

**Q&A with Dan Coughlin  
on his new book,  
*Accelerate: 20 Practical Lessons to Boost Business Momentum***

Here are questions that readers of *Accelerate* have sent to Dan Coughlin. His responses follow each question.

If you have a specific question for Dan Coughlin regarding an idea in *Accelerate*, please e-mail the question to Dan at [dan@thecoughlincompany.com](mailto:dan@thecoughlincompany.com). In the subject heading write, "Questions on *Accelerate*." Please identify the chapter in the book which you are asking about when you send in your question. He will respond to your question directly, and he will post your question and his answer in this section. You are welcome to ask more than one question.

## **Part One – Accelerate Your Individual Results**

### Enhancing Personal Effectiveness

#### *Chapter 1: Enhance Personal Effectiveness - Understand your greatest value*

If you shouldn't spend time ("vast majority") trying to improve your weaknesses - how do you improve and become "good" at other things? In other words, if you spend time trying to improve your weaknesses, won't you turn those into strengths, also?

**Coughlin: Put all of your skills in three buckets: A level, B level, and C level. Let's say you have ten hours a week that you could spend developing your skills. In ten hours you could take a C level skill to a C+ level or you could take an A level skill to an A+. Which one, the A+ or the C+ skill, will have a greater impact on your business.**

**The only time I suggest you focus on developing your weaknesses is if you have a debilitating weakness. For example, I'm basically a C player when it comes to technology, but I've invested time in learning about podcasts, blogging, websites, and so on because those are critically important to your business. If you are a C level public speaker and public speaking is critically important to your function, then I encourage you to improve that weakness. But if you're a C level at spreadsheets and you have a highly competent administrative assistant, then I don't encourage you to take a computer class just to improve your skills.**

What if, after identifying your individual strengths and passions, you realize that you are not operating at the "intersection of greatness" in your current position? If you do not see the opportunity within the company to utilize all your strengths or work at the things that you are passionate about, is it time to look for another job even though you know that your skills are contributing to the overall success of the organization? Is just "being functional" mean that you can't add value?

**Coughlin:** The vast majority of employees that add value are in the functional quadrant. From the organization's point of view, that's ok because functional people can do a good job and help the organization move forward.

However, in terms of your own career, I encourage you not to just be functional. I encourage you to look for ways to apply your specific strengths and passions as often as possible in moving the business results forward. In that way you are adding your greatest value and you are moving your career forward. But in order to do that you have to take conscious control of your career and be willing to say no to your boss, take lateral moves in your organization, or shift to a different organization. None of those are easy.

*Chapter 1: Ten Areas Where Discipline is Truly Essential*

How do you say no when you know deep down the best answer for the organization/individual is yes? I have a hard time saying no to people who need help. It's not my nature – but it really gets me off track.

**Coughlin:** Then don't say no. Say, "I can't take on that task right now. Let's pull out our calendars. Which time slot would be better for you: next Tuesday at 9 AM or next Wednesday at 2 PM? Also, please e-mail me your specific question with any key information that I should know so that I can be prepared to help you." By putting some responsibility back on the other person's shoulders and causing them to schedule a time slot with you, many times the other people will simply solve the problem themselves.

Is there a good way to be more "organized" and or "prioritized" when each of us wears so many different hats and responds to so many different issues daily or weekly?

**Coughlin:** Ask yourself, "What's the single most important outcome I want to improve at work tomorrow?" Consider that question and then write down your answer. Then write down the three things you can do that would have the greatest positive impact on that outcome. Then put those three things on your schedule. Then repeat that process until your schedule is filled up for tomorrow. Suddenly your list of activities will have a much greater impact on moving the business forward.

What is the most common weakness you see in executives you've coached? (Do you maintain a weakness checklist?)

**Coach:** I don't keep a weakness checklist, but I would say the two most common causes of career deterioration for executives is poor communication and poor priority management. Many times, an executive was promoted because of an exceptional performance in some functional area of the business such as operations, finance, sales, or marketing. When they become a senior executive they think the key is to stay focused on the functional areas

of the business. Consequently, the non-effective executive doesn't focus on building relationships and trust, but instead focuses on the details of marketing or operations. The main job of a senior executive is to clarify the direction the organization is heading in, and then to build trusting relationships and influence how other people think. In a word, leadership.

