



The DO! Manifesto

The Pursuit of
Xceptional Execution

Kevin Kelly

What if launching and leading an exceptional business was simpler than you've ever imagined? Not easier. Not less time consuming. Not less gut wrenching. But, simpler. Guess what: It is. What if I told you many successful entrepreneurs didn't start with a compelling vision or indeed a workable business plan? Guess what: That's true.

What if it was possible to dominate a market without any previous background in it?

Well: It is.

Xceptional execution is about taking a relatively simple idea from brainstorm to breakout hit. Groundbreaking research conducted by Columbia University’s Amar Bhidé in 2000 titled *The Origin and Evolution of New Businesses* reinforced the term’s significance, revealing that 88 percent of “breakthrough companies” were the result of “exceptional execution of an ordinary idea,” according to their owners. Only 12 percent were the result of new inventions—“an unusual or extraordinary idea.”

Amar told me in 2013 that whilst some factors have changed since he first published his findings—for example access to capital is more widespread through crowd-funding, along with a mainstream popularization of entrepreneurship and rise of a global startup ecosystem—these developments haven’t changed the fundamental principle of his work.

You don’t have to be Bezos or Branson, Einstein or Jobs. Your product doesn’t have to be a Bentley, Hublot, or a Stradivarius. And your service doesn’t have to be a Dropbox, a Flickr, or a Hulu. You must simply find an ordinary idea, and implement that idea with xceptional execution.

How do I know? In a few words—my lifelong bent towards doing and executing. Growing up in a small town on the west coast of Ireland, I began business life in my family business, Kelly’s Store, selling gas and groceries at the tender age of six, and over the next dozen years I sold to every imaginable type of person on the planet—from a customer who wanted to share their life story with me, the listening six year old, to a customer who wanted speed and efficiency at all costs.

Following college, I worked for three years marketing for manufacturing and construction companies. I proceeded to break sales records at each of the companies before deciding to found my own firm, Advanced Marketing, in 1990. There I worked with SME's (small and medium size enterprises) who produced everything from ambulances to hand-carved wood staircases to high-end wrought iron gates.

One of my overseas adventures brought me to Africa where I built schools and trained teachers and students in the Mukuru slums of Nairobi. Following on from this, I became a consultant to multinational businesses and advisor to startups on their growth strategies. And, in my travels, I've had the fortune to meet some of the finest business minds on the planet, whom I call the Xceptionalists. Hailing from around the globe, they lead some of the world's most compelling brands and companies, from one to 3000 employees, and a range of turnovers from \$100k to \$130m. The Xceptionalists have proven to me that a bent toward doing is all you truly need to succeed, and that anything is possible if you can execute an idea in the real world.

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Confessions of an Idea Killer

Hi, my name is Kevin and I used to be an idea killer. For almost a decade, my job was to detonate concepts for new small businesses before they reached the launch pad. Yes, to stop potentially great ideas before they got to market. Now, that wasn't the title on my business card, but if it were it would've been accurate.

Officially, I was a feasibility consultant: clients brought me ideas for new small and medium-sized ventures. My job, in turn, was to prepare a fancy, high-minded report analyzing whether the new business would fail or succeed.

For \$10,000 a pop, I exhaustively analyzed dozens of business ideas over the years: ideas for recreational centers, brainstorming for boutique furniture businesses, plans for a shop purveying fine crystal. Some ideas could have potentially never made it; some could have become global brands. The truth is, when I dashed these entrepreneurs' dreams, I didn't know.

What I did know was how to say "no" to an idea. Here's how I would kill your idea: Say you ask me to evaluate your new venture. We sit down at a nice coffee shop together here in Ireland, just steps from the Atlantic Ocean, and you pitch.

Maybe you'd pitch a game changing, industry busting, and ruckus-causing whopper of a startup. You tell me about your proposed revenue streams and about all the reasons why your startup will succeed. It's distinctive, creative culture, and plan for employee engagement and focus on the connection economy. Your new venture ticks off all the buzzy boxes.

Then I would go away and find enough reasons why this venture couldn't possibly succeed. Not intentionally, of course, but unfortunately that was the normal outcome in most contexts.

There were always enough reasons—a product of that kind already existed. And it's existed longer than your concept, had more brand recognition and market share. It is difficult to see how you could compete and make this work. If it's a truly new product, then there's no market for it, and no market means no demand, no demand means no sales, and no sales means no profits.

The list of why-you-shouldn't was endless. A few weeks later I would share my insights. After sipping my latte, looking out over the peaceful sea through the window behind you with a sparkle in my eyes, I would turn to you and render my verdict: "Your business will fail." To each of the game changing businesses, the Xceptionalists, I highlight in my book *DO!*, I would've issued a prognosis: failure.

To end my infamous idea killing session, I would back up my argument with a 60-page report. Though I couched the outcome in jargon and niceties, the verdict was almost always the same. It—whatever the “it” is—can’t be done. Could you imagine what I would have said to those that turned up with no industry knowledge? No compelling vision? No business plan?

