

CONSTRUCTING A MONUMENT?



When we found out the central theme of this issue was “strategic alignment,” several executive acquaintances flashed through our heads. None was more prominent than the image of David Brennan. Among many other career highlights, David is the former CEO of AstraZeneca. He currently serves on a number of boards and advisory committees of one kind or another. Central to our purposes here, he has always been the kind of person who could reduce the most intricate and complex dynamics into their most practical and concrete essence. We spoke with him recently about strategic alignment and he did not disappoint:

“I’ve always thought about strategic alignment this way. Say you are walking down the street and happen to be passing a busy construction site. You see three bricklayers. You approach the first one and ask him what he is doing. He answers by saying, ‘I’m putting mortar on the bottom of these bricks.’ You continue and ask the second one the same question and he tells you, ‘I’m putting up a wall.’ You get to the third, repeat the question and she stands up, looks you squarely in the eye and with unrehearsed conviction tells you, ‘We’re constructing a monument!’”

With David’s vignette as a backdrop, let’s agree that strategic alignment translates to people (in many cases large numbers of people) who are frequently diverse in every imaginable manner and focused on achieving two or three goals of significance. There are many benefits imbedded in that kind of working relationship, but chief

among them are increased productivity and amplified engagement.

PRODUCTIVITY

Effective performance management initiates with a clearly defined strategy. As per the age-old analogy of “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” approaching the Cheshire cat in the tree at the fork in the road and asking, “Which road should I take?”; if you have no idea where you are going, it simply does not matter which path you follow.

EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT INITIATES WITH A CLEARLY DEFINED STRATEGY.

Clear strategy that is simple and easy to understand affords everyone the opportunity to align their daily activities and calibrate their progress. This connection in and of itself doesn’t necessarily guarantee productivity targets will be achieved, but the probabilities associated with delivering desired outcomes is greatly enhanced when “the flag at the top of the mountain” is in plain view for all to see, and represents a destination that captivates the aspirations of those signed up for the journey.

ENGAGEMENT

We are all well-acquainted at this point with the power of discretionary effort.

If you have an organization full of people who have “bought in” to a strategy, it almost invariably translates to increased communication and incremental adjustment based on emerging circumstance. Stated differently, people who have “bought in” care, and when people care, they take ownership. And when they take ownership, they take personal responsibility for fixing problems (that no one could have predicted) pretty much in real time.

Read anything ever written about CEO Alan Mulally and the Ford Motor Company from 2006-2013. What you will find is a real-life example that chronicles the efforts of thousands of Ford employees worldwide in a monumental turnaround effort. In overly simplified terms, the strategy developed and communicated by Mulally was, “Here’s where we are ... here’s where we need to be ... and you (Ford employees) are the people that are going to get us there!”

We would argue there is not a more effective technique of increasing employee engagement ever devised than providing a crystal clear “what,” and supporting those with a vested interest in achieving that “what” to figure out the details associated with the “how.” 🔄

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