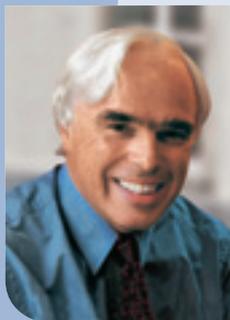


Perspectives for Managers

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The Must-Win Battle Journey

Part One: Engaging Minds and Hearts at the Top

Robert Weber was frustrated. A year ago he had been appointed general manager of the European division of his company with a clear mandate to improve its performance, but so far results had not improved. Top line revenue was stagnant, margins were sliding, and in key market segments competitors were winning. Robert suspected that his boss was starting to wonder if he had been the right choice for the job. Bruno, Robert's vice-president of human resources, looked across the table and said:

"Robert, it's not that we have the wrong people. But surely you can see that the top team is not a team. Everyone is working in his or her silo – no one focuses on the whole business. We need a team-building event – three days in the mountains – to make people really understand that if we are going to turn this business around, it will be by working together in a way we have never done before!"

Lucy, the VP of Strategy, cut in:

"Bruno's right. Everyone has his or her own strategic priorities – especially the country heads. We have no focus. We need an executive committee offsite in which you take charge and tell the group exactly what our priorities are. Strategy has to come first. Team building can wait."

Unfortunately, the situation Robert faces is not unusual. His business does not have strategic priorities that people actually act on, and the top team is a "team" in name only. And as he listened to Lucy and Bruno, he was remembering the strategy offsite held nine months earlier that had seemed to go well. It had resulted in the identification of five key strategic priorities, but when everyone went back to the office on Monday nothing had changed. It was almost as if the event had never taken place.

Over the past three years we have worked with more than 35 management teams to help them develop strategic priorities that make sense for their business and at the same time create energy and shared commitment. When those teams returned to the office things did happen. The approach we have developed centres on what we call **must-win battles**¹ (MWBs) and the whole process of identifying and implementing your must-win battles over time we call the **must-win battle journey**.

What is a Must-Win Battle Journey?

No two must-win battle journeys will evolve in exactly the same way, but the following five steps are usually addressed to a greater or lesser extent by every organization as it moves along the path to MWB success.

1. The leader, alone or with a small group, decides that something needs to be done to break the status quo – to provide clear direction, fresh energy and to get the top team working together.
2. In preparing for the journey the top team needs to develop a shared understanding of the current status of the business and the organization. What is the probable future performance of the business? How clear and appropriate are the current strategic priorities? How well is the top team functioning? How healthy is the organization as a whole? We call this identifying the **starting conditions**.
3. An offsite is held for the top team. This may be a few days or a week, or possibly a series of shorter events. At the offsite the organization's must-win battles are identified – not more than five – and this is done in such a way that the group

“Leading a MWB journey requires leadership skills and capabilities that go well beyond managing “business as usual.””

develops real commitment to the battles. No one comes back to the office willing to continue with business as usual.

4. The battles are cascaded throughout the organization. This is when the real work starts. Organizational silos are breached because cross-business, cross-function and cross-geography co-operation are essential to win the battles. Both the top team and many parts of the organization start to work together more effectively.
5. Over time individual battles are won or lost. Some battles are re-focused and re-energized. New battles are identified. But while battles come and go, the new ways of working remain.

In this article we will discuss the first three of these steps. The final two will be discussed in our next Perspectives for Managers.

Deciding if a Journey Makes Sense for Your Business

Deciding if a must-win battle journey makes sense for your business is a decision that you will be better able to make after you have read the rest of this article.² However, as you consider this question, be aware of the following:

1. Embarking on a MWB journey is not a quick fix. Individual must-win battles can take months or years to win. And the journey itself does not really end - it just changes as you move forward. Kees van

der Graaf has been on a must-win battle journey for more than three years. The battles have become larger in scope as he has moved from being the head of the Unilever's Ice Cream business to head of Europe, but the underlying concepts are still the same. With each success, the performance targets are raised.