The other problem for executives is the ineffective executive feels he needs to earn his substantial income, and consequently works a ridiculous number of hours. He places a primary emphasis on doing a lot of activities rather than doing a few activities extremely well that would have the greatest positive impact on improving the most important business outcomes.

How do you hook up with an executive to be coached?

**Coughlin:** Either someone else refers me to the person, or they read one of my books or one of my articles and they look into what working with me would be like. Usually after an hour or so we can both tell whether or not we will have the chemistry necessary to make for an effective Executive Coaching relationship.

How can I use the skills I possess to better help other people succeed?

**Coughlin:** That's really a multiple part question. The real questions are:

1. Who are the specific individuals that you want to add value to?
2. What are the most important outcomes they want to improve?
3. What are your greatest strengths?
4. How can you use those strengths to improve the most important outcomes for those individuals?

I am also a great believer that passion, coupled with talent, persistence and clarity, is a road map to success. Sounds easy, but in practical terms, if a person is already overwhelmed by doing the "necessities" for survival, how do you find time to pursue the real roadmap to success?

**Coughlin:** First, stop. I mean it. Come to a complete stop. Then take out a sheet of paper, and at the top write down the most important outcome that you want to improve for your organization. Then write down the three things you can do that would have the greatest positive impact on improving that outcome. Then, and this is the hardest part, identify six things you need to stop doing so you have the time and energy to do the three things that would matter the most. Begin to engage your boss in meaningful conversations around narrowing your focus on the activities you both really feel will have the greatest positive impact on results.

## Priority Management

### *Chapter 2: Twenty Ways to Take Control of Your Life*

In point 8, Coughlin writes that only 60 percent of any workday should be scheduled, that time should be spent in talking with people, coaching or observing people in action. Using that example, our staff would work an average of 4.8 hours per day per person. If several of our staff members are working after normal business hours and at home on projects, what are those people doing wrong or, better, what are the others doing right?

**Coughlin: Notice I didn't say you would work only 4.8 hours a day. I said only schedule 4.8 hours a day. During the other hours you can take care of crises or problems as they arise, you can refine projects that you've been working on, and you can respond effectively to opportunities as they open up to add more value to your customers. If you schedule every minute of the day and a problem pops up, then you have to either work incredibly long hours that will exhaust you or you will start rearranging your schedules, and everyone else's schedules, to deal with the problem.**

In chapter two it suggests to read e-mail and listen to voice mails only twice a day so that you control your time better. What might this do to the efficiency of those who are awaiting a response?

**Coughlin: If your job entails giving people immediate responses to questions, then you should check your e-mails more often. However, you have to be very careful with e-mail. If you build the expectation with customers that you are always available via e-mail, then you are setting yourself up to be interrupted in the middle of every conversation and in the middle of every thinking moment. That ruins relationships and never allows you to come up with any breakthrough ideas.**

**The vast majority of the people I've observed could easily tell others, "I check my e-mail twice a day, once at 8 AM and once at 2 PM. If you need a response from me, then just know that I will check it at those times and respond to your need when I see it." In that way, the other person knows he has to take responsibility for getting info to you in a timely manner.**

What is your attitude toward staff meetings in general? How many are enough and how many are too many? Will they accelerate better cooperation between staffs?

**Coughlin: Staff meetings are either incredibly valuable or largely a waste of time. I think meetings that consist of warmup exercises and reports are a waste of time. Meetings that have 2-3 key open-ended questions focused on critical business items that engage the best thinking of everyone in the room and lead to practical steps toward improving high priority business outcomes**

are incredibly valuable. The former leaves the group feeling empty, and the latter leaves the group feeling fulfilled and excited about the future.

**I think a focused two-hour meeting can be very effective every three weeks. Send out the agenda one week before the meeting with the open-ended questions on it for everyone to consider. Then have the meeting, develop action plans when possible, and then have regular updates distributed via e-mail.**

### Communication

In an environment with multiple managers, served by multiple administrative positions, what would be a suggestion for working with some of the communication abyss items that one person might experience but another person does not see because they work with the manager every day?

