PREDICTABLE SUCCESS

GETTING YOUR ORGANIZATION ON THE GROWTH TRACK—AND KEEPING IT THERE

LES McKEOWN

Greenleaf Book Group Press

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW: WHAT PREDICTABLE SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE FROM 30,000 FEET

WHEN I ARRIVED FOR MY FIRST MEETING WITH MIKE, HE SHOWED me into his conference room. "Too many distractions in my office," he explained. As it turned out, the conference room provided little relief. His assistant skittered in and out throughout our meeting—with papers to sign, questions to answer, documents needing approval. Three or four times, one or another of Mike's managers would peek around the door, asking for clarifications, conveying tidbits of information. Occasionally, the phone in the conference room would ring as yet another employee tracked Mike down. Maybe we should have met at the local Starbucks instead.

Mike had asked me to meet with him to explore the reasons why his company's growth had stalled over the previous eighteen months. As Mike was the founder and CEO of a 125-person paint distribution business, I understood that his attention might be needed by a colleague at some point in our ninety-minute meeting, but this was clearly abnormal. As the meeting went on, however, it became clear that what I was watching was more important than anything Mike was telling me. His organization had hit what I had come to call "Whitewater"—the company had outgrown its youthful, "turn on a dime," freewheeling culture, and desperately needed some processes and systems to bring order to the chaos that was slowly engulfing Mike and his managers.

As we worked through the questions I had for Mike, took a tour of his facility and met with some of his key people, everything I saw and heard confirmed that Mike had indeed hit Whitewater—big time. We scheduled our next meeting a month ahead, allowing Mike time to send me some data on his last four quarters' operations, and I promised to come back with my recommendations on the best way forward.

A couple of weeks later, I met with Gloria, VP of Sales for the consumer division of a national financial services company. The setting couldn't have been more different from my meeting with Mike. After a clockwork-precise guided tour of the two floors of quietly humming cubicles that were her domain, and a brief introduction to her boss, Gloria steered me into one of the tidiest, calmest offices I've ever seen. With no interruptions, and with every relevant document to hand and reproduced in glowing color, spiral-bound and dancing with charts and analysis, Gloria and I delved into the exact same problem as Mike's—why her sales had plateaued after seventeen straight quarters of unbroken growth, even though the industry as a whole was healthy.

As we ground through the data, Gloria choreographed a mini-ballet of presentations by her three lieutenants, each one with impeccable dress sense, impressive presentation skills and a strong grasp of the underlying data.

As I watched Gloria interact with her managers, I noticed the stylized manner in which the discussions took place—with acronyms and industry-speak used as shorthand, questions posed rhetorically, and much of the conversation sounding stilted, even rehearsed. Again, as with Mike, the evidence was clear just by watching what was going on—Gloria's division had hit "Treadmill," a later stage in organizational growth where process and systems had taken over, squeezing out creativity and risk taking. Individual meetings with each of her three managers confirmed it: Analysis of data had taken the place of honest debate, and personal initiative and innovation had given way to conformity, uniformity and fear of making mistakes. They were firmly in the grip of Treadmill.

At our roundup meeting at the end of the day, I gave Gloria the Web link for an assessment I wanted her and her managers to complete, and scheduled our second meeting one month ahead. As with Mike, I promised that at our next meeting we'd start looking at some answers to her problem.

Three days later, I stepped out of the blistering Midwest heat into the welcome, air-conditioned relief of a squat, four-story office block sitting at the entrance to an industrial park. I was here to meet with Phil, after an absence of six months. Phil had first called me when his snack brand company had acquired the ailing potato chip manufacturer whose offices I was now standing in, and Phil had been sent down from HQ to manage the division, with the goal of restoring profitability within twenty-four months. I'd worked with Phil and his team for those two years, and I was excited to have the chance to return and assess the results of our work together.

The stated reason I was there was to facilitate Phil's biannual "state of the business" meeting with his managers. While he was perfectly capable of chairing the meeting himself, Phil liked the freedom to participate without the responsibilities of chairmanship. He also liked bringing in someone with an outside perspective and who would not be afraid to ask dumb questions when necessary. I was pleased that he'd asked me to take on the role for this particular session.

