The Three Gaps Between Goals and Greatness

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People Issues

An ostrich with its head in the sand is just as blind to opportunity as to disaster. — ANONYMOUS

In the global race to achieve faster, better, cheaper business greatness, most leaders face a huge gap between the goals they set and the actual results achieved by the people in their organizations. This phenomenon is not a failure to plan, but rather, a failure to *execute*. In an article for the *Harvard Business Review*, researchers Mankins and Steele found that this execution gap can be responsible for a nearly 40% loss in an organization's financial value. According to other studies by Norton & Kaplan, Bersin & Associates, and the Corporate Strategy Board, here are some of the main reasons why the execution gap exists:

- 95% of the workforce doesn't understand company goals

- 86% of the workforce is not motivated

- 84% of companies aren't maximizing workforce potential

- 50% of the average workforce's capacity is wasted

Given these bleak findings, how can companies reliably bridge the gap between their goals and their desired greatness? What exactly is the *nature* of this gap? While there are many possible explanations for the root cause of the gap, the one common, recurring element is a stubborn, nagging blind spot:

People issues.

They won't go away. They are always around. No matter how much you try to avoid them by setting goals and staying busy, people issues are always right in front of you, either helping or hurting your organization's competitive advantage in the marketplace.

I once served in an organization that was experiencing extreme dysfunction and a huge execution gap at all levels of the company. The CEO invited the executive leadership team to an off-site managerial retreat, where we discussed the challenges we were facing in the context of some well-known management books. During that retreat, we all agreed that, according to the concepts in those books, our organization was most dysfunctional in the area of people issues. We also agreed that we needed to follow the three-, five-, or twelve-step programs that were scattered throughout these volumes to close the execution gap we were facing. However, once we got back to our offices, there was no follow-up or execution of the agreed strategies and goals. Collectively, we buried our heads in work, and despite my constant reminders to the team, no one could find the time to address those people issues on a daily basis. By the time we met at the next management retreat, the organizational dysfunction and execution gap had worsened.

By ignoring people issues, we were acting like ostriches.

Just as an ostrich can't get away from a charging lion by burying its head in the sand, one cannot get away from the impact of interpersonal behavioral issues by burying oneself in work.

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by setting goals and staying busy,
people issues are always right in front of you.

The Three Gaps

Character is higher than intellect. — RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Organizations don't become great because they set great goals. They become great because great leadership is in place to inspire and motivate people to get great things done. Every year, companies spend millions on a variety of training efforts and performance management initiatives aimed at trying to close the execution gap between goals and greatness. Unfortunately, these programs find little or no success because they are focusing on the wrong set of challenges. The real challenge is to truly understand the nature of the business execution gap and to recognize that it is not one monolithic performance gap. The execution gap between goals and greatness is actually comprised of three people-related gaps:

Gap 1: Behavior

The first gap is a lack of focus on organizational behavior. Most organizations focus far too much time and resources on performance goals and outcomes, while simultaneously allowing behavior to evolve in a Darwinian, political free-market environment where those who survive are usually the wiliest politicians. Indeed, performance goals can be tangibly measured and monitored, but they are influenced greatly by the softer side of business—human behavior, which is much harder to measure, manage, and monitor. The organization that is able to focus on leadership and employee behavior by assessing, monitoring, and nurturing it will see exponentially improved performance results.

Gap 2: Habits

The second gap occurs when organizations don't create opportunities for their people to turn desired behavioral skills into habits. It is not enough to know what to do. You have to actually do what you know, do it well, and do it repeatedly until it becomes second nature. For example, most people are aware of (and agree with) the principles Stephen Covey laid out in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. But how many people have actually made the time to practice those seven identified behaviors until they become habits? Yet any great athlete, artist, or musical performer will tell you that they rely faithfully on the old adage: *practice makes perfect*. The organization that is committed to carving out some time to help its leaders grow positive behavioral and leadership habits will see a solid increase in employee performance.

Gap 3: Community

The third gap occurs when organizations do not form safe communities of practice where their people can practice positive behavioral habits together. Leadership development results can be significantly improved when individual practice is augmented with the active participation and feedback of others. Human beings are social by nature and are thus able to achieve much more with the trust, positive conflict, feedback, recognition, mentorship, and accountability that are inherent to communities of practice.

A community built around the collective goal of improving leadership behavior can help to increase one's chances of new-skill development.

How to Close the Three Gaps

The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority.
— KENNETH BLANCHARD

The three gaps between goals and greatness manifest in organizations as a pervasive leadership gap. Without great leadership, organizations will be mired in team dysfunction, lack of productivity, and overall inefficiency. For the best clues on how to close these "execution" gaps, one must examine the following opportunities and threats in today's leadership landscape:

- Only Great Leadership Can Close the Execution Gap.
- There Is a Growing Shortage of Great Leaders.
- Most Leaders Don't Focus on the Goose.
- There Can Be No Lasting Change Without Practice.

