



Leaders Should Learn from Olympic Divers

Nathan Bennett, Ph.D.

As I write this, today marks the beginning of the 2012 Olympic Games. Athletes from around the world competing in such a wide variety of events—some so obscure they seem to disappear entirely from our consciousness between Olympic years. One of the events I enjoy the most is diving. I don't give the sport a moment's thought outside the Olympics, but when it's on I find it compelling television.

In diving competition, scores are earned on the basis of two criteria: degree of difficulty and execution. The best score, of course, comes from flawless execution of the most difficult dive. But there are many mathematical combinations of difficulty and execution that produce competitive scores.

Divers preparing for a competition have a sense of the point total they need to advance from the preliminary round to the next round and, ultimately, to place in a medal position. They and their coaches review their program of dives, the way they've been diving recently, perhaps even known tendencies of judges, and the likely programs competitors will present. From that analysis, they determine what dives to attempt. They start from the needed point total and reason back to the tactics, all the while with an honest inventory of capability in mind.

My experience suggests that leaders could learn something from this strategy. Surveys regularly show that CEOs want to drive change through their organizations, that if they can't change, they'll die, and so on. At the same time, evidence is everywhere that companies struggle to effectively execute change.

I think companies struggle with change because they are attempting a dive they have no business considering. Whether it's a love for Jim Collin's big, hairy, audacious goal (BHAG), simple arrogance, or naiveté, executives are asking their company to nail dives that are beyond its capability.

Leaders could take a lesson from Olympic divers. Instead of the BHAG, think about the total number of points your company needs to generate with a change program in order to meet business goals. Then consider the sorts of initiatives your people have proven they can execute with the tiniest of splash. Determine the surest way to earn the point total you need. Start with the end in mind, reason back, understand your limits, and plan accordingly. Just like in Olympic diving, there are many ways to earn a good score. You don't need to earn all the points on one dive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nathan Bennett, Ph.D., is Professor of Management in the J. Mack Robinson College of Business. He specializes in leadership and strategy execution, managing innovation and change processes, top management team dynamics, and contextual influences on individual behavior in organizations. Nate has published in numerous widely-read resources for managers including the Harvard Business Review and Wall Street Journal. He is co-author of the 2006 Stanford University Press title "Riding Shotgun: The Role of the COO" and the 2010 book "Your Career Game: How Game Theory Can Help You Achieve Your Professional Goals." Professor Bennett received both his Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Master's degree in Applied Research from Tulane University, and a Ph.D. in Management from Georgia Tech.