



The Art of Engagement

Bridging the Gap Between People and Possibilities

by Jim Haudan
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Take-Aways

- Organizations often announce new strategies without engaging their employees.
- Since employees execute strategy, this is a serious mistake.
- When an organization's employees do not buy into a new strategy, it almost always dies quickly. This is the fate of most new strategies.
- New strategies often bring changes in operations and procedures.
- Employees fear such changes, believing that they signal management's disapproval of their prior performance.
- Employees do not feel engaged at work for many reasons. For example, multiple mission statements and directives can overwhelm them.
- They may lack a big-picture understanding of the firm and how they fit within it.
- Lecture-type presentations are not an effective way to earn employee buy-in.
- Instead, communicate your new strategy with stories and large visuals that help your employees think in systems and allow them to learn through dialogue.
- To get employees to support your new strategy, enable them to discuss it openly in an atmosphere where it is safe to voice their ideas.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

8

Applicability

8

Innovation

7

Style

8

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why your organization's new strategy will fail if your employees are not engaged with it; 2) What six obstacles impede employee engagement; 3) What are the six best ways to engage employees; and 4) Why "strategic engagement" is a process, not a series of separate, stand-alone actions.

Recommendation

Organizational leaders spend considerable time and effort carefully developing strategies to advance their corporate goals. However, they often fail to communicate these strategies compellingly to their employees – the people who must execute every step. Therefore, it is no surprise that most such strategies fail. Management consultant Jim Haudan recommends a strategy-sharing approach using visuals, metaphors and stories to engage employees. He offers tactics for getting them on board to execute your strategy and organizational directives. One negative: Many of the illustrations (reductions from original table-size artwork) are busy and even fuzzy. Some feature tiny text, which illustrates – in the breach – Haudan's point about using clear visuals to communicate and engage. Otherwise the book is superior, very insightful and nicely written. Haudan uses case studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of his employee engagement process. *getAbstract* believes leaders can benefit from learning his tactics for communicating strategies so employees understand them, support them and actually implement them.

Abstract

The Engagement Imperative

Consider this lesson in contrasts: a baseball game vis-à-vis an office. At the game, people are enthused and excited. They cheer. They clap. They are engaged. This is hardly the scene at the typical office. Okay, so huzzahs and applause rarely fit in at work, but shouldn't employees at least be engaged in their jobs? Indeed they should. So, why aren't they? Numerous reasons exist. For example, managers do not explain the big picture, so employees do not feel like a part of the process. They just aren't sure that their contributions, opinions and efforts make a difference. They think they are simply along for the ride.

These thoughts and feelings are roadblocks to meaningful change. That's why a new strategic push at the typical company often goes nowhere once it leaves the executive suite. When a strategic imperative is meaningless to your employees, they won't get behind it. Leaders plan and develop strategy, but employees execute it. They are the "true engines of business." Without employee buy-in, the most exciting new strategy will be dead on arrival. To make your new strategy work, engage your employees so they take full ownership of it and make it happen.

Roadblocks to Engagement

Most workplaces erect six obstacles that block employee engagement:

1. **"I can't be engaged if I am overwhelmed"** – How many new strategies, plans and procedural edicts has your organization communicated to its employees in the past 24 months? If your firm is like most organizations, the answer is lots of them. Executives bury employees with endless new plans and procedures, a form of process-clog-

"Almost any business leader will admit that creating a strategy is far easier than executing it."

"Most strategic initiatives fail when a company tries to execute strategy despite its people rather than through them."

“People work because they have to. That’s why they call it ‘work.’ But people engage only when they want to.”

“If leaders believe in the intelligence of employees and allow them to think about the big picture, employees will be more engaged and will transform the business.”

“The universal joke is that leaders can just ‘mail in’ the vision-mission-values statement, because every company needs to have one. And once it’s created, organizations rarely do anything more about it.”

“Even people who want to understand a strategy can get frustrated trying to understand it.”

ging “organizational cholesterol.” After a while, employees duck their heads when something new comes down from the executive chambers. They certainly do not engage with it.