Only Great Leadership Can Close the Execution Gap:

Nothing affects the success of an organization more than the quality of its leadership. Not strategy, not technology, not systems, not innovation, and not processes. The single most important factor for bridging the business execution gap is people, and the only way to reliably and predictably improve the effectiveness and productivity of people is through great leadership at all levels of an organization.

There Is a Growing Shortage of Great Leaders:

The demographic reality of our time suggests that there is a shortage of great leaders in most organizations. Additionally, those baby-boom leaders are fast approaching retirement, but there aren't new leaders ready and prepared to fill their spots in the leadership pipeline. General Electric, one of the most celebrated organizations of our era, was successful not only because of one great leader, Jack Welch, but also because of the many leaders he developed in the company's leadership pipeline. In order to become truly great, organizations must implement cultures and systems that continuously develop new leaders to replace the retiring generation.

Most Leaders Don't Focus on the Goose:

While most leaders work hard to create high-performance in their firms (the golden egg), they don't usually assign the same level of importance and attention to employee behavior (the goose). In Aesop's parable, *The Goose and the Golden Eggs*, an intense desire to acquire more golden eggs led a greedy owner to kill the goose. By focusing so intensely on the golden eggs at the expense of the goose, he ended up losing both and having none. This parable makes a simple, self-evident point: You must take care of not only that which you seek, but also, that which produces what you seek. In order to increase organizational success, companies must focus on improving the behavior of their leaders and employees, because that is what will in turn improve company-wide performance.

There Can Be No Lasting Change Without Practice:

Here's a little-known fact: many efforts to develop leaders do not succeed. Another little-known fact: a 10:20:70 rule states that traditional classroom training, which is at the core of most of these efforts, is only 10% as effective as two other elements in the learning mix: mentoring (20%) and practice (70%). By focusing so much on traditional training and the occasional mentoring efforts, organizations are missing out on the most powerful method available for actually implementing lasting behavioral change—*practice!* Great athletes, musicians, or public speakers know the value of consistent practice, and any neuroscientist will tell you that the mind learns best through experience and repetition.

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The Solution Is Practice!

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit. — ARISTOTLE

LeaderPractice is a leadership development process and software solution that helps organizations bridge the gap between goals and greatness. With LeaderPractice, desired organizational behaviors are practiced in the safety of a community environment until they become habits.

The driving concept behind LeaderPractice comes from the "ABC" principles of behavioral psychology—antecedents, behaviors, and consequences—which show that a person's likelihood of developing a behavior is dependent on the reinforcement received during the practice of that particular behavior. The LeaderPractice solution focuses attention on the three "people" gaps:

The Gap	LeaderPractice Solution
Behavior	Identify and focus on developing leadership behavior that will close the execution gap.
Habits	Practice leadership behaviors in an action-learning context until they become habits.
Community	Cohorts provide each other with feedback and positive reinforcement.

Practicing leadership behavior is not very different from the way in which any other human skills are developed. For example, consider what it takes to practice a piano. It turns out that the learning process for becoming great at piano playing is essentially the same as what you'd find for becoming a great leader. The difference is in the context and details, but not the main learning process itself. LeaderPractice simply provides a social software environment where that practice can be positively reinforced, rewarded, shaped, measured, and monitored.

Below is a high-level comparison of the habit-forming process on a piano to the same process when it comes to practicing and developing leadership behaviors:

Step	Piano Practice	Behavior Practice
1.	Learn a new piano phrase	Learn a new leadership behavior, model, or skill
2.	Divide the phrase into left and right hand parts	Divide the new skill into its constituent model parts
3.	Reduce tempo	Reduce risk through role-play with fewer, trusted partners away from real work situations
4.	Repeat until new habits form	Repeat until new habits form
5.	Assemble left and right hands and repeat until combined habits form	Assemble model parts and repeat until habits form
6.	Perform at the right tempo, and in real situations	Perform in the workplace, in real situations

And just as you can schedule lessons to learn the piano, you can schedule LeaderPractice in your workplace as well. And you can start implementing some of these practices right now.

Identify Behavioral Results, Reasons, and Rewards:

Each leadership participant will begin the process by providing a vision statement that describes the personal reasons, sense of urgency, and motivation regarding why they will fully invest and remain engaged in the ongoing weekly leadership practice process. Each participant's behavioral goals are tracked on a weekly basis, and uploaded to an enterprise-wide performance-management software system. In such an enterprise information system, behavioral goals can be viewed, shared, and collaboratively managed, alongside the more tangible performance goals.

Define Unique Leadership Competencies:

Now it is time to identify the core, unique leadership qualities that will propel the organization to competitive advantage and differentiation in its business landscape. For one organization it could be leadership qualities such as strategic thinking or coaching, and for another, it could be innovation. Following this identification, a leadership success profile must be developed that states these leadership competencies while outlining the specific behaviors, habits, knowledge, roles, and skills that make those qualities possible.

