

Preparing to Lead Strategic Organizational Initiatives

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The world in which we work is in constant motion. Our organizations are challenged with conditions that change at breakneck speed. To succeed in this rough business environment, organizations frequently undertake strategic initiatives. Examples of such initiatives could include the implementation of a new business model, the introduction of new hard or soft technologies, or devising a new process for selecting and working with suppliers.

Too often, the initiatives are poorly charted and inadequately executed. Missteps in planning and implementing large-scale initiatives waste money and resources at best. Many times the chaos resulting from poorly executed initiatives actually cripple the organization. In addition, when highly visible endeavors fail or fade away, people become cynical and more resistant to the next change effort.

Effective organizational initiatives require leaders to set a clear direction from the beginning. Your role is to create an environment that supports those who must attend to the many details that will determine the success of the endeavor. You must articulate a vision, lay out a strategy and identify the right groups and persons to develop and implement the plans. In addition, you must ensure that those who are chartered with the execution of the initiative have the right tools and adequate resources.

Over the years, we have developed and tested a process and set of tools to assist leaders in planning initiatives. The tools include:

- Developing the vision for the initiative, including the mission, goals and objectives
- Defining the leadership team's role in overseeing the initiative
- Appraising the opportunities that the initiative will address
- Assessing the factors that are likely to impact its success
- Outlining the groundwork that must be put in place to support the planning and execution of the initiative
- Identifying the resources that will be needed to carry out the initiative

A successful initiative requires a clear vision of the future, a realistic assessment of the present, and a solid plan for how to get from here to there. This paper will summarize the actions contained in these detailed planning tools.

SETTING THE STAGE

Step One – Establish the Vision

Under the best of circumstances, organizational initiatives have the potential for going awry. Chaotic conditions, competing priorities and resource constraints frequently stop initiatives before the goals are met. Initiatives need the “glue” of a shared vision to hold them together. Too often, what is missing in initiatives is a strong sense of purpose and direction to guide people through the rough spots. Leaders’ first challenge is to articulate a vision for the undertaking, one that also supports the overall vision for the organization.

↪ To complete this step, gather the organizational vision documents to be reviewed by the leadership team. There is no need to reinvent the vision. Merely review it. If you find more than one document that is pertinent, you might want to consolidate or summarize them. Most vision documents include items such as the following:

- How do you envision the future of this organization?
- How would you like the organization to be characterized by outsiders? Insiders?
- What would the organization stand for? Value?
- How would the organization treat people? Customers? Employees? Others
- It would be known for what products and services?
- Other?

↪ Develop the initiative vision by stating the specific reason why the organization is introducing this initiative. How does it support the overall vision and goals of the organization?

For example, “A major goal of our company right now is to reduce our costs. To do so, we must become more efficient in the delivery of our products and services.”

- Describe the leadership vision for the initiative. Include a description of the current state, and a picture of the desired future state.
- Describe what it will take to close the gap between the current state (IS-NOW) and the desired future state (TO-BE).

For example, “Our current culture supports worker complacency. It is OK to do just enough to get by. Our future culture must focus on continuous improvement and must constantly raise the bar for performance expectations. To get there, we will need to clarify performance expectations for each function, develop incentive systems that encourage and reward continuous improvement, and provide strong leadership to guide the culture change.”

- State what makes the initiative worth doing. For example, “Our costs aren’t competitive and we are losing market share.”
- State the possible consequences to the organization of not succeeding with this initiative.
For example, “Stock value may decline; We won’t be able to compete.”

Complete an Action Plan for Building Shared Vision

- State how you will build a shared vision for this initiative throughout the organization.
- What approach will you use? Tell, sell, and collaborate? Describe.
- Who will be involved in building the shared vision?

Step Two – Scan for Influencing Factors Working For and Against You

Many factors that affect the outcomes of your initiative are unknown and thus unpredictable. However, you should attempt to identify at least some of the forces that might come into play and might affect your outcomes. Projecting ahead to those circumstances that might work for or against you allows you to develop a clear strategy for achieving your desired ends. To complete this step:

Scan the Environment

- List the factors working for you. These are circumstances with a strong potential of contributing to the initiative’s success, such as leadership support or a motivated and knowledgeable workforce.
- Determine ways to capitalize on these factors, such as having a high-level manager who is in support of the initiative publicly endorse and formally launch the initiative.
- List the factors working against you. These are circumstances with a strong potential for thwarting the initiative (e.g., a history of resistance to change, adverse union/management relations.)

Step3 – Define the Leadership Team’s Role and Strategy

Clarify your mission and roles as a leadership team. To function effectively, you must specify your team’s views of its purpose, responsibilities, goals and strategies. Do not confuse your leadership team mission and goals with the overall goals of the initiative. The leadership team mission and goals pertain to your definition of your team’s role and what you hope to accomplish as a group.