I'd prepared myself for a long day of presentations, and I had assumed that each manager would be "reporting in" (or "reporting out") one by one. Maybe there would be some questions or a discussion or two, but mostly I was expecting the series of one-sided monologues that usually form the core of gatherings such as these. What I got instead was something very different. Sure, there were some presentations, but they were short and succinct, and were followed by incisive, focused discussions, usually two or three times longer than the presentation itself, and always building on the content of the presentation rather than reanalyzing or second-guessing it. The agenda was used merely as a jumping-off point for discussion, as the group probed and prodded the issues facing them, seemingly never content until they had held every issue up to the light and turned it in each direction, seeking always to add a new perspective or find a new answer.

It very quickly became obvious that this was no routine meeting to be endured before getting back to the "real" work at hand. Somehow, in that quiet conference room, undisturbed and intently focused, Phil and his managers seemed to summon the very lifeblood of their business into reality. Like master architects huddled around a set of blueprints, it was as if they could "see" the finished building; with every discussion it felt as though we were taking a virtual walk around the parts of the business we were reviewing. The people, processes and activities we discussed came alive as each manager drew on his or her experience and knowledge to enrich the discussion.

As I watched them in action, I realized that the group had developed an internal rhythm that paced their discussions. With each agenda item, the process was the same: They'd first gather the required information, usually already included in their pre-meeting materials, which everyone had read and which they didn't rehash, unless someone had a specific question. They would then debate the issue for as long as was necessary, always honestly and without defensiveness or blame or guilt. Finally, and swiftly, they would make a decision or, occasionally, defer the matter to a subgroup or a later meeting. It was the rhythm of effective and efficient decisionmaking, and as we moved into the afternoon I began to hear it drum in my mind: *Data*, *Debate*, *Decide or Defer . . . Data*, *Debate*, *Decide or Defer*.

When the time came to make decisions on each agenda item, the dynamic of the group shifted once more. It felt as if the room became an operating theater, with the managers donning scrubs and gathering together around the patient. For a short period, the level of focus and intensity shifted up a gear, with Phil acting as a first among equals, guiding but not dominating the decision-making process. The managers spoke clearly and precisely to each other, trading pieces of information as if reading vital signs from a heart monitor, all focused on one thing—the absolute health of their patient, their business. There were no personal agendas being pursued, no self-serving comments—just a shared desire to do the very best for the organization as a whole.

As the afternoon swept by, the agenda was knocked down item by item in the same relentless, effective rhythm, yet all was done with humor and time for occasional digressions. Finally the last agenda item was done. Phil checked that we had captured all the salient action points, and with that the meeting was over.

During the all-staff barbecue held later in the cool of the evening, I compared notes with Phil, and the next day, I circled through each of the the managers, meeting their teams and getting progress reports on how things had gone since we last had met, six months previously. It became clear that Phil had achieved exactly what Mike and Gloria so desired—he had brought his organization to the pinnacle of organizational growth. His organization wasn't perfect—no organization ever can be—and he still had challenges, many of them. But he also had a well-oiled, efficient, yet very human "machine" taking on those challenges. His organization and the people who ran it were "in the zone": Like an all-conquering football team winning the championship year after year, they had found a winning formula, one which Mike and Gloria craved. They had reached the state of development that I call Predictable Success.

On the plane ride home, tired but energized by my time with Phil and his team, I grabbed a yellow pad and began jotting some notes for my upcoming meetings with Mike and Gloria. Despite their deep concerns and the obvious challenges they faced, I was excited for them both. If they were up for it, Mike and Gloria—and the organizations they ran—were about to begin a transformative, challenging journey of discovery and development. It was the same journey that Phil had successfully completed over the last thirty months, the same journey that I had had the privilege of witnessing—and facilitating—so many times before.

