Open Strategy Matters

Idea In Short

Treat strategy as shared operating guidance, not executive property. When strategy remains trapped in boardrooms, leaders should not be surprised when employees dismiss it as vague, detached and impossible to use. The remedy is not more slogans or a better slide deck. It is disciplined translation. Companies should expose the core strategic choices, explain the trade-offs behind them and connect them to decisions made by teams at every level. They should also invite relevant stakeholders into the process early enough to improve the strategy before execution begins. Employees cannot contribute to a trajectory they cannot see. When strategy becomes visible, discussable and operational, people stop treating it as corporate theater and start using it as a decision framework

Most strategy failures are not failures of ambition. They are failures of access, translation and operational meaning. A company can produce a sophisticated strategic plan, win board approval and still create little movement if the people responsible for execution do not know what the strategy actually asks of them.

Strategy trapped at the top

In many organizations, strategy remains concentrated among executives, board members and a narrow set of senior advisers. The rest of the business encounters it in fragments:

> a town hall headline, a mission refresh, a few annual priorities, or a presentation that explains where the company wants to go without explaining how the path changes day-to-day work

Employees then conclude that strategy belongs to leadership theater, not operational reality.

This perception does not arise from cynicism alone. It arises from lived experience. When workers are expected to deliver results under time pressure, customer pressure, budget pressure and system constraints, they judge strategy by whether it helps them make better decisions. If it does not improve prioritization, resource allocation, escalation choices, or coordination across teams, they treat it as decorative language. That reaction is rational.

Research and commentary on alignment gaps reflect this problem. Kaplan and Norton's widely cited finding that 95 percent of employees do not understand their company's strategy continues to resonate because many firms still overestimate how much strategic clarity actually reaches the operating core1. Leaders often think strategy has been communicated because it has been announced. That is not the same thing.

Why employees dismiss strategy

Employees rarely reject strategy because they oppose direction. They reject the form in which strategy often arrives. The message is broad, optimistic and full of intent, but thin on operational consequence. People hear that the company will become more innovative, more customer-centric, more data-driven, or more efficient. They do not hear which trade-offs will follow, which legacy practices will be retired, which teams will gain or lose resources, which decisions should now be made differently, or what tensions the strategy is designed to resolve.

Without those details, strategy becomes hard to trust. Oracle's own guidance on employee listening emphasizes transparency, accessible communication and sharing the rationale behind decisions so employees can understand how listening findings are used2. That advice is directly relevant to strategy execution. If people do not see the logic behind choices, they infer that leadership is withholding context or that the strategy itself is too weak to survive scrutiny.

A related problem is that many organizations confuse recognition with comprehension. Employees may have seen the strategy slide and still be unable to explain the top priorities, the reasoning behind them, or how their work should change. Practical strategy practitioners increasingly argue that organizations should test understanding directly rather than relying on self-reported confidence3. This is an uncomfortable test because it often reveals that the message has traveled less far than leadership believes.

Strategy without detail is unusable

There is a recurring mistake in executive communication:

> treating operational detail as beneath strategy

In practice, the opposite is closer to the truth. Strategy without detail is often unusable because execution depends on decisions made in contexts far more specific than the strategy statement itself. Teams need to know which customer segments matter most, which service levels can flex, which capabilities will be built internally, which processes should be simplified, what trade-offs justify temporary disruption and which metrics outrank others when conflicts emerge.

This does not mean strategy should collapse into task lists. It means strategy must contain enough specificity to guide action. Otherwise each team interprets the same priority in its own way. Sales pursues revenue growth through one lens, operations defends stability through another and finance protects margin through a third. The company then mistakes disagreement in execution for resistance, when the real problem is that the strategy never established a usable logic for arbitration.

Commentary associated with Gartner's execution-gap findings points to this same issue from a different angle:

> many employees do not understand their role when new growth initiatives launch, which weakens buy-in and raises resistance to change4

If people do not know how strategy changes their role, the strategy remains intellectually interesting and operationally inert.

Secrecy produces skepticism

When strategy stays locked in leadership circles, employees do not respond with disciplined patience. They respond with interpretation. They read staffing decisions, budget cuts, project approvals, leadership promotions and shifting metrics as indirect signals of what the company is really trying to do. If those signals conflict with the stated strategy, credibility declines quickly.

That skepticism toward leadership is not merely cultural noise. It affects execution quality. People withhold discretionary effort when they suspect that the strategy is either cosmetic or unstable. They wait out change programs. They optimize for local targets rather than enterprise outcomes. They reduce upward challenge because they assume the real decisions have already been made elsewhere. This is how a hidden strategy weakens both initiative and honesty.

Research on commitment to strategy suggests that two questions matter more than many engagement dashboards admit:

> do employees understand the rationale behind the strategy and do they believe the strategy will make the organization more successful5

Those are not communication metrics. They are tests of credibility. A strategy that cannot survive those questions is unlikely to survive execution pressure.

