A step-by-step guide: From vision to strategy execution
Plan your execution. Execute your plan.

Planning the future is an exhilarating challenge. Companies need to gauge all the possibilities in front of them and weave the chosen ones into a strategic plan that makes sense.

The result is a grand strategy that sounds fantastic... and usually doesn’t get executed.

The easiest thing to do once a strategy fails is to shift the blame to employees. They didn’t understand the plan. They were not engaged. They didn’t execute it properly.

But we both know that “employees not getting it” is not the reason behind failure. It’s a result of too narrow and too exclusive planning.

And that’s the problem this ebook aims to solve. It’s here to show you how to create an inclusive strategy your employees can get behind.

We’ll start with a vision statement that clearly defines the future in a way everyone can understand AND follow. It will be practical enough to anchor your strategic plan and inform your decision-making.

Then we’ll look at a holistic approach to planning and executing the future of your organization. An approach that includes employees and gets internal buy-in.

We’ll see how to overcome the three main obstacles that stand in the way of strategy execution:

- lack of visibility and control,
- a short-term “firefighting” mentality,
- employee change fatigue.

You’ll also find new ways to foster alignment, spark engagement, empower employees and create a culture that will help you execute and even adapt your strategy to the ever-changing market.

But if there’s only one thing you’ll remember from this ebook, remember that when companies say: “Employees don’t get the importance of the strategy!” they are really saying: “We don’t get the importance of involving our employees.”

In the end, it’s the employees who will (or won’t) execute your strategy and it should be designed with them in mind.

Now let’s get started!

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What is a vision statement

A vision statement is the anchor point of any strategic plan. It outlines what an organization would like to ultimately achieve and gives purpose to the existence of the organization.

A well-written vision statement should be short, simple, specific to your business, and leave nothing open to interpretation. It should also have some ambition.

This comprehensive guide will take you through the entire process of writing a well-thought-out and effective business vision statement, with examples and resources to help along the way.

A vision statement or a mission statement?

What’s the difference between a vision and a mission statement?

The main difference is the state of time. The vision statement is the company’s desired future position for the business. Whereas, the mission statement is essentially the definition of a company’s current business state and objectives.

What is a vision statement trying to achieve?

Here’s a quick reminder of what we’re trying to achieve when writing a company vision statement (not everything will apply to every organization, but you’ll get the gist).

- A guiding star that ensures all our significant actions contribute towards the ultimate goal we’re trying to achieve.
- A memorable and inspirational summary that describes our reason for existence as an organization - one that will help to motivate existing employees and even attract high-quality new ones.
- A succinct statement about what our organization is trying to achieve to help third parties such as investors or the media better understand us.
- A ‘limiter’ that helps us to rule out certain opportunities which do not ultimately contribute to our vision.
- A vision that acts as a reminder and a sense of hope for an organization during the tough times.

Vision statement foundations

There are a few common rules that pretty much every business vision statement will follow:

1. They should be short – two sentences is an absolute maximum. It’s fine to expand on your vision statement with more detail, but you need a version that is punchy and easily memorable.
2. They need to be specific to your business and describe a unique outcome that only you can provide. Generic vision statements that could apply to any organization won’t cut it (see our examples below for more on this point).
3. Do not be ambiguous. Do not use words that are open to interpretation. For example, saying you will ‘maximize shareholder return in 2022’ doesn’t actually mean anything unless you specify what exactly it’s going to look like.
4. Keep it simple enough for people both inside and outside your organization to understand. No technical jargon, no metaphors, and no business buzz-words if at all possible!
5. It should be ambitious enough to be exciting but not too ambitious that it seems unachievable. It’s not really a matter of time-framing your vision, because that will vary by organization, but certainly, anything that has a time-frame outside of 3 to 10 years should be challenged as to whether it’s appropriate.
6. It needs to align with the company values. We talk more about company values in this article. Once you get your company values on paper, revisit your vision statement to see how well they gel.

Following these rules should give you a solid starting point for creating a vision statement. To help refine things further, we’ll now look at some examples of vision statements that did not follow these rules.
3 not-so-good vision statements examples

Here are some real-life vision statement examples that in our opinion, could do with a little tweaking. For each one, we'll try to justify our thinking...