As I thought back on my first meetings with Mike and Gloria, I recalled how frustrated and impotent they felt. It was understandable: From their perspective, their organizations were mired in the mud, going nowhere. In fact, Mike—though he could barely bring himself to say it—feared for the very existence of his company. "I'm worried that we're not going to make it," he'd said to me. "I've never known a time when I've felt less in control of my company. I feel as though it's running me, not the other way around. If I can't get the business back on track soon, I'm seriously thinking of selling out."

For Gloria, the issue was more personal. "Les," she'd said, "maybe I've got to accept that I've reached the limit of my management skills. Maybe I just don't have what it takes to take this division to the next level. I'm not sure I'm the right person for the job anymore."

Two very different people, two very different organizations, two different sets of challenges—yet they shared one important characteristic, and that shared characteristic was the cause of my optimism. Despite the different challenges and issues they faced, if they responded to those challenges in the right way, they were each in fact just one step away from reaching the peak of organizational development—the stage Phil and his team had reached: Predictable Success.

Granted, Mike and Gloria were each approaching Predictable Success from different directions—Mike with a more youthful organization coming "up" the growth curve, and Gloria managing a much larger enterprise trying hard not to slide "down." And yes, each (as we will see) would need to take very different—often symmetrically opposite—steps to get there, but their goal was identical: to get their respective organizations to a place where growth was once more attainable and, more important, sustainable. In other words, to achieve Predictable Success.

What Predictable Success Is Not

What did Phil and his organization have that Mike's and Gloria's lacked? What does it mean for an organization to be in Predictable Success?

Well, let's start by defining what it is not:

It's not about size. Small organizations can be in Predictable Success, large organizations, too. A twenty-three-person firm of attorneys I work with is in Predictable Success; General Electric was for many years in Predictable Success while employing more than 300,000 people. Other organizations never get there, irrespective of how big they grow. Any organization, of any size, can be in Predictable Success if managed correctly.

It's not about age. Being in Predictable Success has nothing to do with the chronological age of organizations—a young organization can be in Predictable Success, and some very old organizations never get there. Litle & Co, a credit-card payment processing company, was number one on the Inc. 500 just five years after it was founded. SC Johnson regularly appears in *Fortune* magazine's Top 100 Companies to Work For and is more than 120 years old.

It's not about money or other resources. As the meltdown of fall 2008 proved all too clearly, resource-rich organizations cannot buy their way into Predictable Success. Conversely, if they take the right steps, resource-challenged organizations can make it to Predictable Success (and in doing so, will also resolve their resource needs faster than they would have otherwise). Microsoft has billions of dollars in its coffers, yet it is not in Predictable Success. A graphic design company I know is in Predictable Success despite funding itself from the partners' credit cards.

It's not a culture. Predictable Success is not about adopting any one organizational "culture." Organizations in Predictable Success don't all adopt the same way of doing business, use the same management style or follow the same "gurus." They each have a unique way of doing business that is specific to their own culture and goals. Predictable Success organizations can be highly disciplined, or looser and more freewheeling. They can be for-profit or not-for-profit, family oriented or more "corporate" in style—it doesn't matter.

It's not about how meetings are held. Although you can tell a lot about any organization by watching how its meetings are conducted (as I did with Mike, Gloria and Phil), this is an effect, not a cause. Meetings in Predictable Success organizations are run a certain way because they are in Predictable Success, not the other way around.

It's not about the industry you're in. I've worked with defense contractors, health care consultants, car parts manufacturers, software designers, government agencies, food distributors and everything in between. Predictable Success is entirely industry-neutral.

Okay—now we know a few things that Predictable Success is not. Let's turn now to what Predictable Success is:

Predictable Success as a Natural Stage in Organizational Development

Look at Figure 1.1 below. Don't worry about understanding all the terms on the diagram—we'll get to those in due course. You can see that Predictable Success is one of the *seven stages of growth and decline* through which every organization progresses. Not every organization makes it all the way through all seven stages—some organizations stop at one or more stages; some make it to one stage, then drop back to the previous stage or stages; and some organizations die at a certain stage.

