

Strategic Thinking

Development Guide



Communicate Powerfully

If you cannot effectively communicate a strategy, it will have little meaning to others. It remains locked in your head. Misunderstanding or lack of information frequently gets in the way of strategic goals being realized.

- Make important discussions memorable. Use stories, examples, illustrations, or parables to illustrate important points. The stories will be remembered when the abstractions are long forgotten.
- Put yourself in the other person's shoes. When you are communicating an important message, begin by asking yourself, "What would I want to know?" and "What would be my biggest concerns?" Then, be sure to speak to those issues.
- Organize for clarity. Create a simple structure for important communications that positions your message in a logical way. Explain the problem, issue, or complication; discuss alternative courses of action; and then conclude with your recommendation and the reasons for it.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Find ways to work elements of the strategy into a variety of conversations. Team members need to be reminded of how the strategy is connected to the work that they do and decisions that are made.



Foster Innovation and Change

Finding unique or distinctive approaches can significantly improve a strategy's effectiveness. Finding ways to implement those unique approaches helps your organization embrace change.

- Answer the "so that" question. Innovation works best when you address the "so that" question. For example, "I want to find an innovative way to solve this problem 'so that' I can meet our production deadlines. Being clear about why you are innovating is a critical first step.
- Ask challenging questions. Ask yourself the hard questions that challenge the status quo. For example, "Why do I do it this way?" Enlist the help of others in thinking about a fresh new way to accomplish a task.
- Support a change environment. When a co-worker is complaining about or struggling with a specific task, help them consider new ways to accomplish it. Be willing to champion a new process with them.
- Focus on the rewards. When faced with change, identify the benefits that will result for you and your team. This will help you and your colleagues to be energized and excited to take on the challenges.



Focus on the Customer

Strategic planning ideally begins with the customer in mind. When organizations focus on customers, the ideal strategy is more apt to follow.

- Connect with customers. Formulate a plan to regularly connect with customers. If you cannot get out to meet with customers directly, spend time shadowing an employee in your customer service area.
- Identify customer trends. Validate your insights with colleagues. Share your findings with other stakeholders.
- Think innovatively about better ways to serve customers. Consider new ways to address customer issues. Share your ideas with colleagues and other stakeholders.
- Gather data from a variety of customers. Explore ways to gather more input from customers on their satisfaction with products or services and their perception of trends and changes in the environment.



Inspire and Motivate

Some leaders believe that a compelling strategy that makes sense and is logical will, by itself, encourage people to act differently. This is rarely true. Inspiring leaders have the ability to persuade team members to enthusiastically commit to a new strategic direction.

- Create strategically aligned goals. Identify goals that align with and support the strategic objectives. Communicate that alignment between immediate goals and the strategy.
- Keep focus on the strategic goals. Remind yourself and others of the payoff the organization will receive from achieving the goals. Enlist help from others in keeping priorities top of mind. Your focus will be inspiring to others.
- Convey your passion. Frequently convey your personal passion and commitment for the work you are doing. Your emotions are extremely contagious. Bring positive emotions with you to work.
- Set a goal that supports the strategy as a team. Involve your direct reports in identifying and adopting a difficult goal that will support the strategy. Nothing inspires people more than pursuing and accomplishing a challenging goal.



Establish Stretch Goals

A strategic initiative nearly always means embarking on a bold new journey that requires everyone involved to grow and stretch. The good news is that teams are often bonded together because of aggressive goals. History has shown how superordinate goals (e.g., a common adversary, a noble cause, or a significant technological challenge) are effective in bringing a loose confederation of individuals together into well-functioning teams—and even bringing multiple teams together. Establishing stretch goals helps leaders bring unity and commitment to their teams.

- Set an ambitious goal for yourself that supports strategic objectives. Share your ambitious goal with your manager and colleagues and gain their support in helping you hit your target.
- Challenge yourself to set a goal to learn a new skill that supports the strategy. Take measures to implement a process to track and report your progress.
- Follow through on your stretch goal assignments. Keep track of deadlines and deliverables to ensure that your commitments are met.
- Invite each of your direct reports to provide feedback on what you might do to better support the strategic goals of the organization.
- Challenge yourself to set an ambitious goal to reduce a typical timeline by a significant margin. Take measures to implement a process to track and report progress.
- Solve problems that get in the way of accomplishing goals. Too often stretch goals seem to encourage people to work harder but not smarter. Look for the problems that are getting in the way of accomplishing a difficult goal and find a solution.

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