

Barnevik, Percy – On Leadership

Sanoma, 2013, [Business] Grade ★★☆☆

Percy Barnevik is one of the more iconic corporate CEOs in Swedish history. Already in the preface he declares that it is the effective execution of business strategies that differentiates the successful company from the less so. While management literature often focuses on high level strategies the more mundane topics of how to handle organization, delegation, incentives and motivation to facilitate the carrying through of those strategies attracts less interest. It is rarely a secret how to succeed in a line of business, those who still don't manage it generally lose due to their execution.

Percy Barnevik on Leadership contains 200 short paragraphs of a half to one and a half pages each. The many topics are loosely sorted under 20 headlines and the subtitle of the book is *200 lessons from 50 years' experience*. The short paragraph format brings to memory the stories often told about Barnevik, on how he generally presented a huge amount of overhead slides in a flow much too fast for anyone to fully grasp the message conveyed in the pictures.

Given the stated focus on execution the section covering this topic over 10 paragraphs and 8 pages obviously attracts interest. The short version of the content is that Barnevik thinks that the road to corporate achievement is 90% execution and 10% strategy. And out of those latter 10% about half is tied to analysis and half to gut feeling. A company must decide on a sufficiently good strategy and as long as the execution is energetic, fast and efficient enough they have a good chance of succeeding. The ability to follow through and see things to the finish line often go hand in hand with a sense of urgency. Individuals who go the extra mile can make a huge impact on their organizations.

A very broad description of the strategy is needed. Then work with the right people and powerfully move in the approximately right direction. Adjust the direction along the way as needed. *“The success of a strategy is dependent on the force and speed of the execution process; this is perhaps my most important piece of*

advice of all.” In following through the execution of a strategy, project management skills are a hugely important craft. Keep things simple, don't complain about circumstances and don't waste time on endless investigations to try to do the optimal – instead do the “nearly right thing” and to it quickly.

Still, to execute and adjust along the way there has to be feedback and analysis. Things must be measured and followed up on. Barnevik is fond of ABC-analysis, uses straight forward tools like decision trees with subjective probabilities, SWOT analysis etc. and advices to prioritize and choose on the course of action with the 80/20-rule in mind – although he says it should perhaps be called the 90/10-rule. That's it. The above is in a shortened form all what is being said under the key headline execution.

Yet, it isn't all. Probably half of the paragraphs in this eclectic text under any of the other headlines are also related to the efficiency of the practical implementation of that particular subject and as such a part of the discussion on how to carry through what has been decided. Overall the bias of the topics is no doubt towards execution but they also cover almost anything and everything related to the business life of a CEO. However, not counting the paragraphs on personal efficiency and personal development, there are only one or two pages reflecting on Barnevik's personal life. This is clearly not his memoirs – instead Barnevik is passing on the tricks of the CEO trade.

To a large extent Barnevik's opinions are typical of a Scandinavian or European large company corporate executive. Although shortly put and sometimes a tad cliché, they are always well motivated and I largely agree with what is being said. The paragraphs are so brief that they barely scratch the surface of each individual topic. Still, in a relevant situation they can provoke thoughts that can help a leader. Personally I would have preferred a little more reflection by the author.

Mats Larsson, July 03, 2017