I would have, for example, told Ben Milne of Dwolla that his business would have failed. All Ben had was a burning desire to solve an existing problem. His company was paying too much in credit card fees. When Ben first shared his vision of changing the way people send and receive mobile payments with others, the question posed to him was, “Why?” Why the need for Dwolla, when the system is working just fine. His answer came in the form of a product that poses a \$1 million a day challenge to companies such as Visa and MasterCard. Ben said, “Actually, Kevin, the current system is not working just fine.”

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The man who founded Dwolla and is changing the face of the financial world had no prior background in the industry before he began in 2009. Four years later, Forbes magazine listed him as one of the 12 most disruptive names in business for his groundbreaking idea for helping customers process a transaction in a simpler way.

If four Argentinian business people had called me about starting and making their country a technology hub during a financial crisis when the peso was devalued, I would have swiftly shown them the exit door. I didn't need to hear that they had no business plan, the country had no history in technology, and they had only \$5000 in capital. Those four entrepreneurs started Globant, now a global company with 3000 employees and revenues of \$129m.

And what about the lady who admitted in her first class that she hadn't a clue about how to lose weight? Was it worth the gas driving to see me? Agnes McCourt, now 72, created Unislim, Ireland's biggest slimming organization. It is now forty years in existence and continues to grow and evolve.

These are not isolated examples. 40% of Inc. 500 founders that were interviewed in Amar Bhide's book had no past experience of working in the industry they went on to dominate. And 60% of Inc. 500 entrepreneurs didn't employ a business plan before launching their companies.

After years of naysaying, I've learned some very important lessons. The most important being: it's not about the idea. It's not about the business plan or the compelling vision to kickstart the process. It's all a little less complicated than that. And it's not about an occasional success or failure, it's about the entrepreneur behind those successes and failures.

It's about the Xceptional execution of that ordinary idea.

Xceptional Execution

The antidote for too much knowledge is execution. Why? Execution helps to work through fear and build confidence. Knowledge will always give you enough reasons not to act. Execution is taking the next step in spite of that knowledge. Xceptional execution is taking that next step with your decisions underpinned by clarity and understanding.

What follows is advice on how to deal with people like me: (former) idea killers. It's about how to deal with the idea killer in your own head, the part of your brain where fear and knowledge keep you from executing the brilliant ideas your mind generates every day. And it's about developing entrepreneurs like you into the kind of people who can execute their ideas with excellence.

My goal is to get you to execute one of your ideas in a truly exceptional way. You'll always have enough reasons not to execute, not to do: not enough time, not enough money, not enough support from those you think you need support from, not enough will or skill. But what matters isn't what you lack. What matters isn't your idea. What matters is what you do with your idea. What will you do?

This is unquestionably the advice of an ordinary man, who others describe as nothing more than an authentic, passionate person with an insatiable appetite for learning. I'm no guru or thought leader, I'm a doer. After years of telling people like you the opposite, whatever you have in mind, it can be done.

Exceptional execution brings results. To launch and lead a breakthrough company, you don't need to invent the next light bulb. You don't need \$50,000 in the bank. You can start with what you have, exactly where you are.

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Cracking the Code | 341005003116555641289

Your challenge, should you choose to accept it, is to crack the above code. If successful, you're on the way to unlocking the secret to loyalty and engagement. Any ideas? This figure, a combination of results from different research studies pretty much sums up how difficult it is to get your message across.

We are exposed to 34 gigabytes of information and 100,000 words daily, and on average every three minutes and five seconds you are interrupted from your task at hand. Attention deficit is no longer the supposed domain of Generation Y's who were brought up on a diet of social media and new technology. A recent study revealed 65 percent of 55-64 year olds surf, text and watch television simultaneously.

The average attention span in 2012 was 8 seconds, which is down significantly from 2000 where it was 12 seconds, according to statistics published by the Associated Press. The article also mentions the average attention span of a gold fish is 9 seconds.

Presentation has replaced conversation and monologue trumps dialogue. Winning a friendly and authentic ear is a rare experience. Therein lies the opportunity.

Entrepreneurs who develop an exceptional mindset shower their customers and co-workers with quality, authentic attention—the most sought after intangible in an attention deficit society. Tim Clark, founder of Business Model You, sums it up: “There’s a reason it’s called ‘paying’ attention: it’s a substantial cost in terms of time and energy. But nothing fundamental has changed. Everyone is still amazed when you actually listen deeply to what they are saying, and respond to that rather than simply waiting them out so you can spew forth your own talking points.”

The DGA’s—“Do Give Attention”—people have the potential to achieve cult status, as I appeared to achieve with a very difficult participant at one of my speaking engagements many years ago.

Everyone’s a Christy

I was commissioned to do a keynote with a group of 50 people who worked for a multinational company. Before I was introduced, a man shouted out from the back of the group, “When is this going to be over?”