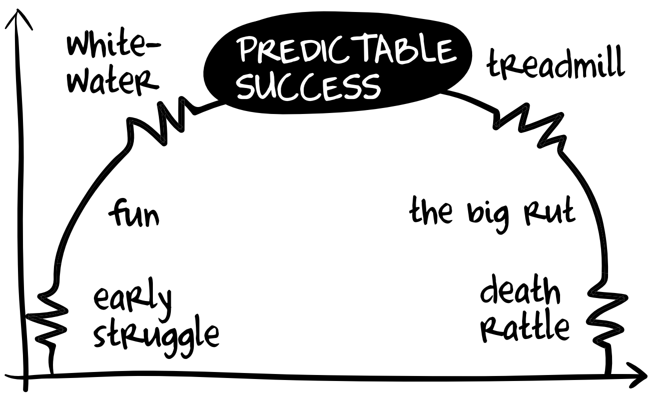


Figure 1.1 The Predictable Success Growth Cycle

Predictable Success is the apex of the growth curve. This book is about how to get there. 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.

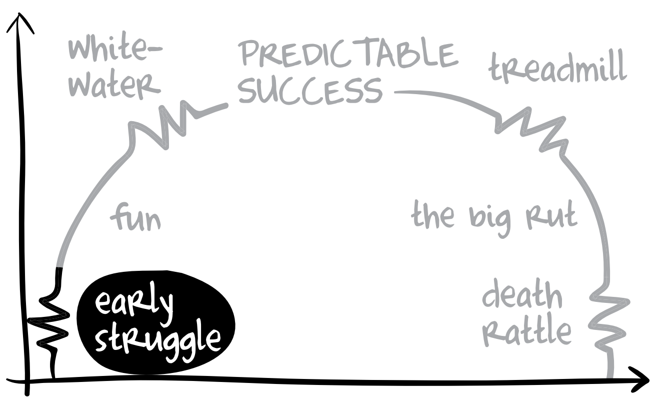
There are three important things to note about the growth cycle:

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 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. Part 2 of this book explains how to achieve this.

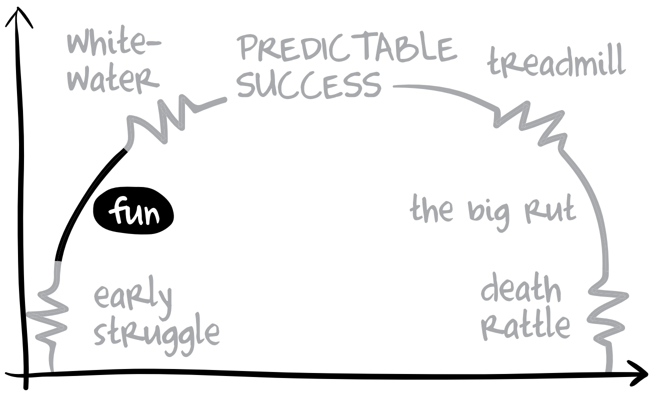
Hold On Tight: Predictable Success in 3 Minutes or Less

The chapters in Part 1 of this book describe each of the seven stages of the growth cycle in detail; however, if you have managed an organization of any size 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:



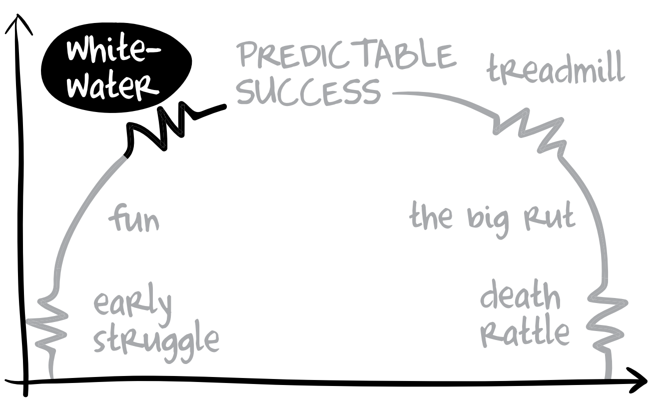
Early Struggle. It feels as if you're hacking through the jungle, fighting to keep your newborn organization alive. The two main challenges are (1) making sure there is enough cash to keep going, until (2) you've clearly established that there is a market for your product or service.

