BigSPEAK CONSULTING

Santa Barbara, CA
(805)965-1400
info@bigspeak.com
bigspeak.com

Custom Corporate Education Programs

Designed with Solutions in Mind for Positive Long-term Change

Source: White Papers - http://bigspeak.com/consulting/whitepapers

Achieving Predictable Success

Les McKeown

Every working day in the US alone, 26 million people—executives, leaders, managers, founders, owners and the self-employed—are tasked with the job of growing their organization, division, department, group or team.

No other business imperative—growth—has been more studied, written about, anguished over or pursued. Literally hundreds of new books, articles, white papers, conferences, workshops, meetings, off-sites (even software) are planned and produced on the subject every day. And yet, despite the heaving bookshelves in the business section of your local bookstore, despite the millions of man-hours spent under the glare of PowerPoint presentations in darkened ballrooms, and despite the fact that literally millions of people in thousands of organizations have plowed the same furrow for hundreds of years, there still is no single methodology, no one magic formula, no silver bullet that, if used, guarantees to an organization that it will achieve continued, scalable growth.

It's not as if organizations in the past have never succeeded in "cracking the growth code." Jeffrey Immelt, the CEO of GE once said "When you put your foot on the gas in this company, the car goes forward." But, while that might sound like a vacuous truism, the reality is that the leaders of most organizations can't say any such thing. For them, when they step on the gas pedal, the car may or may not go forward. And if it does go forward, it may or may not go in the direction they expected or desired.

For many business leaders, even when they do succeed in getting the car to move forward for a time, they live with the constant, subconscious fear that the car might stop again at any moment. Ever had that sinking feeling when you unexpectedly ran out of gas while barreling down the freeway? When, despite the fact that you've pushed the gas pedal to the floor, the car begins to decelerate and comes eventually to a shuddering stop?

For many executives, leaders, owners and managers—for most of them, in fact—this is the reality they face: each day, experimentation, hope and determination meets the unknown and the unexpected, as a result, with luck, the car might go forward. And if doesn't go forward today, maybe it'll go forward tomorrow. Perhaps it will move in the right direction, and perhaps for more than a short period of time. Who knows?

Given the vast amount of time, attention and resources that have been spent on studying the subject of business growth, why do so few businesses, divisions, departments, projects, groups or teams ever fully master it? How come those of us who are business founders, owners, leaders and managers still need to face the challenge of growth anew every day, almost as if everything that was ever discussed or discovered about the subject in the past has been wiped clean from our collective memory? Put simply, how come the business community hasn't managed to solidify a general set of principles that, while not covering every eventuality, would at least provide a basic framework for achieving scalable, sustainable, predictable success?

The reason is bizarre, but simple: nobody ever told us such a thing existed. Most of us (and I assume as you are reading this that I can count you as one of "us") were never told that success could be learned and replicated, understood and scaled, nurtured and sustained.

We were told about cash flow, human resources, people management, vendor selection, discount pricing, strategies and tactics, 5 'P's and 6 sigmas—and a thousand other nuggets of information. But we were never shown how all of it could (and should) add up to more than fleeting momentary

or seasonal success, how we could—if we took the right steps—develop a type of success that could be replicated over time and in any environment. Put simply: we were given the tools for success, and an expectation of success, but no dependable way of combining the two to consistently, predictably, achieve success.

Because of this missing link—no dependable connection between the tools we have and the results we want—our experience in creating and sustaining growth tends to be patchy: sometimes stuff works, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the car goes forward, sometimes it doesn't. And this isn't an isolated experience. Again, just look at the titles on the shelves of the business section at your local bookstore next time you're browsing and you'll see how universal the elusiveness of business success is.

Most of us (and I assume as you are reading this that I can count you as one of "us") were never told that success could be learned and replicated, understood and scaled, nurtured and sustained.

As a result, as business leaders, owners and managers, we have developed a collective belief system that throbs along in the background while we work, telling us that business success will just *happen* eventually if we do the right things (whatever *they* are). This belief system persuades us that while success is there, it is out of reach, locked up in a vault, waiting for us to crack the code. If we put in enough work, if we spend each day trying different combinations on the lock, one day, if we're

lucky or prescient, we'll guess right, the tumblers will fall, the safe door will swing open and success will be ours.

