

13 Steps to Communicating a Strategic Plan to Employees

By Gary Cohen

Creating a strategic plan is quite an undertaking for a business. Not only are you often hiring outside firms for facilitating the process but you are using an enormous amount of internal resources for gathering data converting it to meaningful information and sorting that data over 3 to 5 days of meetings of your key players.

What is fascinating is how often this effort fails not in determining the path forward for the business but in disseminating the information broadly and effectively to all the members of the organization that were not part of the decision making team. A great strategy should have focus and clarity around vision, mission, objectives, strategies and actions. In order to elevate engagement and participation a communication plan needs to provide great simplicity, clarity focus without ambiguity in your communication strategy.

- 1) **Call an all company meeting** around the communicating the strategic plan. If you have any thoughts that information from your senior team will leak beforehand use email or text message to get out in front of your messaging.
- 2) **Who's coming to the party** - Review in detail who will be present and what level of detail they will need to give to create comfort around any changes that will affect them. Think through the negative as well as positive aspects of the plan. When it has to do with change people will imagine the worst so get it all out at once.
- 3) **Provide conceptual tools** - During meeting describe the basic principles of strategic planning. Explain any new terms or definition of terms. For example if you discuss EBITDA (Earnings before interest tax and depreciation) don't assume that all your employees will understand what you mean. If you use a Balance Scorecard model take employees through the basics so that they can understand the meaning behind what you are about to explain to them.
- 4) **Tell and retell the history** - Provide broader base around the history of the organization to create the context of how strategy plays a part in the growth of the company. You can provide the key elements of what has led to your growth and challenges in the past and how that has informed your future direction.

5) **Reveal the competition** - Describe your competitive advantage and disadvantages even providing some specific examples. In other words, name the competition. It may surprise you to learn how few people actually think about the impact that competition has on your business and direction.

6) **Compare and contrast** - Compare past planning processes with current ones. Some organizations have had very bad plans or poor execution of plans, which can give you a bad rap among employees. If you are not specific about how this year is different from the past you may have a tsunami of resistance against your planning before you have even begun to change it. Get ahead of the resistance by naming the difference.

7) **Connect employees to the plan** - Describe how the plan differs from the past strategies. If you went out to employees with surveys, make sure they understand how they participated in the creation of the plan. Making connection points with employees will help find a mental place for them to store the information you are sharing. Without this many companies disconnect with their people and it directly impacts employee engagement. Dow Corning uses a matrix that focuses on Intellectual Understanding and Emotional Commitment of their employees. Those that are high in both are considered Champions. If you execute your communication plan well you are more likely to develop Champions within your organization.

8) **Describe the plan** and what barriers will likely appear that may prevent your organization from achieving its vision, mission, objectives and actions. Remember that all employees have different levels of understanding so make sure that you not only describe the numeric of the plan but what the terms mean and why they are meaningful to understanding the business. We all have different stages in our learning. Differentiate between signal and noise for your employees to determine relevancy.

9) **Provide handout** of the plan (Don't handout information that you would not want your competitors to see – it is a fine line of who to share what information with – within the company). If your plan is in book format please do yourself a favor don't pass that out. Provide the critical information that will help support your employees doing their job.

10) **Point out the differences** - Describe the way in which you would imagine how these differences would show up in behaviors in the organization. The greater the clarity of how these changes will impact each individual the higher your return on both your planning and your communication delivery.

11) **Ask them** what they believe will be different and the same. Often times leaders don't want to ask questions because they are afraid of what they may hear. Remember just because you don't hear it does not mean that they are not thinking those thoughts and discussing them among each other. The only difference of you asking is that you now will know what is going on for them.

12) **Allow them to ask you** questions. Often times this model puts you as the leader on a pedestal, which is not the leader of today. So be careful about showing up as the leader with all the answers.

13) **Reinforce Communication Strategy** on regular intervals and in different ways:

a) Ask them to each meet with their managers about the details and implications of how they do their work within the firm.

b) Provide a report card monthly on how the company and or area is doing against the plan.

c) Provide employee reviews that directly connect back to the plan

d) Tie compensation back to the success of the plan.

e) Include connections in the company newsletter or intranet blog about successes and challenges associated with the plan

f) Put up a communication board or measurement graphic that will keep everyone connected back to the plan and be explicit.

g) Use infographics to present information back to employees

h) Hold quarterly employee meetings live or by video if you are challenged geographically and reconnect everyone back to the plan.

i) Use walls and screen savers to propagate company values and mission regularly.

j) Use electronic score board on video monitors throughout organization.

k) Use metaphorical premiums that can represent the over-arching vision.

If you use some or all of these steps in your communication strategy you will reduce resistance and increase the likelihood of success in your favor.

About the Author

As President and Co-founder of ACI Telecentrics, Inc., Gary Cohen grew the company from two people to 2,200 employees. Currently, he is Managing Partner of CO2 Partners, LCC, operating as an executive coach and consultant. His book *Just Ask Leadership - Why Great Managers Always Ask The Right Questions* (McGraw Hill 2009).

