

# Playbooks Aren't Just for Sports

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Have you ever been part of an organization where the path to getting work done was more like a dirt road with potholes than a high speed freeway? Where obtaining approvals, reaching decisions, and achieving desired outcomes were needlessly slow. Maybe departments competed with each other rather than helped each other. Perhaps drama, politics, and bureaucracy displaced value adding activity. Or best practices weren't defined or followed. Or responsibilities, expectations, processes, and performance objectives weren't clear.

In contrast, have you been part of an organization where outcomes happened so fast they seemed automatic? Where good ideas went from conception to implementation with great speed. People, processes, systems, and resources were in place to competently and quickly handle every detail. Like a highly disciplined sports team, everyone played from the same playbook, knew their role, worked together seamlessly, and executed individually with excellence. Even unique circumstances were anticipated and adapted to with relative ease.

Organizational speed depends on many variables with the most obvious being competent employees who have a sense of urgency. It also requires enabling tools, systems, and facilities. Less tangible though, speed depends on cross-functional collaboration and the consistent execution of best practices like a sports team that executes against a well-defined and rehearsed playbook. Every organization has embedded processes, but those who execute with speed execute processes that have been consciously planned, defined, and refined. They have processes that have been designed with speed and collaboration in mind.

Anyone who enjoys team sports knows that a team's success depends on having a playbook. Winning as a team depends on having well defined plays that are rehearsed and engrained. Players' roles, responsibilities, maneuvers, routes, and motions are so embedded by game day that they are executed unconsciously. Bands and orchestras do the same through sheet music and song lists. Military operations do the same through battle plans.

Likewise in the workplace, organizations need a playbook. They need intentionally-defined processes, roles, and responsibilities to be able to execute efficiently. They can't have employees working at odds with each other through different operating philosophies. They can't have departments executing different processes. They can't have unclear authorities, roles, and expectations. They can't have teams merely doing what they want, when they want, and how they want.

Empowering employees and allowing creativity is part of high performing organizations, but doesn't negate the need for structure. Organizations can't afford to recreate methods, sort out responsibilities, and craft new approaches to working together every time an issue or opportunity crops up. Without agreed upon operating philosophies, processes, roles, and responsibilities, organizations can't scale. They can't execute with speed. They can't continuously improve because they have no consistent baseline from which to improve.

Organizations need a playbook that outlines core principles that guide decision making and operations. They need a playbook that specifies methods for transferring work between employees and departments. They need a playbook that defines people's authorities, people's responsibilities, deliverables, and desired outcomes. They need a playbook with processes that enable consistent results as well as adapt and allow innovation. When one is in place, normal work as well as issues and exceptions are handled with ease. Efficient execution replaces confusion, finger pointing, duplication of effort, and inconsistent results.

If your organization isn't executing with efficiency and speed, consider whether you don't have a playbook, people aren't following it, or your playbook needs to be updated. Your issue might be as simple as a lack of accountability for executing your playbook or as complex as not having a playbook at all.

If you embark on developing a playbook, here are a few principles to keep in mind:

## Developing a playbook:

- Involve all key stakeholders. This is an organizational initiative, not a departmental or individual one.
- Agree on the mission, vision, values, strategy, goals, and operating philosophies before getting into the details of processes, roles, and responsibilities.
- Identify the processes that are critical to the organization's efficiency.
- For each critical process, identify the primary inputs, value-adding activities, and outputs. Ensure the value-adding activities are defined using best practices. Define the activity owners, key responsibilities, metrics, necessary resources, and the desired outcome that the process supports.
- Ensure that each process linkage to other processes is defined so hand-offs across processes are as efficient as the processes themselves.
- Document what has been agreed upon.

## Implementing a playbook:

- Review with all stakeholders the content of the playbook in detail. Reinforce the documentation through frequent messaging, meetings, training programs, coaching, and assignments.
- Validate understanding of the playbook contents with an emphasis on what will be done differently. Address any lack of understanding and commitment.
- Establish metrics, accountabilities, and consequences for playbook execution.
- Implement the playbook. Use it to guide decision making, execution, operational reviews, and performance management.
- Provide the playbook to all new hires as part of their onboarding process.

## Maintaining a playbook:

- Assign ownership for playbook maintenance.
- Establish a mechanism to receive suggestions for ongoing improvement. Include lessons learned from win-loss reviews, project post-mortems, and best practices obtained from external sources.
- Agree on a process to make updates to the playbook.
- Distribute and communicate updates to the playbook.
- Provide ongoing coaching and training on the execution of the playbook.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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