The mortality rate of organizations is high in this stage—more than two-thirds of all organizations don't make it out of Early Struggle. You're fighting for your organization's very existence.



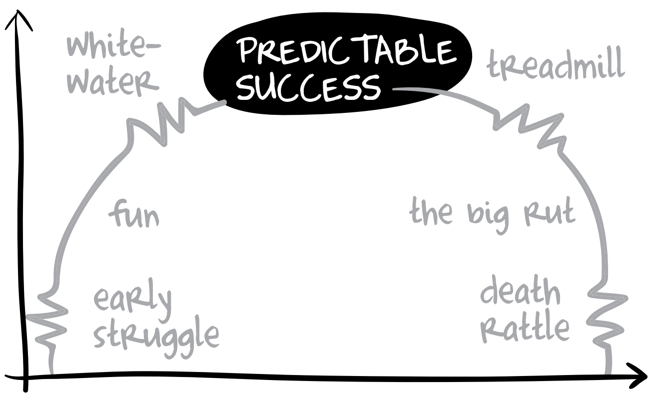
Fun. You've broken through the Early Struggle—you have cash (at least enough to take the pressure off) and an established market. It's time to have Fun! Now you're free to concentrate on getting your product or service into the market, so the key focus now moves from cash to sales.

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.



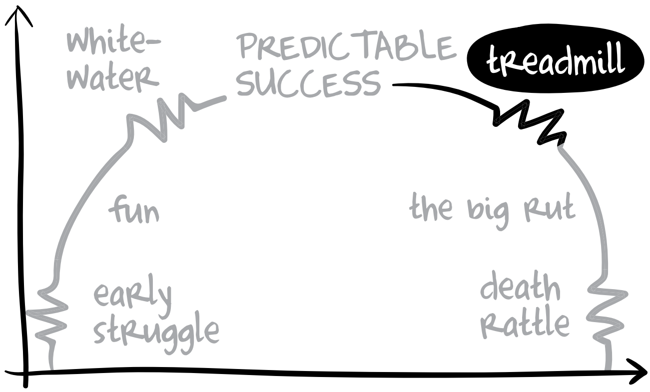
Whitewater. The very success that you reaped in the Fun stage brings with it the seeds of Whitewater: Your organization becomes complex, and the key emphasis shifts once more, from sales to profitability. Achieving sustained, profitable growth requires you to put in place consistent processes, policies 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 be doubting your leadership and management skills.



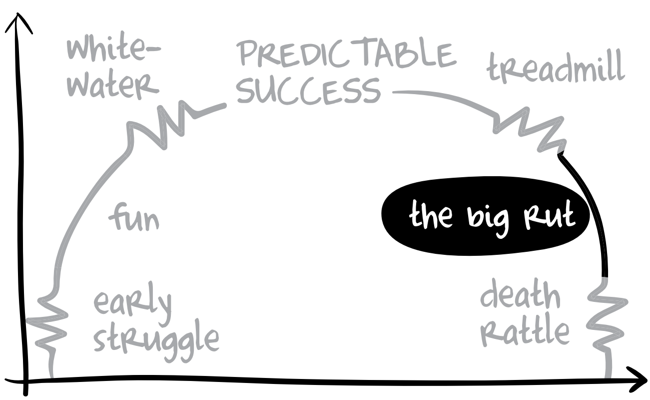
Predictable Success. You've developed a team that has successfully navigated your organization through Whitewater—congratulations! You have reached the prime stage in your organization's growth: Predictable Success.

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.



