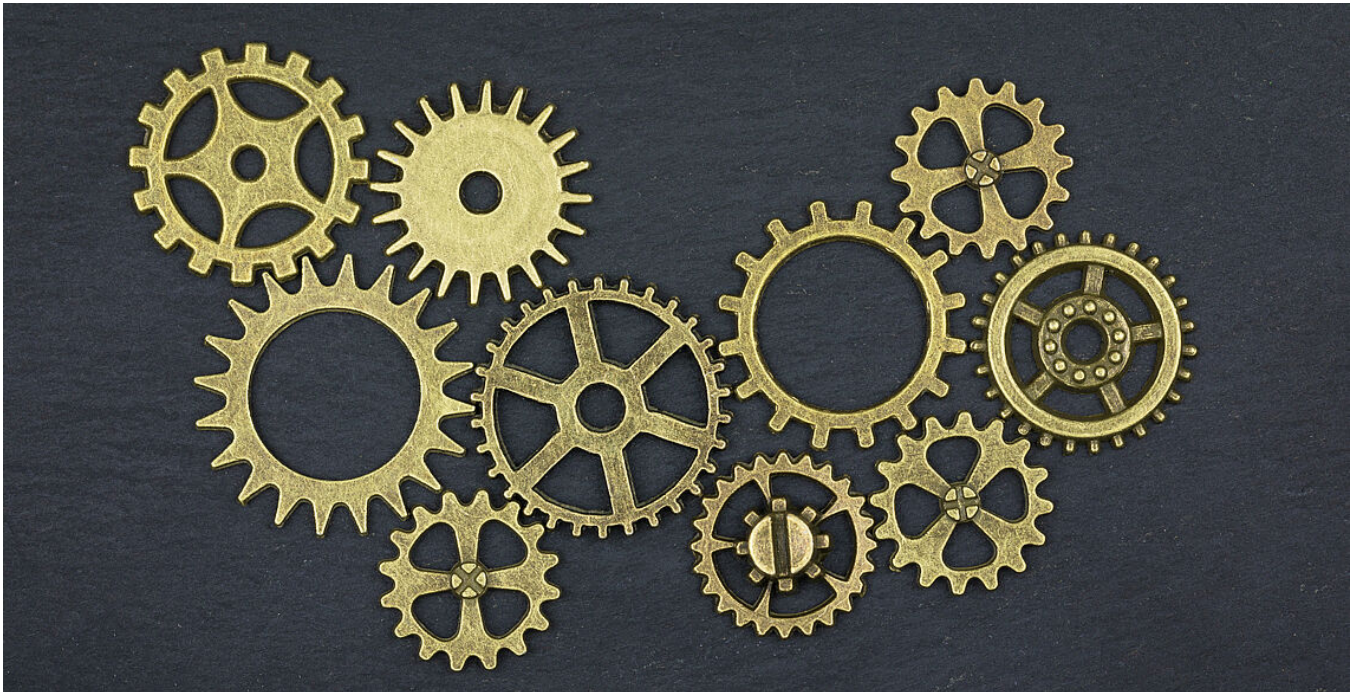


Why is Strategy Activation Important?

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As we close in on the end of a tumultuous, chaotic and uncertain year, counting down the days until the festive season where we spend precious time with family and friends - more of our clients are putting their energy into creating a strategy for the forthcoming year. Historically this is done by talking about it in workshops and then committing it expertly into a document or slide deck. There are an abundance of resources to guide anyone through such a strategic planning process - working with a group of like-minded consultants we used the Business Model Canvas yesterday to dig deep into our strategies for 2021. It was inspiring, uplifting and energising particularly after the year we've all experienced!



However it's vital to recognise that there's a big difference between the production of a strategy and activation of this strategy. As can be seen from the diagram above, it's the leadership behaviours of people that ensure performance and execution - otherwise known as strategy activation.

It's interesting to acknowledge the wise words from James Clear (author of Atomic Habits) as he declared in a recent newsletter that:

"Without hard work, a great strategy remains a dream. Without a great strategy, hard work becomes a nightmare."

We've acknowledged previously that during 2020 people were working incredibly hard and yet found themselves stopping and asking about the:

- Relevance of what they were doing
- Purpose of the work they were undertaking and what the organisation was striving to do
- Sustainability of their effort in the longer term
- Recognition for such effort in the shorter term

Leaders everywhere have experienced significant events, decisions and situations since early March 2020 and have found themselves in uncharted territory - and for many they have done what they know best - focussed on getting stuff done! Experience tells us that in times of crisis it's human nature for people to over manage and under lead. Many leaders have been seen 'bunkering down' - thus creating the nightmare of hard work with not enough to show for it!

