

Making Managers More Effective

Creating a Strategic Focus

Have you ever set a goal at the beginning of the year only to have it slip away, forgotten by February? We all have. Our intentions are good but for many reasons they just don't remain a focus. Even companies fall into this habit at times. They create a set of objectives or strategies that are meant to guide and define the performance of their organization. Again – good intentions but somewhere between the setting and the doing, the message can get lost.

The organization's strategic plan should never be like a new year's resolution that is created then quickly cast aside. It is an evolving set of inter-connected objectives that should be reviewed and evaluated as circumstances and economic changes may dictate. Most companies find themselves in a very competitive environment, not just in their backyard, but nationally and on the global front. Strategic plans reflect this in the current, short-term, and long-term priorities that have been captured. Your company may have the best strategic plan in the history of business, but that doesn't matter at all if your managers aren't living it and breathing it.

We talk a lot about being effective managers. What does that really mean? From an employee's perspective an effective manager is one that is approachable, gives clear direction, and is fair. While this is true, from the company's perspective, the manager's performance should also be evaluated on how well they support company strategies, how frequently (and effectively) they incorporate them into their employees' performance plans, communicate the progress and results to staff and management, and ultimately how they specifically contribute to quantitative organizational goals.

Recently, we focused attention on the need for an organization to have a plan – and more specifically, a strategic plan. While a sound strategic plan conveys thought, vision, and leadership, it is of no value if it is not properly communicated to **all** levels of the organization. To illustrate the importance of clearly communicating your organization's plan, HRN Performance Solutions conducted several surveys of organizations with 100-250 employees. One survey was sent to managers and another to employees. The results highlighted the need these organizations have to better their strategic initiatives. Consider these statistics:

- 87% of employees stated they could have better understood and accomplished their individual objectives if they had been provided with a clear understanding of the organization's plan.
- 69% of managers were asked to communicate the company's strategic goals (the plan) to their employees, but only 20% did this by means of a one-on-one conversation, while the vast majority used a less personal company/staff meeting or a memo.
- 60% of employees had no explanation on how their goals supported broader company initiatives; 30% of employees had no goals at all.
- 27% of managers weren't sure what defined success for their organization.

While technically employees may have received the information, it certainly was not as effective as it could have been. Managers are simply passing on these important strategic directives and by doing so are also passing on an incredible development opportunity. When managers take the time to ensure employees clearly **understand** the company's objectives, they also increase the likelihood that their employees will contribute to the overall success and longevity of the company.

This type of insightful communication has to start with company leadership. Once the strategic outcomes are identified and the objectives are set, they must be well-publicized. Managers need the opportunity to review the information, resolve any questions they may have, and ensure they obtain a thorough understanding. This in turn allows them to not only better explain the importance of the strategic initiatives

to their employees, but to create goals and action plans that support these higher level objectives. Armed with this information, managers can better motivate employees and together build solid, business driven goals.

And what could make this process easier and more efficient? Notice the next statistic:

- 62% of managers have no tool to link their employees' objectives to higher level strategies.
- 76% of managers responded that having such a tool would have helped them set more meaningful goals and foster a better understanding of company objectives for their employees.

Consider for a moment the communication and cooperation of a rowing team. The crew must be able to hear the coxswain (leader) as she shouts instructions and steers the shell. The coxswain must also be an able rower to help the crew and individual rowers correct their form for optimum performance. Rowing requires strength, core balance, and endurance. The crew must be determined to work together to execute their roles efficiently. They must be in sync with each other and maintain focus on the common goal of winning. Each crew member has an assignment and if even one crew member fails to complete that assignment, the whole team will suffer. For the rowing team as a whole to be successful, the coxswain uses two very important tools in unison - her voice and the rudder. Her voice demonstrates verbal control of the rowers, helping them to chart a straight course while maintaining pace and synchronicity. The rudder, however, is equally important, because this allows the coxswain to steer the craft. If either of these tools were not available to the coxswain, the team would for certain fail. Managers and employees, like the rowing team, must work together to reach their common goal. And like the rudder steers the craft, a well-communicated plan directs an organization. A company that provides a comprehensive tool for their managers to communicate strategies and lead their employees via business driven goals, positions everyone for success.