As a serial entrepreneur who has personally launched over 40 businesses, and as a consultant and coach to hundreds of business leaders, I've come to realize that the "growth code" is out there, in plain view for anyone who knows where to look. There is indeed a code, a pattern, a DNA if you will, to achieving predictable success. The difficulty is that because most business leaders work in a limited number of business environments during their career, they don't have the opportunity to see the pattern recur often enough to successfully decode it.

It's like the difference between someone driving to a destination they've never been to before, compared to someone else who takes the exact same route as their commute twice a day. Our first traveler will be tentative, exploratory. They don't know the traffic patterns, the alternative routes on surface streets, or the trouble spots to avoid. Conversely, our regular commuter knows every lane switch to make, every junction best avoided, every trick to minimize their travel time. The path to their destination becomes ingrained—almost second nature.

So it is with patterns of sustainable business growth; they're there, but sometimes you have to travel the route many, many times before they become apparent.

There is indeed a code, a pattern, a DNA
if you will, to achieving predictable success.
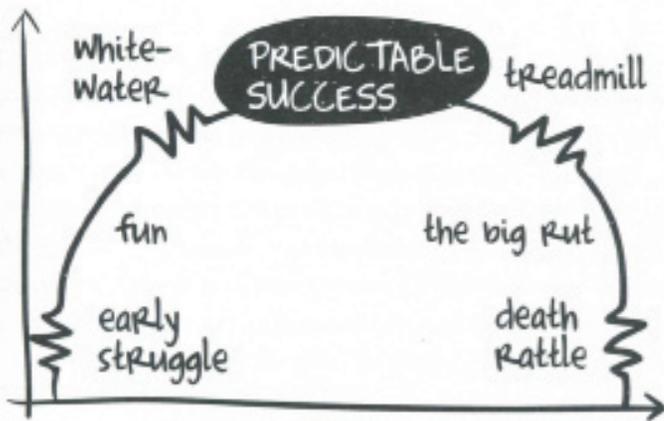
Seeing the Pattern

The first thing that one notices after working with hundreds of companies is that every organization, without fail, goes through the same series of natural, unavoidable, but eminently predictable stages in growth. There is a narrow, but rich field of analysis of these stages in growth. Some are more academic than others, but the model I have developed is based primarily on my personal experience and observation:

The apex of the growth curve is a stage that I call Predictable Success. When an organization (or a division, department, group, team or project) is in Predictable Success, it can attain its goals readily—and with relative ease.

The three stages before Predictable Success (Early Struggle, Fun and Whitewater) are growth stages. The stages after Predictable Success (Treadmill, The Big Rut and Death Rattle) are decline stages.

There are three important things to note about the growth cycle:

1 | **Organizations cannot jump a stage.** For example, It's not possible to move into Predictable Success directly from Fun, bypassing Whitewater, no more than it's possible to jump from childhood to adulthood while bypassing puberty. Every organization trying to get to Predictable Success will move through each of Early Struggle, Fun and Whitewater at some point. However, by taking the right steps, it is possible to minimize the time spent in a specific stage.

2 | **Organizations can move back, as well as forward, in the growth cycle.** For example, it is possible (and quite common) for an organization to cycle in and out of Whitewater and Fun a number of times. As we'll see, this is the fate of most organizations that do not take a planned approach to attaining Predictable Success.

3 | **It is possible for an organization to remain in Predictable Success indefinitely.** By implementing the right strategies, any organization, division, department group or team can undergo a process of continuous rejuvenation, allowing it to stay in Predictable Success and not decline either back into Whitewater or forward into Treadmill.

If you have managed any size organization for any reasonable length of time, you may already have intuitively grasped the concepts behind each stage in the cycle. Here's a brief "helicopter ride" through the Predictable Success growth cycle. See how many stages you can recognize from your own experience:

By implementing the right strategies, any organization, division, department group or team can undergo a process of continuous rejuvenation, allowing it to stay in Predictable Success…

Early Struggle | It feels like you're hacking through the jungle, as you fight to keep your newly-born organization alive. The two main challenges are 1) making sure there is enough cash to keep going, until 2) you've clearly established that there is a market for your product or service. The mortality rate of organizations is high in this stage—over two-thirds of all organizations don't make it out of Early Struggle. You're fighting for your organization's very existence!

Fun | You've broken through the Early Struggle—you have cash (at least enough to take the pressure off), and an established market: it's time to have Fun! Now you're free to concentrate on getting your product or service into the market, so the key focus now moves from cash to sales. This is the time when the organization's myths and legends are built, and the "Big Dogs" emerge—those loyal high-producers who build the business exponentially in this time of rapid first-stage growth.

