

## CHAPTER 7: ACTION ENERGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

### THINKING, FEELING AND ACTING ARE INEXTRICABLY INTERTWINED

*People are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting.* --Richard Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sternin

*A thought is a gentle flare, a quiet breeze or whisper. A feeling is a giant flame — a strong wind of change — that lifts the laziest soul into action.* -- Ian Rheeder

Just as priests consciously vow celibacy, leaders vow to make an honest difference. Why then do so many leaders not act in accordance with their vows? Why is there such a mismatch between what people say and do? Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, in their book *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, state that ‘Execution is not only the biggest issue facing business today; it is something nobody has explained satisfactorily.’ So I trust that this chapter will elucidate how critical the execution of our conscious and subconscious thoughts are.

Although Peter Drucker has said, ‘Almost all of our problems stem from action without thought’, one thing is worse than that — thought without the appropriate action! All leadership experts agree that leadership is a process of influencing followers so they will willingly want to achieve the group’s vision and mission.<sup>1</sup> That requires sustained action. Thus knowledge is great; but acting on knowledge is greater. And to prove how dismal the lack of action in the workplace is, in a study of 125 000 respondents (Neilson, Martin & Powers, 2008), the majority answered negatively to the statement “Important strategic and operational decisions are quickly translated into action.” In fact, implementing strategy is the most time-consuming and complex part of strategic management and leadership.<sup>2</sup>

We know that action speaks louder than words. Vision and thought alone is *not enough* to receive a salary every month — we need to plan and act! You will, of course, also need resources like time, experience, skills, money, equipment, systems, and cooperative teams.

*You cannot create experience. You must undergo it.* -- Albert Camus (1913–1960)

So let’s discover why there is a mass of wisdom in the famous Nike payoff line “Just do it!” Based on Plato and Aristotle’s suggested faculties of the mind — *think, feel and act* — in his book *The Psychology of Selling and Advertising (1925)*, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, E. K. Strong, popularised the AIDA model to logically and systematically explain how people act and buy a marketer’s offer. The AIDA acronym for Attention, Interest, Desire and Action is the strategy for the mental involvement people must be led through before they can effectively solve a problem, and thus eventually act and purchase a product or decide upon a solution.

E. K. Strong believed that we first *think* (cognitive behaviour), then *feel* (affective behaviour), and finally *act, will or desire* (conative behaviour). Using this stimulus-response model of psychology, this sounds quite feasible. We think (stimulus) therefore we act (respond), but what has not been factored in is that *action is also a stimulus*. Successful action is its own positive reinforcement, strengthening the desired behaviour to repeat on itself. In fact, touching and acting at the same time, like playing a video game, activates the limbic system, the emotional part of our brain responsible for establishing new motor patterns, so crucial to learning new habits.<sup>3</sup> The limbic system is a major centre for emotion formation and



Even if we did not take proper aim, taking action gives us immediate feedback to re-adjust our sights. We start leading by example and as the fear of the unknown journey diminishes, our emotions and thoughts are revitalised. Thus action changes the way we think and feel about something we normally would have never contemplated attempting. There is more than enough evidence that action inspires our thinking and feelings to act again. It is not all about thinking, yet so many quick-fix schemes have convinced us otherwise. You can stare at a textbook, but real experience, insights and new neural pathways come from acting.

*Self-knowledge is best learned, not by contemplation but by action. Strive to do your duty and you will soon discover of what stuff you are made.* -- Johann Goethe

Richard Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sternin also challenge the conventional wisdom of “I think therefore I am” with their 2005 Harvard Business Review article on *Positive Deviance (PD)*,<sup>6</sup> where they found successful individuals, or “positive deviants,” who had bucked the trends in challenging environments. Whether a top salesperson in a large organisation, or a successful mother in a poor community, these “positive deviants” had unique practices that allowed them to excel. Then by simply imitating and practicing these extraordinary *actions*, Pascale and Sternin found that nearly everyone in the community could excel or change their attitudes towards certain debilitating beliefs too. In Egypt, for instance, to keep women from enjoying sex, and thus ensure their faithfulness, female circumcision has been practiced for thousands of years by Coptic Christians and Muslims. But by finding hundreds of women who have *not* been circumcised but who have also remained faithful (positive deviants), these women’s publicised stories have had a significant effect on reversing female genital mutilation in Egypt. Pascale and Sternin elegantly sum up positive deviance as follows:

The classic KAP (knowledge, attitude, practice) behaviour-change model holds that knowledge changes attitudes, which in turn changes practice. Positive deviance facilitators turn this upside down and employ a PAK (practice, attitude, knowledge) approach instead. Once you help the community discover who the positive deviants are and identify their practices, you help change people’s attitudes through action. Why? Because people are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting.