**Coughlin: If you have a trusting relationship, then I encourage you to give the other person, even if he or she is your boss, honest, candid feedback in a private meeting behind closed doors. Sometimes that can be the very best thing you can do for the other person. If you do not have a trusting relationship, then keep your thoughts to yourself. One of the most counterproductive behaviors I've seen is when people badmouth other employees when the other person is not present. That is a complete waste of time and energy, and may very well lead to you being looked upon as less than favorable.**

What steps would help establish an administrative meeting (like the type that managers have once a month) to allow sharing what needs to be accomplished for all the managers? A focused monthly meeting, giving time for conversations to happen regarding who is overloaded (looking ahead due to multiple projects or quarterly deadlines). Laying out what will be happening and what does each one need to get this done?? Giving others information and the opportunity to know where help is needed would facilitate less stress at major deadlines and better communication regarding the company goals we all serve.

**Coughlin: Administrative assistants are just as critical to the success of an organization as is any other function. Many executives I've met could not function without their admin person. I believe administrative assistants should have the same type of meetings that are focused on improving high priority business outcomes as any other department or function. The first question could be, "What two high priority business outcomes are we focused on improving over the next 90 days?" And the second question could be, "What three things can we do to accelerate the achievement of the first high priority business outcome?" In this way, the admin team will be thinking and acting like senior executives.**

Our meetings seem to be productive, but sometimes there is a breakdown of communication following the meetings. What do you feel is the most effective way to keep communication flowing following meetings? Managers and staff discuss additional information separately after the meeting without including the entire group and this leads to confusion and duplication of efforts to accomplish the goal.

**Coughlin: Meetings are like newspaper and twigs to start a fire, but if you don't have logs on top that fire will burn out very quickly. The logs are the communication mechanisms that keep the spirit of the meeting alive. I believe key updates should be sent out once a week to everyone involved or connected to the key action items that arose during the meeting. Those updates should consist of no more than 7-8 bullet point items. One of those bullet point items should be, "What we have learned from taking these actions is..." That way the individuals and the group as a whole are constantly learning and improving.**

In order to accelerate as individuals, you talk about working and communicating with others. For a staff of ten people, we work together to get things done that everyone needs, but the problems seem to be in dealing with our business partners and what we do. The question is...how do we "better" influence them to see our capabilities and at the same time help us see what their needs are and what we should be responding to?

**Coughlin: I encourage you to be outcome-focused. What high priority business outcomes do your business partners want to improve? Don't guess, ask them. Then communicate to them ways that you can help them improve those outcomes. Share with them references and testimonials of other people who have worked with you in deploying your capacity for adding value. Every one wants to feel comfortable when they start to use a new form of value-added.**

For managers and staff that don't communicate using the 22 steps provided -- how can they implement them after working the way they have for so long? How can a manager regain their credibility after making some of the mistakes you list in your book?

**Coughlin: As with all human relationships, the key after making a mistake is to apologize, ask for forgiveness if it was an unethical act, ask for another chance, and work to prove yourself capable of doing things in a better way. And then be very patient. It takes time to rebuild trust. But I think most people are very forgiving as well. If the other person can't accept your apology or forgive you or trust you, then you will need to move on to other people to work with either inside your organization or inside another organization.**

I find myself dealing with employees and managers using different methods of communication. For example: Some people you have to treat with "kid gloves" when

speaking to them in order to not hurt their feelings or cause conflict. Others you have to push pretty hard to get something done. How can I stay consistent and still communicate effectively?

**Coughlin: Be consistent in your values; that is, in terms of what you believe to be true. For example, if you value honesty, then never tell a lie. However, one of the keys to leadership is being able to meet the personality needs of other people. Providing a bullet point format for a quick decision-maker and providing tons of written documentation for a conscientious decision-maker is being dishonest; it's being a great influencer.**

## Part Two – Accelerate Your Staff’s Results

### Lack of Unity

At our organization, personality clashes seem to create conflict that holds back our ability to really succeed. What is the answer? So-called “petty” issues seem to impede all progress and become bigger than life. It’s like a dime holding up a dollar.