2. As a member of the leadership team, you will be tested. Leading a MWB journey requires leadership skills and capabilities that go well beyond managing “business as usual.” Leaders need flexibility, the ability to make tough choices, manage conflict – there will be crises – and have the courage, energy and tenacity to take “the heat and the grief” over time. If you prefer to simply “tell people what to do”, or on the other hand, avoid making decisions whenever possible, you will have a difficult time leading a MWB journey.

Developing a Shared Understanding of Starting Conditions

If you decide to proceed, the next step is to make sure that you and your senior managers understand your starting point. Every business sets out on their MWB journey from a different place – and every journey needs to be tailored to the organization’s unique issues. Some are in great financial health. Others are in crisis. Some have a management team that is truly a team, in others the team is in complete

<p>1. Current and Expected Operating Performance of the Business <i>What is the current performance and outlook for the business? Excellent? OK? Poor? Close to crisis? In crisis?</i></p>
<p>2. Health of the Top Management Team <i>Do the top managers function as a team? Do they have shared goals, and shared accountability for results? Are the right people on the team?</i></p>
<p>3. Appropriateness of Current Strategic Priorities <i>Does the top management team have the right strategic priorities, given the issues that the business is facing?</i></p>
<p>4. Health of the Overall Organization <i>How healthy is the organization, beyond the level of the top team? How do employees see the challenges and opportunities for the business? How ready will they be to engage in the chosen must-win battles?</i></p>

Starting Conditions

disarray. These differences in “starting conditions” will impact your choice of MWBs, the urgency surrounding them, and the relative emphasis to be placed on the emotional and intellectual dimensions of the journey. To plan an optimum journey you must first look closely at your starting conditions and answer the questions in the box opposite.

Engaging the Leadership Team

The next step for most organizations is to hold a kick-off event for the management team. This typically means taking the most senior managers offsite for up to a week to identify, through intense discussion and debate, the company’s MWBs – and ends with each member of the top team publicly committing to support this agenda unreservedly. This first phase of the journey tends to be short and intense – and to have three key steps.

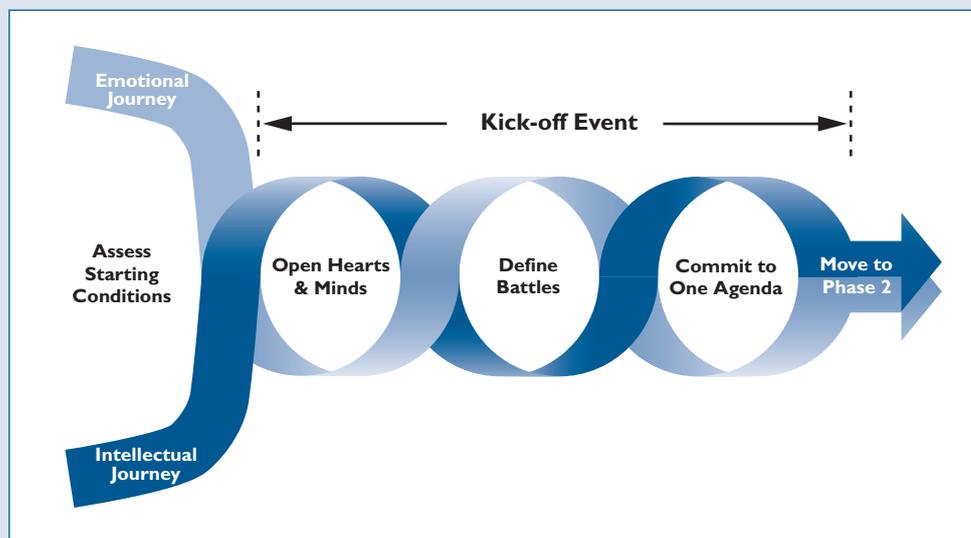
regulators. The more personal exercises will start the group on the emotional side of the MWB journey; the others begin to develop the intellectual, rigorous analysis side. Whether you spend more time opening emotional windows or on intellectual exercises will depend on your starting conditions.