This is also, of course, why ‘mindlessly’ repeating a fire drill or reciting a mantra eventually has the desired behavioural effect. Action not only changes our thinking but it also develops the required habit for change. This is why to-do lists are so powerful – they change our behaviour. Success is certainly not all about thinking. The best question to ask is “what am I doing right now that is going to bring me closer to my ideal?” and nine times out of ten the answer requires taking *action*. The thinking and planning was the easy project – now act! Thoughts were the cause of the plan; the plan must now cause action. Attempting to think your way into Hollywood is not as important as acting your way into Hollywood. If we want to become like our mentors, we must *do* what they *do*. Kenny Harris from HeadSurfing™ suggests that the best way to generate creative thought, is through *action*. When interviewing him in South Africa he stressed that we have our most creative ideas when *doing* something -- walking, talking, driving, bathing, reading, and writing.

*The hands that help are better far than the lips that pray.* -- Robert G. Ingersoll (1833 – 1899)

When observing how individuals and companies destroy themselves, this is exactly what they often do: they blur the boundaries between thinking and action. The solution is to keep the two processes — thinking (planning) and action (implementation) — as completely separate projects.

What is just as important as thinking about your goals is *how* you think about your goals. Do not fall into the trap by stating your goals incorrectly or vaguely, for example: “We’re doubling our sales figures and profitability.” A more effective goal statement would sound something like this: “We’re enthusiastically implementing our 10-point plan, which is improving our service whilst reducing our overheads.”

Why *action* you may ask? Because it is difficult, if not impossible, to worry and act at the same time – action moves worry out of the door. Like the French writer Sarah Bernhardt said, “Life begets life. Energy creates energy. It is by spending oneself that one becomes rich.” So to avoid spiritual drift and depression, it is imperative to have a daily plan and act upon it.

### **Why do managers and leaders procrastinate and not execute strategy?**

*Nothing is as fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task.* -- William James

**Procrastination** may feel comfortable in the beginning, but looking back at all the lost opportunities can be the most painful experience in life. Why would two people with the same good intentions, behave so differently from each other? Why would one act and the other be stuck in their tracks? We look at twelve reasons so many leaders, managers and entrepreneurs never get around to implementing their strategy:

1. **Decision rights, information flow, and lack of responsibility:** The research conducted by Nielson, Martin and Powers (2008)<sup>7</sup> shows that strategy is seldom executed when key people do not know which actions and decisions they are *responsible* for. They explain that successful strategists do not hide behind excuses like “We are not responsible; someone or something else is.” Equally important is that critical information needs to *continuously* flow and be accessible to everyone. Thus an organisation needs the right systems installed. Although there is a plethora of reasons for strategy not being implemented, communication comes up again and again. Leaders need to clearly define and communicate the strategy. This was one of Napoleon Bonaparte’s secrets; if abruptly woken up during the early hours of the morning, every soldier knew what the strategy was.
2. **Strategy, planning and implementation are separate, but integrated projects:** With 20 years of consulting experience, in his 2006 article, *Obstacles to Effective Strategy Implementation*, Lawrence Hrebiniak makes the point that “Making strategy work is more difficult than strategy making.” Hrebiniak also highlights that although execution and planning are interdependent, “strategy formulation and implementation are *separate*, distinguishable parts of the strategic management process.”<sup>8</sup> Also, don’t forget, strategy implementation should be enterprise-wide, and across the entire organisation’s value chain.
3. **The planning process is more important than the plan:** Supreme Commander in the Second World War, Dwight Eisenhower said, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” What he meant by this statement, was as soon as a

plan is written, it soon becomes useless because the environment keeps changing. Thus plans need *continual* updating to remain relevant.