**Coughlin: What’s petty to you may be absolutely critical to another person? What is probably happening is you aren’t spending enough time working to understand each other’s personality needs and how best to support one another. And then, boom, walls go up. Here’s a question and a statement that I think could help: “What can I do to support you better?” and “What I appreciate about you is \_\_\_\_.” Ask each other the question and repeat it five or six times to really flush out how you can support the other person better. It doesn’t mean you will do everything. It just means you will consider what you’ve heard. And then share your answers to the statement five or six times with the other person.**

### Teamwork

How do you help create the internal environment to establish the co-operative efforts versus working for one person? (Environment has not tried that approach effectively in the past.) Goals that are very broad do not encourage the detail needed for the entire plan, time is most often spent in the details and that seems to cause some issue with staff members not involved. Even though the managers do not need to be involved they need to be informed and help with prioritizing projects. Maybe the better question would be: How do the administrative staff members get permission to meet and set collaborative goals that are in sync with their manager’s schedules and priorities?

**Coughlin: Teamwork is built one project at a time. Teamwork is not built by clarifying a vision and mission statement. As each project begins, bring the members of that group together and discuss everyone’s answer to this question, “What is the purpose of this project? What are we hoping to improve or achieve as a result of this project?” And then have the members of the group answer this question, “How can we best support one another toward fulfilling that purpose or achieving our goals?” By engaging the members in the clarification of the purpose and how to support one another, you now have the framework in place for great teamwork. The key is to stick with this framework and not just leave it on a whim or in the midst of a busy day.**

In Coughlin’s book, he writes: “The harsh reality of business teamwork is that it almost never materializes.” He suggests that shortly after teamwork discussions, everyone returns to their “silos.” If this is true (and I do agree with Coughlin), how do

companies overcome the obstacle... if, in fact, it really is an obstacle? Are we a weak organization because some do work in silos?

**Coughlin: I would say you're weaker than you would be if all the functions within the company understood the overarching purpose for why the organization exists. But that's not nearly enough. To have true teamwork, as I wrote above, the functions need to operate as a team on cross-functional projects. In that way, the focus moves beyond a department silo and into a team-focused project that can add more value to customers and will help achieve better results in high priority business outcomes for the company.**

Regarding resolving emotional issues: What is the most effective way to resolve emotional issues constructively without causing more damage and hurt feelings?

**Coughlin: Drop sarcasm and cynicism. They will hurt the relationship even more. Stay calm and professional and communicate to the other person with dignity and respect. Also, be well rested so that you don't fall into poor communication due to being tired. And then in privacy have open, honest conversations. I suggest you go to lunch together away from the building. The time invested in relationship building can save enormous amounts of time and energy in the future.**

How can I change my reactions to my co-worker's indifferences? How can I change my own indifferences or other people's perceptions of me?

**Coughlin: Essentially, take conscious control of your career. A manager's job consists of making decisions, communicating messages, and displaying non-verbal behavior. If you want to become more effective, take responsibility for your non-verbal communications. To address an attitude of indifference, you have to work to clarify the valuable purpose that you strive to fulfill in your work. Everyone has a valuable purpose in their work, but many times it gets forgotten. Go back to your first day on the job. Why did you take that position? Why did the company hire you for that position? What do you hope to achieve in this position? And help others do the same for their roles.**

It's often quoted, "there is no "I" in "Team." Often, however, we find individuals here with strong personalities who are also emotional or sensitive become defensive when they feel others are questioning their "approach" or their "results." This holds back progress on improving services or processes. What can be done to reassure or perhaps reword the question or approach, to lessen the ownership and be more organizationally or "team" minded?

**Coughlin: One way is to ask the other person. You might say, "You seem offended with the way I asked that. What would be a better way for me to ask you this kind of question or share with you this kind of information?" If you do that in a private meeting with the other person, and you sincerely and patiently**

**wait for the response, you can begin to breakthrough these difficult situations. Most walls are built up between people when they don't know each other very well.**

What does "add value to another person" mean??? How do you "add value" to another person? Do you mean "help" another person?

