

## Book Review & Analysis

### THE FOUR OBSESSIONS OF AN EXTRAORDINARY EXECUTIVE, by Patrick Lencioni

Reviewed by Tom Deaderick, SEP 30, 2021

#### Objective(s)

- Summarize the book, extracting the most useful elements for others
- Relate the book's methods to our processes and challenges for discussion and implementation.

#### Legend

Excerpts from the book are in black with page numbers.

Commentary is in blue.

"If everything is important, then nothing is." (p. xi)

I could not agree more with this statement. I have often challenged people to list the projects or tasks that might be assumed to be within their team's domain that they were intentionally not doing or deprioritizing. My quote on this is more of a challenge. If you can't tell me what you're strategically not doing, you don't have a strategy yet.

"During meetings, Rich asked more pointed questions than ever before...he spent more time listening during staff meetings, and when he did jump into a conversation, it was usually to refocus people on the topic at hand." (p. 18)

If you're doing all the talking during interviews, you're doing it wrong.

"Rich enjoyed doing performance reviews for his staff members. In fact, he insisted on doing them every quarter, believing that letting more than three months go by between formal feedback sessions was irresponsible." (p. 31)

When I was president of Intellithought (130 employee IT Services Company), I completely changed the way we did performance reviews. Managers are just people, and like most people, they prefer to avoid confronting an employee with the kinds of issues that are really at the core of the larger performance issues.

Any half-capable manager is comfortable giving people advice on small, mostly inconsequential aspects that they feel might improve an employee's deliverables, but dealing with behavioral, integrity, or work ethic issues (among others) is tough. You're intruding into a person's core when you do that, and the boundaries between what we should and should not try to change about a person are not hard science, they're judgement.

Because managers tended to procrastinate dealing with these tougher challenges, I observed managers saying they would bring the issue up with the employee in the next performance review, even if it was months away.

Clearly, this is not fair to the employee, you're letting them go farther down the wrong path, and just as clearly, it's not good for the organization because those wrong behaviors impact and influence other employees and they impact the business.

So, I made a rule that managers are not allowed to share a single corrective issue during the annual performance review. I changed the name of the reviews to "You Are Heres" (YAHs), like a pin on a map. The only things a manager could discuss in the annual review were things the employee was doing well.

This forced managers to deal with corrective actions when they occurred rather than waiting.

The YAHs were a real success. No one dreaded our performance reviews, and the managers were focused on identifying employee's best behaviors and guiding them during the annual reviews to improve their capabilities and knowledge.

"Jamie appeared to be unmoved by the directness of the remark. Inside he was boiling." (p. 35)

It would be better if Lencioni described Jamie's reactions rather than telling us what he thought. Managers cannot read minds. We must interpret what people are thinking from the outside.

"Besides, the way we execute is ultimately going to determine how successful this is anyway."

This is just mentioned briefly in the book, but it caught my eye because I believe people spend a disproportionate amount of time trying to envision the "perfect" strategy, one that tries to factor in all unknowns, and future technologies.

Weeks are spent on strategies, but I always say that I can beat the first-place strategy with a third-place strategy, because I focus on the successful implementation.

Companies don't spend enough time with the tactical planning below the overarching strategy, if they did, their projects would always have the maximum success possible.

Besides, predicting the future is challenging. You're not going to be right. It's better to be agile and effective, then you can adjust.

"But one thing I have to say about them is that not once did I ever hear them say anything negative about a member of the team." (p. 99)

Most of this book is focused on leadership. My contact with HCA leadership is not wide, but I am unaware of anyone in leadership falling short in this regard. Leaders here rarely, at least within my hearing or observation, criticize other leaders.

I believe this pattern of behavior saturates the teams as well.

Lencioni goes into more detail on page 150...

"Gossip requires the intent to hurt someone, and it is almost always accompanied by an unwillingness to confront a person directly with the information being discussed."

"Anyone who interviewed a candidate had to evaluate the person in terms of the company's values. When they talked about a potential new hire, they talked about values. And during interviews, they asked behavioral questions to see if the candidate could cite examples that demonstrated that he or she fit the values." (p. 104)

Other people like to ask candidates technical questions, and there's a place for those, but between a person's resume, their LinkedIn site and the questions other people typically ask in interviews, I know that will be covered extensively. I always focus on behavioral and internal insight questions.

I keep a list of the questions that I've developed over the years and go into the interview with them in front of me, then I write down the responses and my thoughts during the meeting.

