



**Y**ou're a manager and you've just received an email from your chief executive informing you that the organisation has a new strategy.

The trouble is, you haven't a clue what this actually means for your department. Sound familiar? The problem often lies with the word 'strategy' itself, which can be viewed as an elaborate plan devised by a select few at the top of an organisation, a plan that has no relevance for the managers on the front line who have to implement it.

There are many definitions of corporate strategy floating around out there in the business world. Gerry Johnson and Kevan Scholes, in their book *Exploring corporate strategy*, describe it as follows: "Strategy is the direction and scope of an organisation over the long term, which achieves advantage for the organisation through its configuration of resources within a challenging environment, to meet

the needs of markets and fulfil stakeholder expectations."

Strategy can outline areas such as where the business is going in the long term, what markets it should be competing in, and how it can outperform the competition in those markets. And let's not forget the resources such as skills, technical competence, assets and facilities that are required to compete in a sector, and the impact that external factors can have on an organisation's ability to compete.

People often talk about strategy when they mean tactical action, says Mike Robinson, director at specialist management advisers Berkshire Consultancy. "Strategy is often used to cover terms such as initiatives. Broadly, a plan is still cascaded down from the top, but what is becoming more common is a recognition that if you want a strategy to be more successful, then you must engage all your staff."

Within organisations, strategy is often polarised around two areas, believes Michael Weaver, programme director at business and performance consultancy DPA,

whose clients include Superdrug and Scottish Life. "It's polarised around capability-driven process where it's all about methodology. They say it's strategy, but really it's a complex planning process and not about creating value in an organisation," he argues. "The other area that strategy focuses on is capacity. Lots of organisations talk about vision and values but these often lack substance and don't feel tangible or relevant to the day-to-day operation of the business."

Either approach on its own will only get you so far, says Weaver. "What you need to do is harness the power of both. You need strategic capability and capacity to ensure a successful strategy."

If organisations want to be strategically successful, they need to translate that into values for different levels of the company, advises Weaver. He recommends that the strategy is summarised. "We use maps that put it into the simplest terms possible and explain why an organisation needs to change its strategy. It's usually a big idea that managers can immediately

# FROM STRATEGY TO REALITY

Having a shiny new business strategy is pointless if you can't disseminate the plan to the teams who will be implementing it. **Karen Higginbottom** explores how to get everyone on board and inspired to create change

## DIVERSITY AT PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS

**A fundamental part of PricewaterhouseCoopers' (PwC) strategy is to create diverse and inclusive teams, says Sarah Churchman, head of diversity at the professional consultancy firm. "This helps us build better relationships with our clients, which gives us a competitive edge. In our experience, the most diverse teams are the highest-performing ones."**

PwC's executive board asked its diversity and learning and development teams to devise and deliver training to all of its 16,000 UK staff in 2011. "The strategy was to deliver learning around diversity and bias awareness," says Angela Cooke, manager of the learning technology team at PwC. Cooke and her team held some brainstorming sessions as well as consulting the emerging leaders group (high potentials) within PwC. "We did a lot of research as to what bias is and how it impacts on our day-to-day decisions."

The rationale behind the mandatory training was to get PwC employees to think about their day-to-day decisions, says Cooke. "The way you work with other people and the decisions you make are affected by a number of different things – who you are, your experiences, what



you do and where you do it. Most of the time we're not aware of how much these things influence us, but they can mean we miss out on opportunities to build relationships and create the value our clients are looking for." Cooke and her team developed an e-learning package called Open Mind, comprising a diagnostic questionnaire and a video, to help employees become aware of their unconscious bias. "There is a tendency for people who put teams together to use the same people, but we wanted to challenge them to think differently. Who else is available and might have a different perspective on business?"

The final part of the training was a twice weekly email where the response was voluntary, says Cooke. "It gave them simple tasks such as buying a different newspaper or taking someone they had never spoken to before for coffee."

◀ identify with and relate to their part of the work. We come up with a sentence that summarises what we want to do. The map is like a storyboard that presents the rationale for why an organisation needs to follow the strategy and how it will be taken forward in an organisation."

### A QUESTION OF CONTROL

Strategy can fail to fully penetrate staff consciousness as it may feel imposed on middle managers, says Weaver. "They feel they have no ownership or control of it. People naturally question that process and want to understand where

the strategy has come from – and that is a challenge."

