

Make sure business strategy is easy to understand and repeat key messages for greater impact

GETTING EMPLOYEES BEHIND STRATEGY

When it comes to implementing business strategy, research suggests that most organizations fall at the first hurdle: engaging employees in making it happen. Robin Speculand reflects on the pivotal role that communication plays in turning strategy into action and shares some top tips on how to get employees behind a new business plan.

In the October 2005 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Kaplan and Norton (creators of the Balanced Scorecard) revealed that on average, 95 percent of employees are unaware or do not understand the organization's strategy. This probably explains why, according to our own research into strategy implementation, around 90 percent of strategies fail to be carried out successfully.

That means that most of the time spent identifying, drafting and crafting a strategy is wasted as the organization drifts back to "business as usual" or quickly adopts a new strategy before it has made any headway with the last.

Digging deeper, we discovered that one of the top three reasons for this failure was poor communication. The other two are gaining support to take action and overcoming resistance from staff, both major communication issues in their own right.

After completing the crafting of a new business strategy, the challenge starts with the need for effective communication. Here are four suggestions to help make your company's strategy more engaging.



1. Give it a personality

No matter how complicated the strategy, leaders and communicators

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must work together to make sure everyone can easily understand it. To give the strategy a personality and make it more engaging, create a visual image that captures the essence of the key message.

For example, a technology client we worked with had to roll out a global strategy and convince people to change to improve business performance. To get employees' attention, the communication team ran a three-week teaser campaign using three images.

The first was an aircraft flying in clear skies suggesting that all looked good out the window but there was turbulence just ahead. The second image showed a man crossing a tightrope between two buildings, explaining how although it had taken the company 25 years to reach the top, it only takes a second to fall. The third image showed a customer hanging onto a skyscraper by his fingertips and posed the question, "Are we losing grip on our customers?"

Each image was posted around the office for a week and launched with a message from the regional manager. The campaign hit a chord and ignited the concern leaders were hoping for. By the time the new strategy was announced, employees were ready for the changes ahead.

2. Strive for simplicity

Leaders often over complicate communication, making it hard for people to understand the simplest of messages. Your goal in communicating a new strategy should be straightforward – to enable employees to understand *what* is changing, to explain *why* the organization is changing and to define what they should *do* differently. Unfortunately, leaders frequently adopt ambiguous terms,

blurring the strategy's objectives and leaving people confused.

Communication must be simple, engaging and easy to understand. Key messages should be communicated in different ways through different channels, to suit different ways of learning. But whatever method is used, it should be clear to people why the organization is changing; what they need to do about it; how they will benefit; what the impact will be; and the timeframe involved.

3. Look beyond the initial fanfare

Often when a new strategy is rolled out, trumpets blow, presentations are prepared, e-mails are sent out and videoconferences are organized. But after the initial fanfare, things tend to slow down.

A long-term communication strategy should aim to keep key messages center stage by providing regular updates on progress, celebrating successes, learning from failures and announcing changes.

4. Apply the 7x7 marketing rule

An old marketing rule insists that people need to hear a message seven times in seven different ways before it starts to sink in. Similarly, employees probably won't absorb and adopt a strategy until they've heard about it repeatedly from a variety of different sources.

Sending an e-mail won't be enough. Have managers discuss the new strategy in team meetings, create a special newsletter (or use the existing one) to share stories related to the new strategy, celebrate your change heroes publicly and mention the topic at the start of every companywide meeting.

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