**Coughlin: To me, value means anything that will increase the chances that the other person will achieve what he or she wants to achieve. That might mean just listening to them vent, it might mean sharing an article you read with the person, or it might mean giving the person very honest, candid feedback on a recent presentation.**

Collaboration and teamwork are by no means new business concepts. Hasn't their rise coincided with a simultaneous decline in the international dominance of American business? Clearly, the Japanese have "caught the rising sun" after WW II, and they have to be considered the leaders in the team approach to manufacturing; however, at the management end of these manufacturing businesses, aren't they clearly male dominated, and individually led?

**Coughlin: At the end of the day, someone has to make a decision. That person is usually the highest ranking executive in the group, or the person who has been empowered to oversee a particular project. However, it's been my experience that the executives who encouraged a patient, collaborative discussion with all the members in the group before making a final decision generated better sustainable results than the executives who came in and told the group what to do. Clearly, Toyota, a Japanese company, is a great example of this approach. But I wouldn't say a company has to be male dominated or individually led to be effective in using this approach.**

Where does the value of group-think end and individual leadership take over? Offhand I can only think of Thomas Edison and his lab rats and the secret work of the atomic bomb developers having groups demonstrating the level of achievement comparable to individual risk takers. Can you imagine the Gettysburg Address after it would go through a corporate copy approval process?

**Coughlin: Actually Lincoln did get feedback from a variety of individuals before he delivered the Gettysburg Address. He wasn't looking for corporate approval. He was looking for suggestions and ideas. Same is true for Martin Luther King, Jr. and his famous "I Have A Dream" speech. Group think can add a lot of great ideas and suggestions. Consider those suggestions and ideas, incorporate what you feel will enhance the final product, and then make a decision and move into action.**

I haven't felt like we are a team for quite some time. How do you suggest I personally can get the sense that I am part of a team back? We're such a small

group and sometimes I feel lack of teamwork from co-workers and managers. What can you do to make others understand the importance of teamwork with such a small company?

**Coughlin: Start with the very next project. Ask everyone involved in the project, “What is the purpose of this project?” After the group discusses and comes to a decision on the purpose of the project, have them answer this question, “How can we better support one another to fulfill that purpose?” As I said earlier, this is the foundation for teamwork and it can start at any time with any group. And then the real proof is in the pudding as the days move forward. If people support each other toward fulfilling the purpose, then the group has teamwork. And if they don’t, then they don’t have teamwork.**

### Collaboration

Our mission statement and our tagline is very specific - we are committed to helping our customers. At least we're supposed to be. Sometimes I don't think everyone remembers that during each and every phone call. We all need a certain level of compassion towards our customers when you hear their business unit is closing, is being bought out or has been destroyed by fire, storm, etc. How can we make sure we remember that every time we have a conversation with the customer - that they are our customer?

**Coughlin: Essentially, you’re talking about human relations. And that is what separates the great companies from the mediocre. Every company is in a relationship business. If it was your best friend that just suffered a catastrophe, how would you treat that person? Well, treat your customer the same way.**

I have found myself turning over work to others because I feel that I don't have time to do certain assignments. Some items I have kept because I am afraid to cause conflict. How can I tell someone I don't have time to do certain items of work without looking incompetent? How do you tell certain people you have had conflict with that you can no longer work on something due to time restraints that was assigned to you in the past? How can I ignore (if it cannot be avoided) hard feelings that seem to arise every time an assignment is handed over?

**Coughlin: Trying to please people for the sake of pleasing them is exhausting. I suggest you don’t do that. Ask yourself what are the highest priority outcomes for your organization that you want to focus on improving this week. Engage your boss in that conversation. And then commit your time to doing work, either by yourself or in support of other people, that will have the greatest positive impact on improving those outcomes. Everyday you have to say no to lots of possibilities. Don’t worry what other people think about you. Stay purposeful in your work. Of course, you will disappoint someone because no one can be with every person on every project.**

When you are doing one on one coaching there are specific results you can track to see results....when you work in an organization what process works best to determine the effectiveness of teams with individual members reaching particular goals? ie, Did you fail at *collaboration* even if you delivered your part of a project on time and someone else could not find the time in their schedule to meet the deadline?