2. **“I can’t be engaged if I don’t get it”** – Walt Disney took dusty fairy tales off the shelf and made them into lovely animated films with pretty music. People love them because they seem relevant to their lives. Their simple messages are loud and clear. If staffers can’t get your message and relate to your strategy, they will not pay any attention to it.
3. **“I can’t be engaged if I’m scared”** – Fear stalks many office corridors in multiple forms. Employees are afraid to offer suggestions. They worry that giving constructive criticism will brand them as troublemakers. They are scared to reveal their true thoughts. How can employees engage in implementing a new strategy if they are always fearful?
4. **“I can’t be engaged if I don’t see the big picture”** – Office cubicles wall everyone off from each other. Managers instruct staffers to focus on their immediate tasks. They don’t explain how each individual’s efforts contribute to the company’s overall ambitions.
5. **“I can’t be engaged if it’s not mine”** – Most traditional presentations are about “telling and selling,” but how many people do such shows truly convince? Not many. Think of staffers struggling to stay awake during predictable speeches. No ownership there.
6. **“I can’t be engaged if my leaders don’t face reality”** – In organizations, steep canyons exist between executives who plan strategy, managers who translate strategy and employees who execute – or more often ignore – strategy. Organizations rarely address this reality. Thus, new strategies end up buried at the bottom of the metaphorical ditch.

How to Connect with Your Employees

To strengthen your company’s bonds with your employees, try these six tactics:

1. **“Connecting through images and stories”** – A picture is worth even more than 1,000 words. To engage employees in your new strategy, use oversize, mural-like visuals with “infographics” and metaphorical references. These provide a consistent interpretation of the strategy as a “system” or “big picture,” and allow employees to infer vital connections and relationships at a glance. At one convention, a visual about the changing cable marketplace showed a customer as a superhero in control of his own cable options. Use such creative visualizations to convey your firm’s “drama, emotion and complex stories.”
2. **“Creating pictures together”** – Business teams can use a process of “visual iteration” to develop ideas that represent their members’ combined thinking. In this process, a professional artist helps the team develop a series of visuals that “build ownership” of a strategy and clarify its exact intent. Through this process, team members carefully consider their ideas about the strategy and come together on primary details. As the visuals develop, the quality of people’s ideas improves. Group members begin to agree on what they want to achieve. Plus, visuals eliminate the confusion and false assumptions inherent in verbal communication. Visuals speak plainly and clearly.
3. **“Believing in leaders”** – In many organizations, people feel free to level with each other only at the water cooler or in the hallways. In meetings, arbitrary rules and rigid “control mechanisms” often inhibit trust and open speech, which makes conversations with organizational leaders stilted and political. To capture the honest, informal conversations that happen when people let their guard down, try “water cooler sketching.” Hire an artist to portray your firm’s challenges visually. Make

“Managers have a tremendous ability to influence the translation of strategy into action.”

“Until we overcome our dependency on PowerPoints and other tell-and-sell methods, we’ll never understand the importance of allowing our people to think and learn on their own.”

“Visual iteration sets ideas in motion.”

“Seeing the entire business illustrated in a map elicits a huge ‘aha’ from most people.”

them funny. Such sketches elicit “opinions, attitudes and beliefs” so leaders and staffers can talk about them together.

4. **“Owning the solution”** – To foster engagement, have employees form small groups where they can discuss and personalize the strategic issues at hand. Prompt the dialogue with targeted questions: “How much money does the business make out of a dollar of revenue?” and “How much money do we waste in manufacturing?” Use “data stories” with facts about business trends to open employees’ minds. Challenge your workers’ assumptions by asking, “What do you think...?” Encourage them to develop novel conclusions and to apply their ideas to achieve the best results. Make sure that all the participants contribute to their small group’s conclusions.
5. **“Playing the entire game”** – Employees want to be actively involved. They want to know that managers value their opinions, and that they can express themselves without fear of retribution. To help employees understand your organization better, use a *Learning Map*[®] visual, which has “charts and graphs” to appeal to left-brained “logical and analytical” people. Use visual metaphors to reach right-brained “intuitive or subjective” thinkers. Have small groups sit wherever the members can see and discuss the oversized visuals. Through this facilitated process, they should be able to “bridge the canyons” that separate them. *Learning Map*[®] group sessions (called “modules”) involve four steps: visualization (the oversized artwork), data or information cards (to “allow people to explore information in layers”), dialogue and facilitation. Through this process, employees come to see the need for a new strategic thrust, and to become more engaged and supportive.
6. **“Practicing before performing”** – Staffers worry that the organization will punish them for making mistakes. So, to introduce a new strategy or process, offer a “flight simulator” opportunity to let employees practice and learn. Pilots learn how to handle different planes by using simulators. In that vein, create a simulated environment where employees can try out new ways of doing things. In this atmosphere, where there is no retribution, employees know they can fail without negative consequences.

