

Making Changes That Dramatically Improve Results

by Ron Snyder

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"When a key element of the business isn't quite working, and nobody seems to own the problem, you don't have to just live with it. You can be an agent of change!"

- Are there issues that consistently get in the way of introducing products, entering new markets or competing effectively?
- Has the organization missed important deadlines or market requirements?
- Have you had significant cost over-runs?

This article gives you a practical approach to launching a strategic initiative that will turn around a business problem and significantly improve critical results!

What is a strategic initiative...and why should I care?

Making critical change happen can be challenging in any size organization. Obviously, when a large company decides to make a significant change – as Intel, GE and Microsoft have in the past year – it requires a coordinated, cross-functional effort to succeed. Even in smaller organizations that are light on their feet, changes that involve more than one group must be well orchestrated and have the active support of all of the groups involved. A strategic initiative is one that:

- Responds to an issue that, when resolved, will have a significant impact on the organization's results, and
- Requires cross-functional support to succeed.

You may say, "Yes, there is a change we need to make, but why should I be the one to sponsor it? I'm so busy as it is!"

When a strategic change is needed, the results of each of the key functions, i.e. sales, marketing and product development, are usually substantially affected. In order to achieve the results you know your organization is capable of, this change must be made... and you can be the one to make it happen!

4 steps to successfully sponsoring a strategic initiative

"OK," you say, "how do I do it?" There are four steps:

1. Initiating the effort – Gathering support
2. Launching – Agreeing on the approach
3. Executing – Producing results
4. Gaining momentum – Communicating results

1. Initiating the effort – Gathering support and buy-in

Identify the key people whose results are suffering due to the issue. Review the situation with them and the results being impacted, especially in their areas, to enroll their support. Branch out to engage the leaders of the other functions required to solve the problem.

2. Launching – Agreeing on the approach, roles, and milestones

It is critical that there be a “meeting of the minds” in which the cross-functional management team discusses and agrees on:

- The problem to be solved
 - The approach to solving it
 - What each group will do to contribute to the effort
 - Key people to be involved and their roles and responsibilities
 - The intended results and how progress will be monitored, and
 - Key milestones and when reviews, follow-up meetings will occur
- The deliverable of this meeting is a plan that everyone supports.

It is also important to identify what new information, skills, training and support structures are needed in order for people to develop any required new skills and adjust to the new approach.

3. Executing – Doing what it takes to produce the intended results

Naturally, it is critical to take the right actions to resolve the underlying problem and produce improved results. All involved (some of whom may not have been involved in the initial management session) must have a clear understanding of the objective, their role and what they need to do to enable the initiative to be successful.

Further, there must be on-going support for the initiative and people must know where to go for additional information and help. If there are new systems, methods or skills involved, there must be a clear plan for getting everyone up to speed on them as soon as possible.

4. Gaining momentum - Communicating results and garnering broader support

As progress occurs, it is important to communicate it to all who are affected by the initiative. This is central to reinforcing the support of those currently on-board and broadening support and interest across the organization and the ecosystem, including outside parties who contribute to the success of the program.

Cautionary notes

“That sounds good,” you say, “but I’ve seen initiatives go off course. How do I avoid that?”

Beware of the 6 deadly sins...underestimating the importance of:

1. Establishing a common objective and approach

It is tempting to skip this step in the interest of time. However, without a clear understanding of the common objective, it is difficult to coordinate the activities of multiple groups and many people.

2. Ensuring that leaders and participants buy in and make this a priority

Everyone is so busy, it is imperative that each person realizes the importance of the initiative and prioritizes it into their activities.

3. Persistently communicating the need for the initiative

Without this, the initiative and the actions associated with it slowly lose perceived importance, and people wonder if the effort is bearing fruit. When this happens, key activities will not get done and momentum wanes.

4. Providing sufficient support structures

It is tempting to cut corners in the arena of support. If people don't have the needed support and it is difficult to do what they need to do, they can lose motivation and go back to business as usual.

5. Generating and communicating short-term results

Even if people are supportive at the beginning, they need to see that the effort is paying off. It is critical to communicate the wins in a way that people can relate to.

6. Establishing metrics, accountability and monitoring progress

It is hard to demonstrate the impact the initiative is having when metrics are overlooked. A loss of senior sponsorship and support across the organization may result. Further, metrics serve as an early warning system for swift course-correction.

The key Ingredient

"All right, what's it going to take to succeed?", you ask. As with any worthy effort, there are invariably bumps along the way. The key ingredient that really makes the difference in the end is **the commitment and resolve of those sponsoring the program**. Keep in mind that the reward for holding the vision is the dramatic impact it will have on results.

Should you use outside help?

"We have a very experienced team. Do we need outside help?", you wonder. Granted, you know your organization and market better than an outside party. However, an external process facilitator can provide the following value:

- An experienced consultant/facilitator – It is important to work with consultants who have experience guiding organizations in managing the changes necessary to make an initiative successful.
- An unbiased perspective – An outside party with no other agenda than enabling the organization to produce the best results possible provides you with candid, impartial feedback and recommendations to ensure success.
- Leaders' full attention on the initiative – Working with consultants who have guided many organizations through the process enables the leaders to be full participants and contributors, rather than having to be both leader and process facilitator.

Ron Snyder is CEO of Breakthrough, Inc. Contact Ron to sign up for a complimentary organizational assessment and receive recommendations for making your strategic initiative successful. Call Ron at 650-508-0622 or send email to inquiry@breakthrough-inc.com.