

Tactical Management

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The need for effective planning is understood. However, facing accelerated change, uncertain resources and shifting objectives, most managers don't have time or staff to devote to strategic planning. Many won't commit to long-term goals or objectives, especially when they become holy writ and inflexible mandates by which management progress, performance and pay are measured.

Managers are expected to be visionaries, making decisions with the “bigger picture” in mind. Strategic planning helps map an organization's path forward, accounting for contingencies. Traditional strategic planning requires an investment of time, and ongoing attention and adjustment. Consequently, plans are often developed with minimal effort, minimal expectation of follow up, and minimal grounding in reality, if they are developed at all.

How, then, do managers address constantly changing immediate needs with longer-term goals, objectives and organizational direction? By maintaining a balance between fire fighting and fire prevention: making tactical decisions that respond to real time demands while keeping in focus the greater needs of the organization as a whole.

The Big Picture

As Lewis Carroll wrote, “If you don't know where you're going, it doesn't matter which road you take.” Effective

management requires a sound strategic plan. The extent that plan is communicated depends on the organizational environment or climate, and the degree to which management has the flexibility to modify goals, adjust milestones and target dates, and revisit its vision. Whether this plan is clearly known or merely a mental picture in the mind of the Chief Operating Officer, the basis is a clear determination of the organizational needs both near term and future.

The plan begins with an assessment independent of current organizational capabilities. What does the organization need right now; and five years out? This may be completely different, especially if the organizations' mission has changed since its inception.

Once these needs are identified, existing resources are plugged in, including identification of known or anticipated changes, such as retirement or routine attrition. The result is the shortfalls and/or deficiencies, which impact the organization's ability to accomplish its mission.

Getting Where You Want to Go

Resource decisions — e.g., work assignments, training expenditures, reassignments, contractor dollars, etc., — address resolution of immediate, isolated needs and longer term organizational demands. Define short-term goals that address both of these needs. For example, if functions are being combined, recruitment or training efforts should focus on skills required in both areas, even if the organization hasn't yet changed to reflect the combination of functions.

Things that are important tend to get measured and things that get measured are often considered important. To keep attention on organizational transformations, establishing and defining short-term goals is not only helpful, but also acknowledging successes when decisions are effected brings the organization closer to its future status.

What makes this a more tactical approach is that the goals and measurements are not a whip and chair,

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forcing an organization into a new mold, but are like guideposts on a road map, which consider alternative routes when the path forward is delayed or blocked. Change often comes reluctantly.

Look for opportunities to celebrate “opportunities for growth” instead of the elimination of functions or responsibilities. When decisions don’t live up to expectations, build on what aspects went right, rather than fixating on shortfalls.

In a fire-fighting environment, immediately recognizing accomplishments is as important as responding to disasters. From a tactical standpoint, such recognition is often what keeps fire fighters fighting fires.

Getting the Most From Managers

Effecting organizational changes can no longer be accomplished by the organizations’ leader alone. Subordinate management structures are critical for the organizations’ survival and success. In many circumstances, the best air traffic controller, analyst or inspector is promoted to supervision and never developed so he/she is no longer an ATC, analyst or inspector.

Now their primary responsibility is the management of human capital. Clarification provides an appreciation of the investment in and importance of first line management, and people in those positions need the right kind of experience to become effective leaders and senior managers.

Many professions have requirements for continuing professional education. This normally doesn’t exist for management positions.

A tactical approach redefines the roles of the management structure, develops a training agenda that gets the most out of the management team and gives them tools to get the most from employees. Investing in training for managers is important resource expenditure, but often the one most overlooked.

Getting Employees On Board

Most employees value working in an organization where they believe in the mission, enjoy challenges, and feel appreciated. All that can be undermined when employees don’t know what’s going on, how they benefit the organization or where the organization is going.

This all falls into the same category: lack of communication. Employees like to hear from their leaders; more than that, they *need* to hear from their leaders. An effective communications strategy can be anything from regular email





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Effective communication in any organization — especially in a time of uncertainty or change — is critical in a tactical strategy. There are a number of approaches to managing people and change.

One option is *Appreciative Inquiry*. This builds on positive past experiences, rather than focusing on shortfalls or deficiencies. The inquiry process looks at what makes an organization successful, and draws on those characteristics and conditions to create a vision of what is possible.

It differs from conventional problem solving, which assumes that organizations are problems that need to be solved. Appreciative Inquiry holds that the organization has the solution within its diversity, multiplicity and forward movement. Engaging employees in this kind of visioning provides them an opportunity to be a part of that forward movement.

When There's a Union

Labor relations are one of the most complex and yet most misunderstood and underestimated aspects of human resource management. In most organizational relationships, there are two parties: management and staff. While there may be disagreement, generally the positions/interests of the respective parties are similar.

Where employees have a labor representative, there are now three parties, with their own rights and interests; and even between the employees and their union, the interests may not be the same.

Management support from seasoned, knowledgeable labor relations professionals that provide effective support is critical — e.g., in-house, contractor support or combination thereof.

Paying attention to sound structures to manage relationships that balance labor law and labor relations is as important as maintaining an effective communications strategy. Failure to do so is sure to result in a much greater investment of time and resources after the fact than before.

To establish and/or maintain an effective and consistent labor relations strategy, it is important to first define the nature of the relationship. Is it going to operate “strictly by the book,” or is it one based on mutual respect, cooperation and constructive collaboration? Regardless of how top management wants to address its labor obligations, the best of relationships require integrity and consistency.

Communications with the union, as the representative of bargaining unit employees, is as important to success of the organization as is communications within the organization. In fact, in many instances, it is required. A good rule of thumb is to err on the side of inclusion, rather than exclusion.

Define boundaries and/or conditions up front. In a tactical setting, this can be a valuable resource for information. Sharing plans and ideas before final decisions are made can give you insight into issues, concerns or problems with potential implementation.

Adapt, Adopt, Improve

The landscape in today's workplace seems to be shifting at different rates and in different directions. Keeping one eye on the future and the other on obstacles in the road immediately before you requires an expertise in which few have been trained.

The key to surviving and succeeding is to adapt to changing conditions, adopt innovative, creative and successful approaches and ideas and to improve communications, interpersonal relations and organizational effectiveness. Simple. ✦

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