

## **Strategy-Focused Teams**

**Think you're home free once the organization's overall strategy is set? Think again. The strategy can die on the vine due to gaps in team alignment. Here's how to recognize the gaps, and how to close them**

*By Shawna O'Grady*

Once an organization's strategy has been set and the future direction communicated, the various teams will follow along, right? Not necessarily. All too often, team members return to work and the strategy dies on the vine. I have identified three gaps that, if closed, will help ensure that the strategy is implemented at the team level.

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#### About the author

Shawna O'Grady, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Management at Queen's School of Business. She is well-known for her effective approach to building teams and high-trust cultures. Shawna consults widely in the areas of human performance, team development, and organizational development. She is co-author of the best-selling book *Border Crossings: Doing Business in the U.S.*, about Canadian and U.S. retailers' successes and failures entering each other's market. She also teaches at Cornell University and is a regular presenter on Queen's Executive Development programs.

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#### GAP #1: LACK OF ENGAGEMENT

**You know you have a problem with this gap when. . .**

- the behaviour of team members does not reflect the needs of the new strategy;
- employees do not seem to be clear about how to proceed; or
- team members criticize the strategy using words such as "they," demonstrating a lack of ownership and engagement.

#### **The Fix: Have each team create its own mission statement**

Often, the drafting of a team mission statement is a necessary but overlooked step. Teams are rarely involved in setting the strategy, even if they are consulted along the way. The organizational strategy is often too broad to provide teams with the focus and inspiration required at their level. They need to have their own mission to truly align and then to clarify roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities to ensure positive results. This takes extra time upfront yet it saves time over the long haul as team members become committed to implementation.

#### **How to implement the fix**

*Ensure the team itself develops its own mission statement.* The team mission statement must support the organization's mission statement. The team leader may present certain parameters to help guide the team's discussion but everyone should be involved in setting the team's mission if they are expected to own it.

*Develop a team mission at the right time.* Any team mission statement must support the overall organizational direction, so it must take place after or at the same time as the organizational process. The overall strategy must be clear.

*Establish meaningful metrics to ensure the team mission is supporting the overall strategy as intended.* Great organizations require every team to demonstrate how its mission statement contributes to the overall

mission. If the mission is to increase value to the customer, for example, the operations team may introduce lean over the next 18 months. Each mission ought to have clear goals that are measurable and time-specific; this also helps ensure the team mission supports the overall strategy.

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*Align team mission statements.* A common concern of having each team with its own mission statement is that issues may be forgotten or left behind in the delivery of the strategy. The antidote is to have the team leaders meet to share their team missions and explain how they plan to deliver. This will allow them to identify gaps and the people responsible for closing them. Team leaders should collaborate with others throughout this process to ensure they don't miss an important element of the bigger picture. When this works well, a higher level sponsor is held accountable for each major initiative.

## GAP #2: INAPPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS

### You know you have a problem with this gap when. . .

- questions being asked demonstrate a lack of understanding of the strategy;
- team members criticize the strategy using words such as “they,” demonstrating a lack of ownership;
- the behaviour of team members does not reflect the needs of the new strategy;
- team members do not believe they are part of the strategy or understand how they fit in; and
- there are inconsistent interpretations of the message, and team members begin to spin their own versions.

### The Fix: Get team leaders talking about and translating the strategy

It is important to change the way we communicate about strategy. Too often we gather our teams into a large assembly or town hall to deliver messages about our strategic direction. We hope for quick uptake with this approach and assume we have reached everyone efficiently and effectively. Although useful as a start, teams need to hear the message delivered to them from the person to whom they report.

They must also have the broader message about strategy “translated” into specific behaviors that affect their own working

environment. This requires that each leader spend considerable face time dialoguing with the team as a whole and with each individual to ensure the strategic direction is translated into the right behaviors for implementation.

### **How to implement the fix**

*Ensure the message passed down from the team leader is accurate and undiluted.* Prepare a Q&A for team leaders outlining the important areas so that each leader provides his or her teams with consistent messaging and an agreed upon tone, and delivers the messages at the right time. Equally important is training for team leaders in how to deliver the messaging, handle difficult situations, and create a positive culture through interpersonal influence.

Some organizations use web-based testing to ensure employees are aware of and understand organizational values and policies — information they expect their leaders to share. Each employee must sign in and complete a survey showing his or her level of understanding of concepts and then sign off indicating a level of awareness.

### **GAP #3: COLLABORATION ACROSS TEAMS IS NOT HAPPENING**

#### **You know you have a problem with this gap when. . .**

- teams compete for resources without assessing the overall impact on the strategy;
- teams work in silos;
- work is not being coordinated among teams;
- Work is being duplicated or important items fall between the cracks;
- there are no regular cross-team meetings;
- teams do not recognize the success of other teams;
- team members are not aware of the progress of other teams;
- animosity or jealousy builds between teams; and
- mistakes get made and people point fingers.

#### **The Fix: Plan for and reward across-the-organization alignment and collaboration**

Consistency across leaders is important for effective and speedy implementation. Once the strategy has been developed, there is a

tendency to think the work is done. Yet it is just getting started. An organization's leaders must align around consistent messaging and agree on implementation behaviors to make it work. Otherwise several different versions of how to implement the strategy may result and employees will sniff out even slight inconsistencies. Competition across teams will begin to take over, instead of collaboration toward the same goals.

Taking the extra time to plan the "messaging" and how leaders of the organization will demonstrate alignment across their teams will position your organization favourably when it comes to implementation. Leaders rarely take time to do this unless organizational rewards support collaboration at the team-leader level. Without it, silos develop and ideas and resources are not shared. True alignment saves time and money, and collaboration can lead to enhanced productivity and innovative thinking.

### **How to implement the fix**

*Create a cross-functional team of team leaders to ensure the strategy is being achieved effectively.* This team can gather regularly to solve problems and generate better ways of addressing issues. Some members of this team may also need to communicate more frequently than others to ensure issues are resolved in a timely way. Team progress should be monitored regularly by a senior leader-sponsor. Obstacles must be addressed promptly.

*Address competition or rivalry among teams head on.* A face-to-face team session is necessary to help teams learn about each other's issues and to build relationships. Once team members build personal connections and learn what others are going through, they are more likely to be supportive. When interactions remain detached and impersonal, it is all too easy to be unhelpful.

*As well, review the organization's reward system to ensure it is not creating competition between the teams.* Even executive attention (an informal yet powerful reward) can foster competition. One executive reinforced this unknowingly by passing by the desks of one of his teams and asking for their latest numbers. When the team's numbers had increased, he would high-five each of the team members. Team members sitting nearby, eager to increase their own numbers and

receive the executive's approval, began shutting out the other teams from information and resources.

*If silos persist, refocus team members with proper modeling, and reinforce the importance of collaboration and organization-wide rewards.* Leaders can model collaborative behavior by inviting other teams to learn from their team; encouraging team members to approach other teams to learn best practices; and explaining how decisions benefit the organization versus only the team. An example is an executive who sends his high performers to meetings as his representative so they can have face time with more senior executives. By placing his team first, he demonstrates his willingness to put others ahead of himself at times for the good of broader organizational development and succession planning.

Leaders can also reinforce the importance of collaboration across teams. We assume our teams know to do this, yet many external messages reinforce the importance of working competitively. Hearing the message from your leader that sharing and collaborating is desirable will help people behave differently.

Finally, organization-wide rewards help team members understand the value in working with, and not against, other teams to deliver organizational objectives. This does not preclude evaluation of individual performance too, as strong teams depend on excellent individual contributors aligned with common objectives.

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