

Waste Remover

Thomas H. Willingham loves being a fly on the wall in a manufacturing facility.

“For me, it’s like being a kid in a candy store,” he says.

In just a few hours, he can identify a myriad of wasteful activities: piles of inventory, inefficient tools to accomplish daily tasks and employees going from here to there on a route that resembles “a plate of spaghetti.”

Willingham, president and sole proprietor of The Hampton Group, is an expert in strategic execution management. That means he helps companies to bridge the gap between developing strategy and executing it in order to move the organization forward – while still accomplishing the day-to-day activities that keep the lights on.

The goal: increase clients’ profits by three to five times his fees.

Willingham suggests that companies approach their work like an Indy 500 pit stop. Instead of using a manual wrench to replace a tire, Indy pit crews use a pneumatic gun. Instead of five lock-



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Thomas H. Willingham parachutes into companies to identify and eliminate waste and inefficiencies to help companies execute their strategy successfully.

ing nuts, an Indy crew member only has to take one off.

Willingham applied his expertise to significantly reduce the three weeks it took a community bank to board and book loans for antique autos. Among other things, the bank was shipping physical documents on a weekly basis – a task that could be accomplished in seconds by computer, using a program such as Dropbox.

To reduce stacks of inventory and free up cash, Willingham offers these suggestions:

- A company buying containers from China need not pack the entire container with a single item. Have a consolidator arrange for

a mixed container of two or three different items.

- Rather than run a whole pallet of product on a machine that takes hours to set up, reduce the setup time so it’s possible to run a smaller quantity more frequently to accommodate demand.

Mastering execution is neither easy nor automatic, Willingham warns.

“What I can’t do is conduct a two-day seminar and immediately have the company executing,” says Willingham. “You can’t just flip a switch. Change is hard, and you have to develop and set up a formalized process.”

Moreover, strategy execution management is not just a top-down affair. Employees need to be on board, Willingham stresses. Managers have to establish clarity up front. That way, both employee and employer know whether they've missed, met or exceeded set criteria.

“Conversations cause clarity. Clarity drives actions. Actions produce results,” Willingham says.

Rather than annual performance reviews, Willingham suggests an execution management system called KeyneLink to create performance agreements and bi-monthly or quarterly progress meetings. That way, if an employee has veered off track, you can rectify the problem immediately.

Willingham's secret sauce is his extensive experience at every facet of the manufacturing process, from industrial engineer on the shop floor to the top of the food chain.

His tools and tricks include Simul8 simulation software, which takes into account the variability in each process – the time to load and unload parts, equipment breakdowns, the quality of materials and employee skill level --- to identify bottlenecks affecting overall production time. Simul8 can also forecast unexpected consequences. For example, what if you invest in a more efficient machine to eliminate a bottleneck – but the third machine in line can't handle the additional production?

His top tip for business success: Know your strengths and weaknesses.

“Business leaders need to know when to ask for help – and that it's okay to ask for help,” Willingham says. His ideal client is someone who recognizes that the company isn't performing at the level it should be – someone willing to listen and understand in order to improve.

Willingham handles a wide variety of projects, both short- and long-term. In one case, a client had four or five facilities totaling 200,000 square feet. Willingham's analysis showed duplication – and the need for a facility only 105,000 to 110,000 square feet.

Another client had spent three years on implementing an enterprise resource planning system. Willingham suggested an alternative system, advising officials to start with the basics and add additional features later. The company was live on the new system in three months, with six to eight months of implementation following.

Client Annie Van Scoy of Rios Containers has been working with Willingham for the past couple of years. The company, run by Van Scoy and her brother, Andrew, wanted to improve and update its business processes for the 21st-century world.

Willingham helped the company convert to more robust software and assisted in the hiring process for new positions. “He knows our business and how we operate, and the personalities involved,” she says.

Van Scoy described how Willingham helped Rios Containers find and implement new software to better manage the business. She had already made a contact and was planning to purchase his software. Willingham brought in a broker with a less-costly solution. He told her to buy a smaller-scale version of the software under consideration.

“We implemented in October 2016, and by early 2017 we had a good grasp of it,” she says. She can run reports in many different ways and look at numbers and trends in different formats. “It gives us tools to help run the business.”

Van Scoy describes Willingham as “mild-mannered; cool, calm and collected.” And when he poses a challenge, he does so “in a nonthreatening way.”

“He's given us a lot of insight and input, making us aware of how we do things and how we can move forward in this challenging business world.”

Willingham applies strategic execution management to his own business. He has bi-weekly calls and monthly KeyneLink progress meetings with North Carolina colleague Gary Tomlinson “to keep me on track and executing to my own performance agreement,” he says. “Mastery of execution is a journey that has no end point.” — *By Eve Gumpel, California Business Journal*

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