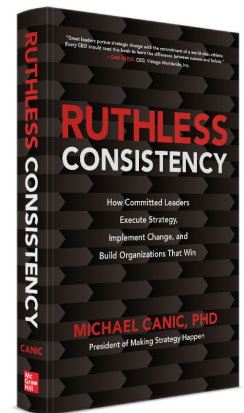


Ruthless Consistency

How Committed Leaders Execute Strategy, Implement Change, and Build Organizations That Win

by **Michael Canic, Ph.D.**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

According to *Harvard Business Review*, “most studies still show a 60–70 percent failure rate for organizational change projects—a statistic that has stayed constant from the 1970s to the present.” When all is said and done, a lot more gets said than done.

In *Ruthless Consistency*, author Michael Canic identifies the three surprising reasons most strategic change initiatives fail: Leaders unwittingly send mixed messages that demotivate their people and undermine those initiatives. Leaders focus on what they do instead of what their people experience. Leaders are not as committed as they think they are or need to be. The antidote to these problems? Ruthless consistency.

Following this principle, Canic introduces an intuitive yet comprehensive model for success. Simply put, leaders who develop the right focus, create the right environment, and build the right team—consistently—are leaders whose organizations win. *Ruthless Consistency* is a must-read for every leader who wants to implement change successfully.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Three principles you need to succeed.
- To stop strategic planning and embrace strategic management.
- How to be a coach, not just a manager.
- To overcome the three enemies that undermine commitment.

Introduction

When All Is Said and Done, a Lot More Gets Said Than Done

If you want to play the odds, bet on failure. That's what's likely to happen when you execute strategy or implement organizational change. Published failure rates for strategic planning, for example, range from 70 to 90 percent.

It's not just strategic planning. The same is true of any strategic change initiative (SCI). Mergers and acquisitions? Up to 90 percent fail. Lean Six Sigma? Between 60 and 90 percent fail. Software and systems projects? Over 70 percent fail.

And how costly is all this failure? For IT projects alone, the worldwide cost has been estimated at up to *\$3 trillion* a year.

It gets worse. When SCIs repeatedly fail, you create a track record of failure. You create an expectation of failure. You create an acceptance of failure. And you create a culture of failure. Failure becomes the norm.

You might be thinking, "Hold on. It's not like our efforts have been a total failure. We've made progress. We've gotten some things done."

That's it? That's your reaction? And you're the leader?

The tragedy of repeated failures is how they poison organizational culture. It becomes easy for people—starting with you—to rationalize anything other than success. And it becomes all but impossible to get people to believe in and support the next SCI. The culture of failure becomes self-perpetuating.

Bad News and Good News

If you've decided that this travesty has to end, and you're intent on getting to the root of the issue, then take a look in the mirror. It's you. It's what you as a leader haven't done but need to do to execute strategy, implement change, and build an organization that wins.

Here's the good news: There are principles to help you win. But you have to supply the commitment. It won't be easy and it won't happen overnight. Anyone who tells you otherwise either is lying or hasn't lived it.

Let's start with three surprising principles you must embrace to succeed.

Part I: The Reality

Most SCIs fail, but why? It's because leaders don't have a complete picture of reality: what it takes to execute strategic change, their role in making it happen, and the level of commitment required.

If you're fed up with failure, then first you need to understand the reality of why things fail.

First Principle: What Matters More Than Anything You Do Is Everything You Do

The difference between success and failure is ruthless consistency. It turns out that's true not just for continuous quality improvement; it's true for any SCI. Successful implementation requires more than just a pinch of training, a dash of resources, and a dollop of communications. It requires a systematic approach to aligning *everything* with the desired outcome. Everything matters. The whole truly is greater than the sum of its parts.

Think of it this way. It takes only one misaligned wheel to make your car undrivable, one misaligned vertebra in your back to incapacitate you. One misaligned element in any system can undermine everything.

Ruthless consistency is the key to implementing strategic change.

Saying that everything needs to be consistently aligned is one thing, but doing it is another. To be ruthlessly consistent you have to do three things: Develop the right focus. Create the right environment. Build the right team. Continually. That's it. Every SCI always comes down to those three things.

Developing the right focus means identifying and articulating why your organization must change, what you intend to achieve, and how you intend to achieve it. Creating the right environment means aligning every organizational touchpoint, so that your team can and will execute on the right focus. Building the right team means securing the right collection of talent to make it happen.

