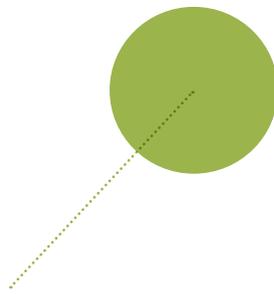


Winners Lead from the Middle: Linking Vision to Value

BY WILL FUNDERBURG



“In the middle” – the place from which to make the greatest impact and the place all successful implementers of strategy eventually find themselves.

In most cases, “the middle” is between these common business archetypes: the visionary leader and the practical manager. Take the following example: Emily Newhire is hired as the head of Operations at XYZ Corporation. Her charge is to implement her business unit’s section of the corporate strategic roadmap. Throughout her recruitment, the consistent message from the company’s CEO, Tom Vision, was about the envisioned future of the company, the initiatives her business unit would drive, and the results that were expected. While there isn’t much mention of the specifics around the implementation of the initiatives, Emily doesn’t see this as cause for concern. She is motivated by the opportunity to help Tom achieve his audacious goals — figuring out the mechanics of actually doing so will be her job.

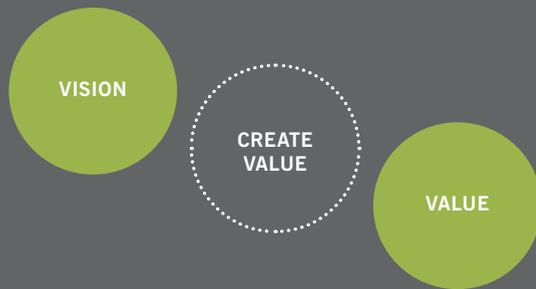
In her first week on the job, Emily decides to meet with each of her direct reports. The goal of these meetings is to understand the current state of the organization and to communicate the envisioned future Tom preached. At the conclusion of her first round of meetings, it is clear that her team is not

motivated by Tom’s vision. In fact, one of the managers she met with, Bob Value, states, “I’ve sat through multiple all-hands meetings where executives say things like ‘increased focus on the customer’, ‘innovation matters’, and ‘people first’ only to get back to my desk and think, ‘What was that all about?’”

Emily is “in the middle.” She has a great opportunity but also a great challenge. She must overcome her team’s skepticism to align their efforts with the initiatives of the senior executives and demonstrate results — but how? Simply reviewing the quarterly expectations with Bob or walking him through the “pretty strategy binder” isn’t motivating. He’s heard that stuff before, and he still doesn’t understand how his actions lead directly toward the stated envisioned future. He cares mostly about the tangible financial and operational impacts of his projects, not Tom’s pie-in-the-sky vision. Going to Tom in her first week with the concern of her team’s skepticism won’t be the best first impression Emily was hoping for. How should she move forward?



RALLY AROUND THE COMMON GOAL



TAKE A STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY



The following are four techniques to effectively communicate a business strategy for adoption and set it up for execution:

1. RALLY AROUND THE COMMON GOAL

While Bob may think Tom is disconnected from the realities of the organization, they ultimately have the same goal: to create value for shareholders in a way that offers long-term success for the company. For example, Tom's vision statement of "Become the nation's first choice for XYZ services" may invite an eye-roll from Bob, but Bob cannot argue that if that vision is achieved, it would directly lead to value for all stakeholders involved. By raising this extreme example, Emily can get her team to realize that the intent of the statement is to motivate and paint a picture of the envisioned future, not to place unrealistic expectations on employees. When Bob and Tom agree they have the same goal, more focused discussions on how to realize that vision are possible.

2. TAKE A STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY

How often do we find that misunderstanding or miscommunication is at the heart of most issues? I pose that it's unlikely that Tom and Bob have clearly communicated the details of their perspectives, understood that they ultimately have a common goal, and still don't understand each other. For any strategy to be adopted and executed successfully, it has to be communicated effectively. To accomplish this, consider taking all "strategy implementers" on the strategy development journey. If it isn't possible to include them in the development, at least walk them through the logic and evolution of the roadmap as it happened in the course of the development.

