



BLOG POST

Embedding Strategic Change: Small Shifts For A More Successful Year

BY SARA SADDINGTON JANUARY 2018

“A change in strategy should result in a change to how the entire organization thinks and behaves.”

– [Chris Taylor, Actionable Founder & CEO](#)

The end of January is typically where New Year’s resolutions go to die. The lustre of a fresh start has grown dull, and the grind of sticking to a new routine or change either starts to become habitual, or gets abandoned entirely. If you’re among the few who are sticking with their intentions, I applaud you. But I’m willing to bet that the vast majority of readers would prefer not to be reminded of all those ambitious declarations made at the beginning of the month.

Change is hard work. Our [brains like routines](#), and deviation from long established routines is perceived as painful. We crave certainty and safety, but to change means that we have to embrace the unknown and the possibility of failure. And it ends up being easier to simply stay the same.

Unfortunately, this discomfort with change isn’t just an individual problem—it’s also an organizational challenge. In fact, at the organizational level, the problem is compounded: individuals (who are typically uncomfortable with change), make up teams (which are subject to the dynamics and attitudes of the group), which all roll up into an organization. Each step, from the front line workers all the way up to senior leadership, creates an added layer of complexity and nuance. It’s no wonder that up to [70% of change initiatives fail!](#)

As the year gets going, organizations everywhere are also rolling out new strategic plans. After a senior leadership team builds the strategic plan, organizations turn it into an operational plan—budget planning, HR planning, department/team meetings, one-on-ones, etc. These operational plans provide a roadmap for what the organization hopes to achieve in the year ahead, and individual performance is managed according to that plan. And to be fair, most organizations are pretty good at creating and working these operational plans.

As we see it, there are two big components missing from this approach: organizations have to rely on lagging indicators to measure their success (meaning, by the time you know things aren’t going well, it’s too late to get back on track), and the lack of buy-in to the strategic plan in its pure sense.

Sure, front line workers know what KPIs they are being evaluated on, but they typically lack understanding about why their targets are important and how they are linked to the overarching strategic goals. Even the best communicators can fall victim to the broken telephone that happens when trying to share the high level vision and direction of the organization—senior leaders share with their direct reports, who share with theirs, and so on. If the vision reaches the frontline workers (and that’s a big if), chances are the message has changed significantly as it is passed down through the ranks. In addition, we all have different definitions, assumptions, and understandings of what we hear, making these conversations even more complex.

To get new results, you need new thinking, and new behaviors. You can't simply mandate a 20% bump in sales or a 15% reduction in customer attrition with a memo from leadership in your organization and expect to see results. What you can more likely expect is frustrated and burned out employees.

In his Behavior Model for Persuasive Design, BJ Fogg identifies three key components for a target behavior to occur: motivation, ability, and a trigger. A strategic plan does not inherently include any of these components. At best, it provides a starting point for developing motivation—however that motivation is typically limited to the people who create the strategic and operational plans. It does not increase ability, or provide sufficient triggers. The change that needs to occur at the individual level is simply not supported.

A recent [article in HBR](#) gets to the heart of the problem: “while strategic plans identify what your organization should do differently, very few provide a roadmap for how to build the skills, knowledge, and processes needed to carry out and sustain the critical changes. But without building these capabilities, it's very difficult to achieve the results you want.”

Motivation can be increased by communicating the strategic plan effectively, and establishing the significance of that plan in context of work activities throughout the organization. You can develop ability by identifying and supporting the capabilities required to enact the plan, and removing barriers to change. Lastly, a trigger should be provided: this could be a prompt from a manager, a check-in during your regular team meetings, or a nudge/reminder sent from a behavior change platform like the one that [Actionable provides](#).

It's also worth noting that the cultural element of change should not be underestimated. Does the culture of your organization embrace and encourage change, or does it discourage change by rewarding the status quo? Things like overly rigid decision making processes, bureaucratic hierarchies, and a lack of safety in failure can all ensure that your change initiatives fall flat. Shifting culture is **difficult work that requires sustained effort** and an understanding of the complexities and nuance of your organization. But even more difficult (if not impossible) is successfully implementing a strategic plan that is out of sync with the established culture.

Whether you're part of the leadership team presenting a new strategic plan, a manager tasked with implementing a new vision for your team, or an individual contributor just trying to keep up, remember that to get new results, you have to perform new behaviors (and you have to be willing to get uncomfortable to make change).

For successful implementation of a new strategic plan, individual behaviors need to be aligned. Create the conditions required for those individual behavior changes—motivation, ability, and an effective trigger. Plan your communications to ensure the strategic plan becomes relevant for all individuals within the organization. KPIs are great, but are often lagging indicators—to be successful, you can't wait until the monthly or quarterly numbers are in to course correct and expect to see quick results.

Don't let your ambitious plans for the year ahead fade into the background as the hustle of the day-to-day takes over and the year marches on. Change is about the only **constant we can count on in our VUCA landscape**—so make it your resolution to embrace change with new behaviors and ensure they are sufficiently supported not only once, but on an ongoing basis. Your organization will thank you.



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