Whitewater | The very success that you reaped in Fun brings with it the seeds of Whitewater: your organization becomes complex, and the key emphasis shifts once more—from sales to profitability. Achieving sustained profitable growth requires you to put in place consistent processes, policies and systems. Unfortunately, putting those systems in place proves harder than you expected. Making the right decisions seems easy, but implementing decisions, and making them stick is incredibly difficult. The organization seems to be going through an identity crisis, and you may even doubt your leadership and management skills.

Predictable Success | You've developed a team that has successfully navigated your organization through Whitewater. Congratulations! You have reached the prime stage in your organization's growth—what I call Predictable Success. Here, you can set (and consistently achieve) your goals and objectives with a consistent, predictable degree of success. Unlike Fun (when you were growing, but weren't quite sure how or why), in Predictable Success you know why you are successful, and you can use that information to sustain growth in the long term.

Treadmill | In principle, there is no reason for any organization to decline from the position of Predictable Success. In practice, many organizations begin to swing too far toward a dependence on process and policies. Creativity, risk-taking and initiative decline in response, and the organization becomes increasingly formulaic and arthritic. Working for the organization at this stage in its development can feel like being on a Treadmill: a lot of energy is being expended, but there's little sense that forward momentum is being achieved. There's an emphasis on data over action, on form over content. Good people start to leave—many of whom have been with the organization

for some time. Even the entrepreneurial founder(s) (if they're still there) may be becoming frustrated and threaten to leave.

The Big Rut | Treadmill is a dangerous stage in the organization's development: if it is checked in time, creativity, risk-taking and flexibility can be re-injected, taking the organization back to Predictable Success. Left unchecked, however, the organization will decline further into The Big Rut. At this stage, process and administration have become more important than action and results. Worse, the organization loses its ability to be self-aware and cannot diagnose its own sickness and decline. When an organization reaches The Big Rut, it can stay there for a long time, on a very gradual, slow decline.

Death Rattle | Eventually, in all bureaucracies, there is a last final attempt to resuscitate the organization, whether by the appointment of bankruptcy practitioners or by being acquired. Either way, the organization will not survive in its present form. After a brief Death Rattle (when illusory signs of life may be seen), the organization dies in its present form.

When an organization ... is in Predictable Success, it can attain its goals readily— and with relative ease.

The 5 Key Benefits of Getting to Predictable Success

So we've seen what it means from a technical perspective to be in Predictable Success, and we've taken a brief helicopter ride through the journey leading up to (and away) from it. Now let's see what it means in reality, to actually be there. What is it like to manage or work in an organization that has reached Predictable Success?

There are five main characteristics of any organization that is in Predictable Success, that taken together, distinguishes it from organizations at other stages in the growth cycle:

1 | **Decision-making:** Spend any time with an organization in Predictable Success, and the first thing you'll notice is the way in which they make decisions—particularly in comparison to organizations
in Whitewater or Treadmill. There is neither the sense of sitting atop barely-managed chaos that accompanies Whitewater, nor the plodding, turgid, rote decision-making so often seen in Treadmill. Instead, there is a sense of flow—decisions are made without the decision-making process placing a burden on the organization. Sizing up an issue, crafting an appropriate response, and getting it implemented doesn't slow down the day-to-day management activities.

Instead, decision-making is an integral part of the management process—it happens naturally, organically, and is accepted not only by senior managers, but by managers, team leaders and supervisors as just "part of the job." And it's not just command and control, centralized decision-making either. In the Predictable Success organization, much—make that most—of the decision-making is delegated and decentralized, freeing managers at all levels of the organization to concentrate on what they can do best, rather than micro-managing others.

Finally, decision-making in the Predictable Success organization doesn't stop with the making of the decision itself. If anything, in Predictable Success, the greater focus is on the execution of that decision once it has been made. The decision doesn't just languish there in limbo, with the managers

hoping that it will gain traction or acceptance. Put simply, it gets done. The main reason for this is that, in Predictable Success, decisions are not made by a closeted team of managers, then tossed over the transom to front line employees to implement. rather, they are made by involving—from the start—all those who will be materially impacted, thus achieving buy-in and momentum right from the get-go.

2 | **Goal-setting:** When I speak with an executive whose organization has made it to Predictable Success, this is the one aspect of being there that they most value, and refer to most frequently— this sense of really being in control, being able to make things happen. As we saw in our quote from Jeffrey Immelt: "When you put your foot on the gas in this company, the car goes forward." Leaders in organizations that are either in Whitewater or Treadmill lose the ability to "make the car go forward." And, when this happens, the organization's management may not notice the effect for quite some time. Months, maybe even years, can pass before it becomes clear that the goal-setting (and goal-achieving) process is broken.