Democratising strategy

Democratising strategy does not mean turning every employee into a board member or disclosing every confidential issue. It means giving relevant stakeholders meaningful access to the strategic logic of the organization. People need to know what the company is trying to achieve, what choices it has made, what constraints matter, what will not be prioritized and how success will be judged. They also need a channel to challenge assumptions and surface execution risks before those risks become expensive.

This is a practical governance issue as much as a cultural one. The question is not whether employees should be inspired by strategy. The question is whether they have enough context to act intelligently in its direction. A democratized strategy gives teams decision rules, not just aspirations. It tells them what to protect when trade-offs appear, what to escalate, what to stop doing and which tensions are deliberate rather than accidental.

There is also a power dimension here. Strategy often remains closed because executives assume wider access will create confusion, leakage, or political noise. Sometimes that risk is real. Yet the greater risk in many firms is false coherence at the top and silent confusion below. Open strategy surfaces disagreement earlier, when it can still improve the plan. Closed strategy preserves neat alignment among a few people while pushing complexity downward into execution.

The middle-manager bottleneck

If executives write the strategy and frontline teams live with its consequences, middle managers carry the translation burden. They turn broad priorities into staffing decisions, project sequencing, customer commitments and cross-functional negotiations. When they lack clarity, the strategy rarely reaches the frontline in usable form.

This is why strategy democratization cannot stop at executive broadcasts. Middle managers need deeper exposure than everyone else because they are not just recipients. They are interpreters. They need to understand not only the headline priorities but the reasoning, trade-offs and boundaries behind them. Without that depth, they paraphrase the strategy in generic terms and then rely on their old local logic when pressure rises.

Data on frontline experience also suggests that those closest to customers often feel furthest from strategic clarity, with measurable gaps between executives and frontline staff in how clearly the vision is understood6. That gap matters because strategy is tested where customer reality and operational friction meet. If the people at that boundary lack context, the organization loses both execution quality and learning speed.

What open strategy looks like

A democratized strategy is visible in operating choices. Teams can explain the top priorities in plain language. They know which few trade-offs the company has chosen to make. They understand how their function contributes and where coordination with other units matters. They also know what evidence might challenge the current plan and who has the authority to revisit assumptions.

This requires more than cascading messages. Leaders need forums where strategy can be interrogated by the people expected to execute it. That includes role-specific briefings, working sessions that translate enterprise goals into functional implications, manager toolkits that explain not only what but why and feedback mechanisms that carry operational intelligence back upward. Strategy should move in two directions. Leadership provides intent and choices downward; the operating system sends friction, insight and correction upward.

The tone also matters. When executives communicate strategy as polished certainty, they discourage useful challenge. When they communicate it as a set of reasoned choices under constraint, they invite better execution. Employees do not need leaders to pretend the path is simple. They need leaders to show that the choices are deliberate and that operational realities are part of the strategic conversation.

A better contract with employees

At its core, democratising strategy changes the relationship between leadership and employees. It treats people not as passive implementers of executive judgment but as participants in organizational direction. That does not dissolve hierarchy. It improves it. Leaders still decide, but they decide in a system where more people understand the rationale and can contribute relevant intelligence.

The payoff is not only engagement. It is execution quality. Employees who understand strategy make better local decisions, coordinate across functions more effectively and identify weak assumptions sooner. They are more likely to challenge work that does not support the chosen direction and less likely to treat every initiative as equally important. Strategy becomes a filter for action rather than a speech about ambition.

1. Expose the few strategic choices that actually govern trade-offs
2. Translate those choices into role-specific implications for teams and managers
3. Give employees channels to question assumptions and surface operational friction
4. Test comprehension directly instead of assuming communication equals understanding
5. Reward leaders who turn strategic intent into usable operating guidance

Companies do not need more employees who can repeat strategy slogans. They need more employees who can use strategy to make decisions. That shift begins when leaders stop treating strategy as something to unveil periodically and start treating it as something the organization must understand, test and execute together

- 1The Strategic Alignment Illusion
- 2Listen To Your Employees Or Lose Them
- 3Does Your Team Really Understand Your Strategy?
- 4According To The 2020 Gartner Execution Gap Survey, 67% Of Employees Do Not Understand Their Role When New Growth Initiatives Are Launched
- 5The Real Reason Employees Don't Commit To Your Company's Strategy
- 6Mind The Gap: Why Those Closest To Customers Feel Furthest From Strategy

Summary

Strategy loses force when it is treated as confidential intent known only to a small group at the top. Employees then fill the vacuum with guesswork, local priorities and skepticism about leadership credibility. That skepticism is not irrational. It grows whenever people hear ambitious messages but cannot connect them to resourcing, sequencing, incentives, or daily trade-offs. Democratising strategy does not mean broadcasting every board discussion. It means giving relevant stakeholders enough context to understand what the company is trying to achieve, what choices it has made, what it will not do and how each part of the organization contributes. Companies that do this well turn strategy from a periodic announcement into an operating discipline that can be questioned, refined and executed