**Coughlin: You didn't "fail" at all. Collaboration, communication, teamwork, and leadership are all intangibles. You can't measure them, but you can measure the progress of a high priority business outcome. The intangibles can be "internal achievements" that will help to improve "external achievements" such as greater sales or better profit margins or other measurable items. The external achievements serve as indicators on how to improve the intangibles.**

### Execution

I really agree with Part I of *Before the Planned Activities Happen* in Chapter 9. "Posting mission statements and core values on the wall does not constitute a culture. It is consistently displayed BEHAVIORS - not slogans - that create a culture. It is continually talking about EXPECTED BEHAVIORS and RESULTS and HOLDING PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE for those behaviors and results, you will instill the desired culture in everyone in the business." I believe most of our managers - and especially our CEO - "practices what he preaches" on a daily basis. How can we instill this in each and every manager and employee?

**Coughlin: You're talking about how to build a culture. First, model the desired behaviors. Second, reward and recognize the desired behaviors. Third, provide negative consequences when the "wrong" behaviors are demonstrated. If you do that consistently, you will build a strong culture. I once saw a rude person working at DisneyWorld, but the experience was so rare that it actually reinforced for me how strong their friendly culture really is. People aren't robots. You're not going to have "perfect" behavior every day by every person.**

Sacrificing planned activities is something I don't think any of us are capable of. How can we do this in our organization? How can we get anything important done when we spend so much time working on seemingly insignificant projects?

**Coughlin: That sounds like a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you're never willing to let go of anything, how are you ever going to have the time and the energy to do the few things you know would have the greatest positive impact on improving the most important business outcomes for your organization?**

## Part Three – Accelerate Your Organization’s Results

### Leadership Council

You mention that a Leadership Council usually consists of 6 to 8 people including a chairman, vice chair, secretary and treasurer. So, is that really 10 to 12 people or just the 6 to 8, in which case do we need to have one here that would be the whole staff or is this something the board should do to give us direction?

**Coughlin: A LCEC (Leadership Council Executive Committee) usually has 6 to 8 people. A Leadership Council could have up to 15-18 people.**

Page 145 Coughlin asks the question "When you're looking to add a new person to your organization, what do you look for?" The executive's response included - "I don't necessarily look for people who fit in." My question is what affect happens when adding a person that does not fit in with the rest of the team?

**Coughlin: I believe this executive was referring to the idea that not every member of the team has to be exactly like every other member. Sometimes you need someone who is very different from the rest of the group to add a new flavor and generate new ideas. Individuals don't have to "fit in," but they do need to be able to support one another toward achieving a clear, meaningful purpose.**

When you work with a diverse group sometimes there are disagreements and "head butting". How can this be avoided?

**Coughlin: Don't try to avoid it. Those disagreements, if handled in a professional manner with respect and dignity, can actually be the basis for innovative ideas and breakthrough strategies. Encourage "head butting" as long as it does not involved personal attacks and abusive language.**

### Strategic Planning / Strategic Focus

#### *Chapter 13: Gain Strategic Focus*

How do you/can you gain strategic focus when you have "competing" customers?  
ex: business partners versus customers

**Coughlin: A strategy is a story. It explains how a company is performing today, how it wants to perform in the future, and the path it intends to take to get there. That intended path will include a description of how it intends to add value to both business partners and customers.**

You mentioned the “red” and “blue” oceans. Given where our organization is and some of the business partners, how do you keep a “blue” ocean when we know some of the business partners are not providing the services necessary to our customers. That creates some infighting among them and leaves some to believe we are in a “red” ocean. How do we handle these types of situations better?

**Coughlin: I think you’re confusing strategy with holding business partners accountable. Part of management’s job is to establish a clear strategy. Another part of management’s job is to hold business partners accountable for their behaviors and decisions. You could have a great strategy, but be generating lousy results because of your inability to hold business partners accountable for their poor performances.**

Our teams work toward goals established through a strategic plan. What are some of the “self tests” we can work with to help achieve results that will benefit the team evaluations? If you work on a support level, what is the best way to determine your level of authority within the larger group? ( And if you are being effective....)  
A simple question but the lawyers involved with getting the job done can sometimes be difficult to navigate. Clear on one level (get the job done within this timeline), but if you are part of the support team, work can be negatively affected by other team members that do not share your time line and affect the results within your area.