I'm sharing them here because anyone that is invested enough to read these reviews before an interview with me is demonstrating qualities that we want, and even advance notice of my favorite questions doesn't ensure you can answer them well in an interview.

## **My interview questions:**

Q: What was a recent (within the last year) criticism that you received that you actually agree with?

Every time I ask this question, the candidate pauses and says something like, "Wow, that's a good question." It **is** a good question, and it has almost always revealed something about a candidate that has not yet come forward.

Everyone's ready for the usual, "what are your weaknesses?" types of questions, so the responses are canned. In this response, they must recount a situation where someone found fault in them, and they need to show the maturity to accept the feedback and transform it into a useful modification.

They're also trying, somewhat frantically, to filter everything they are thinking so they don't say anything that causes them to look bad. Because it's nearly impossible to manage all these things in a few seconds, you tend to get an honest response. I have received several responses to this question that, alone, caused us to move away from a candidate that the other questions didn't reveal as a bad fit.

Q: What's a job that you were good at, but didn't like?

This question reveals a lot. Sometimes, they'll tell you that something you need them to do isn't something they like. The follow up, if necessary, is to ask for the specific aspects they didn't like.

Q: Think about a person who wouldn't say good things about you, and you be them telling us about you. Extra points if you act it out.

I always say it like this.

During interviews, unless the company's culture forbids it, I want to come across very informally. I want to get the candidate's guard down. I have had a couple people act it out, even speaking in the voice and accent of the other person. It's not essential of course. No matter how nice a person is, how careful, there's something about them that just rubs someone else the wrong way. Let's find out what that is in the interview.

Q: Tell us about a person who has frustrated you in the past? Why?

Typically, a performer will describe a person that's not pulling their weight. If you're working hard, the people who most frustrate you will usually, maybe not always, but usually, be the people who aren't. If you're not the person who is frustrated about underperformers, chances are it's because you are the underperformer.

The other thing I'm listening for is someone who is frustrated with leadership. If you're frustrated with leadership, maybe it is because leadership is horrible, but maybe it's because you haven't learned that figuring out how to be effective even with imperfect leadership. That's important, because there is no perfect leadership.

Q: What did you do last week that you feel the best about?

Everyone's ready to tell you about the achievements of the last year, so I frame the question just at last week. A productive person has achievements every week.

Q: Think of someone that does some of the same tasks you do, but you think they are not doing it in the best possible way, tell me why.

This is a time-saver. Rather than me asking a lot of questions and trying to figure out how they might stack up to peers, I like to start with what they think.

Q: How do you think we'll be doing this (insert a business process relevant to the role, like identifying users, or provisioning people, etc.) in five years?

I like to ask about the future because all projections are based on current day practices, and you can't make a decent prediction about the future without a good understanding of the current trends and processes. I also want to find people that have no trouble sighting for change.

Q: This is not really a question, but just something that I do.

Every interview is an opportunity for me to make my existing team members feel good about themselves and their role on the team. I always describe some of the highlights or strengths of a person as I introduce them or when I reference them in my other questions.

This shows the existing team that I value them in a public setting, and it shows the candidate that this is a team where people's gifts are valued.

"And then they make all the interviewers get together in a room and debrief." (p.122)

I implemented an improvement on this at the companies where I've been a leader. Near the end of the interview, I ask the candidate to step out for a moment and I debrief with the interview team. We discuss any concerns, or exiting aspects the candidate has shared. We'll take five minutes or less, then call the candidate back into the room. I'll share a few encouraging aspects with the

candidate and then I'll share our concerns. We now use WebEx chat to share notes and concerns during the interview, so we no longer step out of the room to discuss.

Giving the candidate a chance to elaborate on, or refute, our concerns is much more productive than the whole rest of the interview. We get to see how they handle challenges; they have a chance to clear up areas where we might just have not understood their response - that's happened several times.

Often, by the time the interview is over, it will be the candidate's responses to those concerns that sold us on them - or tipped them over the edge.

There's another reason for doing this. I believe every candidate should get something out of the time they spent with us. If they are missing the mark by the way they describe themselves, shouldn't we tell them and let them learn to be better so they and their family have the best possible future? I would want my sons to be interviewed by people who did this, so I do it.

"Rich would list the major objectives for each quarter on a board, and then he'd ask everyone to think of every possible thing that had to happen for each goal to be reached. When the staff exhausted every activity, he divided them up among staff and began their individual goal-setting process there." (p. 105)

I love this informal structure. If there's just one thing we could implement from this book, it would be to have project meetings that are like this. Get together, discuss what's needed with the key stakeholders, get those tasks on the backlog and get to them.