Example #1:
Our company vision is to make every brand more inspiring and the world more intelligent by 2023.
Well, this one gets a tick on the ‘ambitious’ test if nothing else. But is it realistic that ‘every brand’ will use the services of this company? How about ‘making the world more intelligent’? Let’s try to quantify what that might actually look like. Or let’s not. Because it’s impossible.

Example #2:
Provide maximum value for our shareholders whilst helping our customers to fulfil their dreams.
This ‘vision’ could pretty much apply to any company, anywhere (it’s an insurance company in this case – but would you have guessed that?). It’s sort of like saying ‘Our Vision is to succeed as a business’. Not wrong – but certainly not inspiring or unique.

Example #3:
We are committed to achieving new standards of excellence by providing superior human capital management services and maximizing the potential of all stakeholders – clients, candidates and employees – through the delivery of the most reliable, responsive… (it goes on, but that’s probably enough).

It would be quite hard to write a vision statement filled with less tangibility and more subjectivity than this one. ‘New standards of excellence’. ‘Superior human capital management’. ‘Maximizing the potential’. There are simply far too many buzzwords, intangibles, and vagueness here for this to be either memorable or inspiring.

We are of course being rather harsh. But hopefully, the above examples illustrate well some of the pitfalls to avoid when creating your own vision.
The process of writing a vision statement

Articles usually give you a high-level overview of what to consider when creating your vision statement. However, we noticed most of them don’t give you a concrete process you can follow.

So here’s our process – the one we use with our clients at Cascade. It might work for you too.

Of course, not every vision statement out there follows the process below. But if you’re struggling or just need a place to start, then hopefully this will help.

**Step 1:** Define what is the output or outcome of your business

**Step 2:** Define what unique twist your organization brings to the above outcome

**Step 3:** Apply broad quantification

**Step 4:** Add relatable, human, ‘real world’ aspects
**Step 1: Define what is the output or outcome of your business**

Start by being exceptionally clear about what it is your organization actually does. Be careful to remain ‘output focused’ rather than ‘input focused’.

For example, Microsoft famously had a vision statement to ‘Put a Microsoft-powered computer on every desk in the world’ (slightly paraphrased). Strictly speaking what Microsoft ‘does’ is making computer software, but for the purposes of their vision, they looked forward to the actual outcome of this process – i.e. computers on desks.

Let’s look at some other hypothetical examples:

- A bakery makes bread. But the outcome is consumers enjoying that bread.
- A consulting company gives advice. But the outcome is the success of others based on that advice.
- A government department does… lots of things. But the outcome is better lives for the citizens they serve.

Whilst this may seem obvious, you would be surprised by how rarely organizations actually go through defining the outputs in a formal, written way. Doing so will take you a long way towards creating your vision statement – BUT it’s not enough on its own! If it was, all bakeries would have the same vision statement – which is hardly inspiring!

**Step 2: Define what unique twist your organization brings to the above outcome**

Very few products or services these days are truly new – most are reinventions of something that already exists, but with a different approach, focus or spin.

At some point in your organization’s lifespan – usually at the very beginning – someone believed that this business will be more successful than its competitors because of [something].

You need to define that something!

Let’s take our bakery example. So far, our vision statement is looking pretty generic – along the lines of customers enjoying our bread.

But why will they enjoy our bread MORE than the bread from the place next door?

Is it because we use century-old traditions passed through generations of our family? Because we only use premium grade locally sourced ingredients? Or because we use special technology that makes our crust crunchier than ever?

Whatever your unique selling point is – let it shine through in your vision statement.

**Step 3: Apply broad quantification**

A common problem with vision statements is, ironically, that they are too visionary.

With no possible end in sight (or a totally unrealistic one), the initial inspiration derived from a solid vision statement can quickly turn to frustration or even cynicism among employees and customers.

That said – don’t be too specific or apply specific metrics at this stage (they will come later in our planning process).

Sticking with our bakery example, we might want to refine our target audience to ‘every customer who walks through the door’. That’s fine, or maybe we want to be bolder: ‘every customer within walking distance of a store’.

