



By James Haudan

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THE CASE FOR BRINGING EMPLOYEES INTO THE LOOP

His company helps companies show their employees the big picture so they can serve their organizations better. He tells us why he does what he does—and why you should, too.

It's an old cliché: You can't see the forest for the trees—meaning one is so focused on the details, the big picture is missed.

The saying is appropriate for the business world. By taking a few steps back from a problem, the sum of these parts is revealed and we're better able to address challenges.

Most human resource and internal communications executives are responsible for employee talent management. They know employees cannot be expected to fully realize their potential without adopting a big-picture perspective.

Unfortunately, most organiza-

tions spend countless hours trying to help their people do a better job assuming it will improve the business, but they never tell them anything about the big picture of the business.

Companies will see increases in productivity, profitability and job satisfaction across the organization if they build a culture of engagement and help people see and understand the big picture.

A culture of engagement

While many companies have developed long-term strategic and operations plans, many fall down when it

comes to engaging employees in helping to carry those plans out, because real engagement is difficult. The key is to develop an engagement strategy that runs parallel to the company strategy and the operating plan.

Many employees still struggle for the answer to one basic question: "What should I be doing?" Or, "What exactly do you want me to do differently?" While most people know their jobs or *how* to do them, they don't have contextual understanding, which means they can't find meaning in what they do, gauge how they are performing and truly appreciate the greater significance of their contribution.

Traditionally, companies leapfrog the *why* in order to expedite the skill-building required for the *how*. Context can provide employees with a direct line of sight into how their individual skills and behaviors contribute to the bigger picture.

Employees in several companies have used a very simple example to express to senior leaders how important the big picture is to change the way they think and act on strategy. In the words of one employee:

"I can't understand what you want me to do different around here. It is as if you have a 400-piece jig saw puzzle and every week you send another piece of the puzzle across your desk to us. The problem is that it is impossible to see how all the pieces fit together. They all end up being equal priorities and I will just keep doing what I have done in the past until someone simplifies all this for me."

The natural cry from employees is to send the cover of the puzzle box along so they have a chance to make sense of all the pieces and see how they fit together.

Once the overarching strategy or puzzle box top is understood, it is much easier for employees to grasp supporting pieces. A cohesive view makes what once seemed overwhelming, conflicting and random appear sensible. Once they can place each strategic initiative, skill or activity within the bigger picture, employees can effectively translate their understanding to action.

Consider, for example, the trucker who figures a longer route is always better—believing an 1,800-mile run would help the company twice as much as a 900-mile run. However, depending on routes and rates, the company could make a larger overall profit on the shorter run. A mid-sized glassware manufacturer may devote 80 percent of its production to a mass-produced line for department stores and outlets and only 20 percent to a higher-end line for the

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upscale boutique market. Those in the mass-produced division might have a sense they're the backbone of the company. Yet if the mass-produced line only nets a one-cent profit per item, and the high-end line nets a five-cent profit per item, the mass-produced division has a skewed view of its importance.

While a narrow focus on the job at hand is often useful and necessary, not being aware of or fully understanding the larger context can often hamper productivity and sometimes bring catastrophic

results. This holds true at any level, from the individual employee to the boardroom.

Myopic views no more

The above examples demonstrate how individuals usually have a somewhat skewed perception of the big picture, based on personal interpretation. A famous *New Yorker* magazine cover helps illustrate this point. It shows an artist's rendering of the way a typical New Yorker sees the country: a map of Manhattan fills the frame and off in the background, crammed together, is the rest of the country.

Each person in an organization has a role to play in executing overall corporate strategy. It is critical that all employees not only excel in their individual roles, but also that efforts are connected to the whole.

When employees work in silos, the opportunity to connect personal

strengths, functional expertise and business resources in a way that the whole exceeds the sum of its parts is lost. Building the case for ownership of the whole and enabling individual leaders to keep one eye on the bigger picture brings powerful results.

The bigger strategic picture

Once line of sight has been created and each team or person is able to make a meaningful and personal connection to the bigger strategic >

picture, companies need to take on the task of developing personnel capabilities in ways that clearly connect to corporate goals—completing the strategic engagement cycle.

Individuals in all organizations have the ability to make a dramatic difference. People without big picture understanding can't take responsibility for change; people with understanding cannot avoid taking responsibility. Understanding of the big picture unlocks the desire and capability within each employee to be accountable, to make better decisions, to contribute, to make a strategic difference and to tap into the meaning and purpose that comes from being part of something bigger than his or herself.

To translate strategic understanding into strategic action, employees must be given the opportunity to practice making complex decisions and building experience. Everyone should be given tools and capabilities to apply concepts in

real work settings. By planning opportunities for trial and error, organizations accelerate the learning process in a way that is personal and sustainable for the long term.

A step back to move forward

This is not to suggest that every employee from the executive suite down to the parking valet be responsible for every strategic company decision (although some CEOs may surely welcome the respite). However, in a corporate culture where information is readily shared and people are encouraged to see not only the what of the task to be done, but also the why behind it, they are more engaged, more creative and more likely to understand what they do in terms of how it benefits the company, not just themselves.

At every level, corporate efficiency and productivity improves

when employees make decisions with an understanding of how different departments work together, what their role is in that process and how the decisions they make impact the roles of others.

Efficiency and productivity translate into greater profitability, meeting the goals of investors and top-level executives. Employees gain satisfaction from knowing they are included and valued. Moreover, as they develop a sense of pride in what they do, better products and services come to market.

Ultimately, stepping back to see the big picture will result in meaningful, measurable change across all levels of an organization. Not surprisingly, what you will find is that by appealing to the highest level of thinking in your people, you will get the highest level of engagement, commitment and strategic actions. ■