

# Execution Is a PEOPLE PROBLEM, Not a STRATEGY PROBLEM

BY PETER BREGMAN

Paul,\* the CEO of Maxreed, a global publishing company, was having trouble sleeping.

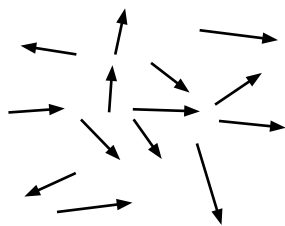
Publishing is an industry that's changing even faster than most other fast-changing industries, but Paul wasn't awake worrying about his strategy. He had a solid plan that took advantage of new technologies, and the board and his leadership team were aligned around it. Paul and his team had already reorganized the structure—new divisions, revised roles, redesigned processes—to support their strategy.

So what was Paul worrying about? People.

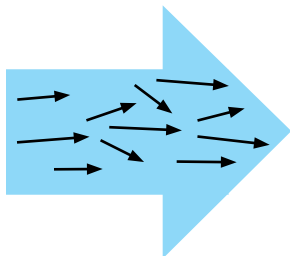
Which is precisely what he *should* be worrying about. However hard it is to devise a smart strategy, it's 10 times harder to get people to execute on that strategy. And a poorly executed strategy, no matter how clever, is worthless.

In other words, your organization's biggest strategic challenge isn't strategic thinking—it's strategic acting.

If I were to depict the challenge graphically, it would be going from this:



To this:



The conundrum is how to get from the first graphic to the second one. Most organizations rely on communication plans to make that shift. Unfortunately, strategy communication, even if you do it daily, is not the same as—and is not enough to drive—strategy execution.

Because while strategy development and communication are about *knowing* something, strategy execution is about *doing* something. And the gap between what you know and what you do is often huge. Add in the necessity of having everyone acting in alignment with each other, and it gets even huger.

The reason strategy execution is often glossed over by even the most astute strategy consultants is because primarily it's not a strategy challenge. It's a human behavior one.

To deliver stellar results, people need to be hyperaligned and laser-focused on the highest-impact actions that will drive the organization's most important outcomes.

But even in well-run, stable organizations, people are misaligned, too broadly focused, and working at cross-purposes.

This isn't critical only for a changing company in a changing industry like Paul's. It's also true for fast-growing startups. And companies in turnaround situations. And those with new leadership. Any time it's critical to focus on strategy—and when isn't it?—the most important strategy question you need to answer is: How can we align everyone's efforts and help them accomplish the organization's most important work?



That's the question Paul reached out to ask me. Below is the solution we implemented with him at Maxreed. We call it The Big Arrow Process, and it represents my best thinking after 25 years of experimenting with this very challenge.

## DEFINE THE BIG ARROW

We worked with Paul and a small group of his leaders to identify the most important outcome for Maxreed to achieve over the following 12 months. Their Big Arrow had to do with creating a strategy and product roadmap that was supported by the entire leadership team. The hardest part of this is getting to that *one* most important thing, the thing that would be a catalyst for driving the rest of the strategy forward.

Once we defined the Big Arrow, we tested it with a series of questions. If you answer "yes" to each of these questions, it's likely that your Big Arrow is on target:

- Will success in the Big Arrow drive the mission of the larger organization?
- Is the Big Arrow supporting, and supported by, your primary business goals?
- Will achieving it make a statement to the organization about what's most important?
- Will it lead to the execution of your strategy?
- Is it the appropriate stretch?
- Are you excited about it? Do you have an emotional connection to it?

Along with that outcome clarity, we also created behavioral clarity by identifying the most important behavior that would lead to achieving the outcome. For Maxreed, the behavior was about collaborating with trust and transparency. We determined this by asking a few questions: What current behavior do we see in the organization that will make driving the Big Arrow harder and make success less likely? We then articulated the opposite, which became our Big Arrow behavior.

## IDENTIFY THE HIGHEST-IMPACT PEOPLE

Once the Big Arrow was clear, we worked with Paul and his HR partner to identify the people who were most essential to achieving the goal. Doing this is critical because you want to focus your efforts and resources on the people who will have the most impact on the Big Arrow. In the case of Maxreed, we identified 10 people whose roles were core to the project, who already had organizational authority, and who were highly networked. With other clients, we've identified many more people at all levels of the hierarchy. As you think about who might be the appropriate people, ask the questions: Who has the greatest capacity to affect the forward momentum of the arrow? Who is an influencer in the organization? Who has an outsize impact on our Big Arrow outcome or behavior? Those are the people you should choose.