4. **Lack of motivation (attitude):** John Maxwell said, “Commitment starts in the heart. The only real measure of commitment is action.” Henry Kissinger stated, “No policy – no matter how ingenious — has any chance of succeeding if it is born in the minds of a few and carried in the hearts of none.” Early in the strategy planning process, involve all the minds of the body that will be used to implement the strategy. In other words, get the vision from “up there” to “down here”, then keep involving followers at every stage of the ‘open’ process, or expect to have your strategy derailed or ignored. The vision is not the CEO’s personal plan, but the entire organisation’s *raison d’être*. If there are insufficient emotional “whys” (vision) to move the brain’s primeval limbic system, there will be little action by the body proper of the organisation. People feel uninspired when the strategy is irrelevant or unrealistic, or worse yet, both. The journey is not do-able because there is no compelling joint vision, no obvious reward, and no fuel or spark for persistent action. Followers will say, “Life is already too busy to tend to a lukewarm vision and plan.”

Attitude, which includes self-esteem (see chap 6, 14 tips to build self-esteem) is key in avoiding procrastination. The below diagram reminds us how to get followers to act. But remember, followers also need ability too. *Success = Attitude* (Thoughts x Emotions) + *Ability* (skill + talent) + *Action*



**Figure 7.2: Our Belief and Value System (which includes self-esteem) Affects Attitude. Attitude determines our Actions.**

*The big rewards come to those who travel the second, undemanded mile.*  
Bruce Barton (1886–1967)

5. **Unrealistic reliance on past qualifications:** Amongst the top fifty CEOs in the world (2010), only 26 percent had MBAs. Eva Young has said, “To think too long about doing a thing often becomes its undoing.” Attitude and energy is the imperative. Those who get into action to better equip themselves will benefit an organisation more than those who rest on their laurels. Managers need to lead “from the front” and be examples of always improving themselves to those on their teams. While it might not be an MBA that needs to be completed to display leadership, certain skills (learnt on an

MBA) constantly need to be refreshed in order for managers to bring on their “A-game.”

*While the doctor reflects the patient dies.* -- Italian Proverb

6. **Lack of talent and skills — ability or competencies — to accomplish tasks:** Some managers fall into the trap of consistently planning, but they have blurred the borders between the strategising and the implementation stages. So often, at an unconscious level, the executive just does not have the skill (or confidence) and broad-based experience to make the first move. The new strategy may also require *new* skills. Exacerbating this, if they do realise their skill deficit, then they are too embarrassed to expose their weaknesses by attending training in front of their subordinates. The consequence is that they have forgotten most of their training, or the training they remember is outdated. “Why were our managers not on this training?” is one of the most common gripes I hear after training a division.
7. **Politics and teamwork:** Alone in an organisation, it is nearly impossible to be successful without the *support* of other individuals. Having political potholes in your path is going to be a difficult journey. If you re-visit Victor Vroom’s Expectancy theory in chapter 6, you will realise that having political support will “fuel” your cause. Great leaders have an emotional bond with their followers.
8. **Sub-standard research capabilities:** The first and arguably the most important “R” in goal setting is *Research*. Managers often relegate too much of the researching of the “what” and “how” to subordinates. Thus, they do not have a detailed plan of action for confidently translating thoughts into action. Frequently, managers have not consulted with enough stakeholders and do not have a firm grip of their macro and micro marketing environments. The consequence is they themselves have not bought in to their own strategy, mainly because they were not integral in the research phase. Or they fear that their strategic plan may be misguided by shallow and/or flawed research, and therefore are reluctant to act. Worse still, the leaders thinks that the future is just more of today, and has not adjusted the underpinning assumptions and strategy accordingly.
9. **Misconceptions of corporate position:** The executive has no idea how important it is to lead by example. Somehow, they feel, and hope, that everyone else will lead and manage the organisation.
10. **The comfort zone and fear of failure:** Why risk failure by sticking their neck out? They would rather do something else, perhaps administration, where there is very little fear of failure. They may also set low targets for themselves because they know if they achieve an ambitious target that the bar will be raised even higher the following year.
11. **Too busy:** Too snowed under is a ‘good’ reason to procrastinate. However, this rationalisation is normally always a false representation of reality. Normally the real reason is bad prioritisation, due to bad planning and strategy.
12. **Play at work:** If you enjoy what you do, and like those that you do it with, you will tend to do it more often.

*"Opportunity is missed by most people, because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work."*

-- Thomas Edison (1847-1931) inventor and salesman who often worked more than 40 hours straight.

In the previous two chapters, we discussed “Mental Energy” and “Emotional Energy” and we saw how important it was to lay the foundations to accommodate this phase, “Action Energy.” We saw that persistent action is triggered by a deep down desire to achieve our authentic vision and core purpose. Once you have figured out “*Where* am I (current situation), *Where* do I want to go (future vision), *Why* do I want to get there (Vroom’s model), and *How* do I get there (plan/mission)” the next question is “*When* do I act (implementation)?” This final step requires transforming your focussed strategic thinking into effective action.