The quantification we apply could also be industry-specific. E.g. if you’re a B2B company – are you shooting for SMEs or enterprises?
Step 4: Add relatable, human, ‘real world’ aspects

Your vision is nearly finished, but there’s one final trick you should use to help make it even more memorable. **Add a real-life aspect.**

This will allow people to conjure up a solid **mental image** to associate with your vision statement. Let’s look at an example – which of the following statements is likely to be more memorable:

a) To have every working person in the world using a Microsoft product.

or

b) A Microsoft powered computer on every desk.

I would argue that (b) is more memorable because as I read this, I’m actually visualizing a computer sitting on a desk in a room. There’s nothing wrong with (a) but it’s highly conceptual and thus difficult to transform into a mental picture.

Let’s look at another example:

*Ensure that every customer leaves our store with a smile on their face.*

Here, using the word ‘smile’ as opposed to ‘happy’ is powerful, because it conjures a mental image of a person smiling.

It won’t always be possible to bring this level of tangibility to a vision statement – but if it is, I would strongly encourage you to do it.

**How to bring your vision statement together**

Let’s see how our bakery’s vision statement turned out after following the above guidelines.

*Baking and selling locally sourced cakes and pies that taste and smell so delicious, consumers can’t help but leave our bakery with a smile on their faces.*

If we deconstruct using the above steps, we can see each at work as follows:

*Baking and selling locally sourced (2) cakes and pies that taste and smell so delicious (1), consumers can’t help but leave our bakery (3) with a smile on their face (4)*

**Step 1** – The output – delicious cakes and pies.

**Step 2** – The twist – locally sourced.

**Step 3** – The quantification – every consumer that visits our bakery.

**Step 4** – The human connection – smile on their face.

As I said, there are other ways to write an effective vision statement, but following the above process will definitely help you bring structure and purpose to your effort.

Now that we know how to craft a vision statement, let’s take things in a more strategic direction and see how to create a strategic plan.
How to create a strategic plan

Planning your strategy in business affects 80% of the profits and, in some cases, is the difference between survival and bankruptcy.

But where to start?

The strategic planning process is the method an organization follows to determine its goals, needs, and actions.

If done correctly, it reveals lucrative opportunities or fatal weaknesses. It’s a tool that structures and contextualizes information leading to important decisions.

In this chapter, we’ll highlight the importance of solid research of your business environment and the untapped potential of an irresistible vision statement paired with clearly articulated values.

By the end of it, you’ll be able to set a clear destination for your organization and plan a feasible route to get to it. Then we’ll propel you to go beyond planning and start executing your strategy.

Understand where you stand

First, you need to research your industry, your competitors, and yourself. As part of your research, you should do the following.

- Analyze threats and opportunities in the market and industry.
- Ground your plan in reality.
- Profile your competitors.
- Discover what makes you different.

Reliable industry research is the foundation of every great strategic plan.

Before any serious attempts to plan for the future, you need a thorough and detailed analysis regarding the current state of your industry and market, as well as their trends.

Analyzing your industry’s trends and historic performance helps you ground your strategic planning process in reality. An honest analysis of the industry’s capabilities and the market’s behavior will protect you from baseless assumptions and dreamlike notions. You’ll learn the full potential of your growth and discover the mistakes your competitors made along the way.

Actually, a lot of your research will include studying your competitors. Start by figuring out who they are.

Take a good look at their products and strategies. Figure out their value proposition and discover the unique point of view that they bring to the market. Pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of each one.

Study their marketing campaigns to determine the audience they are targeting. Find out how much of it overlaps with your target audience. Determine their market share and whether you’re going to claim any of it.

Your analysis should also reveal gaps in the market that you can fill and early opportunities you can take advantage of.

Once you have a clear picture of your environment, it’s time to take a good look at your own organization.

Analyze your assets and most significant strengths.

Determine what makes you different from every other competitor. Decide on your value proposition and unique take on the product or service, or your unique place in the market.

Clearly state the problem you are solving for your customers concisely and specify how and why is your solution better than others in the market.
Your strategic plan should be built around your strengths and the opportunities the market offers. At the same time, though, it should take into account your weaknesses and your competitors’ strengths.

A great way to start your strategic planning is by doing an honest SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is general enough to fit most organizations. However, there are other models that might serve you better:

- Gap Analysis
- Value disciplines
- McKinsey’s Strategic Horizons
- The Stakeholder Theory
- The Balanced Scorecard
- The Ansoff Matrix
- VRIO Analysis

Choose whichever fits best for your organization. You can also combine them. Strategy is highly customizable, so don’t be afraid to mix ideas and models to answer your most pressing questions.