For employees to have individual goals tied to the strategic goals, managers must help them make the connection between the two. Understanding how their own performance impacts the organization is powerful and sadly uncommon. Managers must deliberately:

- Engage, inspire, and assist employees to strive for their best performance.
 - Provide employees with necessary information to give them a clear line of sight and complete understanding of the business strategy and company objectives, so there are no questions regarding their responsibilities.
 - Make achieving their goals second nature.
- Set relevant, specific, meaningful, and business driven goals in partnership with each employee while maintaining transparency of the company goals.
 - Remove any non-essential, non-business driven goals from the employee's individual performance plan, having replaced them with well-defined, action-oriented goals supporting the organization.
 - Influence employees' buy-in to own their performance assignments and responsibilities.
- Conduct regular, individual goal progress meetings. (The shorter time interval between progress meetings, e.g. monthly, the greater the employee commitment.)
 - Provide encouragement and ongoing support.
 - Increase two-way communication allowing manager to recognize differences in employees, identifying each member's strengths and areas for improvement.

This list puts the manager's responsibilities into perspective. Each of these items takes a great deal of planning, organizing, and time to master them. Having an effectual performance management tool to help managers and employees get on track and stay on track, can mean the difference between success and failure.

The question remains, though, how should a tool be used by managers to help them effectively communicate the company's strategic plan? A solid performance management system would be

considered a best practice for facilitating communication, tracking goal progress, and recording employee development (a system like Performance Pro!). If your organization does not have such an application, a good, old-fashioned paper appraisal form will work. Whichever you use, it should detail organizational strategies or goals, the basic action plans designed for employees to contribute to those goals, and the expected outcomes for each employee.

Sounds easy, right? It may seem daunting, but when managers focus on each step of the process, it is actually very straight forward. To encourage a manager and their employees to think and work strategically, HR should foster a process similar to this:

1. Broadly communicate company strategies using an effective performance management tool.
2. Help managers ensure that all employee goals are business driven and tied to the organization's objectives.
3. Managers should explain directly to each employee how their individual goals impact the company's progressive movement toward success.
4. Provide reporting and metrics based on employees' performance resulting in success in accomplishing company objectives.

Following such a process will give employees a clear line of sight of organizational objectives, which is priceless. But most importantly, it can expand their capacity for improvement of their individual performance which will enable them to experience personal and career growth. Beyond improving the performance of the organization as a whole, other extremely valuable benefits will be realized by the company. It can:

- Establish employees' trust in management.
 - Employees will connect individual performance to strategic outcomes through deeper understanding and definitive action plans.
 - Readily engage in open communication process.
- Help the organization retain top talent.
 - Pay-for-performance - Employees have incentive to do their part to meet business goals - rewarded for performing well.
 - Increase employee engagement and purpose.
- Increases productivity and morale.
 - Employees gain a sense of belonging and a desire to be successful.
- Builds individual accountability.
 - Greater employee commitment to attaining goals.
 - Encourages ownership of their goals.
- Gives employees a full, clear view of the direct impact their contributions make toward the success of the company.

The value and benefits realized by a manager's effective communication efforts are enormous. An informed workforce gives a company a huge advantage over their competitors and results in a forward momentum toward success. Making sure your managers understand and evangelize your company's plan is the key to ensuring employees fully grasp and understand the big picture. When they do, the possibilities are limitless. Managers and employees work as a team. Their energy is channeled and **together** they reach the milestones set by leadership. And unlike last year's goals that were set and forgotten, these objectives stick around, become a part of the employee's performance, their job, and their company.