Linking Strategy Execution to Strategy Planning

A scowl crosses the face of some people when they hear the term "strategic planning." These people have been to the off-sites with bright ideas and sticky notes, they've seen the slick "final plan" with cool clip art, and *then* they've seen . . . *nothing*. Nothing happening. Nothing changing. And then they realize: This was a stupid waste of time. Strategy *execution* isn't part of the deal. Leadership wasn't serious.

For leaders who *are* serious, for whom strategy execution *is* part of the deal, we've always seen these **three ingredients** work.

1. A steady accountability drumbeat. Even leaders who are terrific at communicating their goals and strategies will come up short if they don't build in an accountability cycle. Each member of the leadership team must regularly (say, monthly) stand in front of boss and peers and report progress on his or her piece of the strategic plan. The conversation flows like this:

- ◦ "This is the measurable impact I committed to achieve."
- ◦ "Here is how I'm doing."
- ◦ [optional] "These are the changes I'd suggest to our direction," and/or "This is the help I need from my boss or peers."
- ◦ See ya next month!

This is a great conversation, and it's what drives everyone to realize, "Oh crap! The stuff in this plan is actually my day job!" Also, these conversations create self-correction and improvement in the strategic plan. That means that your strategic plan doesn't have to start out perfect; you can settle for the 60/40 solution and *get going!*

This group readout not only helps the organization stay focused, but it also keeps leaders aligned with each other and constantly mindful of how they are affecting each other.

Of course, your strategic plan must spell out what *each* team member is supposed to accomplish. Otherwise, you have a wish list, not a plan, and accountability is impossible.

2. Strategic initiatives managed as projects. Strategic plans almost always name something new that has to be accomplished. Regardless of industry, there will be "initiatives," each with a beginning, middle, and end – and an outcome. That's a wordy way of saying that *there are projects to be managed*. As soon as you realize you've got some projects on your hands, you can lean on the well-known body of knowledge called "project management." Here are some of the more salient points.

- Put ONE person in charge of the project. There's a reason ships don't have two captains. Even big ships.
- Establish a clear goal, a clear timeframe, and a budget. Progress reports (we're back to the accountability cycle) need to be couched relative to (a) work accomplished vs. schedule and (b) work accomplished vs. budget. Make sure you get both.
- Stand up a project team with team members who have clear accountabilities and clear understanding that for this project, they work for the project manager. (Obviously, the project manager must have some clout. We covered this topic when we discussed the perils of accountability without authority.)

There's plenty more to say on this topic, but this'll get us started for now.

3. Innovation Switched On. Many organizations' plans identify gaps between where they are and where they want to be – and they cite "innovation" as the way to close that gap. In an earlier post, we discussed Prahalad's prescription for quantum innovation (See "We Can All Play In The Innovation Sandbox"). In addition,

- Encourage constructive failure. The innovators' dictum to "fail fast, fail often, and fail cheap" boils down to this formula: **non-fatal failure + learning = discovery**. You need discovery for innovation, and the more discovery the better.
- But **failure + blame (or stories, reasons, and excuses) = uh, FAILURE**. When you see this happen, at least act annoyed.
- Reward innovative solutions, reward learning from failure, reward people for reaching across boundaries to create solutions.
- Contests work for a while (so use them), and demonstrating that you take "different thinking" seriously – whether or not you use it – always works.

These three ingredients do a pretty good job of turning strategy into results. Any that you'd add to the list?