Researching your industry and market is a never-ending project. But that’s alright. This analysis’ goal is not to map the industry 100%. That’s impossible.

What you want to achieve is a more-than-decent understanding of your competitors and the current state of the market so you can better position your organization to grab the opportunities you discovered.

Example: Toyota’s humble approach to greatness

In the year 1973, the ‘Big Three’ car makers in the USA had over 82% of the market share. Today they have less than 50%. The main reason for this is the aggressive (and unexpected) entry of Japanese car makers, led by Toyota into the US market in the 1970’s.

Toyota spent years studying the production lines of American car makers such as Ford. They knew that the US car industry was more advanced and more efficient than the Japanese one. So they waited. They studied their competitors and tried to copy what the Americans did so well. They blended these processes with the strengths of their own and came up with something even better.

Toyota proved that knowing its own weaknesses can be the key to success and be one of the best business strategies you can ever deploy. Their finely honed production processes were so efficient and lean that they were able to beat US car makers at their own game. By understanding where they stood, they became the brand that personifies ‘continuous improvement’.
Look forward, plan backwards

The most effective way to approach your strategy is to decide where you want the organization to be in the future (e.g. in 5 years) and work your way back to the present.

Try to be as specific as possible. Imagine the customers you’re going to be serving and the state of your business. Determine the number of employees, your monthly revenue and your brand awareness level.

Including quantifiers in your description, like important metrics, will give you a concrete set of outcomes to pursue. For example, “we will have a $15 million ARR” or “we will employ over 500 people”. Be bold and ambitious.

Once you have a clear picture of the state of your organization in the future, break the timeline down into intervals – and don’t go over 6-month increments.

The sweet spot for each business is different, but 3-month long intervals are a reliable initial baseline.

It’s tempting to build your route from where you stand right now instead of determining your bold future and creating it backwards. But that would be a mistake.

Why? There are two common mistakes that happen when you’re simply planning ahead.

The first one is that the plan is too ambitious and does not define how to execute the strategy. Building your route backward forces you to connect the future with the present and even your organization’s past performance and make a necessary distinction. It makes it clearer if the plan is feasible and which actions you need to perform to reach your goal.

The second mistake is scattering your efforts. When you plan your actions and moves with a vague notion of where you want to arrive, the results aren’t great.

Going backwards helps you prioritize your focus areas and you quickly see there shouldn’t and can’t be more than a few. You aren’t just deciding what to focus on, but also what is not important for the organization and that is huge in order to stay on track.
How to successfully execute your strategy

Too many people in too many organizations execute daily on tasks that are not aligned with their objectives. Others simply have no idea where they fit in the overall strategy of their organization.

The biggest obstacle in the way of successful strategy execution is the lack of alignment.

So let’s see what’s the best way for companies to communicate their strategy and align their departments and employees.

Pitching your strategy doesn’t work

Most companies treat strategy communication like an event - a one-time thing. They talk about “launching” their strategy as if it’s a big marketing campaign, when in fact, it’s more of a transformational process.

Ongoing and attention-demanding.

Pitching your strategy to your people the traditional way simply doesn’t work and it’s clear why.

If you haven’t also included your employees in the discussions early on, it’s much harder to make them care. They don’t know how the strategic plan came to be and feel excluded from the process and not valued.

Their initial reaction is quite defensive, as most people don’t like change, and they don’t buy into it. Presenting the whole strategy at once can quickly be too abstract to make an impact or too complicated to be understood.

That’s why a week after the “big launch” week, everything will be back to business-as-usual.

Fortunately, there is a much better way to showcase your new strategy.

1. Make the strategy easily accessible

2. Connect daily tasks to desired outcomes

3. Take the leap and learn

4. Keep the big picture in mind
Make the strategy easily accessible

Every person inside the organization must be able to refer to the strategic plan quickly and without any extra permission. That way, people will be able to align with the plan and make more informed decisions.

Several tools can help you make your strategy accessible. However, being accessible is not the same as also being worthwhile and effective to use.

Your method should be as frictionless as possible. Make the plan easy to read and understand.