On pages 123 through 124, Lencioni describes a very informal performance evaluation process with four questions:

1. What did you accomplish?
2. What will you accomplish next?
3. How can you improve?
4. Are you embracing the values?

I won't spend a lot of time on this because a large company has a high legal profile and therefore requires consistency in areas that could involve disagreements between manager and employee. I believe that less can be more in this regard though, and that HR should provide the bare minimum structure that achieves the necessary legal protections without removing a manager's ability to improvise, given that every employee's needs are not always fitted perfectly to the standards.

I don't think there is much that we can actually do in this area that we have liberty to do, and I have not invested myself in a way that would be in-depth enough to have a valid viewpoint. Sometimes, it is best to trust that the people leading HR are making good choices, and I feel that is typically the case.

"Rich used to say that he wanted people to run out of things to talk about. Because that was when they would start talking about the important things." (p. 125)

We all have enough material in front-of-mind to script out 15 or 30 minutes. After that, you're creating. So, I think there's some truth to that.

"No one reads email or does ancillary busywork during meetings, even when the issue on the table is not directly related to them." (p. 145)

Nearly everyone today is guilty of this. A recent study found that the people who consider themselves good multitaskers are worse at it than the people who find multi-tasking is a challenge.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2013/01/24/170160105/if-you-think-youre-good-at-multitasking-you-probably-arent>

When you're successfully multitasking, what you're really doing is responding. You're listening just enough to respond, but because your mind is otherwise engaged, you're not thinking ahead, or looking for solutions to the problems being discussed the way you would if you had no distractions.

So, you're never really giving very much of your true potential if you're multitasking, and if you're always multitasking, you're never giving your true potential.

"What is most important is that team members get comfortable letting their colleagues see them for who they are. No pretension. No positioning." (p. 146)

I don't believe it is specifically stated in the book, but this is the single unifying concept across the entirety of the book. None of the other tricks, suggestions or tactics described fall outside, or are possible without, this lack of formality. I believe this is the greatest possible improvement that could be made from this book.

Lencioni recommends another book that seems interesting, "The Wisdom of Teams" by Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith.

Since we are all part of many teams, but a much smaller number of us are in management, this book might yield value for us. I will check it out.

"But organizational clarity is not merely about choosing the right words to describe a company's mission, strategy or values; it is about agreeing on the fundamental concepts that drive it." (p. 151)

There are examples around of that suggest we could improve in this. I have been on several calls where people from various, and widespread, parts of the organization actually expressed that they were not clear on just what the company's business case is for implementing cloud infrastructure and applications or moving more of the infrastructure off-premises.

There are numerous possible reasons, but I don't believe anyone has clearly stated which of those reasons are driving these efforts. Are we looking to reduce costs, if so, how much is being saved? It would be helpful to know because change incurs cost, moving to new platforms will usually create a pause, and often, it will necessitate some backward movement before you're able to move forward again with more efficiency (hopefully).

(RE: Organizational Clarity) "...it allows them to make decisions and resolve problems without constant supervision and advice from managers. Essentially, organizational clarity allows a company to delegate more effectively and empower its employees with a true sense of confidence." (p. 151)

It is not easy to find room for autonomy within large companies. Every conceivable idea, every conceivable task is tied to a large stakeholder network, essentially a web.

Presumably, those established in leadership have observed that because of this large network of connected tasks, interaction across functions can be disruptive and as a result, they have instituted a protective response to this risk. Employees learn, without any formal instruction, to be cautious in situations requiring cross-functional collaboration.

This is my observation and belief, and I could obviously be wrong.

This caution stands somewhat in the way of the less formal, more organic innovation and teamwork described in the book and I believe it is important to at least acknowledge this and perhaps evaluate whether we are balanced in the desired manner between potential organizational chaos and decreased innovation.

To me, that is a strategic question at the same level of the book's protagonist asks. Are we balancing chaos and innovation the way we want? It's quite possible that the extra care in cross-functional collaboration helps avoid considerable churn and has a higher payback than any lost opportunities for more organic innovation.

Strategic clarity isn't all that's required for the "environment of empowerment, traction, and urgency" however.

Leaders, with the best of intentions, want to minimize opportunities for failure by subordinates. There is a widespread desire that any deliverable, report, metric, or presentation be perfect, and considerable time spent reviewing and considering before moving forward.

People trying new things will fail. They will not get everything polished as well as those from processes that are long-established.

The desire to achieve a comprehensive deliverable can impede innovation. People will fail, we can help them back up and if a minor slip is a career-limiting matter, the problem that needs most to be addressed is the culture, not the minor imperfections of its employees.