After all, you're still the boss—you're still having budgets made, setting goals, agreeing to business plans. Your people do respond when goals and targets are set. "Things" are still happening— meetings are being held, resource allocations are made, emails are sent, progress reports are written. But months later, in spite of all that activity, you look up to see that nothing of note has actually happened—your organization has stalled, or worse, is going backwards. It seems like nothing you do or say "moves the needle" anymore.

This sense of helplessness—the feeling that, try as you might, nothing you do or say is translating into substantive on-the-ground progress—can be devastating. Most executives are task-focused, strong-minded individuals who've got where they are by getting things done, so coming to a realiza-tion that the car won't go forward when they step on the gas is intensely frustrating for them.

In contrast, managers in Predictable Success organizations can feel a direct linkage between their metaphoric right foot, the gas pedal, and the organization's acceleration. The goal setting process is accomplished with relative ease (I say "relative" because no goal-setting process is without some pain, but in the Predictable Success organization, it's radically reduced), and it is a process, not an event. Goal-setting is part of the warp and woof of the Predictable Success organization, it happens seamlessly, as part of the day to day operation of the business, not as a resource-sucking, do-it-at-the-last-minute event that it is in so many other organizations. Once goals have been set, barring catastrophic external events, the organization then moves relentlessly toward the achievement of those goals.

That's not to say Predictable Success organizations don't sometimes miss their targets (of course they do) but they hit them more often than they miss them, and when they do look like they will miss their goals, they know about it early and take timely corrective action.

3 | **Alignment:** In most organizations, there are considerable efficiency losses caused by the inter-action between the three main moving parts of the organization: its structure, its processes, and the people who work within both. Put more simply, a lot of time and energy is expended by people because they have to manipulate the organization's processes and/or structure in order to get things done.

In the upward part of the growth cycle (Early Struggle, Fun and Whitewater), the processes and structure are typically under-developed, leaving the people in the organization to compensate by working out systems and policies on their own, leading to duplication, inefficiency and increasingly frustrated customers. In the downward part of the growth cycle—from Treadmill on—the systems and structure are over-developed, and increasingly rigidly enforced, draining from employees the ability to show initiative and be innovative.

In Predictable Success, the organization achieves perfect balance between structure, process and people. There is just the right amount of process to ensure things get done in a consistent and efficient way, and just the right amount of structure to provide the railroad tracks for the organization to run on. People have the optimum degree of autonomy and freedom necessary to keep the organization vibrant and innovative, but enough controls and systems to manage risk, avoid unnecessary duplication, and to prevent the organization from becoming exposed or vulnerable to a few superstar "Big Dogs" (those high performers who also have a monopoly of knowledge in how the organization works).

In Predictable Success, the matrix of structure, process and people are interconnected and organic, not fixed and absolute. In the Predictable Success organization, there is a realization that what worked yesterday may not work today, and accordingly, the interplay between structure, process and people is constantly shifting, staying fluid to meet the organization's changing needs. Through the use of cross-functional teams, process improvement events and the genuine empowerment of supervisors and team leaders, the organization's structure and processes are constantly changing and evolving, rather like a lava lamp (for those of you too young to know what a lava lamp is, Wikipedia is your friend).

4 | **Accountability:** The single most powerful characteristic of the Predictable Success organization is the existence of a culture of self-accountability. In the Predictable Success organization, everyone, from the senior management to the truck drivers, receptionists and janitors, has a strong sense of self-accountability toward their own, and their team's, responsibilities.

Why is there such a strong commitment to self-accountability in Predictable Success? It comes directly from the decision-making culture we discussed in point 1 above. By being empowered to make decisions of genuine import about their own jobs and responsibilities—and by being given the resources and the freedom to do what it takes to implement those decisions (see point 3 on

structure, processes and people) —each employee becomes personally "bought-in" to the success of their own, and their team's, activities.

With this strong sense of accountability comes a commitment to genuine achievement (rather than checking boxes or putting in face time). In Predictable Success, there are fewer turf battles, and individuals or teams do not work in silos, cut off from each other and working independently. Instead, groups and teams work harmoniously and cross-functionally, sharing knowledge and experiences, building a social network that supplements the more formalized organization structure. Information flows where it needs to, untrammeled by micromanagement or information-hoarders, as the teams and groups in the organization drive toward results rather than self-justification or personal glory.