Finding the desired information should be effortless. Having a massive PowerPoint file with a hundred slides or an Excel file with too many tabs won’t help anyone. Plans that are tough to use and apply basically do not exist.

Ensure that every project is correctly connected to its rightful objective and that every action and measure is connected to its rightful project.

It must be easy to see what they are trying to achieve and why their work matters. Then they can make a much better decision on how to do it.

Connect daily tasks to desired outcomes

A study showed that up to 50% of mid-level managers understand their organization’s strategy or know how they contribute to it. But when it comes to employees, less than 5% understand the strategy or their contribution.

Now, it’s hard to execute something you don’t understand, right? And there’s really no motivation to do it properly if you don’t feel any sense of ownership and feel like your work doesn’t matter.

But companies that care can change that and by connecting actions with goals. That’s what builds alignment. People’s daily tasks shouldn’t be disjointed from their teams’ goals.

When an employee has a newly defined goal to achieve, they must include new actions in their day-to-day work to achieve that.

That means that they will likely have to abandon some of their previous tasks to do that. That’s why it’s so important to figure out which actions contribute to the goal’s progression.

Executing a plan demands intentional effort and a clear understanding of what is important.

Without that urgency (real or not) will always beat importance. And that’s not how you execute a strategy.

Take the leap and learn

Your plan will always involve a fair amount of unpredictable variables, assumptions, and projections. It’s inescapable.

Instead of trying to reach “certainty of success” before you begin executing your plan, you should aim at reaching “reasonable confidence of success” and start executing.

The only thing you can be certain of is that you’ll have to make changes to your plan along the way.

Executing your plan will create friction and reveal its weak areas. That’s the point. Now you have the opportunity to correct your course. That’s the approach you have to take if you want the plan to succeed. Treat early execution as a learning process.

At the start of the execution process, until the plan gains some traction, you should also incentivize honest effort at implementing the plan.

Set up the right initial metrics to track the progress and the traction of your new strategic plan. Don’t let people get discouraged. You’re introducing changes and if the initial goals are too demanding and the initial results underwhelming, they might stop trying.

The most important thing at the very beginning is to start moving things in the desired direction and to build momentum. After all, if people aren’t executing the plan, nothing else matters.
Keep the big picture in mind

Your strategic plan will and should change. You fail, you learn, you iterate and improve.

However, how you communicate these changes is just as important as the changes themselves.

One of the most common mistakes we notice is communicating changes without providing any context.

But people need to understand why something has changed. When they have access to the big picture, they can see how their actions connect with it. It makes them feel they are an important part of the organization.

It might demand more effort from the leadership’s side to contextualize their decisions, but transparency is a huge part of alignment and employees appreciate it.

When you make changes to your plan, reconnect your strategy to your organization’s vision.

Reminding people about your vision makes people feel their work is important and empowers them to make vision-based decisions.

It’s easier to adopt new behavior and align with the plan when your actions and decisions support a common cause you understand.

Example: How Salesforce aligned its workforce

Marc Benioff, Salesforce’s Co-Founder and CEO, equipped the company with the V2MOM management process to create and maintain alignment.

He realized that the company’s Vision, Values, Methods, Obstacles, and Measures were highly effective at clearly communicating what the company wants to achieve.

At every level inside the organization, people and teams had to fill their own V2MOM, forcing them to consider where they fit in with overall goals and vision. Through that process, they clarified their priorities and were able to build actionable plans.

This seemingly simple process aligned Salesforce’s workforce with the company’s vision and strategy.
How and why you should define metric ownership

Accountability is a driving force behind the execution of any strategic initiative. Goals that nobody owns and stays on top of won’t be achieved in time. But people don’t like being accountable as missing a goal might get them in trouble.

That’s why accountability must start at the top. People need to be allowed to fail and make mistakes. And the leaders must set an example — either by owning their shortcomings or by showing that trying and failing won’t get you in trouble.

That’s the first step towards a culture of genuine accountability. And it’s crucial because:

**Metric ownership creates clarity and alignment**

The most effective way to build accountability is by assigning metrics and KPIs instead of ambiguous goals.

That’s because what you wish to monitor is progress towards the outcome. Progress is easy to measure and report. Therefore, set up suitable metrics and define one owner.