**Physical Energy to Act:** Visualisation and implementation *must* be regarded as separate projects. The great strategist, Michael Porter, believes that activities are the essential tool, and highlights the fact that competitive advantage is the accumulated affect from many *activities*. Porter writes, “Activities provide the bridge between strategy and implementation.”<sup>9</sup> The reality is that we need to work; and one of the best tips to help people work effectively is to have a daily to-do-list.

Neuroscientist Brian Knutson has proven that action is its own reward. Charles Goodyear discovered the all important vulcanization process of rubber by accidentally spilling his mixture on a hot stove. Thomas Edison, who failed thousands of times before perfecting the light bulb, said, "I never failed once. It just happened to be a 2000-step process." *Action*, the part of success that is often ignored, is an excellent way of emotionally reprogramming. By taking action, we learn new feelings while simultaneously unlearning deeply seated feelings of inadequacy. It is so healing, that happiness can be described simply as *goal-directed engagement*. Put another way: “the thrill of the hunt is more enjoyable than the pleasure of the feast.”<sup>10</sup> It is a fact – as human beings, we are just made this way, to have goals and to work toward them.

If you consciously slow down your breathing and breathe deeply, you immediately feel less anxious. Hence action changes our mood and thought. Both Charles Darwin and William James realised that if we hold a smile and stand tall, we feel better. We also feel better after an invigorating gym workout. The act of unfolding our arms during a lecture makes us much better listeners. Writing out a gratitude list is more rewarding and mood lifting than just thinking about a list. Listening to angry music whilst pulling an angry face changes our mood and will even increase our body temperature. Therefore ‘action’ is not just an act, but it is also thought and emotion provoking – refuelling us to act again.

### **Action often trumps inspiration**

*Sooner or later you're going to realise, just as I did, there's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.* -- Morpheus (in the Matrix movie)

Surely something as creative as art should first require pure inspiration? Top American artist and photographer, Chuck Close, answers this dilemma so well in Andrew Zuckerman’s striking book, *Wisdom*, that it must be shared with a larger audience:<sup>11</sup>

Inspiration is for amateurs; all the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself. Things occur to you. If you’re sitting around trying to think up a great art idea, you can sit there a long time before anything happens. But if you get to work, something will occur to you and something else will occur to you and something else that you reject will push you in another direction. Inspiration is absolutely unnecessary and somehow deceptive. You feel like you need this great idea before you can get down to work, and I find that’s almost never the case. Any day that you don’t do any painting, is a totally lost day.

Look at how being busy with something can accidentally give birth to our heart's desires. It is while engaged in work that we so often find serendipitous luck, and by being idle we frequently decline into despair.

- Jim Collins was planning to just write an article, which evolved into his third book, *How The Mighty Fall*.
- Rebecca Stephens, a reporter on an Everest expedition, was so inspired by the experience that she later went on to climb Everest herself, which then precipitated her to conquer the Seven Summits, which led her to co-authoring *The Seven Summits of Success*.
- South African, Mandy Ramsden, started running around the block in her thirties, and then after having four children, landed up becoming the first African to summit the Seven Summits (2010).
- On a long car trip, Richard Adams made up a story to keep his young daughters entertained. They so loved the story that they pushed their dad to write his first novel, *Watership Down*.

Whether creating the Great Wall of China or The Great Escape, both require concentrated effort or execution over an extended period. Buildings do not build themselves. And it is pointless chipping away randomly to break through a wall — you have got to choose a single spot and unceasingly pulverize that particular point until you break through it. “It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer,” admitted Albert Einstein. This means *persistent focused action* is more important than intelligence. This obsessive persistence may seem imbalanced in the short-term, but over the long-term it builds results. “Life Balance” is not about balance on a day-to-day basis, because more often than not there are unavoidable short-term imbalances, but it is about balance over an extended period. If, for example, you need to get through a tough exam, you may temporarily find yourself needing to put a few other activities on the backburner. Sometimes you need to take a step back socially or financially to take a giant leap forward in other life areas. But over the medium to long-term, life must have balance. For example, if you lose your career, other life areas will keep you buoyant.