“Strategic Engagement” Is a Process

The six “connection steps” are not stand-alone activities. They are part of an ongoing “Strategic Engagement Process,” a concerted effort to help employees engage. It must belong to everyone the company in order to attain its three primary goals:

1. **“Create line of sight”** – Develop “marketplace to me” insights so each person sees the path from his or her efforts to the end consumer.
2. **“Connect goals”** – Help people link their individual goals to the firm’s objectives.
3. **“Develop capabilities”** – Enable employees to acquire the skills they need to execute the new strategy.

The Principles of Engagement

When it comes to engaging employees, some universal truths apply:

- **“People won’t change if they perceive the ‘need to change’ to be an indictment of their past performance.”** – Everybody hates change. People assume that change means the bosses are not satisfied with their results. Teach employees that your organization changes to keep up with the evolving marketplace or emerging business challenges.
- **“People will tolerate the conclusions of their leaders, but they will act on their own.”** – People are not machines. Dictating to them will not engage them. Help your employees put the pieces of the puzzle together independently with your assistance.

*“Tell me,
and I’ll forget.
Show me, and I
may remember.
Involve me, and I’ll
understand.”
[– old adage]*

*“Once individuals
understand the
strategy and their
role in it, they can
begin to apply that
knowledge to their
daily work.”*

*“People can’t
wait to play if
they’re really in
the game.”*

To be fully engaged, they need to achieve “aha!” moments about changes in strategy on their own. Make sure they get that opportunity.

- **“People without understanding of a company’s strategy can’t take responsibility for change.”** – Your employees need context, the big picture, to understand what your new strategy intends to accomplish and demands of them. Otherwise they won’t get behind it.
- **“People don’t need help in starting new actions; they need permission to stop the old ones.”** – Is your business cluttered with old strategic initiatives and missives from the top? If you want employees to adopt your new strategy, first get rid of all the old stuff that is still clunking around. Make sure everyone knows to focus on the new plan and that it is okay to ignore the old ones.
- **“Strategy is...a purposeful adventure.”** – Present your new strategy with conviction, vim and verve. Make sure employees know that the organization is embarking on an exciting new journey.
- **“People need an honest assessment of where they are and a clear picture of where they want to go.”** – To get employees to understand and support a new strategic direction, and to see it as credible, executives must be truthful and unambiguous.
- **“It’s impossible to visualize fuzz.”** – Imprecise thinking will get you nowhere. Albert Einstein summed up the problem this way: “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” Do your organization’s plans translate into easily understood visuals? If not, rethink your premises.
- **“Good comedians can be more valuable than strategists.”** – A skilled, genuinely funny comedian quickly connects with the audience. A bad comedian bombs as soon as he or she takes the stage. What quality separates the two? Good comedians convey that they know and respect how the audience feels, and want to engage with it. Bad comedians are completely out of touch with their audiences. Similarly, strategists who cannot connect with employees risk fast defeat when the spotlights hit their plans.
- **“People must overcome the ‘or’ and embrace the ‘and’.”** – Many firms contend with numerous dichotomies, including the supposed “profit-volume paradox,” which asks whether to target “high-profit” or “high-volume” customers. Why not both?
- **“Dialogue is the oxygen of change.”** – Your organization will never be able to move in a new direction without dialogue among its employees. The process of open discussion can uncover and eliminate hidden barriers that stand in the way of progress. Without dialogue, those deadly below the surface barriers remain in place, ready to sink your new strategy as soon as your organization bumps into them.
- **“Competitiveness is not determined by the learning speed of the ‘fastest few,’ but by the learning and execution speed of the ‘slowest many.’”** – Your new strategy will work only if your executives and your employees understand it fully. Developing a “strategy-in-a-box” and then sending it off to employees without adequate explanation is a guarantee that it will not work.
- **“Success is not about a few people having better answers; it’s about everyone asking better questions.”** – Today’s right answers may not be right tomorrow. The way to always have the best answers is to ask the best questions continually. This is the only viable way to maintain engagement in a world of constant flux.

About the Author

Jim Haudan is co-founder and CEO of Root Learning, a management-consulting firm.