

Bring Strategy to Life

Shift people's mental model.



by Douglas Berger

WHY IS IMPLEMENTING strategy so difficult? How can

leaders implement a new strategy more quickly and effectively? What does it take to make the strategy stick?

Strategy is about altering the future—putting the organization on a new trajectory. Why do so few strategic initiatives deliver? Excessive attention is focused on strategic decisions: What markets, investment, products, services, and business model? While initiating a strategy is based on the such decisions of senior managers, the success of strategy depends on the daily actions of many people. So, the key to effective execution is having people internalize strategy as a new mental model of the business and then to change their daily thinking and actions, making decisions about priorities, consistent with the strategic direction.

Success depends on strategy taking on a life of its own with many people. Until strategy is enacted, it is just an idea. How can we enable people to internalize sensible ideas, stop taking old actions, and start taking new actions?

What Is a Mental Model?

An executive was recently discussing a new concept for growth. He said, “To succeed, I have to establish a new mindset. Future growth and profitability will come from a different way of doing business in our markets. The company will be conducting business differently. I wish it were as simple as telling them what to do. Everyone needs to figure out new responses and break from the habits of the past.”

Ingrained thinking, habits, and prac-

tices keep people acting in business-as-usual mode. These habitual responses undermine a future of promise. Each of us has our way of making sense of our work. Mental models represent our internal perception and thinking processes that shape what information we see and hear, how we understand it and act on it. Our mental model organizes the way we see and interpret the world. Our daily actions are shaped by assumptions, conclusions, and rules.



Make sense of the world in a new way, and your actions will follow. Changing the structure, decision-making, and processes doesn't get at individual behaviors. Our mental models guide (and limit) our effectiveness. When our mental model shifts, we start viewing familiar situations in a new light. We then create new opportunities for success and higher performance.

As a shared mental model of how an enterprise operates, culture influences our effectiveness, energy, creativity, and performance. Culture is like the tide—it lifts or lowers everything.

Shifting the Mental Model

While data may create the intellectual reason for change, data doesn't create the compelling motivation for

people to change. Analysis and facts do not change people's minds. If they did, millions more people would not be smoking; tens of millions more people would not be chronically overweight due to poor eating and exercise habits.

To create compelling motivation, shift the mental model in five ways:

1. Engage people on an emotional level.

Stories, metaphors, and analogies create a vivid picture. They appeal to our senses, emotions and imagination. Listeners are stimulated to see and feel a new future. This provides people with a different way to interpret reality. Stories and metaphors transform strategy from a concept to a real, personal experience.

2. Reveal today's implicit and often hidden mental map.

We can't change what we can't see or openly discuss. To shift the mental model requires that leaders reveal the existing and often implicit mental map. This is what guides today's actions. It “pulls our strings.” Leaders must challenge hidden truths, reveal unseen and unspoken forces, and discuss them.

3. Use contrasts.

People get a clearer picture when we use contrasts. In many markets, contrasts are the accepted way to attract customers. Consider how the dieting industry uses before-and-after photos. There is an emotional appeal in contrasting pictures. For example, when Jack Welch took over as CEO of General Electric, he created an explicit contrast between the current day and the future, and he graphically described how people would achieve this vision, by articulating new values to guide behaviors.

Play Games to Get Results

Playing games is a basic human aptitude and inclination. This makes *The Game* a powerful concept for discovery, learning, and shifting the mental model. Using the framework of *The Game*, we can help people redraw their mental map and create a “new common sense” for what to attend to, and how to act. *The Game* brings strategy to life.

The game you play determines the

results you get. For every company, there are consequences and implications of their game—different strategy, different growth prospects, and differing cultures and processes.

When you compare growth and profitability results to your history, you are playing *The Game* against yourself. This internal guidance system can throw you off course without you even realizing it.

The Game defines performance boundaries. The mental model when played out by people will determine what opportunities are recognized, prioritized, and enacted.

Imagine your business through the lens of *The Game*. If winning is individual and every player is on their own, how difficult would it be for you to implement a course of action (strategy)? Sadly, many executives face this situation when trying to implement a new course.

Six Elements of The Game

There are six elements of the game:

1. The Game. The game that you are

playing is what you are organized to do. We are a _____ company. This is not what brochures say. It's what your people know is the game.

2. Playing field. The business environment is the basic competitive and economic structure of your industry, along with your operating environment. Your competitors may have a different environment. How will competitors respond to your moves? You are competing against organizations, not just their products and services.

3. Winning and keeping score. People want to be on a winning team. They play to win. The marketplace scores performance. The metrics you use in operations (how you score your performance) is critical to your success.

4. Rules. Rules define allowable action. The internal map always has a few rules (but these may not conform to the formal rules and policies).

5. Playbook. These are the ways we do business—how we play to win, our few critical priorities, the few things we

do with excellence, the opportunities we seek, and our programmed responses.

6. Players. Everyone is playing to succeed. In many cultures, individual success has become the highest priority. It might supercede business success.

When using the framework and language of *The Game*, people internalize what needs to be done to succeed with the new strategy, new ways of doing business, the new model, how decisions are made, and how the implementation of the new strategy will benefit all.

To realize its full potential, any strategy must take on a life of its own with all players. Contrasting the old strategy (Old Game) with the New Game enables people to internalize the shift. The new game requires an emerging environment, a new definition of winning and keeping score, new rules, new ways of doing business, new ways to succeed, and new opportunities. **EE**

Doug Berger is Managing Partner with Innovate. He specializes in large-scale systemic innovation and breakthrough initiatives. www.Innovate1st.com, doug@Innovate1st.com, 732-546-0945.

ACTION: Bring your strategy to life.