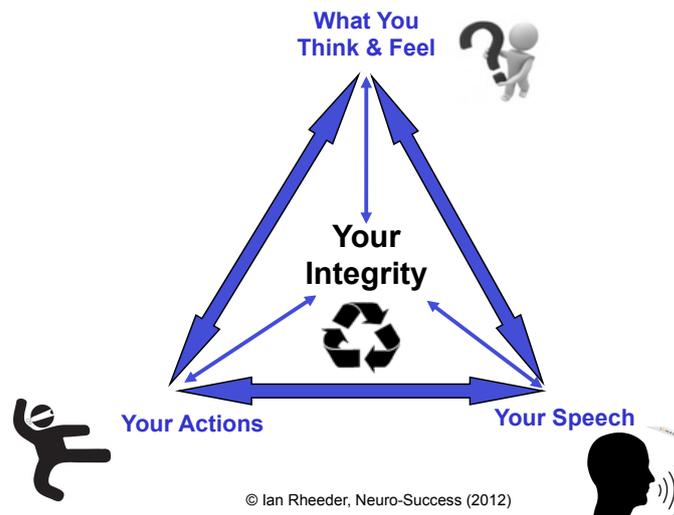
Life is not an event like a 100m sprint where everyone starts at the same time. Life is an ongoing marathon. You can outrun superior talent by running whilst they stagnate. Like American golfer Ben Hogan said, “If you can't outplay them, outwork them.”

There seems to be a worldwide paradox between what we believe in and what we do. So let us look at a practical example of how thought and actions get frayed and disconnected. During the Second World War, Germany was the most Christianised country on earth. However, the fact that the “moral majority” believed in Christian principles did not stop the malevolent rampage of killing six million Jews and an estimated 70 million fatalities during the Second World War. While the over-riding principle of Christianity is based on love for one’s neighbour, the over-riding action during this time was to punish and kill those who were different. If we observe [Fig 7.3](#) below, we begin to understand why when a leader has no congruence between what they say and do, the follower loses trust.

*‘The nine most terrifying words in the English language are, ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’* Ronald Reagan

But why in reality do the majority of individuals, organisations and politicians have a severed connection between their strategic thinking and acting that very same thinking out? Is it because they lack the physical energy to put into action what they envisaged? Why don’t thoughts correlate with an

equivalent action? From my observation, the most notable disconnect between thought and action is that the two disciplines should be regarded as two separate projects. *There is not a natural seamless transition from strategy to action. They are linked, especially when emotions are involved, but they are two different projects.* Get your thinking, feelings, beliefs, and attitude right (project one) and then get your action right (project two). However, in reality, most people just get their thinking-project right and then wait for a plan-of-action to devise itself. Or even worse, hatch a detailed action plan based on rotten or hollow strategic thinking and research.

