

# The “Active” Leader: Using Willpower to Move from *Knowing* to *Doing*

By Jean-Yves Lord MBA, CAE  
Leadership Coach and Facilitator

---

With our constant stream of emails, voicemails, meetings, conference calls, pages, faxes and so on, it is a minor miracle that any of us can accomplish anything. With our Blackberry’s surgically implanted into our hands, our time is sliced so thinly that we never have the focused time to develop the big-picture perspective required for an action plan, let alone the time to execute it.

“Daily routines, superficial behaviors, poorly prioritized or unfocused tasks leech managers’ capacities—making unproductive busyness perhaps the most critical behavioral problem” in business today, contend Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal in their book *A Bias for Action*.

For so many of us—whether CEOs for major corporations, small business owners or solo-entrepreneurs—there is a fundamental disconnection between knowing what should be done and actually doing it. Calling this disconnection the “knowing-doing gap,” Stanford University researchers Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton pose the question: “Why does knowledge of what needs to be done frequently fail to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge?”

Is there anyone in business today who hasn’t wondered the same thing?

The answer, argue Bruch and Ghoshal, is both simple and profound. They sum it up with the term “willpower.” The problem they say is not that managers’ time is sliced, but that their intention or “volition” is sliced as well.

Getting things done requires two critical components: energy and focus. And both are at risk in the modern workplace. Building a bias for action in yourself and your organization requires developing and reinforcing the skills to become a “purposeful” or “volitional” manager. These are people who can consistently achieve their objectives by making an unconditional commitment to their goals and then leveraging the power of that intention to overcome the obstacles in their way,

whether their own doubts and fears or the bureaucracies within their organizations.

“Purposeful action-taking depends on engaging the power of the will,” according to Burch and Ghoshal. “Not only does willpower galvanize your mental and emotional energy, it also enables you to make your intention happen against the most powerful odds: distractions, temptations to move in a different direction, self-doubt, and negativity. Willpower is the force that strengthens your energy and sharpens your focus throughout the action-taking process.”

Burch and Ghoshal identify four key steps that form the basis of successfully taking action:

**Form your intention.** To work, your goal must appeal to you emotionally and be something you can define concretely enough so you can clearly visualize its success.

**Commit unconditionally to your intention.** This is the key step, which the authors liken to “crossing the Rubicon,” Caesar’s irreversible decision that led to his conquest of Rome.

**Protect your intention.** Once you have made your commitment, you have to protect it from forces both within yourself and your organization.

**Disengage from your intention.** Unlike Caesar, your Rubicons aren’t life-and-death affairs. You have to define your “stopping rules,” the point of success—or failure—from which you walk away and take up the next challenge.

From the commitment come both the emotional energy and the focus that are critical to your success. In short, the process of getting things done in business is pretty much the same as in any other aspect of life: The only things that get done are those that you genuinely believe in, and believe will get done.

---

## **About the Author:**

Jean-Yves holds a MBA and is an accredited leadership coach. As a coach, facilitator and trainer, he works as a trusted advisor to leaders who want to achieve great professional and business results in harmony with a sustainable employee engagement culture. He is known for his superior ability to elicit trust from others, bring people together, and develop lasting collaborative relationships. He is a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, and an Open Space facilitator.