**Coughlin: A strategic plan is merely a series of performances that need to happen in order to deliver desired business outcomes. Each performance should have a desired objective and a measurement in place for that objective. In that manner, everyone throughout the organization can see where they are hitting their objectives and where they are missing them. True team members pull together to support one another in hitting the desired performance levels throughout the strategy. Most people in support roles don’t have “authority” over other people, but they can develop the ability to influence how other people think, which is leadership and which is not related to title or income level.**

Coughlin suggests conducting an organizational audit targeted toward employees. However, would he support an organizational audit to learn if we have the capacity to do one or two things really well? I’m concerned that we’re stretched so thin that we try to do too many things, which makes me wonder when we complete projects whether we achieved our desired outcomes. Therefore, should we conduct an organizational audit?

**Coughlin: I suggest you conduct an Organizational Asset Audit so you know what strengths, passions, values, know-how, and resources you have to impact your desired business outcomes. And I encourage you to focus those assets within a clear strategy so that the collective impact will be far greater than if you disperse your assets over a vast array of activities that are not connected together.**

When conducting an organizational audit, how can you know an employee is giving an honest answer or just saying anything because they feel pressure to do so?

**Coughlin: Do you trust your employees? If not, then don't bother asking open-ended questions. If you do, then discuss away. The foundation of a great organization is trust, which means believing people in your organization will be honest with each other. The foundation of a successful career is integrity, which essentially means trusting yourself that you will do what you consider to be the right thing in any situation.**

In chapter 13 of Coughlin's book, he writes about gaining strategic focus, suggesting, "Let's just pick one thing and do it really well." We have a strategic plan that, in raw terms, merely outlines objectives. But does it define our desired outcomes? Moreover, do we have the horsepower (people and resources) to achieve desired outcomes?

**Coughlin: Picking one thing to do really well is an oversimplification of strategy. However, saying, "We're here to serve customers" is another oversimplification of strategy. And saying we're going to do 60 projects extremely well with ten people is unrealistic. A strategy should simply state the areas of performance that a group is going to focus on improving in order to generate more value for customers and to do so in a profitable manner. I believe six such areas of performance is a good maximum number to keep in mind. Within each of those areas of performance, identify the two to three specific items that are going to be put in motion over the next twelve months. That's twelve to eighteen key action items. Do those really, really well before you add anything else to the plan.**

## Talent Management

You list examples of characteristics that managers say they want in their employees: *“technically strong, honest, acts with integrity, stays customer-focused, can collaborate with others to generate a desired outcome, willing to search for best ideas in other industries, can stay focused long enough to get the job done well, can effectively influence others, and is open to improving as an individual and as a group member.”* I believe every employee here would feel that they qualify as talent according to this list, but personality differences tend to create conflict in many situations. What is the best way to overcome this when you really do have a talented group? How can an employee become aware of their own shortcomings that might be hindering the morale of the group?

**Coughlin:** In many ways, those are the jobs of the manager. When hiring employees, managers need to make sure they hire people who can work effectively with others. They need to facilitate discussions with the group to clarify the purpose of the group and how the members of the group can support one another in an effective way. The manager needs to be close enough to the members of the group to see when these unnecessary conflicts are flaring out of control. And then the manager needs to intervene and meet with the individuals both together and separately to turn these mountains into molehills rather than the other way around.

Have you ever conducted peer reviews and if so, do you feel they are effective?

**Coughlin:** Dozens of times and they can be very effective. The key is to provide the individual with all of the answers in three buckets: what he, or she, does that is effective, what is not effective, and what could be more effective. Don't attach any names to any comments. Encourage the person to read the feedback away from the office. Encourage the person to not try to figure out who said what because that's a waste of time. Instead encourage the person to look for patterns in the comments. And then encourage the person to just focus on leveraging a few strengths even better, to improve a few areas of concern a bit, and to consider the suggested ways to be more effective. Little by little people can become much more effective by considering honest, candid feedback.

## Part Four – Accelerate Your Impact on Consumers

### Business Research

In reading the section on “Eight Customer Insights to Search For,” the question comes up “who are our real customers – the business partners or the customers?” Ultimately, I believe the business partner is our real customer, but how do you find the answers to these questions when there is so much variation of leadership and the services provided from the individual business partners? How do you really get to the heart of the matter when you don’t work directly with the business partner on a day-to-day basis? It’s often said that some business partners don’t even realize what our organization is doing for their benefit. It seems that we have all the right marketing tools in place (magazine, updates, Web site, partner programs, etc.) so what can we do to improve the marketing efforts to our business partners?