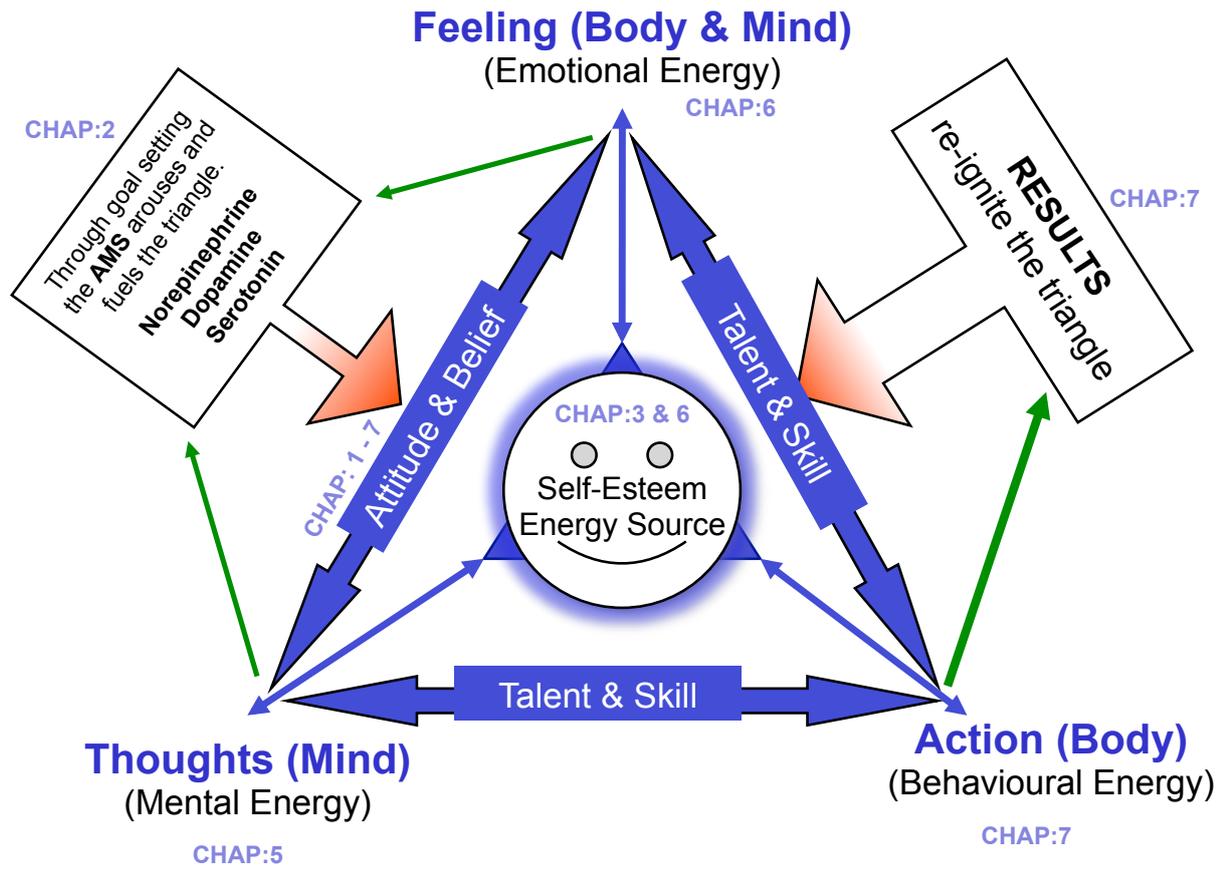


**Figure 7.3: If actions are not aligned with what we say, we lose credibility.**

It is not always possible to know what the right option is for a given situation, but always attempt to move from “I think” to “I know.” There is a big difference between “I think I know” and “I know I know,” a deep knowing based on a healthy respect of reality. Become an expert, do research, and get a second and even a third opinion.

Once you have your strategic thinking right, you will feel more secure and you will be able to act out with more disciplined persistence. Once your mind is right, project number two is to write an action plan based on the facts — a plan devised with your head out of the sand. But in reality, the average person too often jumps to conclusions about what the facts are and then allows an undisciplined, often unwritten, random and reactive plan to unfold as the ‘universe miraculously feeds’ them more information. This is the reason 90 percent of all new businesses in South Africa fold in the first 18 months. It is not that they suddenly and mysteriously run out of cash, it is that they run into cash flow problems because of bad planning before and after inception.

The point is that the feeling of achieving is a giant stimulus. I have heard it often said that *Every time you do something you are afraid of, your fears diminish.* It is important to understand the different projects that are going to give you the required result. Without action, however, even the best-laid plans culminate in nothing. Lao Tzu’s comment explains this perfectly: "A 1000 mile journey begins by taking the first step."



AMS: Ascending Monoamine System

**Fig 7.4 For the best Return on Energy, ensure that your Source is driven by a Positive Self-esteem**

Looking at the above framework — a closed-loop of systemic energy – there is a simultaneous synthesis between thinking, feeling, and acting, in all directions. As the leader and follower develop their healthy self-esteem, this healthy inner energy source propagates, perpetuates and orchestrates positive thoughts, feelings and actions. That all-important energy required for implementing your personal and organisational strategy.

*We cannot predict the future. But we can create it.* -- Jim Collins & Morten Hansen (2011)<sup>12</sup>

**Key Takeouts: ACTION ENERGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

*I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.* -- Confucius

- When observing how individuals and companies destroy themselves, this is exactly what they often do: they blur the boundaries between thinking and action. The solution is to keep the two processes — thinking (planning) and acting (implementation) as separate projects.
- Neuroscientist Brian Knutson has proven that action is its own reward. *Action*, the part of success that is often ignored, is an excellent way of emotionally reprogramming.
- ‘Action’ is not just an act, but it is also thought and emotion provoking – refuelling us to act again.
- Obsessive persistence may seem imbalanced in the short-term, but over the long-term it builds results. “Life Balance” is not about balance on a day-to-day basis, because more often than not there are unavoidable short-term imbalances, but it is about balance over an extended period.
- Without action, even the best-laid plans culminate in nothing.

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