Step 2: Colliding to Decide: Defining and Agreeing Must-Win Battles

Of course you cannot open windows forever, you need to get to the heart of the matter, which is deciding on the must-win battles your business needs. A well-chosen MWB:

- **Has impact:** On the whole organization, not just one part of it.
- **Is externally focused:** If you are pre-occupied with internal battles you will lose in your markets; a common external “enemy” or goal creates energy.

“ There will be winners and losers as a long list of potential initiatives gets robustly challenged to reach the shortlist of 3 to 5 battles. ”



The MWB Journey – Phase One: Engaging the Team

Step 1: Opening Hearts and Minds

The aim of “opening hearts and minds” is to build a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the business, and to surface everyone’s feelings about how the team works together.

The exercises range from very personal ones such as asking each participant to describe their hopes and fears for themselves and the business to “outside-in perspectives” to get into the “hearts and minds” of shareholders, customers, competitors, or perhaps

- **Is tangible:** Specific and measurable; generalizations such as “innovate more!” don’t work.
- **Creates excitement:** Goes beyond the incremental and captures the emotions!
- **Is winnable:** Going “beyond the incremental” does not mean impossible.

Defining and agreeing these battles is an iterative process. There will be winners and losers as a long list of potential initiatives gets



“The most successful MWBs are those that tap into the groups’ aspirations and create organizational excitement. Excitement leads to commitment, and commitment leads to success.”

robustly challenged to reach the shortlist of 3 to 5 battles that will receive the lion’s share of management attention and resources in the coming months. Conflict is inevitable and the shared understandings built in the previous step are critical to promote productive dialogue now.

It will also be a testing time for the leader. The leader who arrives at the kick-off event with a fixed idea of the “right” list of MWBs and imposes these is in trouble. There will be no buy-in and the battles are unlikely to be won. Neither is selecting must-win battles a popularity contest. If MWBs are chosen on the basis of who is supporting them rather than intellectual rigor, you have a problem. The most successful MWBs are those that tap into the groups’ aspirations and create organizational excitement. Excitement leads to commitment, and commitment leads to success.

Step 3: Breaking the Silos: Committing to One Agenda

Robert Weber’s problem was that his MWBs never became anything more than a nice list generated at an offsite event. To avoid the same fate, you need to focus the final part of your kick-off event on the tough questions of how the team will work together to ensure battles are won, and how each individual within the team will contribute. Everyone must commit to fully supporting all of the chosen must-win battles – and to working together as a real team at the top. Not a trivial challenge!

You need to be clear that shared goals and shared accountability will be expected and demanded from this point forward. Silo walls are coming down, for good. The new mood is best captured by the manager who explained: “If I win the must-win battle that I am leading by using all of the resources you need to win yours, that is not a win”.

Ending the Beginning

At more than 90% of the kick-off events we have attended, the leader and the team left

the event feeling enthusiastic and committed to the must-win battle agenda and new ways of working together. But real success is determined by what happens back at the office. The choices and promises made at the event must now become reality and shape the organization’s actions and behaviours. Without these changes, there will be no success.

So engaging the team is just the end of the beginning of your MWB journey. As an introduction to our next perspective, which addresses the challenges of winning back at the office, we leave you with the words of a MWB journey leader:

“Over time, individual battles will be won or lost; what endures and drives further success are the new ways of working together.”

1 See: *Must-Win Battles*, IMD Perspectives for Managers, No. 106, January 2004.

2 And if you are further interested, see: *Must-Win Battles: Creating the Focus You Need to Achieve Your Key Business Goals*, by Peter Killing and Thomas Malnight with Tracey Keys, 2005, FT Prentice Hall (outside North America and forthcoming through Wharton School Publishing in North America (February 2006)). Also see: www.mustwinbattles.com.

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