Be explicit about it — one owner or two co-owners at most. Then you can include as many collaborators as the project needs.

Having one person accountable for each metric frees the person to make the necessary decisions to drive that metric’s progress. It removes the uncertainty of who is responsible for what, which is a common cause of delay.

When every part of the plan is accounted for, most of the anxiety fades away. People know what the expectations are and how their project fits into the big picture. Employees can focus on completing their tasks while being aligned with others.

There’s another huge perk of accountability. When a goal is achieved, owners feel proud, which increases their engagement and sense of fulfillment at work.

That’s why having accountable leadership and assigning one owner to each metric is a huge step towards successful strategy execution.

Metric ownership is also necessary in order to analyze the performance of your strategy. Let’s see what’s the best way to do it.
How to assess the performance of your strategy

You can’t adapt your strategy if you haven’t figured out what works and what doesn’t. And only adaptable strategies can thrive in our fast-paced world.

79% of agile companies use metrics and systems to accommodate fast portfolio changes and continuous reprioritization. They have tailored the review process of their plan to their individual needs and made reporting an organizational habit.

In this chapter, we’ll show you how to improve your metrics reporting.

The two qualities your metrics must have

Setting a goal like “Increase our sales by 5% in Q4”, is not enough. It’s not wrong, but even if you achieve it, it doesn’t tell you how your organization managed it without the right metrics in place.

Defining the metrics that will contribute to this goal and the actions each team needs to take is what drives progress.

It will allow everyone to track what matters and to quickly see what’s working and what’s not.

So, how do you define the actions you need to focus on?

You start with measures that have these two qualities:

• Predictability
• Influenceability

Metrics with both of these qualities are called lead metrics.

Predictability means that the metric is capable of predicting whether or not you’ll achieve a certain goal.

Influenceability means that you can directly influence that metric.

For example, if your goal is to “reach $12 million revenue” by the end of the year, then “reaching $1 million revenue per month” is not an influenceable metric. It’s predictive but not directly influenceable.

Instead, “offer an upsell during each checkout process” is a lead metric. You can directly influence it and it predicts whether or not you’re going to hit your goal.

To achieve your goals you need to translate them into specific and measurable activities.

For example, if you want to lose weight you can say “I need to exercise more and eat healthier” or “I need to go to the gym 3 times per week”. That kind of goal forces you to take action three times per week and it’s also far better at predicting if you are on a path to success. If you are hitting your weekly goal consistently, you’re on the right track, otherwise, you’re not.

Explain crucial metrics

You can’t succeed or learn if you’re not evaluating the performance of your strategy.

The first thing you need to determine is the most important metrics you want to pay attention to.

Regardless of your industry, a few crucial metrics can paint a clear picture of the progress of your organization’s strategy.

When creating a strategic play, you need to define what these metrics are. You should also determine the frequency of reports. Find out the interval for each crucial metric that makes reporting it meaningful. Some metrics need more time to showcase progress (or a lack of it), while others shouldn’t be neglected for too long.

These key metrics are also crucial for alignment. That’s why you need to explain the thought process that led to their selection.

If you don’t, people will still strive to achieve them, but if the chosen metrics are the right ones, their work will be wasted.

If you make sure they understand what’s behind them, they can suggest changes if things aren’t working out and are empowered to make informed decisions in line with the reasoning behind the selected metrics.
Example: Costco’s membership renewal rate

Costco is the third biggest retail player in the world and uses a membership-only warehouse club business model. Therefore it’s no surprise that the membership renewal rate is one of their lead metrics - and the renewal rate at the end of 2020 was extremely high: 91% in the US and Canada and 88% on the global market.

The renewal rate can easily predict Costco’s success, as most of the company’s profits come from their membership fees and not product margins.

The metric can be influenced by many areas that represent what Costco stands for - great deals, surprising shopping experience, excellent customer service, etc. If the metric falls, the company can identify what area is lacking and take action to improve it. E.g. “Have 20% more seasonal special deals that create the treasure-hunting atmosphere”.

It’s also not hard for employees to understand why the metric is important and the actions they can take to influence it. The whole Costco experience is built around it. Employees know that if they make the customer happy, they are more likely to renew their membership. Their actionable goals can be broken down to something as small as “Make the customer smile at least once before they leave the store.”