But let's be clear. Ruthless consistency does not mean robotic repetition. It's not about mindless and mechanical activity performed without variation simply for the sake of being consistent.

Ruthless consistency means that everything you do—as creative and innovative as that might be—is consistently aligned with your purpose, your intentions. Ruthless consistency not only allows for creativity and innovation, it

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demands it. Why? You're operating in an ever-changing environment. New technologies emerge. Customers' needs change. Processes become obsolete. Practices get stale. What made your organization successful in the past could kill it in the future. Creativity and innovation are requirements of ruthless consistency, not enemies.

Second Principle: What You Do Is Not as Important as What Your People Experience

Leader thinks he does a good job communicating. Employees think otherwise. Leader concludes that communications aren't the problem; employees are the problem.

Reframe your thinking. It doesn't matter that you're telling if they're not hearing. Just like it doesn't matter that you're training if they're not learning, or that you're empowering them if they don't feel empowered. What matters is what they perceive, what they believe, and what they feel.

Why? They're the ones doing the real work. They're providing the service; they're making the product; they're engaging the customer. Implementing strategic change depends on them. Ultimately, it's not about you. It's about them.

To be fair, we haven't been trained to view the world from our employees' perspective. We've been trained to view it from a leader's perspective. Countless books have been written, presentations delivered, and workshops conducted on leadership: what great leaders do; how great leaders became great leaders; how you, too, can become a great leader.

Yet, if there's one thing to sear into your mind about leadership, it's this: It's not about you. It's *through* you. What you do is validated only by what they experience and, as a consequence, what they do.

For people to do what you need them to do and perform at their best, first you have to understand their perspective. Ultimately, this is about empathy. Seeing through their eyes. Thinking in their minds. Feeling with their hearts. And then taking the right actions.

Third Principle: You're Not as Committed as You Need to Be . . . Yet

It's one thing to say you're committed and another to be committed.

Think of a failed SCI you've experienced. Now, write down all the reasons why it failed. Be brutally honest. Were you as committed as you needed to be to successfully execute that SCI? Did you set specific goals? Did you regularly communicate them throughout your organization? Did you communicate why you needed to achieve them and how you intended to achieve them?

Did you provide your people with the knowledge and skills needed to achieve the goals? With sufficient resources—materials, budget, and time? With sufficient authority to make decisions and take action in support of the goals?

Did you provide them with ongoing feedback and guidance about their performance? Did you recognize and reinforce them for the right behaviors and right outcomes? Did you hold them constructively accountable when needed?

Did you redesign whichever processes needed to be redesigned in support of the goals? Revise whichever policies needed to be revised? Change your org structure as required?

Were you committed enough to identify, examine, and align every touchpoint with your goals, so as to overwhelmingly tilt the odds in your favor? Did you persevere when the change wasn't happening or wasn't happening quickly enough?

Many of us have the will to win. We love the feeling of winning. We want to be associated with winners. But do we have the will to do what it takes to win?

Part II: The Right Focus

It starts with the right focus. A focus that articulates, "What must we achieve? Why must we achieve it? How will we achieve it?" Without a concise "what," there is no focus. Without a compelling "why," SCIs are merely should-dos, not must-dos. And without a clear "how," the "what" is nothing more than a dream.

You're committed to winning? Then start by developing the right focus.

Stop Strategic Planning

To develop and sustain the right focus, strategy has to be a process, not just an event. The goal isn't just to develop a plan or even implement a plan. The goal is to institute a system that ensures strategy is an ongoing, managed process.

The Strategic Management Process has four phases: Assess, Position, Plan, and Implement. In the Assess phase you develop a compelling Case for Change—the strategic “why.” It emerges from a solid understanding of the strategic context in which your organization operates, context that spotlights gain and pain—the consequences of changing versus not changing.

In the Position phase you concisely define your strategic positioning—the strategic “what.” What are we driven to achieve, what business are we in, what makes us desirably different in the marketplace, and what must our culture look like to win?

In the Plan phase you clearly outline the critical few SCIs that must be accomplished for your organization to win—the strategic “how.” This phase charts the course from strategy to reality.

In the Implement phase you sustain focus by (1) instituting mechanisms to systematically manage implementation, (2) creating an environment that consistently points people in the right direction, and (3) securing the capabilities that can and will make it happen.

How does strategic management stand apart from strategic planning? In short, strategic management is strategy + execution.