Cris Beswick, an author and speaker on strategy, leadership and innovation, argues that the best way to turn high-level strategy into reality is to create two versions. "Chief executives are strategic thinkers by nature, that's why they are in those positions. In contrast, employees are implementers and doers, so it's imperative to align both perspectives. My approach is to get the CEO and senior team to create the high-level strategy, forming the main strategic direction and core pillars by which the organisation will drive growth. Then, using the



core pillars as a guide, a second strategy should be co-created with every employee. Company-wide engagement is crucial, as is the co-creation element."

Beswick believes that the employee strategy forms the basis for implementation of the core strategy at staff level. "It's only by doing this that employees can relate the high-level strategic moves to their everyday work. We can't expect people to take ownership of something they've had no input in creating or building. Without co-creation, organisations just have dictation and fait accompli. That isn't engagement and doesn't help build a high-performing team."

Managers need to involve their team in creating their own priorities for an organisation's strategy, advises Weaver. "The leaders in the organisation are setting the strategy but you must engage senior managers to help define how you make that happen. Engagement is at its best when it's a learning process. To practice this means working



**Strategy is the direction and scope of an organisation over the long term**



“YOU CAN'T EXPECT PEOPLE TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF SOMETHING THEY'VE HAD NO INPUT IN CREATING”

## HOW TO ACHIEVE STRATEGIC GOALS

### 1. Strike the balance between ambition and realism

Strategies can't be delivered unless managers and their staff support them. A good starting point is to ensure that the objectives strike the right balance between ambition and realism. Ambitious strategies will only work if a pragmatic and cost-effective approach is taken.

### 2. Don't strive for the perfect plan – it will never be achieved

Aiming to create a perfect delivery plan will just result in delays, which is not a perfect plan. Managers need to be adaptable as there will be events that, no matter how long planning has taken, will never be anticipated.

### 3. Set measurable goals

A plan to deliver the strategy needs to include measurable short, medium and long-term goals – otherwise known as milestones. This ensures that everyone knows where they are and where they need to be next.

### 4. Invest in experienced people where needed

Expecting managers to lead a new strategy implementation on top of their usual business responsibilities creates an additional risk of failure.

To deliver strategies, it's worth finding leaders with experience of change and then freeing their time to focus on delivery.

### 5. Ensure you have the right people

The roadmap required to deliver any strategy should take account of the organisation's current capability: does it have the right number of appropriately skilled people who can make the vision a reality? This includes an analysis of whether the right managerial structures are in place to deliver the strategy and motivate the workforce through the journey.

### 6. Communication is key

Strategies can often fail because they are not communicated clearly to the wider organisation. It's crucial to get people involved from the outset, and then work hard to constantly communicate the logic of the strategy so that it is clearly understood and owned by the people who will implement it.

**Source:** Pip Peel is the founder and vice president at PIPC, a project and programme management consultancy, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of IT, consulting and business process outsourcing provider Cognizant

organisation's change agenda and know how to present that agenda so that they understand it and link it to their own objectives.”

### TALKING THE LANGUAGE

More complex strategies need to be fed to staff in bite-sized chunks, says Robinson. “They need to know what it means for their team, and the strategy must be communicated to them in a medium they can relate to. Use of analogy or metaphor may help as often it's the behavioural change that is more difficult to secure than intellectual buy-in.”

Of course, the Achilles heel of any implementation strategy is often

communication. This is where many strategies fail to get off the ground, says Professor George Tovstiga, professor of strategy and innovation management at Henley Business School.

“Organisations don't understand the importance of shared buy-in and getting people on board. Employees need to know how it's going to affect them and when the milestones will happen. They want to have a sense of being informed. It's almost a case of over-communicating.

“The person who devised the strategy should be in control of what gets communicated and what gets sent out.” ■



Work with managers in your organisation to build and implement strategy

together to understand the rationale and reasoning (the 'why?') that has led to strategic goals, objectives or capabilities (the 'what?'). This can then be channelled into group discussions about how teams are going to implement them locally (the 'how?'). This can only be done face-to-face and I think it works best when teams can do it for themselves without too much outside involvement.”

One of the major problems within organisations is that middle managers are often regarded as conduits for a strategy rather than active translators of it, says Professor Julia Balogun, director of the graduate management school and the centre for strategic management at Lancaster University Management School. “Senior managers have to actively work with middle managers to ensure they understand what the strategy is about and what the implications are for their teams.

“They need to get their employees to buy into the