## DETERMINE WHAT THEY SHOULD FOCUS ON

Once we established the key people, we worked with each of them and their managers to determine their:

- Key contribution to moving the Big Arrow forward

- Pivotal strength that will allow them to make their key contribution
- Game changer, the thing that, if the person improves, will most improve their ability to make their key contribution

One of the things that makes this process successful is its simplicity. It's why we settled on *one* pivotal strength and *one* most critical game changer. Strategy execution needs to be laser-focused, and one of the biggest impediments to forward momentum on our most important work is trying to get forward momentum on *all* our work. Simplicity requires that we make choices. What will have the biggest impact? Then we make that one thing happen.

## HOLD LASER-FOCUSED COACHING SESSIONS

Once we made sure the right people had the right focus, we coached in laser-focused, 30-minute one-on-one coaching sessions. Coaching is often used in organizations to fix a leader's flaws, but that is not the focus of this kind of coaching. Here, the leaders were coached to focus on making clear headway on their key contribution to the Big Arrow. These conversations only focus on larger behavioral patterns to the extent that they are getting in the way of the task at hand.

## COLLECT AND SHARE DATA

Because we were coaching multiple people, we were able to maintain strict confidentiality with the individuals being coached while collecting data about trends and organizational obstacles they were facing, which we reported to Paul and his leadership team. This wasn't just opinion survey data; it represented the real obstacles preventing Maxreed's most valuable people from driving the company's most important priorities forward.

One of the main challenges we uncovered was a lack of cross-functional collaboration. Armed with that insight, Paul was able to address this issue directly, getting the key people in a room together and speaking openly about the issue. Eventually, he initiated a new cross-functional Big Arrow process that included leaders from the groups that weren't collaborating. Identifying what they needed to achieve together broke down the walls between the groups.

## AMPLIFY PERFORMANCE

While Paul removed organizational obstacles, coaches continued to help Maxreed's most critical people address the particular obstacles and challenges they faced as they delivered their key contribution. Coaches addressed the

# The Magic of 30-Minute Meetings

BY PETER BREGMAN



Five years ago, after becoming frustrated with my fruitless tendency to juggle multiple activities at once, I tried an experiment: For one week, I would not multitask and see what happened.

The experiment changed everything for the better. My relationships improved, my stress dissolved, and my productivity soared. There is zero downside to focusing on one thing at a time without distraction.

One of the side benefits of my focusing on one undistracted task at a time was a new and almost unbearable impatience for wasted time. In the past, if I was on a call that wasn't going anywhere, I would do email or surf the web. In my post-multitasking world, staying focused on a dragging call was painful.

Which is how I stumbled on the single most life-changing, business-transforming revelation of my last five years:

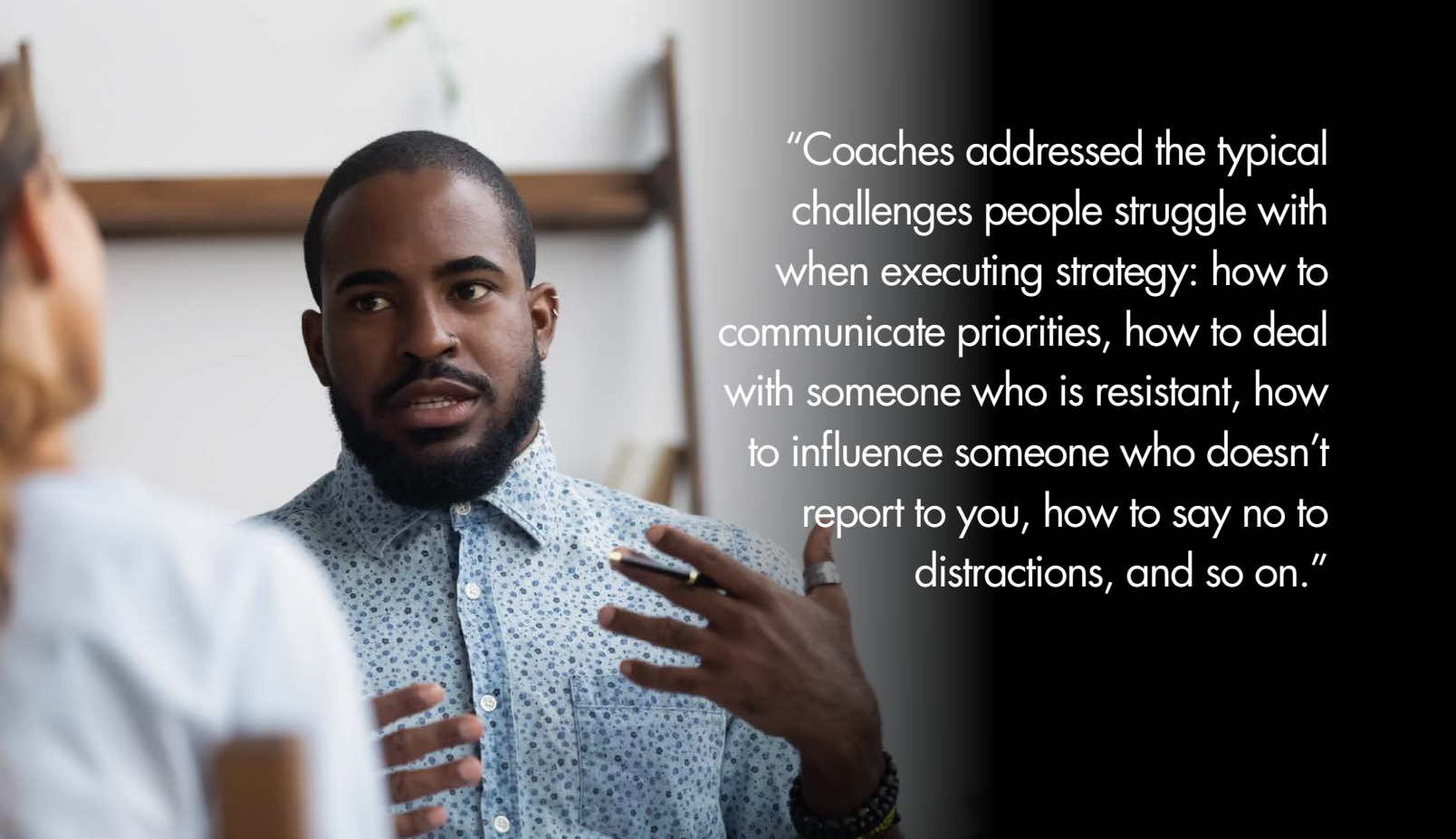
Compressed time.

First, though, a caveat. There are some things in my life—dinner with friends, writing, sleep, unstructured time with my family—that deserve to live in the spaciousness of stretched-out time.

But other things—like most meetings and tactical work—could benefit from compressed time.

Often we schedule one-hour time slots. Why? How did an hour become our standard time allotment for so many meetings, phone calls, and appointments?

As my impatience with wasted time grew, I tried a new experiment: I cut the time I allot for many activities in half.



“Coaches addressed the typical challenges people struggle with when executing strategy: how to communicate priorities, how to deal with someone who is resistant, how to influence someone who doesn’t report to you, how to say no to distractions, and so on.”

“If you have half the time to accomplish something, you become hyper-aware of how you’re using that time. And hyper-focused during it.”

I started with something easy. I used to work out for an hour a day. Now it’s down to 30 minutes. My results—weight and conditioning—improved.

Here’s why: my intensity is higher (I know I only have 30 minutes), I eat better (I don’t rely on my workout to keep slim), I integrate movement more into my day (I don’t rely on my workout to take care of all my fitness), and I never miss a workout (I can always find 30 minutes).

If you have half the time to accomplish something, you become hyper-aware of how you’re using that time. And hyper-focused during it. Most of my phone calls are now 30 minutes or less. My podcast is 15 to 20 minutes. Even many of my conference calls, with multiple parties, are 30 minutes or less. People on the calls, aware of the time constraint, are more thoughtful about when they speak, and more careful not to follow tangents that aren’t useful.

People also listen better because, when things are moving faster, we tend to be more alert. We know that a single distracted moment will leave us behind. And, since that keeps us more engaged, we end up having more fun in the process.

Nowhere has this impact been more transformational—and more evident—than in the leadership coaching we do at Bregman Partners. For the past several years, all the coaching we do is accomplished in 30-minute sessions.

