

The Breakthrough Model

by Judy Rosenblum

Firms today are focused on results. It is not enough to have a powerful strategy – the key is to execute that strategy successfully. Many firms are trying to become “execution-driven enterprises.” They are constantly looking for ways to create better results and to motivate their employees to follow through on the firm’s strategic goals. But what does it take to really execute a strategy? A large component of a firm’s potential to reach its strategic goals lies in its human capital. The firm must have the capabilities required for successful execution of the activities needed to reach its desired objectives.

The Breakthrough Model is a tool used to identify what an organization needs to be able to do in order to execute its strategy. The model asks managers to be clear in their thinking about the results they want in their business and what their organization must be able to do over time to achieve those results.

Destination and Current Reality

An effective strategy requires a clear picture of both where the business aims to be - destination - and where it is today - current reality. Managers must be able to articulate a destination that describes the results they will achieve, in the marketplace and as an organization, by the end of a defined timeframe. A common pitfall is to focus completely on desired results, without focusing sufficiently on why this destination truly matters to the employees who will be asked to reach it. Managers need to make a convincing case for why the firm must reach the destination and convey this with enough texture and clarity so that people understand how they can contribute in their roles.



The articulation of the current reality – where the organization is today and why it is there – is equally important. Often times it is easy for goal-oriented leaders to focus on a destination without seeing a clear picture of the firm’s current situation and without understanding why that reality exists for the firm. Current reality must be well understood before managers are able to think deeply about how to reach the destination.

An employee working in a specific role within a division will not necessarily have a clear idea of the larger picture reality of the firm. Employees sometimes need help in understanding the dynamics, both internal and external, that create their own firm’s reality. To connect to a destination that may be a “stretch,” the firm’s people need to believe that their leaders truly understand the company’s current reality and have been thoughtful about why it must change. Unless both

destination and current reality are clear, the gap that must be closed by strategy is unclear.

Staged Objectives

Most strategies are about building something or changing something. Strategies are typically staged in their execution. That is, the organization focuses on a set of incremental objectives on the way to the ultimate destination. The Breakthrough Model asks managers to lay out the path of objectives that will close the gap between what is desired and what is.

Managers need to define the results that will be achieved at each of progressively greater levels of organizational change – incremental, substantial and transformational. Managers need to think about how the strategy will play out incrementally over time, raising awareness of the details that need to come together for the strategy to be successfully executed.

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continued on next page ►

Each of these levels of change implies a timeframe as well as a degree of change for the staged objective. Incremental adjustments are made within the shortest timeframe of the three levels. These changes are thought of as “low-hanging fruit” because they are the easiest and most obvious to achieve. Substantial changes describe objectives that can be accomplished in the midterm. They are significant changes that take time to achieve, but they are not transformational in nature. Transformational changes are accomplished over the longer-term and represent an extremely significant leap for the organization. Once transformational objectives have been attained then the organization has reached its destination.

Capabilities Required

When both the destination and current reality are clear, and the staged objectives have been defined, managers next need to answer the question: “What does the organization need to be able to do to execute the strategy and reach the destination?”

Individual competencies refer to a specific person’s knowledge and skills required to fulfill specific role requirements. Organizational capabilities are collective abilities of the firm required to execute the business strategy. Even the most brilliant strategy will not succeed if the firm lacks the organizational capability to execute it. It is striking how much time is spent in corporate business planning on “what we are going to do” and “what that will do for growth and profit” and how little time is spent on “what we have to be able to do” in order to make any of it happen.

The development of capability becomes an integral part of the plan as the manager thinks about what has to happen in terms of people, process, knowledge, measurement and environment for the strategy to be executed.

Summary

In a time when so many business leaders are focused on execution and driving toward results, the Breakthrough Model provides a tool for identifying what an organization needs to do in order to execute a strategy and reach the desired destination. Using this framework, leaders are able to identify the capabilities the organization must build to achieve its goals. Engaging the organization’s people in the strategy and developing needed capabilities is key to moving beyond plans and really getting to the essence of what the organization needs to be able to do to achieve its goals. ■