In so doing, there are two likely outcomes:

1. Misunderstandings can be absolved, resulting in buy-in
2. The implementers can explain why the strategic plan is faulty and suggest improvements (e.g., they can provide reasons why initiatives/metrics/targets do not actually lead to the intended results)

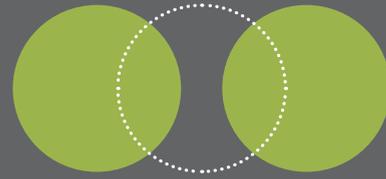
If Bob is not involved in the strategy development, it's well worth Emily's time to walk him through all of the analysis and discussion that went into the final plan. By breaking down the strategic plan into the components that Bob can relate to and comment on, Emily can quickly identify which area is the cause for Bob's reluctance. For example, on the face of it, a yearly initiative for Emily's organization to "improve customer service" isn't something Bob can get upset about. However, if she digs deeper to a specific target of "95 percent of customer calls are handled within ten minutes," she may find it to be the point of contention.

Now Bob can challenge the logic behind this target and suggest alternatives. If he knows from experience that XYZ Corp. customers actually value the time customer service reps spend with them to fully resolve their problems and wouldn't respond well to limiting that time, he might suggest that customer satisfaction scores would be a better metric to focus on rather than average handle time. By grounding conversations in the common goals and working to the specifics, everyone can avoid the emotion and energy wasted by speaking in generalities. Both possible outcomes (buy-in or suggestions for improvement) are equally valuable and worth the time invested in taking the strategy implementers on the strategy development journey.

ASSESS ALIGNMENT TO THE STRATEGY



DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN TO ADDRESS THE MISALIGNMENT



3. ASSESS ALIGNMENT TO THE STRATEGY

Although it's easy to be skeptical of business strategy for being impractical and starry-eyed, there's a reason why every major corporation has some sort of vision statement and/or guiding principles. Corporate strategies are intended to provide a framework within which all of a company's business units/departments can align. This ensures that they are not working against each other and wasting the company's resources. Additionally, there are two external benefits to strategic alignment. The first is that it contributes to the establishment of a clear market position by sending a consistent message to the company's employees and customers. The second is that it sends a clear message to shareholders, who can then make more informed investment decisions.

Strategy without execution is just theory. In the case of Emily's predicament, her team is ready to execute, they just need to fully understand the value of alignment with the corporate strategy and move forward accordingly. Once her team has bought into the corporate strategy, Emily can use it as a framework with which to measure all current and upcoming projects. Where misalignments are found, she can make adjustments and communicate her findings to Tom. Identifying these misalignments focuses Emily's efforts and serves as the input to an action plan.

4. DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN TO ADDRESS THE MISALIGNMENT

With Tom Vision and Bob Value aligned and an assessment of her business unit's initiatives complete, Emily now has all the pieces needed to put together an action plan. This is where the visionary leader

and the practical manager come together. With the misalignments identified, Emily can work with her team to define clear actions to align their efforts and achieve their assigned targets. With her team mobilized in accordance with XYZ Corp's overall strategies, she can demonstrate progress to Tom.

Does Emily's story sound familiar? Have you ever been handed lofty goals and the latest strategy, only to be asked to implement them with managers who are skeptical and roll their eyes at the sound of the first ambitious statement? While these situations undoubtedly present a challenge, "in the middle" is the position from which to make the biggest impact. The adoption and execution of business strategy relies on those who can communicate and operationalize it. Deciding that the strategic and the tactical will never understand each other and opining in generalities is rarely fruitful. Connecting each point of view's objectives by demonstrating the alignment of intent and resolving the differences in the detail is the only way to drive intended results. By using the techniques above to demonstrate the link between vision and value, strategies can achieve remarkable results. So the next time you find yourself in this position, embrace it for the opportunity it is. Link vision to value and enable your team to realize its envisioned future.

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WILL FUNDERBURG
will.funderburg@jabian.com

Will is a Manager and an experienced strategist with specialties in project management, strategic planning, and business analysis