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Even the most brilliant strategy is worth nothing if it isn't executed well, especially by your front line — the employees who interact daily with your customers. Unfortunately, these employees are regularly asked to execute strategies that others developed and that they may not understand, never mind feel committed or connected to. In fact, according to Robert Kaplan and David Norton, the founders of the Balanced Scorecard, only 5% of employees understand their company's strategy. This makes successful execution nearly impossible. So how can you help frontline employees not only understand but get behind your company's strategy?

What the Experts Say

Traditionally, there has been a clear separation between the processes of strategy creation and execution. Strategy is created by a small set of executives and then passed down through the organization to be translated and implemented. According to Nilofer Merchant, author of *The New How: Creating Business Solutions Through Collaborative Strategy* and founder and CEO of Rubicon Consulting, this separation is often responsible for poor execution. Merchant advocates taking strategy creation out of the board room and bringing people from all parts of the organization together, regardless of level, to think about the company's future. "Engage all of the company, but not after the process, *during* the process," she says. (*For more about Merchant's approach, see Case Study #1 below.*)

However, many companies not ready for such an approach will continue to create strategies at the top of the organization and cascade them down. For managers in these organizations, the question is how to rally employees around someone else's ideas. Below are three approaches to help frontline employees take ownership and feel accountable for the company's future.

1. Communicate and Clarify

Merchant says that if employees are involved in creating the strategy, they are already bought into it, making execution both easier and smoother. When that's not possible, however, the strategy needs to be communicated across the organization. Managers need to relay it to their employees so that it feels real, achievable, applicable to their part of the company, and valuable to the customer. Each manager will have a unique approach to this. Robert Simons, the Charles M. Williams Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and author of the forthcoming book *Seven Strategy Questions: A Simple Approach for Better Execution* suggests using visual aids, such as "strategy maps," that help frontline employees see how the company plans to achieve its mission.

Strategy communications should always be accompanied by metrics, which help frontline employees take ownership over their roles in the execution. The message should be two-fold: this is what we are trying to achieve *and* this is how we will measure if we are achieving it. Of course, some jobs will be more naturally connected to the strategy than others. For example, it is easier for a sales representative to understand how the strategy affects her job than an account receivables clerk. Yet, all employees should be bought into it. "Strategy is a theory about how the company can create value for its customers," says Simons. It's the job of managers to explain that theory to employees and help them integrate it into the work they do, regardless of how direct their relationship is to the customer.

2. Don't Dictate How

"Leaders often over-define the specifics of how strategy should be executed," says Merchant. Leaders and managers can set the vision and targets but they shouldn't dictate how employees achieve them. More specificity may make frontline employees' jobs easier, but it eliminates their need to think and diminishes their sense of ownership. "Let people figure out how to best accomplish the goal," says Merchant. Ask your frontline employees, *How can we achieve our objectives?* This question will likely uncover new approaches to execution that senior management hadn't thought of. "Often the best strategies don't come from the top of the organization," Simons points out. The frontline can be a well of ideas. "New ideas pop up from the pressure of trying to solve a problem for the customer," says Simons.

3. Use Values to Guide Execution Decisions

Since you aren't telling your frontline employees exactly what to do, you need to rely on your company's values to help drive their decisions and actions. Thousands of execution decisions are made every day in an organization: a sales rep decides whether to give a large customer a deal on their next order; your researcher decides whether to explore a new feature for your product. It's impossible for any executive to create a strategy that dictates all of these decisions. According to Simons, that's were values come in. They help guide actions but also help employees make tough choices, especially when the choice pits employee, customer, and stakeholder interests against each other.

Values are best communicated through stories. "If managers cannot tell stories about how the values relate to their work, then the values aren't valuable," Simons says. Find examples of employees using values to make decisions aligned with the strategy and then take opportunities — in staff meetings, over coffee, during weekly one-on-ones — to tell those stories.

How to Handle Dissent

Even if you do all of the above, it's possible, and even likely, that some of your frontline employees will voice objections to the strategy. They may think the leaders have chosen the wrong approach or have decided to play in the wrong space. If this happens, listen carefully. "Every failed strategy had people on the frontline who expressed concerns," says Simons. It's a manager's job to allow bad news to bubble up to the top of the organization. Simons urges though that once those concerns have been heard and dealt with, then people need to get on board with the strategy regardless of their opinion.

Principles to Remember

You should:

- Involve your frontline employees in strategy creation when possible.
- Share stories about employees who used values to guide strategic decisions.
- Ask for input about how the company can achieve its goals.

You shouldn't:

- Be overly specific about how to execute the strategy.
- Communicate the strategy without explaining how success is measured.
- Stifle objections to the strategy.

Case Study #1: Combining the what and the how of strategy creation

A few years back, Openwave, a global software company based in Redwood City, California, was at a critical juncture. The wireless access protocol software the company built its success on was quickly becoming obsolete as more and more devices accessed the internet directly. They needed to enter the IP market, and fast. Bruce Posey, general counsel, was one of the leaders responsible for developing a new approach. In the past, strategy was created in a board room, ordained by the executive team and then tossed out for implementation, which made execution unwieldy and slow. Openwave needed to act fast to get itself back on track. With the help of Nilofer Merchant (expert above), Bruce and the others at Openwave took a radically different approach: one that was more transparent to the rest of the organization and that involved as many employees as possible.

For just over three months, 30 employees representing all functions went through a rigorous practice to generate strategic options, test them with the rest of the organization, and then select the right strategies. This was very different from a few executives sitting in a room and deciding what was best for the company. It involved many "gut wrenching discussions," says Posey, who believes the advantage of the process was that cascading and communicating was done simultaneously with creating. The majority of the company had already bought into the strategy before it was completed.

"People actually feel like they had a piece of the action that they now feel accountable for," he says. In particular the front line had the opportunity to give input and explain what they thought would work and what wouldn't. "The strategy belonged to all of us. It wasn't just the CEO's," says Posey.

Case Study #2: Using values to drive execution

In late 2007, leaders at Gentle Giant moving company started to see their business falling. Directly affected by the hurting real estate industry, the organization anticipated a tough year in 2008. Since it is a low-margin business, Gentle Giant needed to focus on costs and decided to reduce the number of non-revenue generating hours that its movers put in. Pat Inman, the director of operations, knew it wouldn't be easy news to deliver since many of their movers relied on those non-revenue generating hours — cleaning the warehouse, driving from one job to the next — to keep the company running smoothly and maintain their salaries. But, Inman was hopeful that the over 200 employees would get behind it.

Gentle Giant has little hierarchy and is very transparent with all of its employees about finances. The majority of the company's leaders, including Inman and owner Larry O'Toole, started as movers themselves. In fact, Inman still goes out on jobs once or twice a month. Because the leaders had once been in the movers' shoes, the movers trust them. "In particular, the frontline managers have a supreme amount of credibility," Inman says.

Leadership began explaining the new strategy. They set a goal for how many non-revenue generating hours they wanted to reduce to and articulated why that number was chosen: it was the only way to prevent layoffs. "We can stand up in a meeting and deliver a message all day long," Inman said, "but if it doesn't mean anything to our movers it won't be heard." Since the company has a strong set of values focused on helping fellow employees, the movers bought into the strategy and were willing to take the hit. "That's what we're all about — taking care of each other from the owner on down," Inman said. The successful execution of the strategy saved the company hundreds of thousands of dollars and helped it through the recession with little impact to its core staff.

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict at Work*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter at @amyegallo.