Embrace the Joy of Pain

Your objective in the Assess phase is to attack your assumptions, understand the strategic context in which your business operates, and develop a Case for Change—the strategic “why.” It must be compelling enough to overcome the four poisons that inhibit organizational change: complacency, arrogance, the fallacy of extrapolation, and psychological inertia.

Organizations are far more likely to change when they have a strong drive to achieve a desirable outcome (gain), coupled with a strong drive to avoid an undesirable outcome (pain).

Here is an example of paired Case for Change statements:

“If we don't optimize our product portfolio, then revenues and margins will continue to shrink, and our future will be at risk” (pain).

“If we optimize our product portfolio, then revenues and margins will grow, which will help secure our future” (gain).

With a well-thought-out Case for Change, it becomes almost unthinkable that you wouldn't take action. Each pair of statements offers you and your Strategic Leadership Team a stark choice. Pain or gain. Your choices will determine your legacy. Choose well.

Climb the Right Mountain

You're clear about why your organization needs to change. Now, what would it look like for your organization to win?

An unfortunate consequence of the popular view that you should dream big and pursue your passion is that it implies any dream is worth pursuing. It isn't.

It's not that you shouldn't dream big. It's that before you commit to pursuing your dream, you need to understand the three Rs—rewards, risks, and requirements. Understanding these allows you to answer the question, “Is this a dream I am truly committed to pursuing or not?” There's no wrong answer, as long as it's an informed answer.

Once you conjure up your next big dream, ask yourself these questions: Why that dream? Why not some other dream?”

“What rewards make it uniquely worth pursuing?”

“What risks and consequences are associated with pursuing it? Am I willing to accept them?”

“What is required to fulfill the dream? Am I willing to meet those requirements?”

Do Less, Use More Resources. . . No, Really

You've identified why you need to change. You've determined what you need to achieve. Now, you need to plan how. How are you going to realize the gain and avoid the pain outlined in your Case for Change? How are you going to win? How are you going to live up to your Brand Commitment and Cultural Commitments?

Through your SCIs.

You're going to take on too many SCIs because you're ambitious, you see the opportunities, and like the proverbial kid in a candy shop, you grab at everything. What happens? Resources get diluted, people get stretched too thin, and

before you know it, instead of everything being a priority, nothing is a priority. Failure.

Do less, and you'll accomplish more. As Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, once explained, "We say no to great ideas in order to keep the amount of things we focus on very small so we can put enormous energy behind them."

Let's say you've come up with a list of potential SCIs. How do you prioritize them?

- Conduct targeted research into the most promising SCIs.
- Identify criteria for evaluating the relative merits of each, such as resource requirements, length of time to complete, payback timeline, organizational trauma, probability of success, return on investment, and so forth.
- Determine if any criteria should be weighted and if any should be immediate disqualifiers.
- Discuss and rate each potential SCI against each criterion (using, for example, a 1–5 scale); total the ratings.
- Compare the overall ratings for each option and ask if they pass the "gut test." Does your assessment of their relative merits seem fair and reasonable?
- If yes, select the very few top-rated items that the organization has the means to strongly support. If no, then revise the evaluation model and go through the first five steps again.

Put the "Exec" in Execute

Now comes the hard part—making it happen. Everyone's energized. You've come out of your annual strategy session with a clear focus and a set direction. But then reality starts to seep in. Your plate is already overflowing. How are you going to find the time to get it all done?

Clear your plate. All of us spend time on activities that, if we're honest, add little or no value. Eliminating those activities allows us to free up time for the strategic work.

Operationalizing your SCIs requires Execution Plans. An Execution Plan outlines the time-linked milestones and associated resource requirements (material, financial, and people) for each SCI. It identifies the Executive Sponsor—the Strategic Leadership Team member ultimately responsible for the SCI, the Champion—the person entrusted with managing its execution, team members, and periodic contributors. Finally, it documents the ROS—the expected return on strategy that justifies the SCI.

The goal isn't just to develop a plan. And it's not just to implement the plan. The goal is to institute a robust, repeatable process for assessing, developing, and implementing strategy.

How do you sustain the process and make sure nothing falls through the cracks? Develop and manage a control document such as a Master Calendar. Use it to matrix all the key strategic activities against the months of your fiscal year. Then review the Master Calendar at monthly Progress Tracking meetings, and look ahead to what needs to be done in the coming months.

Doing this, nothing gets overlooked or forgotten. It ensures the Strategic Management Process becomes the overarching management process for your organization.