A secondary result of this high degree of self-accountability is that there is little room for time-wasters, pencil-pushers or politicians in Predictable Success, and the organization becomes increasingly competent at exposing and expunging those who become "makeweight." Mediocrity, willful under-performance and the simple shirking of responsibility stand out so clearly that the underperforming individual has few places to hide.

This culture of self-accountability in the Predictable Success organization doesn't come simply from wishful thinking. Rather, all of the organization's structure and process is focused on demanding and delivering it. From the hiring process, where self-accountability is identified as a must-have attitude, to training, mentoring, coaching and the model set by the senior management, self-accountability is at the core of Predictable Success.

5 | **Ownership:** Most leaders of organizations (or divisions, departments, groups or teams) feel at some point like they are pushing an increasingly large rock—that if they don't constantly have their shoulder to the wheel (to mix metaphors somewhat), the whole thing will begin to lose momentum, and eventually start to run downhill, losing all the gains that have been painstakingly made so far.

One of the reasons managers take few vacations, work long hours and sometime just plain burn out is the fear that if they don't push, and push, and push some more, all the progress they have made in growing their business will be lost.
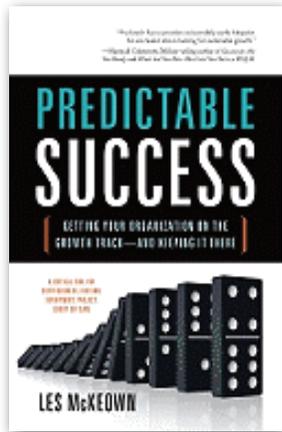
In Predictable Success, managers get to do what they do best—managing.

In Predictable Success, the situation is reversed. The organization, possessing each of the characteristics above (the ability to readily make and consistently implement decisions; the ability to readily set and consistently achieve goals; having structure, process and people in harmony and a culture of self-accountability at its core), reaches a whole new phase of organizational growth—one where its growth and development is achieved by everyone taking ownership and pulling together, rather than by the manager group constantly *pushing*.

In Predictable Success, managers get to do what they do best—managing. Instead of firefighting and fixing things, compensating for the poor work of others, or simply doing things because they think "I can do it better than anyone else," the manager becomes what they were meant to be in the first place: an overseer, a resource allocator and an innovator supporting, motivating and leading those on the front line.

In the Predictable Success organization, there is no dependency culture around the management team. Instead, there is a deep sense of co-dependency: managers are dependent on their teams for delivering results, and the front line employees are dependent on their managers for guidance, advice and leadership. **One is as important as the other and, together, they *pull* the organization toward its growth goals.** ⏻

info

BUY THE BOOK
Get more details
or buy a copy
of Les McKeown's
Predictable Success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Les McKeown is a serial founder/owner, sought-after advisor, bestselling author, and in-demand speaker. An internationally known strategist, Les McKeown advises C-level teams at Fortune 500 companies on high-performance organizational development. He first distinguished himself as Ireland's youngest-ever accounting partner, and after some time at Price Waterhouse, became a serial entrepreneur—launching over 40 businesses, from a tool and die manufacturing company to one of Ireland's leading contemporary art galleries. He simultaneously co-founded a business incubation consultancy that grew to 13 offices worldwide, and created the European Union's award-winning Entrepreneurship Program. Based now in Marblehead MA, Les now spends his time consulting, writing, teaching, and speaking.

SEND THIS

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

Sign up for our free e-newsletter to learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available.

BORN ON DATE

This document was created on June 2, 2010 and is based on the best information available at that time.

BigSpeak Consulting   (805)965-1400   info@bigspeak.com   www.bigspeak.com

Big SPEAK CONSULTING

Santa Barbara, CA
(805)965-1400
info@bigspeak.com
bigspeak.com

Reprinted with Permission

Keynote programs provide the sizzle and have their place. However, a comprehensive learning program needs to embed new behaviors and thought processes into your corporate culture and hold people accountable to make certain that positive change sticks. An expert at BigSpeak Consulting partners with you to customize a learning program specifically designed to fit your needs. Together, we construct the path to success, aligning it with your core business strategies and budget. Partnering with BigSpeak Consulting gives you the edge, ensuring successful implementation of custom corporate education programs.

Source: White Papers – www.bigspeak.com/consulting/whitepapers