greatest shift that you'll ever make as a leader is when it stops being about you, and it starts being about them."

If you're a traditional manager and you're climbing up the ladder of success throughout your career, you get to a certain place where you are promoted to your level of competence. You're also, in a sense, struggling to figure out, "How do I energize key people? How do I develop people? How do I recruit? How do I evaluate talent?"

As a leader finds themselves less about execution and more about building top talent, building the right team, and strategically leading the business, they start asking themselves questions around selecting, attracting, training, developing, promoting, and really energizing those people around them.

I think as soon as a leader makes a shift — some sort of management of things, budgets, a lot of things that you *can* control — to those things that, in terms of empowering people, it's the greatest shift a leader will ever make. Quite honestly, some leaders never make it. They treat people as objects or they pull out the big baseball bat and create fear and intimidation. They really don't figure out how to leverage the talent around them.

I: Tell me how those work for you.

MS: I would say, first it starts with being able to select, attract, train, develop, and promote the right people. Jim Collins talks about this in his book Good To Great where he says you have to get the right people in the right seats on the bus. As you go up in the organization, those seats have to be expanding, and you have to have the right people in those seats.

You think it starts with a leader having great vision, a leader having great clarity, a leader setting very high expectations and holding people accountable. Above and beyond that, I think it's being able to engage and empower those in a way where you trust them and you give them very direct delegation. After that, it's about setting goals, setting direction, and helping to support them as you collectively achieve the mission and the goals of your unit or your team.

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I: I see. Tell us a little bit about the Four Disciplines of Execution.

MS: It's really a nice segue, because once you identify your talent and those people that you want on the bus in the right seats, above and beyond strategy and setting direction — whether it's your competitive strategy that goes out to markets, segments, customers, how you differentiate yourself, or your operating strategy on how you really leverage your resources, capabilities, and internal operations — there is a process of really getting your team strategically aligned to the goals.

The Four Disciplines of Execution are like an operating system where you can plug in a goal and just achieve it again and again. There are four main disciplines.

The first one is what we call on ***focus on the wildly important goals***. When you think about setting goals, based on research we've seen —this is looking at about three hundred fifty thousand leaders worldwide — is that leaders don't know the goals of the organization. There are either too many goals, they're too broad, they're too vague, they're not measureable, or they may be conflicting or competing.

What we say a leader needs to do is first to have no more than one to three wildly important goals per team at any given time. Once you land one goal, you can pull in number four; you land two you pull in number five, etc. It's really about narrowing the focus.

The challenge with discipline, the first counterintuitive aspect, is to really let go of some good ideas, because there will always be more good ideas than you have the capacity to execute. One, you have to set up the goals in a narrow and focused way, and two, you have to do it in a way where you can measure those goals in what we call an X-Y-Z Win. There's got to be a current state, a future state, and a clear finish line of when you're going to accomplish that goal.

Lastly, your team has to be able to implement or execute that goal at least 80% of the time, meaning many goals can be too lofty and too broad, or someone else has to execute, and you're really not setting your team up for success if you don't really position them with goals that they can actually influence.

The second discipline is what we call ***act on the lead measures***. This is just really the goal of execution in that once you define the 'what' you have to get the team to align to the 'how' and the daily actions, behavior, and tasks that really drive the goal.

The counterintuitive aspect of discipline two is that you really can't fixate on what we call the 'lag measure' — the measure that's after the fact. You really have to focus on the lead measure, and that's all those measures that would help proactively influence your goals. As you begin to proactively influence your goal, you really have to get those things that are most predictive and most able to be influenced by the team.

For instance, if I want to lose weight, (which would be my goal), my lead measures would be exercise and diet. I'd need to exercise three days per week, maybe run for an hour each time.

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Regarding diet, I'm may cut out soda pop, or I'll eat salads for dinner three nights per week. I'm going to pick the behaviors that are truly going to impact my weight. Those are the things that I really want to proactively manage, measure, and track, while I keep my eye on that lag measure, which is reducing my overall weight.

That's disciplines one and two. Discipline three is what we call ***keep a compelling scoreboard.*** It's really the idea that 1) people many times don't know what game they're playing when they show up to work, or 2) they don't know what they do on a day-to-day basis that's going to impact that game or that score.