Costco’s membership renewal rate is a great example of a lead metric that supports the company’s business model and strategic plan while making it easy for everyone to understand what to do and why.
Commit to regular reporting

None of the tips and actions mentioned above will make any difference without one simple word: commitment.

It’s the most underestimated principle of assessing a strategic plan. Giving up on regular reporting is the most common mistake businesses make and one of the most costly.

By committing to regular reporting, you manage to stay on top of your plan. Metrics become powerful reminders that push people to focus on what matters most. It ensured people stay aligned.

Prioritise clarity and accuracy

Effective reporting is concise, clean, and easy to read. Clarity should be your #1 priority. Unclear reports are unused reports.

Reports should also be accurate. If a report is clear but delivers unreliable information, then it is useless. It can’t inform decisions or be used to assess the performance of the strategy.

Yes, it seems obvious, but the last thing anyone wants is to have a reporting meeting where they discover a report is not accurate or they don’t know how to interpret it.

Determine what to do next

Every reporting meeting needs to have a predetermined agenda to force the conversation to remain focused on the matter at hand.

Usually, a reporting meeting should dissect and analyze the results and figure out the actions that drove progress or stagnation.

“Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do.”

Steve Jobs,
Ex-chairman and CEO of Apple Inc.
Strategy execution and adaptation are key for success and longevity. And both depend on engaged employees.

Therefore employee engagement is one of the most important goals every company should strive to achieve.

It’s not enough to care about the performance of the employees, organizations also have to take into account their feelings during the workday. Taking care of their employees should be a high priority for any organization’s leadership.

That’s why we’re going to talk about cultivating a growth culture. It’s a transparent culture where people are allowed to learn through experimentation and therefore feel safe executing a plan. Let’s see how to foster it.

**Create a safe environment**

Psychological safety is a key aspect of growth culture.

When people are afraid, they don’t take risks. If they know that they will be punished for their mistakes or even lose their job, they are reluctant to venture beyond their comfort zone. They care more about “getting caught” than “making it work.”

The organization’s progress becomes irrelevant in their daily work lives and people try to get on with their work, stay under the radar, and not call attention to themselves.

Surely that’s now what you want.

That’s why you have to make sure all leaders in the company normalize mistakes.

Leaders that openly admit their weaknesses invite other people to do the same.

Hearing your leader say, “I don’t know”, or “I need help with this. What are your ideas?” or “This is on me. I made a mistake” is what convinces people that these behaviors are not condemned.

People feel more comfortable sharing their mistakes and gaps when they see other people doing the same and receiving support instead of being punished.

In too many companies, making a mistake or failing at some task is harshly treated as a major setback. It takes surprisingly few of such occurrences to send a message that failing is not permitted.

And when failure is forbidden, people won’t take any risks.

On the contrary, normalizing mistakes provides your employees with the psychological safety to take calculated risks and initiatives that drive faster progress.

**Innovation is born of failure**

A mindset shift that cultivates innovation is to treat failure as a learning opportunity.

Examine what went wrong and how the people involved could have acted differently.

**Focus on what went wrong during the decision-making process.** Examine the assumptions and the information available at the time of the decision. That’s how you convert misplaced decisions to valuable insights.

Even if a mistake was costly, it should be treated like an expensive lesson. People realize the gravity of their mistakes and understand their consequences. If you’re supportive they’ll work extra hard not to repeat them.

That enables people to innovate.

To enable innovation, go beyond offering permission for failure. Encourage employees to try again. Let them try to achieve the goal by using what they’ve learned. That’s what growth culture is all about.

Experimentation and resourcefulness drive the company’s growth. It’s through them that people develop their skills and improve their performance.

And with new skills, they’ll be better equipped to execute new strategic plans.

**Empower your people by giving them authority**

We mentioned earlier that fear leads people to use the rules as their only safety anchor. The antidote to that is empowerment because it helps people build a more healthy relationship with the rules.

Rules are not meant to be followed blindly. Otherwise, there wouldn’t be any need for human intervention and critical thinking.

Rules serve us well when operations run normally. But when there is an unforeseen circumstance or when we need to innovate in order to progress, we don’t put our trust in the rules but in the people.
That’s why leaders have to empower their people to break the rules when needed. It also shows that they trust their employees to recognize the exceptions and act for the benefit of your company and customers when they have to.

