

LEADERSHIP Excellence

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Fishing the Stream

Just as grizzlies must be completely focused on the fish, leaders must be focused on their internal and external customers and stakeholders to enjoy market success.

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nothing wrong with telling people: "From now on, I want to hear fewer reasons *why we can't* and more suggestions for *how we can*." Those messages make conversations easier because people already know your expectations. Ask them, *If can't wasn't an option, what would you do? If you can't blame someone, what can you do?* These questions get them to meet the challenges they face with the right attitude and keep them focused on *solutions*. And when everyone brings a solutions-oriented attitude to the table, the entire culture improves and everyone is driven by results.

6. Dissect outcomes in a "no excuses" moratorium. You are in the *results* business. You either have the outcome you hoped for, or a pile of useless excuses. To help people take more responsibility, examine the results of all projects and initiatives together. Trace how your people's choices and attitudes impact the final outcome—and don't let them (or yourself) off the hook. The purest *responsibility-based conversation* includes clear expectations followed by excuseless discussion of results. The courageous elements of your leadership will manifest in the questions that you ask regarding performance. To help people to accept responsibility for their performance, you could ask: *What did you do or not do that led to these results? If you could turn back the clock, what would you do more or less of? Of the things you controlled, which do you think contributed to this success/failure?* Such questions drive "no excuses" performance.

7. Partner up. Do you use *accountability partners*? Pairing people up in *accountability teams* that meet twice a month to talk about their goals and their progress will increase the responsibility everyone feels. These meetings aren't designed to make people feel bad or to catch each other failing, but to help people adopt mindsets of execution and performance. Over time, the *questions asked* get tougher, and achievements get bigger and come faster.

Your people can't achieve greatly and accept responsibility if you don't ask clear, direct questions delivered in an *I-want-you-to-win* tone. Your team deserves a leader who is *courageous* enough to ask, and ask often. You'll get better at this as you practice it. You'll also see results improve over time as people start thinking about their own roles, and how their choices and attitudes impact the big picture. LE

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ACTION: Help people take responsibility.

Reset Your Strategy

It's a conversation, a dialogue.



by Andrew J. Blum

I WORK WITH CLIENTS TO help develop, clarify, execute and communicate their strategy. We often arrive on scene to find that several attempts at addressing strategy have been made and much work conducted. Sometimes, a fully baked strategy is in place. Yet rarely is the strategy clear—and this lack of clarity is a persistent complaint.

With so much strategy work being done and so many people focused on strategic issues, why do so few leaders say that their strategy is clear and well understood by all?

It begins with how the strategy gets developed. The strategy process is *less* about finding an answer and communicating it outwards, and *more* about discussing options, collaborating on approaches, and reaching a solution that has shared meaning backed by emotional commitment.

For example, I recently met with a head of corporate strategy. The line leaders were all developing separate strategies, though he had already put a plan forward and these *sub plans* were often in direct conflict with the direction he had given. When I asked him why, he said, "I don't think they agree with *the strategy I developed*."

"Exactly!" I replied (I see this often).

"What do you mean *exactly*?"

I told him: *line leaders never agree with a strategy that they don't have a hand in developing*. The fix wasn't in changing his strategy but in making the development of it an *interactive, collaborative dialogue*: "Until you include your line leaders in defining questions, boundaries, tensions and tradeoffs, they'll never see it as their own, or agree with it. In fact, they'll reject it."

"So, *what should I do now*?" he asked.

With that, I offered this coaching:

1. Strategy is an ongoing dialogue, not an annual deliverable. The best strategy work is an *ongoing dialogue*. While a team can work towards *alignment* on some basic parameters, goals and execution priorities, a strategy changes as circumstances and realities

change around it. So, strategy development work is ongoing—leaders must talk about strategy all the time, use it to set the frame for their decisions, talk about what is working, what is not—and make incremental revisions to it as leaders reach new conclusions together.

Strategy can no longer be developed at the start of the year and stay in place until next year's cycle (things move too fast, and change too often). You might even hold a *quarterly strategy development and review*. This is often less cumbersome than a comprehensive annual strategy and planning process that people ignore within weeks of completion.

2. Dialogue does not mean democracy. When I suggested to my client that he *meet with his line managers several times a year* to revisit their strategy, he recoiled: "You can't imagine how much debate we had in drafting this version. I don't have the energy to do this quarterly."

One challenge of *developing strategy together through dialogue* is that these *discussions* can evolve into *debates* that seemingly can only be resolved when *everyone sees things the same way*.

The good news is that agreement doesn't need to happen. Businesses are

not democracies. The point of a *strategy development process* is to be *exclusive and conclusive*, and if the right level of debate occurs where both reasonable and unreasonable options are considered, the leader's job is to declare an answer and demand *aligned execution*.

What I'm suggesting is very different from *declaring the answer and demanding alignment* at the onset. This is about *creating a dialogue* that includes conversation and exploration of options, and concludes once the various viewpoints are discussed. There'll always be some disagreement on strategy, which is why *alignment* and not *agreement* is the goal.

With my client, we conducted a *strategy reset meeting* that included all leaders who needed to align around the strategy. After all viewpoints were presented, we then crystallized them into four options and synthesized those into an *integrated strategy*. All leaders saw where their ideas were supported and saw the realities and tradeoffs that needed to be addressed. They *aligned* around the strategy and, for once, *agreed* that they had a *unified strategy* that they could execute together. LE

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ACTION: Create and act on a unified strategy.