We would say that all teams need to keep an ongoing scoreboard that's simple, visible to the players, has both the lag and the lead measures, and tells the players immediately if they're winning or losing. That way, it engages everyone on the team in the game, and you can certainly create a lot of excitement and a lot of energy towards moving the needle on the scoreboard.

I think the counterintuitive aspect of discipline three is that many times when people have scoreboards, they just focus on lag measures, or they're focused on a coach's scoreboard as opposed to a player's scoreboard. We would say that the scoreboard needs to motivate the players to win, so we really need to drop it down into a player's game.

The last discipline is what we call ***create a cadence of accountability.*** That's really a weekly check-in, a weekly huddle, a meeting that happens same time, same place, where each of the individuals on the team can report out on last week's commitments. They update the scoreboard, they can see whether they're winning or losing, and then they make one or two key commitments for the upcoming week.

I think the counterintuitive aspect of discipline four is that people meet less frequently. They meet maybe once a month, once a quarter, or they'll meet semiannually or annually for strategic planning and so forth, but we would say each team needs to meet fifty-two weeks a year to get better.

That's the summary of the four disciplines. I would say, what I've seen with leaders — I've done this with thousands of leaders and hundreds of teams across the world — that if they follow these principles and they apply them in a team setting, they will literally have profound results again and again.

I: How do you feel about scrums, the daily fifteen-minutes to get everybody on the page?

MS: I think that's important. We generally set up a weekly cadence of accountability, which would be for about twenty minutes. The daily scrum or the daily huddle where the people make daily commitments is critical as well. Many times if you have a project that you have to land or you have to hit a deadline in a very short period of time, that level of velocity or frequency with accountability becomes critical.

It may be just a huddle at the end of the day or a huddle with your team at the beginning of the day to say, "What are the one or two things that we have to get done today?" Or, at the end of the day, you may check in and say, "Were we able to accomplish these critical things that needed to be done?"

I'm completely open to the daily scrum or the daily cadence as well, but normally we'll set it up weekly and then modify it based on the intensity of the timeframe that needs to be delivered.

I: Basically, what I'm hearing you say is that's a really good tool for when you really have to get a project out.

MS: Yes. When you really have to have all hands on deck, that cadence may go from a week to a couple times a week or even daily. In environments like grocery retail where you have maybe different shifts or with one of my clients, Marriott Hotels — I worked with forty-one different properties this past year, even all throughout Canada and Latin America — they'll have a daily huddle or a daily cadence meeting, and they'll do it by shift, just to make sure that everyone on every shift is getting the same message.

I: Great. Do you have some final advice you'd like to share with us about leadership and how to be a successful leader?

MS: We talked about understanding a stakeholder's needs and always starting there. I think number one is, as long as leaders understand that inherently your organization and your team does not inherently have a right to exist. You exist because you have a customer or a key stakeholder that's willing to pay or utilize your service. Many times, the danger of leadership is that people can get internally focused. First, we keep our eye on the customer's needs, and then ultimately what the external or internal results that we need to accomplish are — that's the organization principle where leaders need to start.

Secondly, we always start first with mission, vision, values, and strategy, and we always try to connect to the overall purpose. It's easy to get caught down in the weeds and the task and the day-to-day whirlwind, but many times we need to step out of that hamster cage or treadmill, so to speak, and all those urgent tasks and say, "What is the ultimate value, and what is the ultimate purpose of what we're trying to accomplish?"

Lastly, I leaders need to know that what we *do* is ultimately more important than what we *say*. I think, as a leader, we need to focus on how we show up as a leader and we certainly need to build credibility and trustworthiness with those that we seek to influence. Trust becomes critical for us. It really is the one thing that impacts everything as a leader — who we are, what our values are, what we stand for — that really becomes that anchor and that North Star that really guides us in our day-to-day decision making.

On the competence side, it really boils down to two things, our capabilities and our results. Capabilities are our skills, our talents, our judgment, all those things that we bring to the table. Our results are, "Do we deliver the goods? Can we deliver the goods?"

Balancing that high character and high confidence — trust really starts with me, first. As we model those things and as we work in increasing that character and competence, we build tremendous credibility with our teams.

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