The goal is to institute a robust, repeatable process for assessing, developing, and implementing strategy.

Part III: The Right Environment

You've developed the right focus. Now you need to create the right environment, one in which every touchpoint is aligned with your intentions. An environment that your people experience as ruthlessly consistent.

Why the right environment before the right team? Because most leaders have a team in place. And until you create the right environment, you won't know for certain whether you have the right team. When you create an environment in which people are aligned, equipped, coached, supported, and valued, you create a culture of engagement, a culture of performance.

Everything Starts with Heads and Hearts

Implementing strategic change depends on people. You can have plans and goals and timelines and meetings, yet none of it matters unless you engage the hearts and minds of your people and align them with what you want to achieve. It's not about buy-in; it's about want-in.

Most leaders think about engaging their employees once they've identified their SCIs. Too late. The decisions have been made. And the employees weren't involved in the process.

There are three times to engage your employees: before, during, and after you've developed your Strategic Framework. It starts with getting their input—their perspective on the issues, opportunities, and challenges facing your organization—before you make any strategic decisions. An anonymous, all-employee survey as well as focus groups with select employees are good first steps.

Then, once a draft framework is developed, get their feedback. An effective way to do this is to conduct a half-day One Team Meeting involving all your employees. Seat them at round tables, present the draft Strategic Framework, and then have them discuss and flip-chart what they like about it, what concerns they have, and what questions they have.

Have each table present their highlights to the entire team. Collect their outputs and review them later with the Strategic Leadership Team. Be open to modifying your Strategic Framework, and if you do, give the employees credit for it, acknowledging them for their ideas.

Once you've finalized your Strategic Framework, engage your employees again. Involve them, when appropriate, as members of your SCI teams.

For all that's been said and written about having a sense of purpose—as important as that is—what's even more important is that you connect the dots between purpose, goals, and each person's role—what is expected of them. What ignites purpose is when they clearly see how what they do as individuals contributes to the big picture, to success.

You're Not a Manager; You're a Coach

There's a critical distinction between being a manager and being a coach. Coaches take responsibility for the performance of their team and each team member. Coaches view their role as helping team members perform at their best, helping them learn, improve, and grow.

Rarely will the coach of a team sport talk to individual players about winning. Instead, the coach will talk about performance and improvement, focusing on what each player can control because if each player does what she can and should do, then the team result will take care of itself.

Two people are responsible for a team member's perfor-

mance. You and the team member. You're responsible for creating an environment in which each team member can perform at their best. Each team member is responsible for performing. Both you and the team member play a critical role; both of you must be committed.

You don't motivate people. You create an environment in which the right people will be motivated. And that doesn't mean the same environment for everyone. The Golden Rule of Coaching is that different approaches have different effects on different team members at different times. Great coaches are adaptive.

There's also a common misconception about performance. It's that by repetitively doing something, we automatically get better. That experience translates into improvement. But we don't learn simply by doing. We learn by processing the feedback we receive from doing. And not just any doing. The doing has to be focused and intentional.

- Don't review performance; improve performance. Coaches provide SMART feedback and guidance—specific, meaningful, actionable, real time.
- Great coaches are “performance doctors.” Much like medical doctors, they diagnose the factors that are influencing performance and then prescribe what's needed to improve.
- Great coaches ask incisive questions. You don't want a team of mindless order takers; you want a team that continually learns, grows, and improves. Strong coaches promote this by asking incisive questions.

Part IV: The Right Team

You have to have the right team. How do you build it? It comes down to processes. Yes, processes. Robust and rigorous processes for attracting strong talent and selecting the best candidates. Not necessarily the most capable individuals but the most capable team members. Then, having a process to evaluate and strengthen those processes.

Don't Just Recruit; Compete

Many organizations are finding that the standard approaches to attracting talent just aren't good enough. It's time to rethink recruitment.

Adopt this mindset, and you'll have a fighting chance: Compete for talent. You're no longer simply recruiting; you're competing for talent. You're not just hiring; you're

There are enemies conspiring against your commitment. Fortunately, you're able to confront them. They're in the mirror.

competing for talent. And you'd better compete for talent as fiercely as you compete for customers, because prospective employees have choices, and they're asking the same questions as prospective customers: Why you? Why not your competitors? What makes your organization special? What's in it for me? How will you help me grow? What opportunities will you provide?

How can your organization compete for talent?

Develop relationships. Increasingly, companies are competing for talent by hosting events that interest prospective recruits. Know your target audience, and design events that appeal to their interests, both work related and personal.