**Coughlin: Don’t get caught up in defining the word “customers.” Focus on the groups of people you need to add value to in order for your organization to improve its desired outcomes. In your case, it sounds like you need to add value to your business partners who in turn will add value to customers. You’re paid by your business partners who in turn are paid by the end users. So the question you need to focus on is, “How can we increase the flow of value from our organization and our business partners to the end users in ways that they will pay for?” Focus your energies on answering that question and not on who the true “customer” is.**

### Deliver Convenience

I agree that Americans are searching for convenience. What are some suggestions for trade associations to provide more convenience to its members?

**Coughlin: First, ask your members what would make things more convenient for them. Second, think about when you are the member of an association. What would have made things easier for you? Ask ten people you know well to describe the associations they are in. Ask them what makes things more convenient for them and what gets in the way of convenience.**

### Consumer Demands

In the book you are always talking about big corporations that have products to sell and manufacture. How does this book apply to a service organization since we don’t manufacture a product or sell a product and have only 10 employees?

**Coughlin: Practically every idea in my book applies to both service organizations and manufacturing organizations. Essentially, my book explains how individuals, groups, and organizations can accelerate the delivery of**

**value to customers in relevant and profitable ways. It has nothing to do with the product or service that you sell. I've consulted companies that sold products and/or services.**

Under one of the acceleration tips you mention that *“complaints and rejections from consumers provide enormously valuable insights into how they view the value your organization is putting into the marketplace. Treasure every complaint and every rejection, convert them into learning experiences, and implement what you have learned to improve the value consumers receive.”* This is a great principle, but how can you instill this concept in the staff to practice it at a personal “team building” level, e.g., *“Treasure every complaint and every rejection, convert them into learning experiences, and implement what you have learned...”* Doesn't it need to start there?

**Coughlin: As with any desired behavior change in others, the best place to start is by demonstrating the behavior yourself. And when you see other people do that, compliment them. And if someone gets offended because he or she heard a complaint about the quality of the work, ask, “Well, aside from being upset, what can you learn from that feedback?”**

#### Build the Brand

Today, most businesses are fixated on “value creation.” For an association, creating value often centers on providing knowledge/useable information faster, cheaper, and better than anyone else. The Internet is an enabler, but is also a source of competition. Any suggestions on how to enhance the value proposition to our members that goes beyond the Internet and information flow?

**Coughlin: Associations are organizations just like for-profit corporations. Study how successful organizations deliver useful information faster, cheaper, and better than anyone else. Your value proposition should simply be a statement as to who will be better off by working with you and how they will be better off. The Disney Company provides quality family entertainment. That's pretty simple. Their target audience is the entire family, and the value they deliver is entertainment.**

Is it possible to have a "dual" branding strategy (customers who value "products" vs. customers who value "services"). Or must you direct your approach to one customer type?

**Coughlin: Of course you can have multiple branding strategies. Disney has ESPN primarily for men and The Disney Channel primarily for children and Desperate Housewives primarily for women, and yet they all fit under the umbrella of entertainment for various family members.**

One of the employee skill identification items on pg. 164 is “*manage multiple projects simultaneously and move each of them forward in a steady and productive manner.*” Multi-tasking used to be considered a great skill. But several places in the book it mentions scaling back on the number of projects, that a priority list can have at most three items on it, that you should “do less in order to achieve more.” What do you consider to be a reasonable number of projects? With a small staff, it always seems that there are more than three priority items on a list at any given time.

**Coughlin: I suggest you map out your activities for a given week by identifying the three most important business outcomes you want to improve. Then start with the most important outcome. What three things can you do that would have the greatest positive impact on improving that outcome? Schedule those three things. Then go to the next high priority outcome. What three things can you do that would have the greatest positive impact on improving that outcome? Schedule those three things. Do that one more time. Now you have nine high impact activities on your calendar. Then schedule in the rest of your stuff for the week while making a conscious to let go of as many items as you can. Then go to work.**