For example, suppose that the purpose of your organizational initiative is to design and implement a new work process. Your role as a leadership team could be limited to setting the general direction, budget and time-lines for the project. On the other hand, your role might be to manage and oversee the entire design, development and implementation of the work process. These alternative roles for the leadership team imply very different responsibilities. If the leadership team chooses to oversee and direct project management, the duties will be much more extensive than if the team chooses to set direction only. If the leadership team chooses to adopt the less labor-intensive role of setting direction only, then they must establish a management oversight team and/or a project manager to carry out the more intensive day-to-day management of the initiative.

With this knowledge in hand you will be in a better position to determine whether the leadership team will assume the role of project managers, or assign it to another group.

Do not rush through this step. The leadership team must have a clear, commonly held understanding of its role and mission in the process of carrying out the initiative. The team should discuss the behaviors that will be consistent with its roles. For example, a common role for leaders is to serve as the advocates for the initiative. Leaders advocate for an initiative through words and actions. If you assume this role, look for opportunities to speak of the importance of the initiative. Support the initiative by making time for it and providing the appropriate level of resources. List other actions that will demonstrate your leadership roles.

Likewise, the team should consider the types of behaviors that would be inconsistent with their roles. For example, as advocates of the initiative, leaders should avoid inadvertently undermining the project by sending messages that other things are more important. Discussions of these behaviors go a long way in ensuring that the leadership team shares the same picture of their roles.

CREATING THE GAME PLAN

Step Four – Develop the Initiative Blueprint

Through taking the first three steps, you have made decisions that will set the stage for the initiative. Now you will work through the issues that will allow you to develop a blueprint for carrying out the project.

Describe the Initiative Deliverables

- Describe each product, service or outcome (deliverable) that must be rendered by those carrying out this project.
- Identify a person or group that has the primary responsibility for producing each deliverable. You may appoint sub-teams to take responsibility for some of the deliverables if the project is complex.
- Describe the leadership teams's roles and responsibilities pertaining to each deliverable.

For example, perhaps one of the deliverables will be a communications plan. The leadership team's responsibilities for this plan might be to charter a sub-team to develop the communications strategy. Likewise, training might be another deliverable that you will choose to assign to a sub-team.

Complete the Cost Criteria and Infrastructure

- Estimate the costs for carrying out this initiative. Estimate (to your best ability) your expectations for the return on your investment from the resources you commit to the project.

Step 5 – Develop the Project Action Plan

Now that you have drafted the initiative blueprint, you will develop the “big picture” project action plan. Because change initiative projects tend to be complex, a project action plan is essential. You use action plans to record tasks, timelines, “owners” (i.e. persons responsible), and costs. Action plans make everyone aware of the deadlines, reduce uncertainty, and communicate steps in a logical order. You may need to adjust your action plans later based on input from sub-teams, responses from critical stakeholders, and so forth. Nevertheless, the leadership team should establish a preliminary action plan to guide the project in its initial stages.

↪ Complete a Big Picture Action Plan to Create each Deliverable

- List the main tasks and outputs, to the best of your knowledge, for producing each deliverable. The purpose of these big picture plans is to create a scope for the project.
- Fill in your best estimate of start dates and completion dates for each task.
- Estimate the costs for each major task. This will help you prepare a budget for the deliverables.
- Designate who “owns” the responsibility for each deliverable. This will help you determine whether to charter sub-teams to carry out the major tasks.

Step 6 – Prepare Charters for Sub-Teams

In most cases a major initiative should not and can not be carried out by the leadership team alone. In fact, large-scale initiatives generally involve several sub-teams and require the expertise and involvement of many people. Of course, with multiple players comes the need for coordination and clear expectations concerning each person’s and sub-team’s role in the initiative. One way to achieve the necessary coordination and clarity is for the leadership team to develop charters for all sub-teams involved in the project. The purpose of a charter is to inform a team of what has led up to the initiative, the vision for the future, and the details around the role that the chartered team will play in achieving that future state.

↪ Describe the background of the initiative and the big picture plan.

↪ Define the roles and responsibilities of the sub-team.

For example, one sub-team might be responsible for creating the communications plan for the initiative. Another sub-team might be responsible for designing and delivering the training to assist people in acquiring the knowledge and skills to support the initiative goals.

↪ Specify expectations and boundaries for each sub-team.

For example, if the sub-team is to provide input only to the leadership team, spell out this boundary in their charter. On the other hand, if they are to make the final decisions and carry out the actions, say so.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The leadership team is responsible for the success or failure of organizational initiatives. Your imperative is to set a clear direction from the beginning. You must take the time to create a blueprint that will allow others to accomplish the initiative goals and realize successful outcomes. The more careful the up front planning, the smoother the path to the achievement of your objectives. Organizational initiatives are frequently costly in both dollars and time. If it is worth it to invest these precious resources in the initiatives, it is certainly worth it to spend the time set the stage for success.