The obvious advantages are obvious: Everyone saves time and money. But here’s what’s less obvious: The coaching isn’t simply as powerful, it’s vastly more so. When the coach and the client both know they have only 30 minutes, they move into high gear.

- Clients show up. Just as with my workouts, people are far less likely to skip a 30-minute session than they are an hour.
- Everyone is on time. Every minute counts in a 30-minute conversation and they know it. The session gets started more quickly, as the relationship is built on doing good work, not small talk.
- People are much more likely to come prepared. There’s no time wasted on tangents and going-nowhere conversations. Clients know what they want to cover and have put some thought into it beforehand.
- The time pressure enhances focus and attention. People don’t focus on three issues; they tackle the single biggest opportunity or persistent, intractable obstacle. And they move on it. Focus leads to success.
- Coaches are more willing to be courageous, and clients are more willing to be prodded. In a 30-minute session, coaches can’t

typical challenges people struggle with when executing strategy: how to communicate priorities, how to deal with someone who is resistant, how to influence someone who doesn't report to you, how to say no to distractions, and so on. The coaching prioritized helping people build relationships on their own teams and across silos, which was supported by the data and the Big Arrow key behavior of collaborating with trust and transparency. Individuals aligned with the goals of the organization to drive continued growth and success.

While the Big Arrow process is ongoing, we sent out a survey to people being coached as well as others outside the program to assess progress being made by the key contributors. Compared to before the coaching, are they more effective or less effective at making their key contribution, achieving the outcomes of the Big Arrow, and addressing their game changer?

There were 98 responses to the survey:

**Key contribution:** 90% said either more effective or much more effective.

**Big Arrow:** 88% said either more effective or much more effective.

**Game changer:** 84% said either more effective or much more effective.

In other words, the key contributors were getting massive traction in moving the organization's most important work—its key strategy—forward. This data was confirmed by Paul's own observations of the progress they've made on their Big Arrow outcome, a strategy and product roadmap that is supported by the entire leadership team.

Maybe most important, the broader organization was noticing. Which, of course, is how you start a movement.

Paul is still working hard to continue the momentum of the strategic shift. That's the point, really: Strategy execution is not a moment in time. It's thousands of moments across time.

But now, at least, it's happening. [AQ](#)

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waste time beating around the bush. They get to the point faster and earlier, interrupt more bravely, and ask more provocative questions.

- Clients get more done in between coaching sessions. I'm not sure why this is. But here's my hypothesis: Leaders at all levels need to be highly skilled at getting to the point quickly and efficiently. The compressed, focused coaching session hones the skill of getting to the point quickly, focusing on the most essential elements of a situation, and taking action.

The downside? I haven't seen one yet.

Try it yourself. Transition some of your hour-long meetings to 30 minutes. As you do, consider these three steps as a way to make the 30 minutes most powerful:

1. Read what you need to beforehand and tell everyone else to do the same. Think about your questions and concerns. Decide what's important to you and what you can let go of. Ask yourself the most important question: What outcome do you want?

2. Decide on the one thing that will make the biggest difference, and spend the 30 minutes on that issue, topic, or opportunity. Get started right on time, no matter who isn't there, and be bold and disciplined at keeping the conversation on track. Let go of anything that is less critical. Make decisions quickly, even if they are imperfect. Getting traction on a single thing is far more useful than touching on many without forward momentum on any.
3. The sign of a great meeting isn't the meeting itself. It's what happens after that meeting. Save at least the last five minutes to summarize what you learned, articulate what was valuable, commit to what you are going to do as a result of the meeting, and clarify how you will assess the success of your next steps.

You will need these “get to the most critical point fast” skills—and the courage to use them—if you are going to make the most of your time. You need to be bold, and even provocative. You need to be willing to interrupt, thoughtfully and for the greater good of moving ambitiously toward what is most important. You need to let go of things that don't really matter.

And you need to be fully present. No multitasking. No texting under the table. No distractions. Which is also the upside: You get to be fully present in what you are doing.

There is a cost. While it's energizing, it also takes a lot of energy to be so focused, even for a short amount of time. It's a sprinter's tactic.

On the other hand, when you cut your meetings and other activities in half, you'll have a lot more time to relax at dinner with friends, write, sleep, and spend unstructured time with people you love.

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