Align People With Strategy

Idea In Short

Successfully implementing organizational strategy relies on aligning individual motivations—especially long-term aspirations—with the company's goals. Leaders must address the “What's in it for me?” [WIIFM] question by helping staff see how strategy meets both personal and professional ambitions. Whole-company workshops foster this understanding, clarify barriers, and commit to action plans. Sustained alignment requires ongoing communication, barrier removal, and leader coaching, ensuring that strategy becomes a shared mission rather than top-down instruction.

Implementing organizational strategy is inherently a process of change, whether evolutionary or revolutionary. The success of this change largely depends on how well people within the organization align with and support the strategy. This alignment is crucial, yet complex, as it involves understanding and addressing the personal motivations and aspirations of individuals.

The WIIFM Factor: Understanding Personal Motivations

At the heart of people's reactions to change is the question, "What's in it for me?" [WIIFM]. As one expert notes, "To understand WIIFM for their staff, leaders have to be part mind-reader." This complexity is further compounded by the fact that individuals themselves may not fully understand their own long-term aspirations, often realizing them later in life.

Short-Term vs. Long-Term Needs

People evaluate changes against their perceived needs, which can be either short-term or long-term. When they can only express to themselves their short-term needs, individuals evaluate changes that flow from the strategy against those short-term needs. However, when individuals can articulate their long-term needs, they evaluate changes against both short-term and long-term perspectives.

Creating Disciples and Apostles of Change

The key to successful strategy implementation lies in demonstrating how the strategy aligns with individuals' long-term aspirations. When, as a leader, you can demonstrate that your strategy will help individuals achieve their long-term needs, they will embrace your change.

Furthermore, by actively helping individuals overcome personal and organizational barriers, leaders can transform employees into "disciples" and "apostles" of the strategy.

The Path to Alignment: A Simple but Comprehensive Approach

Achieving this level of alignment is described as "simple but not cheap." However, the return on investment is significant, leading to benefits in strategy implementation, retention rates, discretionary effort, and innovation.

The Workshop Approach

I advocate for a series of whole-company workshops as a crucial step in achieving alignment. These workshops should include:

1. Discovering personal long-term aspirations
2. Understanding the strategy and its implications
3. Demonstrating how participation in the strategy aligns with personal goals
4. Identifying personal and organizational barriers
5. Committing to removing these barriers
6. Developing action plans for individuals and the organization

Critical Elements for Success

The workshop agenda should be tailored to each organization, but certain critical elements remain constant:

"Providing people an environment where they can discover what their personal long term aspirations are." "Allowing people the opportunity to understand – in their terms – what the strategy is, why it is needed, and what the results of a successful implementation will be for

them and those they care about." "Demonstrating how their participation in the execution of the strategy will allow them to create the potential to achieve their long-term aspirations."

Sustaining Long-Term Results

While workshops can generate initial enthusiasm and intention to change, sustaining this momentum is crucial. There are three key actions I wish to emphasize:

1. Follow through on removing organizational barriers
2. Communicate decision-making processes and impacts
3. Train leaders to coach staff in removing personal barriers

This might sound like a lot of effort, but the long-term results are definitely worth it.

Aligning people with organizational strategy is a complex but essential process. By focusing on understanding and addressing individual long-term aspirations, organizations can create a powerful force for change. Through well-designed workshops and consistent follow-through, leaders can transform their workforce into active supporters of strategic initiatives, leading to improved implementation and overall organizational success.

Summary

Strategic alignment hinges on understanding and connecting with employees' aspirations. By openly addressing WIIFM, hosting workshops to match personal and strategic goals, and removing barriers, leaders can turn staff into committed champions of change. Maintaining engagement demands transparent decision-making and continuous coaching. This comprehensive approach transforms strategy execution from a compliance exercise into a purposeful journey, driving higher retention, innovation, and discretionary effort across the organization.