Not a great start, I thought. Since his interjection had raised a question in everyone’s mind, I began by reassuring the audience that my input would be brief. I then addressed my impatient friend, requesting his name.

“Christy,” he said.

“Christy, imagine that you are interviewing me for a sales job. I want you and the audience to assess me before I even open my mouth. Please analyze how I walk into the interview room, how confident is my handshake and so on.”

I walked down to the back of the room and gave him a strong, confident handshake and went back to the podium.

“Ok,” I said, addressing the whole room, “Just remember that Christy is interviewing me for a sales job. His task and yours is to record your first impressions.”

I walked back to him again and shook his hand before returning to the podium. After the third occasion, I requested his feedback, which was mentally recorded. A few minutes later, directing my attention away from him, I said, “As Christy mentioned earlier,” and repeated the most relevant comment he had made.

By now there was a major shift in his body language. He was sitting forward with his eyes firmly fixed on me. He had moved from being a big challenge in the learning environment to, at the very least, being neutral. What had happened?

Christy had delivered a high-powered learning experience. He had articulated a basic need that many would shy away from declaring consciously but nonetheless demand. What was it? Christy wanted quality attention, like any customer or co-worker. Execution should be underpinned by this understanding if you truly want to engage.

As the trainer, I knew that if I delivered quality attention to Christy, there would be a dramatic change in his attitude. The attention was delivered in a few ways.

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Inclusion | Christy was made feel wanted by including him in the exercise. Clearly he is more likely to be engaged if he is part of the show. Asking questions and including people in the conversation should be the base level strategy for any would be persuader. Finally, be warned that when you ask, allow people the opportunity to respond. Too often honoring an insatiable appetite for attention, people look like they are going to pounce on their colleagues as they wait to either interrupt or “present” their contribution.

Name Please | Most people love to hear their own name, but use it sparingly, particularly if you don't know the person, otherwise it will be perceived as a gimmick.

The Power Of Touch | The handshake helps to establish connection and build rapport. Studies have shown that touching someone on the upper arm for just a second or two can have a significant effect on how much help they will provide. One study had researchers approaching people on the street requesting a dime—the touch increased the possibility of cash by 20 percent. (N. Gueguen 2007) A study from the Touch Institute at the University of Miami showed that a little touch on the shoulder was enough to make people tell the truth and return the money they had found in a phone booth.

Repetition | Another great rapport builder is repeating back to people what they have said. When you repeat a person's words back to them, you are not only showing the ability to listen, you are also attaching importance to the words.

When I—the perceived expert in this situation—referred the audience to Christy's comments, I was validating his input and helping him feel very good about himself. Some years back the lead singer of The Corrs, an Irish band, described where the crowd sings their songs back to them at a concert as the equivalent of a spiritual experience. In negotiation, I believe repetition of key points has the same effect.

A study from the University of Nijmegen illustrates its effectiveness. In the experiment the waitress was asked to request orders from the customers in two ways: (1) Listen and be generally positive and polite. (2) Repeat the order back to the customer. Those subjected to hearing their own words gave 70 percent larger tips than those in the first group. As an aside, what if customer service personnel repeated back to clients, in a retail setting, their order? Would it increase the possibility of a better order?

Spotlight on the Customer | What happens when a trainer moves around a room? Usually the audience follows him/her with their eyes. When I went down to Christy on the three occasions the whole audience was feeding him attention at a subconscious level and he reveled in it. In the past people have told me that the attention is a source of embarrassment—this is their conscious response, which isn't aligned with their subconscious truth. Remember we are inside out, not outside in.

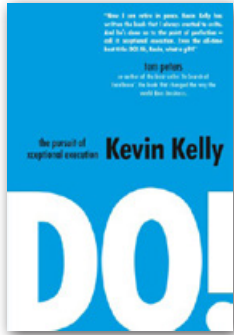
“Presentation has replaced conversation and monologue trumps dialogue. Winning a friendly and authentic ear is a rare experience. Therein lies the opportunity.”

How do you keep the delivery of quality attention to your customers at the forefront of your execution strategy? It starts with an innovative and essential business strategy—you need to focus on building friendships, not customer relationships.

People crave genuine, authentic, undivided attention, the side effects of which are extremely positive: loyalty, engagement and positive word-of-mouth. The challenge is we're operating in a 24/7, always-on world, inundated with advertising and social media, smartphone pings and text messages. Distraction is the new normal.

Always remember, there's a Christy in every room. 🙏

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Kevin is a leading authority on the success principles of entrepreneurship, leadership, sales and motivation. His book, *DO!*, is the culmination of his life experiences, client work and keynote insights, highlighting the thinking behind those who live and breathe the exceptional execution mindset and approach to business and life. Beyond the shining lights and buzz of delivering keynotes, Kevin's belief in the importance of nurturing tomorrow's leaders sees him having raised funding and build schools for education in Africa and closer to home, collaborate on developing supportive infrastructure and resources for today's Youth.

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