Look for the opportunities in the obstacles. Changing workforce trends provide you with opportunities, not just obstacles. The growth of the gig economy and the desire for more flexible and varied work schedules are examples of such trends.

Uhhh, about your hiring standards. Having a hard time finding talent? Lower your hiring standards, but do it selectively. Make sure not to lower your performance standards. And never compromise your organization's values or the individual traits that are critical to success. But you may want to reconsider your requirements for education, experience, and skills. Are your educational requirements nice-to-haves or must-haves? Can experience be gained? Can skills be developed?

Be Selective in How You Select

If building the right team is critical to your success, then you'd better have an effective, efficient, and evolving selection process. How confident are you that your current selection process meets those criteria?

Which assessment method can give you the confidence that you're selecting the best candidate? The reality is, no one method can do that. Look for converging evidence. The more that evidence from different methods converges on the same conclusion, the more confident you can be in that conclusion.

Start by identifying the assessment methods that are most relevant for the position.

Qualification screening. First, you need to identify what success looks like for the position you're filling, and then you need to determine the basic requirements for success (skills, experience, values, and traits). Don't erect false barriers. Distinguish between must-haves, should-haves, and nice-to-haves.

Interviews. You want multiple interviews conducted by various people, including the candidate's future boss, peers, and, if applicable, direct reports.

Role-plays. When a position you're hiring for requires strong interpersonal skills, such as sales or customer service, role plays can be helpful.

Trait profiles. Trait profiles can provide you with insights into a candidate that might be hard to determine from an interview. How conscientious is the person? Does the person prefer a more- or less-structured environment? While many assessment instruments are available, the High Potential Traits Indicator evaluates traits that have been extensively validated as linking to workplace success.

Job simulations. If you're hiring for technical skills, consider having the candidate demonstrate them. If making presentations is critical to the role, for example, then have the candidate deliver a presentation to your team.

Part V: The Right Commitment

Right focus, right environment, and right team—that's what it takes to win. But it's all theoretical unless you embody the motive force that drives it: the right commitment. At first glance it seems easy enough. Be committed. Of course, it's not so easy. There are enemies conspiring against your commitment. Fortunately, you're able to confront them. They're in the mirror.

The First Enemy You Must Defeat

As a committed leader, the first enemy you must defeat is complacency. Yours.

Are you constantly looking forward? Is your work your passion? Are you immersed in it? People who don't just achieve success but sustain success always have an inspiring next goal.

Develop a Personal Case for Change, a case compelling enough to ensure you're ruthlessly consistent in developing and sustaining the right focus, creating and recreating the right environment, and building and rebuilding the right team.

First, determine what you need to do differently to drive strategic change in your organization. Next, document both the pain that will result if you don't do what you need to do and the gain that will result if you do.

The Enemy That Grows Stronger By the Day

Distractions. It's like you're at the Grand Bazaar with a thousand vendors yelling at you, pulling at you, enticing you with their wares. And it's never-ending.

Yet, distractions don't torpedo strategy execution; distractibility does. Distractions are what lure your attention; distractibility is how you respond. Manage yourself by prioritizing your priorities, taking breaks, and committing to being 100 percent present.

The Enemy That Poses as a Friend

The third enemy you must confront is the most insidious. It makes you feel good and good about yourself. It poses as a friend. Left unchecked, it will lure you along the path to failure. Ego.

Let's be clear. To be an effective leader you need a strong and secure ego. You have to be able to confront tough situations, make painful decisions, overcome massive challenges,

and take risks that, even if well calculated, could lead to severe outcomes. And you must have and project confidence through all of it.

Yet, it's possible to have a strong ego and not be an egomaniac. To control your ego, understand that vulnerability can enhance your credibility; acknowledge others' strengths and accomplishments; admit mistakes; and be more concerned with learning than knowing.

Leadership expert Jim Collins wrote, "The signature of mediocrity is chronic inconsistency." Yes, and the signature of excellence is ruthless consistency.

What drives all of it is the right commitment. Ask yourself this one question: "Do I have the will to win or the will to do what it takes to win?"

There will be many challenges—obstacles, setbacks, and frustrations—but they won't determine your success. Because in the end, it's not you versus those challenges. It's you versus you.

IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- *Simplify: How the Best Businesses in the World Succeed* by Greg Lockwood, Richard Koch
- *Strategy First: How Businesses Win* by Brad Chase



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