Select and Assess Leadership Participants:

Once the target leadership behavioral competencies and goals are identified at the organizational level, individual leaders from each management level of the organization need to be selected and assessed using inputs from multiple sources (such as psychometric personality tests, multirater/360-degree tools, and leadership interviews).

The result of this assessment process is an *Ostrich Card*, which is either a physical card or a software application that highlights the top three strengths and destructive behaviors of each participant, (including suggestions for how to address them in real time or in stressful situations). The leader would carry the ostrich card at all times (i.e., in order to keep his or her head out of the sand).

Here's an example of some of the strengths and weaknesses that might be identified on an ostrich card:

OSTRICH CARD		
STRENGTHS	**DERAILERS**	**SUGGESTIONS**
Empathetic	Self-Important	
Optimistic	Pessimistic	
Forthcoming	Uncommunicative	
Delegating	Micromanaging	
Dependable	Unpredictable	
Courageous	Overly-Nice	
Respectful	Sycophant	
Amicable	Combative	
Trusting	Detached	
Truthfulness	Ambiguous	

Align Behavior and Performance to Organizational Goals:

Once leaders are identified and assessed, it is time to align behavioral goals with performance goals, which must in turn be aligned to the very highest goals of the organization. Like a pyramid, every behavioral and performance goal must be linked to the overall goals and vision of the organization.

Measure, and Monitor Behavior Goals:

Measurement criteria should be assigned to every behavioral and performance goal and monitored in a software tool on a computer or a Smartphone. The software tool allows the participant to self-record weekly behavior observations and generates a graphic dashboard of behavioral progress for collaborative discussions with others.

Hold Weekly LeaderPractice Meetings:

The participants in the leadership development process will meet weekly to leverage the power of communities of practice. Each meeting is held for an hour at least once a week. Each meeting provides an opportunity for each of the three gaps (behavior, habits, and community) to be closed. Each meeting will include three sections:

- Impromptu simulations, role-play, and games
- Prepared "teachable moment" speech
- Participant feedback and evaluations

Use a Trained Facilitator and Project Manual:

LeaderPractice meeting participants will work together in accordance with a LeaderPractice project manual that outlines twelve carefully scripted leadership simulations, role-plays, games, and the overall LeaderPractice meeting practice process itself. Each of these projects addresses a core leadership behavioral competency. A trained facilitator is assigned to each LeaderPractice meeting to ensure adherence to the manual and to record the results of the overall meeting process.

LeaderPractice

We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. — ALBERT EINSTEIN

LeaderPractice is a decidedly different approach to leadership development, although it is based on proven, brain-based learning principles that will help increase productivity, reduce team dysfunction, and achieve organizational greatness. Here are three specific things you can do right now to begin closing the three gaps between goals and greatness at your organization:

BEHAVIOR: Download the FREE LeaderPractice Gap Assessment from www.leaderpractice.com. Normally valued at $500 USD, it will give you a good idea of where you stand in terms of how people issues are helping or hindering your organizational greatness. It will also help leaders in your organization see behavior as something that should be measured, monitored, and managed at the same level of granularity as performance.

HABITS: Create "action-learning" or "on-the-job" opportunities for people to practice improving leadership strengths and reducing behavioral weaknesses.

COMMUNITY: Use social leadership development software to monitor, manage, and measure leadership development. By creating virtual (and physical) communities of practice, you will provide leaders the kind of social feedback, encouragement, and accountability that will greatly accelerate their development.

LeaderPractice helps companies improve productivity and performance by developing great leaders at all levels of the organization. **It is time to pull our heads out of the sand, address the 'people issues' in our organizations and bridge the gaps between goals and greatness.**

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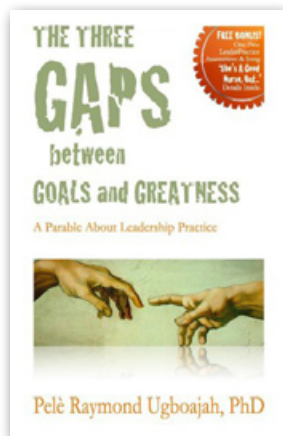
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*The Three Gaps Between
Goals and Greatness.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Pelè Raymond Ugboajah is an author, speaker, consultant, musician, and the founder of LeaderPractice. Born and raised in a war-torn African refugee village, he was named after Pelè of Brazil—the greatest soccer player on earth—whose influence was so great that it stopped a bloody civil war. Pelè internalized his namesake's simple, yet powerful secret of success—practice—and later transformed it, developing his own unique skills in music, writing, and motivational speaking. Eventually, Pelè turned his attention to the world of business, where he created LeaderPractice—a signature process for helping organizations bridge the gaps between goals and greatness. Pelè holds an MBA and a PhD specializing in leadership development. Over the years, he has authored several books, major label songs, and has spoken to diverse business audiences.

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