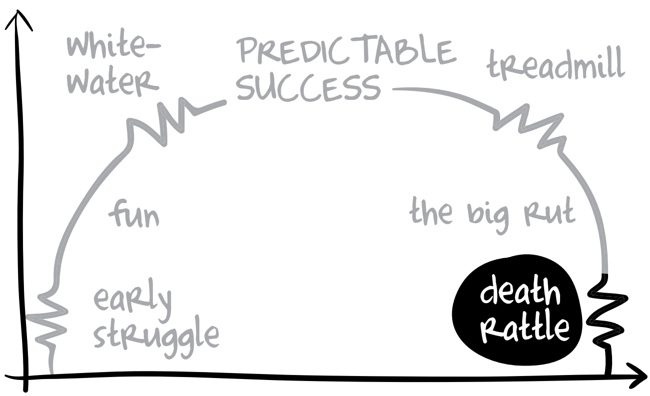
Treadmill. In principle, there is no reason for any organization to decline from the position of Predictable Success. In practice, many organizations begin to swing too far toward dependence on process and policies. Creativity, risk taking and initiative decline in response, and the organization becomes 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 overemphasis 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 threatening to leave also.



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 decline.



Death Rattle. Eventually, for all bureaucracies, there is a 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.

The 5 Key Benefits of Achieving 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?

Any organization that is in Predictable Success exhibits five main characteristics that, taken together, distinguish it from organizations at other stages in the growth cycle:

1. **Decision making.** The ability to readily make and consistently implement decisions.
2. **Goal setting.** The ability to readily set and consistently achieve goals.
3. **Alignment.** Structure, process and people are in harmony.
4. **Accountability.** Employees become self-accountable, in addition to being externally accountable to others.
5. **Ownership.** Employees take personal responsibility for their actions and outcomes.

Note that these characteristics are not "tidy"—they don't all begin with the same letter or spell out an easy acronym—they don't even roll easily off the tongue. That's because Predictable Success isn't a "made up" theory—it's an intuitive, natural reflection of the way things really are in predictably successful organizations—and sometimes, reality just refuses to be neat and tidy.

Let's take a look at each of the five Predictable Success characteristics in turn:

1. Decision Making: The Ability to Readily Make and Consistently Implement Decisions.

Spend any time with an organization in Predictable Success, and the first thing you'll notice is the way in which its members 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 lower-level managers, team leaders and supervisors as just "part of the job." As Phil said at the barbecue when I shared with him my observations on seeing his team make decisions together, "That's what we come here to do every day, so we better be good at it."

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 micromanaging others. We'll see more on the impact of decentralized decision making in Part 2.

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 is made. Once a decision has been made, it doesn't languish in limbo, with the managers hoping it will gain traction or acceptance—put simply, it just gets done. As we'll see, 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" for frontline employees to implement, but rather 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: The Ability to Readily Set and Consistently Achieve Goals.

The second characteristic of Predictable Success is the one that both Mike and Gloria had most obviously lost, though for different reasons: *the ability to readily set and consistently achieve their goals*.

When I speak with an executive whose organization has made it to Predictable Success, this is the one aspect of being there that he or she most values and refers to most frequently—getting back a sense of really being in control, being able to make things happen once more. As Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of GE, puts it: "When you put your foot on the gas in this company, the car goes forward."

> I refer here to the organization's internal ability to easily set and achieve their goals. No methodology can inure an organization against catastrophic **external** events such as a market collapse or demographic shifts, although, as we'll see, the Predictable Success organization will be consistently more nimble in responding to such external events.

Both Mike and Gloria had lost the ability to "make the car go forward." And as they both discovered, when this happens, the person in charge doesn't 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 held, resource allocations are made, emails are sent, progress reports are written. But months later, in spite of all that activity, just like Mike and Gloria, you look up to see that nothing of note has actually happened—your organization has stalled, or worse, it is going backward. It seems as though 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 gotten where they are by "getting things done," so coming to a realization 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 the 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 it *does* look as though they will miss their goals, they know about it early and take timely, corrective action.

3. Alignment: Structure, Process and People Are in Harmony.

In most organizations, there are considerable efficiency losses caused by the interaction 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 underdeveloped, leaving the people in the organization to compensate by working out systems and policies on their own—in turn leading to duplication, inefficiency and increasingly frustrated customers. In the "downward" part of the growth cycle—from Treadmill on—the systems and structure are overdeveloped and increasingly rigidly enforced, draining from employees the ability to show initiative and be innovative.

