



GETTING THE RIGHT ENERGY BEHIND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Much more than just a few PowerPoints

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New strategic initiatives tend to descend top-down and to push their way into already heavy agenda. More often than not, they are greeted with disbelief by lean and efficient business units. There is often no “slack” that can be diverted towards these “new ideas” from the center.

Yet, just continuing to do more of the same better and better is a sure route to disaster when the business context keeps changing so fast. Shaping the future will require more effort. Strategic initiatives are meant to mobilize the whole organization.

The logic of why strategic initiatives are required is perfect. No one will argue. But to more-of-the-same organizations, they present a change and learning challenge that makes everyone hold back. It is tempting to say “Yes, it makes sense, but I am already more than busy meeting my targets.” The rationale is accepted, but the individual commitment and energy to do it are still lacking.

Where energy comes from

Human energy is not stored in a set of batteries that can be recharged with some dose of inspiring PowerPoints, and discharged on demand. Commitment and energy have very little to do with pure cognitive logic. Energy comes from a sense of mental and physical equilibrium with our environment that makes us ready and willing to interact with it.

There are many factors that can produce this state of readiness: what we see and hear, but also good and bad memories that we are not even aware of, body language that we register subliminally. The brain cannot process it all linearly in a decision-tree fashion. Our heartbeat, blood pressure, muscular spasms, skin temperature also try to tell us something. And in the end, our choice to commit to some action, and the resulting energy to do so, is the result of a whole-body process, rightly called “emotion” – to set in motion. And that choice is made before the “conscious brain” even realizes it. All that the conscious brain may hope for is ex-post rationalization.

Yes, you have seen others be emotional or driven by their instincts. But not you: you are a rational decision-maker. However, what is summarized here relies on widely published neuroscience. Your mind processes a lot more diverse information than you are aware of, and puts it together as a “hunch”, without much supporting detail. You have a hunch about what your best course of action is. Of course, you can still “make up your mind”, i.e., not

follow your hunch. But how often do you admit to yourself that your intuitions turn out to have shown foresight? - "I wish I had followed my hunch on that project!"

More logic will not help

If you admit, as most smart people do, that your decisions are well supported by your intuition – your experience, your ability to read between the lines, your “big picture” capabilities – why not other people’s decisions as well? It has been observed that we tend to give much more credit to our own intuitions, because we have more inside information about ourselves, than we do other people’s intuitions. In fact, generally, we have no inside information about them. So we expect others to be strictly logical and to adhere to our ex-post rationalizations.

But their minds too have also taken into account vast amounts of implicit information in delivering a hunch to their conscious brain. So, it is clear that more logical arguments from us can only help very marginally. Contrary to popular belief, the leader can hardly convince anyone. Even the standard “emotional arguments” – “Follow me! Isn’t it exciting?” – have a fair chance of missing their targets. Without the inside information, they could even reinforce the fears and make people sit on their hands.

The best that the leader can do is to provide a safe environment in which people can commit to interacting. It is not only about the great personality of the leader whom every one dreams to follow. It is really about what the leader does. A leader cannot be “hands-off.”

Look at yourself first

The first piece of information that people take into account to decide whether an environment is safe enough to interact with is the behavior of the leader. And from that behavior, they infer what’s on the mind of the leader. Some regions of the brain are even suspected of being specialized in that task. What’s on the mind of the leader is indeed very contagious. For example, we may not want to admit consciously that the leader doesn’t seem to be seriously committed. We want things to work after all, and we prefer leaders whom we can respect. So we go through the motions. But our heart and guts are not there, literally. We find excuses for doing something else, and our stomach or back aches!

As the leader, don't expect others to be committed and energized for a project if you are not genuinely committed and energized yourself. When we work with initiative execution teams and we hear would-be-leaders say "I have good people to do this for me", really meaning "And I can pursue my hobbies", we know that the team will find it difficult to be fully committed. As a leader, you don't declare yourself committed. You prove it.

Set up people to win

The other major input in people's decision that their environment is safe to interact with is whether they feel legitimate in their social role in that environment. We have preferred social roles that we naturally resort to. Our commitment and energy come from our ability to play these roles, and to feel valued for doing so, by those who matter in our environment.

For example, some people need to be recognized for achieving demanding targets. Some of the best ways to kill their energy are to be not demanding enough and to deprive them of feedback and recognition. Others need to be recognized as being in charge. But they are easily perceived by an insecure leader as competition. Micromanaging them, for example, is a straightforward energy killer.

Some people need to be just recognized as part of the team. This role may be very helpful when they seek to keep the team together. But some action-oriented leaders may be impatient with touchy-feely discussions. They can kill these people's energy in no time and be left with the individualistic achievers and the competing chiefs.

Everyone needs to feel respected. This shouldn't be a revelation. Yet, management by contempt is a widely used approach by would-be leaders who need to reassure themselves. Exclusion is an effective way to kill commitment and motivation.

When we were asking effective execution leaders "What really worked best for you?", invariably the answer was "My personal attention to people." Setting people up to win simply means understanding each person's motives, and making room for them in a win-win situation.

You can start now

In execution, expect no energy from “leadership from the rear”, from the headquarters, from the corner office, from the top floor... Only “hands-on” leadership, walking the talk and setting people up to win, will provide the safe environment for learning and change that will release the readily available energy in people.

This article is drawn from the book "Smarter Execution: Seven steps to getting results", by Xavier Gilbert, Bettina Büchel, and Rhoda Davidson. Professor Bettina Büchel is Director of the Orchestrating Winning Performance program, and Professor Gilbert teaches on this program. Rhoda Davidson is an IMD Program Manager.

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