(Re: Built to Last) "...describe the concept in detail and provide examples of companies that were able to articulate their core reason for being, as well as their core values" (p. 156)

"The key to answering this question lies in avoiding the tendency to adopt every positive value that exists. Many companies I've worked with want to claim that they are equally committed to quality, innovation, teamwork, ethics, integrity, custom satisfaction, employee development, financial results, and community involvement." (p. 157)

I really appreciate that, as an organization, we genuinely adhere to a patient-centric mission. I don't think I would feel as good coming to work every day to serve an organization that **only** wanted to make money. I do, of course, want to work for an organization that does make money, anything else isn't a good career bet.

However, as important as that is, what really drives me is closer to this...

"I believe that character is important. That good people draw more good people to them. That any job worth doing is worth doing well."

- Dr. Thomas Frist Sr.  
HCA Healthcare Co-Founder

I want to be a craftsman at anything I do. If I'm asked to review a book, I give it my all, if I see an opportunity to make things better that requires a skill that I don't have, I commit myself fully, not just to learn it, but to become a craftsman at it. I love learning and becoming more today than I was tomorrow, even when it's mentally taxing and sometimes stressful.

I know that what I'm doing does not directly help a patient. I don't interact directly with them at all. However, I know that what I'm doing is a valuable part of the service that does, and that if I do it well, and everyone else does their part to the best of their ability, it will all work, and we will achieve great things.

"One way that I help executive teams identify their fundamental values is by asking them to think about the two or three employees whom they believe best embody what is good about the firm." (p. 158)

"Then I ask them to write down one or two adjectives that describe the employees they selected." (p. 158)

"To help them solidify their thinking, I then ask them to identify the one or two employees who have left the firm, or should leave the firm, because of their behavior or performance." (p. 158)

"Almost without fail, the same adjectives appear on most team members' lists, and these often embody the antithesis of the company's fundamental values." (p. 158)

Obviously, this looks like a useful experiment.

"Because all employees should be made to feel like salespeople or ambassadors for the firm." (p. 160)

I believe every job is a sales job. We all need to convince other people from time to time, on one matter or another. How much better would we all be at our jobs if everyone had an hour of sales training?

"The key is taking the time to look at all the decisions that the company has made, even the obvious ones, and identify those that, when combined, make the company uniquely positioned for success." (p. 161)



"At the highest level, an organization should have one or two basic thematic goals for a given period." (p. 161)

I could not believe this more strongly. I have been part of organizations where leadership tacked one major initiative after another up as "Priority 1". It's a cliché that there are so many "Priority 1" projects.

I once told my company's CIO that the only people that were **not** creating company strategy were those in leadership.

He was shocked and offended and told me it wasn't true. I assured him that it was. I explained that every day, 13,000 employees came to work and decided which of the "priority" tasks they would work on first, using their own best judgment that included many more challenging criteria than a computer program could manage.

- Is this task holding someone else back?
- Is that task under a tighter timeline?
- Will the person demanding this task break the chain of command and bring my boss down on me?

Those 13,000 people were doing an overall fantastic job with the organization's strategy every day, and you know that because the organization survived. And the only people that were not involved with that strategy were the people in leadership that did not have the discipline necessary to prioritize employee's tasks.

"The key to managing this challenge, of course, is to identify a reasonable number of issues that will have the greatest possible impact on the success of your organization." (p. xi)

"they turn away more business than they take." (p. 128)

RE: Thematic goals

Thematic goals:

What is this period's focus?

Major strategic goals:

What are the key areas which relate to that focus, and exactly what needs to be achieved?

Metrics:

What are the ongoing measures that allow the organization to keep score?

"Once an organization has clarified these areas, it can call on its various departments to build their own goals, in a manner that is aligned with the direction of the entire organization." (p. 163)

This is excellent. Structured and informal.

"One of the greatest problems that organizations encounter when it comes to achieving clarity is the inability to translate company goals into concrete responsibilities for members of the executive team." (p. 165)

This is a problem at all levels. Interestingly, Lencioni has already provided the answer to this problem, but does not call it forward here.

The answer, of course, is that executives **are** employees, and the same way we want employees to feel empowered enough to take active part in fitting their responsibilities to the overarching strategy, works just fine for executives.

We are all, as a whole of course, better at fitting our responsibilities and abilities to the strategy than anyone in leadership could be. What's often missing is the clarification, from leadership, that this is the expected and desired approach, rather than the top-down omniscient guidance that some employees crave.