In Predictable Success, the organization achieves balance between structure, process and people. There is just the right amount of process to ensure that 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 there are enough controls and systems to manage risk, avoid unnecessary duplication, and prevent the organization from becoming exposed or vulnerable to a few superstar Big Dogs (high performers who also have a monopoly of knowledge about how the organization works—we'll learn much more about Big Dogs later).

In Predictable Success the matrix of structure, process and people is *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: Employees Become Self-accountable, in Addition to Being Externally Accountable to others.

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. When empowered to make decisions of genuine import about their own jobs and responsibilities—and 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 personally buys in to the success of his or her own and the 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 underperformance or simple shirking of responsibility stands 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 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, training and mentoring and coaching, and by being modeled by senior management, self-accountability is at the core of Predictable Success.

5. Ownership: Employees Take Personal Responsibility for Their Actions and Outcomes.

Most leaders of organizations (or divisions, departments, groups or teams) feel at some point as if they are pushing an increasingly large rock uphill—that if they don't constantly put their shoulder into it, 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 just this—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 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 with a culture of self-accountability at the core), reaches a whole new phase of organizational growth—one where its growth and development are 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—manage. Instead of firefighting and fixing things, compensating for the poor work of others, or simply doing things because "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 frontline 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.

Time for Mike and Gloria to Take the First Step . . .

Mike drained his second espresso (we met in Starbucks this time), and I watched as he mentally processed what I had just shared with him. I'd explained the Predictable Success growth cycle, briefly describing each of the seven stages. From the data he'd collected for me and my notes from our meetings, I'd showed him why I felt he was in Whitewater. In fact, I hadn't had to explain my conclusions for too long: "Stop." He turned his palms outward. "You don't need to convince me anymore—the very word Whitewater says it all—that's exactly what we're going through."

Mike concentrated intently, taking occasional notes as I explained the silver lining—that although his business was shuddering right now, he was in fact very close to Predictable Success—just one "growth step" away. Slowly, I talked him through the five characteristics of a Predictable Success organization—decision making; setting and achieving goals;

structure, process and people in harmony; self-accountability; pull not push. There was no doubt: Mike was hooked. I could tell from his nods and his looks of recognition, from what he wrote down and what he didn't need to write, that Mike understood the power of getting his organization to Predictable Success. I had just one question: Was he ready to take the necessary steps to get there?

"Ready?" said Mike, setting down his cup. "I've never felt so ready to do anything in my entire life." He looked right into my eyes, and I knew what his next question would be. He smiled as he asked, "What do we do first?"

"First," I said, reaching for my schedule, "you and your team need to understand exactly why and how you got here. Only by knowing what causes Whitewater can you start the process of moving to the next step—to Predictable Success. When is your team free to meet?"

As we flicked our schedules back and forward, comparing dates, I noticed my upcoming meeting with Gloria. Persuading someone that their organization was in Treadmill was always a more difficult process than with someone in Whitewater. It was going to be an interesting meeting . . .

SUMMARY

- Predictable Success is a natural stage in every organization's growth.
- In Predictable Success, the organization can easily set and consistently achieve its goals.
- Predictable Success is not about an organization's size, age or resources.
- Nor is Predictable Success a specific corporate culture, a way of having meetings or industry-specific.
- An organization must progress through the earlier stages of development to reach Predictable Success. It cannot jump a stage (though it can reduce the time spent there), but it can cycle through various stages.
- An organization can stay in Predictable Success indefinitely.
- An organization in Predictable Success benefits specifically from better decision making, goal setting, alignment, accountability and ownership.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Les McKeown is the president & CEO of Predictable Success.

With over twenty-five years of global business experience, including starting forty-two companies in his own right, and as the founding partner of an incubation consulting company that launched hundreds of businesses worldwide, Les has an intuitive understanding of why businesses grow and succeed.

Les's clients have included Harvard University, the US Army, Pella Corporation, Chiron Corporation, Microsoft, United Technologies Corporation, the Canadian Defence Department, MI-SWACO, St. Vincent Health, VeriSign, and many others.

Les has appeared on CNN, ABC and the BBC, and in *USA Today* and the *New York Times*. He lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts, with his wife and two dogs, and receives occasional care packages from his three children.