So, what exactly does it mean to give employees the power to make decisions?

It goes back to your vision statement and strategic goals. You have to ensure they understand them and that they have the necessary context. Then you let them own the situation, the challenge, and its solution.

Instead of telling them how to do things, tell them what they need to accomplish and give them the freedom to choose their approach. When people have the freedom to take initiative, they become great problem solvers who develop creative solutions.

**Develop transparency**

Honesty is the basis of every successful long-term relationship, whether between people or between organizations and people. It is also the foundation of transparency.

Without transparency, it’s impossible to build top-down trust and bottom-up accountability. That’s why it requires two-way communication practices.

Growth culture cannot develop if managers are not open about their mistakes with their teams or don’t provide proper or useful feedback. By withholding information because it’s “irrelevant” or “too sensitive,” managers indicate that they don’t trust or value their team.

On the other hand, when team members are not transparent about their goals, projects, and outcomes, they can’t be held accountable. Without accountability, mistakes can’t be turned into lessons and teams can’t correct their course.

**Transparency drives accountability**

Many organizations are hesitant to be open and candid with their people, let alone with their customers. The same goes for a lot of employees, but for different reasons.

Employees fear transparency because it’s often perceived as incompetence. They fear transparency. That’s why it’s so important to normalize mistakes.

But how can you hold people accountable when failure is so openly acceptable? The answer is with transparency.

Encourage your people to be open with their processes and the obstacles they meet along the way. Don’t micromanage, just ask them about their progress.

Reinforce accountability and transparency regularly and people will demonstrate those values.

Reinforcement isn’t the same as reminding. For example, when people are open about the hardships they overcome, you should celebrate their wins and efficient problem-solving.

Hold your people accountable for their successes, as well as their failures.
Example: How transparency saved Ford

When Alan Mulally became CEO of Ford in 2006, he found a culture overflowing with fear in a company inches away from bankruptcy. Nobody was willing to admit what wasn’t working. Everyone was afraid of losing their job.

The only reason Mulally managed to save the company is that, when a senior manager presented the first red-flagged issue, instead of condemning him, he rewarded him for bringing it forth.

Over time he developed trust with his team and the senior management became more open about the issues that needed to be solved. Mulally provided the necessary support and in time improved the company’s situation.
Conclusion

Whoa, we covered a lot of ground in this ebook. Before we wrap up, let’s revisit the most important points to get the big picture of how to plan and execute your strategy.

Your vision statement should guide your strategy.

Your vision statement should be short, simple and specific. It should be ambitious and in line with your goals and values. It also should be relatable and not abstract - it should trigger a mental image. Such a vision statement is a great starting point for company-wide alignment as everyone “gets it”.

Research where you stand, define where you want to be and plan how to get there.

Connect where you want to be and where you are, but work backwards. Once you merge your plan to your current reality, you’ll see if the road ahead seems feasible or if it seems too ambitious.

Inclusivity encourages execution.

If you ask for feedback and opinions while you’re creating your strategy, the people will feel acknowledged and engaged. Make the strategy as accessible as possible and ensure everyone understands their part in it and can also suggest improvements. If people feel ownership, they’re much more likely to execute the plan.

Define lead metrics you’ll focus on.

Everyone should know what they’re working towards and how they can influence the outcome. Therefore you need to define and explain your lead metrics and regularly analyze how the organization is doing and determine what are your next steps based on the results.

Encourage accountability.

Create an environment where it’s safe to fail and learn from mistakes. Make sure people aren’t afraid of mistakes. Otherwise, they will never try new, perhaps better methods of executing the plan. Make sure teams know who is responsible for what, offer them support when needed and celebrate successes. That’s how you make people feel comfortable being responsible and transparent.

As you can see, strategic execution is the part that most organizations struggle with. Most plans stay in their Powerpoint form and change nothing.

That’s why we created the Cascade. It’s the culmination of thousands of experiences implementing a strategy with our clients (large and small) and we think it’s quite simply the best way to structure your strategic plan – regardless of your industry or size.

It costs nothing to try it out, but it can seriously improve so many business processes!

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Book a demo with our team of strategy experts today.

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