

ONE-LINERS FOR EXECUTIVES

by [John S. McCallum](#)

Leadership | July / August 2012

One-liners are very short statements that purport to capture the essence of a situation. At their best, they can bring clarity and precision to complexity and confusion. They can also focus decision-making. The knock on them is that they can oversimplify and create only an illusion of an understanding.

Regardless, one-liners are part of every executive's world. Here are 15 of the best. Used properly, they can help an executive determine what to do and also help get others on board. Sourcing can be difficult and is uncertain, as a number are so commonly used that they have become part of the woodwork. Where possible, sources are provided but apologies if certain ones are overlooked.

1. "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." I am uncertain of the specific source, but the idea is captured in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in a bizarre exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat. Alice asks the Cat which way she ought to go; the Cat says it depends on where you want to get; Alice says she doesn't much care; the Cat says then it doesn't matter which way you go.

For executives, the message is simple. You cannot lead anybody or anything anywhere if you don't know where "there" is. The absence of clear goals often explains why businesses perform poorly. Clear goals are common thread to all successful businesses.

Goal setting should not be taken lightly; it really matters. Maybe Beat Generation icon Jack Kerouac said it best in *On the Road*: "Sal, we gotta go and never stop going till we get there. Where we going, man? I don't know but we gotta go." Not a recipe for running a good business.

2. "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." This Steven R. Covey gem should be top of mind for executives.

Don't get distracted by things that don't matter; keep yourself and your team focused. When the "main thing" ceases to be the main thing, you end up being satisfied with decisions only accidentally.

Keeping the main thing the main thing takes attention, discipline and courage. Keeping the main thing the main thing requires a clear understanding of what the main thing is and why it is the main thing. If you are always failing to keep the main thing the main thing, you may need either a new main thing or a new leader, or both.

3. "The art of being wise is knowing what to overlook." William James may have been a 19th-20th century Harvard philosopher and psychologist, but with advice like this he would have been very much at home in the business school, teaching executives.

Executive time and energy is scarce; not overlooking what should be overlooked creates confusion and anxiety and is usually at the expense of something that should not be overlooked. Good executives have the capacity not to let the small but irritating stuff get to them and affect their performance as leaders.

4. “There is never just one cockroach in the kitchen.” Warren Buffett’s more colorful version of “Where there’s smoke there’s fire” is terrific advice for executives.

When even small things go wrong, investigate thoroughly and fix the problem, because one offs are rare in the trouble department. Problems are usually a sign of other problems. Don’t let denial get the best of you. Don’t just deal with problems; actively look for them.

5. “The devil is in the details.” Updated from the much older expression, “God is in the details”, this is probably sourced as anonymous but it is surely worth executive consideration.

What looks good at the 20,000-foot level can actually be a nightmare when you get close enough for real understanding. The message: Before deciding and committing, drill down and then drill down further. If you are far enough away almost anything can look good; up close, not so much. When things go wrong, it is often the details that get you. The results always expose the details you ignored.

6. “You don’t know what you don’t know.” Socrates, Bob Woodward of Watergate fame and former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have all been associated with this line. Donald Rumsfeld’s version has a big following: “There are known knowns; we also know there are known unknowns; but there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don’t know”.

Executives who don’t know what they don’t know often get into trouble. Learning to know what you don’t know is no small trick, but it begins with humility and includes involving and actually listening to many different viewpoints. Just because you don’t know what you don’t know does not mean others do not know what you need to know. Getting those others involved — to borrow a concept from trigonometry — is called triangulation. Good executives triangulate from many angles when the stakes are high. Another well-known line fits here: “Advice on advice: get some”.

7. “Bedside manners are no substitute for the right diagnosis.” This is vintage Alfred P. Sloane. Sloane put together General Motors in the 1920s and wrote what is arguably the best business book ever: *My Years with General Motors*.

Executives, like doctors, are in the problem business. You can’t solve a problem unless you diagnose its root cause properly; kindness, personality, charisma etc. are certainly important but they will not fix a problem that has been misdiagnosed and is consequently not being treated properly. It is good to have a nice person as your doctor, but if you are seriously sick the only thing that really matters is a doctor who gets your situation right. At that point you are not looking for bedside manner. You are looking for competence. So it is with business, where the executive is the doctor.

8. “Like hires like.” Not sure of this source but it is sure something for executives to think about when they appoint people.

People like what they see in the mirror and tend to replicate it when hiring. Examples: if you appoint from outside your organization, don’t be surprised that your appointee continues to add

from outside. If your appointee is of a particular viewpoint, don't be surprised if more follow with the same viewpoint. A related version of this line: "Situations change, people don't".

9. "Success often lies not in what you do, but what you stop." A former Canadian prime minister, William Lyon McKenzie King, had a view of politics along these lines. It applies to business.

Doing new things gets big headlines while stopping things hardly gets noticed. But what you stop can make all the difference in a business. Examples: a bad executive hire; a bad acquisition; a bad product; a bad securities issue.

10. "If you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it." Physicist Lord Kelvin (Sir William Thomson) is the source. Ford Motor Co. CEO Alan Mulally provides the modern day version "The data will set you free".

A big part of achieving goals in business is to measure, accurately, where you are and where you want to get. An unwillingness to measure is not a good sign. Accountability is rooted in measurement and accountability is key to success.

11. "Only the paranoid survive." This is the title of Intel co-founder Andrew Grove's very highly regarded 1999 management book.

A healthy fear of the things that can get you in a business is a good quality in an executive. It can keep you out of a lot of trouble.

12. "You get what you incent." Widely used but of uncertain origin, this line should always be with executives.

"Incentives affect behavior" is a cornerstone of management and economic theory. Workplace incentives include everything from ordinary income, bonuses and stock to perks, recognition and title. Executives control the incentives they provide. They should think about the relationship between incentives and behavior.

13. "No situation is so bad that overreacting and doing something stupid cannot make it worse." Also of uncertain origin but it too makes a good point for executives.

Bad things happen. Executives have to deal with them. Good executives do not make things worse. They do not panic. The more scholarly version of the line comes from Thomas Hardy: "And yet to every bad there is a worse". Then there is the medical version: "Primum non nocere: First do no harm".

14. "Structure follows strategy." Former Harvard Business School Professor Alfred D. Chandler tells executives that they should first determine their strategy and then design an organizational structure to execute it. Too often, strategy is forced into the existing structure with predictably poor consequences.

15. "This too shall pass." Sources include Persian poets and King Solomon.

Great advice for executives having trouble functioning effectively because of the stress of the day. The concept of trouble passing with time is soothing and provides perspective. But it is not a substitute for managing. While everything does eventually pass, difficulties must be managed with an urgency and intensity befitting the situation. When “This too shall pass” becomes “Don’t worry, be happy” it is time to change executives.

You can’t run a business with one-liners. But being able to sum things up in a few words can sometimes be a real help to executives. There is a lot of wisdom in some one-liners. The trick is to use the wisdom but appreciate the limitations.