It's critical now for all leaders to take a step back and up to create focus for themselves, others and the company and stop creating the 'nightmare of hard work'. They do this by producing a strategy. However as acknowledged by James Clear, once the strategy is produced then comes the hard work of strategy activation. This is notoriously difficult and not undertaken well within companies or by leadership teams.

Strategy is activated through people

The only way a strategy can be activated is through the people and their behaviours. This requires accountability, discipline and a focus on the habits each person brings to the way they work. If they are simply presented with the strategy that was produced, usually in a document or a slide deck, followed by a presentation at say the company 'Town Hall' then it's easy for it to become overwhelming and confusing, lacking individual relevance and context. This is exactly why many people resort to their comfortable and habitual way of getting things done, regardless of what's recorded in the strategy document and what was presented to them at the company 'Town Hall'.

How many strategy documents have you read or produced that refers to the importance of 'one team' and yet each year the silos remain intact as each person continues to use their well developed and reliable habits to ensure operational performance meets the financial targets. However the way people are working hasn't changed at all. That's when you realise the true potential of the people and the company is not being realised and therefore limiting the products / services available to customers. This weakness becomes part of the SWOT analysis for the following year and once again integrated into the strategy... all companies have some of these 'white elephants' that just keep looming as unattainable year in and year out - what are yours?

Strategy activation

Anchoring behaviour change to key business outcomes that matter to participants and the organisational strategy.



It's essential people are engaged and empowered, believing their effort matters and the strategy IS crucial for success. Leaders who want to activate their strategy need to get serious about empowering people - this is the only way people turn up with a 'can do' attitude, solve problems, innovate, activate strategy and collaborate to achieve outstanding results. It's the secret ingredient. For this to happen as shown above people are challenged to build new behaviours. To do this we are currently partnering with clients to generate learning experiences at the right time, to develop the right capability, and enable the right context for each individual, so strategy activation happens.

Monthly operating rhythm

Every leadership team has monthly meetings and they participate like 'clockwork' because it's part of their operating rhythm. For strategy activation to be successful then it's essential it's integrated into this rhythm. We see enormous benefit in all leadership team members bringing a focus on the same behaviour during the same timeframe and speed the achievement of outcomes linked to those behaviours and the current environment, incorporated within the strategy. In this way everyone is on the same wave of change throughout the entire company and just imagine the operational impact. For everyone to be on board it's critical that each leader cascades these behaviours into each operational or functional team. We're doing this with clients right now and it's exciting to see the results.

Create context for everyone

As we've shown above, strategy activation is highly dependent on the people who report to members of the leadership team - referred to as middle managers, people leaders - this is where the real work gets done - it's the operational hub of any company. This is where processes work, or don't and where the customer experience is delivered.

Middle managers and people managers are also the most overloaded and under pressure population of people within an organisation - being responsible for the day to day operational performance of the business, lead and manage change, lead people in their functional areas so they are engaged and productive, report to senior leaders while also making sure customers are happy and quality is high. This level within any organisation must be ready for and committed to strategy activation or it won't work.

It's therefore important to cascade strategy activation into these critical levels of the company. Not in 'Town Halls' but in purpose-filled conversations where each person creates their own context for change in their day-to-day work. Each person takes accountability to change and to activate the strategy - because they care, because they are motivated intrinsically to do so and they believe their efforts really matter.

We find bringing a focus on habits is where the change is enabled - replacing the old habits with new habits - and this means helping people identify triggers for their old habits and seeing how the new habit can be embedded on a daily basis. It's all about the intentional conversations leaders and managers are having to support, encourage and empower each other.

Doing it differently this year

We encourage leaders to think beyond the production of your strategy to the activation of your strategy. Seek out ways to integrate strategy activation into your monthly operating rhythm. Ensure people are empowered and supported to make the changes.

As well as being CEO and Co-Founder of Courageous Leaders, Mandy Holloway currently Chairs two Syndicate groups at The CEO Institute which provides plenty of insight into the real business environment being faced by business leaders. Her career

success was anchored in her strong business skills, ability to develop trusted relationships and the courage she brought when expressing her leadership mastery while consistently challenging the status quo.

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