



By **Theresa M. Welbourne**

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## MANAGERS' LAMENT: HAVE STRATEGY, NEED DIRECTION

Managers know what the company is trying to do, long-term; they just don't know where to begin. Here's how to help.

**L**et's start with a story. You just came back from a session with your life coach, and the two of you worked up a new strategy to enable work/life balance. The first project on your list of to-do items is to take a vacation. So you rent a convertible, pack the essentials and head out. You immediately notice one slight problem. You forgot the map, and you have no GPS system. You start driving, but today, right at this minute, you don't know where to drive to-do. Should you hop on the highway? Which road gets you to your destination the fastest? Even though you

have an elegant life strategy, completely documented, you get very irritated because you don't know what to do right now! You need a map; you need directions.

Fast-forward to your first day back at work.

You are someone who has memorized and passionately supported your organization's strategy, vision and mission. You know exactly where the company is headed. However, today, on your first day back to the office you face more than 3,000 e-mails in your inbox, new assignments from your boss, work from your peers, a group of frustrated employees and

complaining customers. Today you not only still have the big projects you left behind when you went on the driving tour, but you now have three more big projects; five emergencies to troubleshoot, a new employee to train, one employee who quit while you were gone and a host of other tasks to be done. You have stacking work syndrome (too many stacks, all equally important); the joy of vacation quickly dissipates. You have no idea what to do first, second or third. You lack direction; you need a map.

Flash insight: Direction—it's what you don't have at work!

Direction might just be trumping strategy as the most important leadership imperative in today's large, global and fast-moving organizations. Direction, not strategy, will provide long-term competitive advantage. Realignment will be more important than alignment.

As organizations speed up, become more global, face a more complex and mobile work force, and as work just keeps on stacking, strategy becomes less important than direction. I am not saying strategy is unimportant; it's just that strategy is not enough. Strategy is long-term; it's like the goal to have work-life balance. It's nice; it sounds good. Vision and mission do too, but they do not help the masses of employees who show up at work and say, "I don't know what to do today." The lack of "knowing" is not due to some new loss of intellect; the lack of direction is a consequence of multi-tasking, constant inflow of information, new projects, changing priorities and more. Combine this with the fact that managers have become working managers and no longer have the time necessary to help determine direction. There are no road maps—just BHAGS (big hairy audacious

goals). We love strategy, vision, mission and BHAGS, but employees are burning out from lack of direction.

### My evidence

Since 1996, I have been collecting data from employees in organizations doing short "Pulse Dialogues" (my word for surveys) as frequently as weekly. I measure employee energy because I've found it's the most predictive self-assessment metrics. However, I quickly learned that energy fluctuates frequently, making annual, traditional measurement (what is done in most employee attitude surveys) fairly useless. Thus, I embarked on a process of more frequent pulse checks, and I found that variance in energy predicted turnover, customer service, sales, quality, 360 ratings of performance and more. The need for frequent data collection led me to develop technology solutions to not only measure energy but create the dialogue process that was even more important than a survey process.

Through using a custom technology solution, I've been able to do in-depth studies of companies going through change, transitioning new leaders, merging, growing and sustaining business in troubled times. The data I've collected continues to tell a story about direction, not strategy. Corporate leaders say they know the company's strategy; in many cases, they created it. But they are showing up at work with the same dilemma—no map. They don't know how to get where the strategy tells them to go, and even worse, they do not have a path to get through the day.

The result is burnout, family problems, depression, stress and lack of productivity. Leaders are re-

porting energy levels that are lower than the rates where they say they are most productive. They too need a map; they need direction.

### Tip No. 1: Now is the time for management

We all read about the frozen middle and the problem organizations are having in motivating middle managers. Should anyone be surprised? These middle managers are all working managers today. They know that direction is a problem, but they have no time or data to help alleviate the issue.

Managers need to be managers again. Rather than continually stacking managers with more work and more projects, we need to revisit the job of the manager.

Not only do managers need to make a stunning comeback, but managers need their own direction. Leaders need to be responsible for direction, right from the top of the organization. Revisiting direction on a regular basis at the top will result in tremendous learning and perhaps changes in strategy or realignment between strategy and actions.

### Tip No. 2: Bottom up meets top town

The direction discussion is not one-way. When I talk about giving managers time to manage, this does not mean further dissipation of the strategic direction messaged downward. What happens when managers start becoming managers again is that they listen; they engage in conversations. In fact, listening is more important than telling. Managers engage employees in dialogue about what work is flowing up, what projects are new, what old ones are incomplete, >

what works should be terminated to take on new projects, the type of troubleshooting employees are doing and that managers know nothing about.

Many projects come from customers; challenges come from a changing business environment. The direction discussion means higher quality dialogue which is two-way, not one-way. As a result, the “guys and gals” at the top of the organization, the leadership team, have a lot of information they did not have before. This means they will have more data that may indeed result in a change or evolved strategy.

### Tip No. 3: Measure direction misfit

Measurement is key to being agile and linking direction misfit with the people who can fix the problems and take advantage of the opportunities which arise from lack of direction. In my own practice, I use employee surveys for the measurement and diagnosis of misdirection.

When I mention surveys, do not shriek in fear that I mean the traditional all-employee survey. In many cases, I pulse select groups of employees, and through a small sample, I can gauge direction crisis moments. For those less interested in quantitative metrics, a frequent focus group process also can be useful. It is more difficult to prove to management that your data is representative, but at least it can point you in your own direction.

Profitability, earnings and other key financial metrics are pretty healthy signals of direction. If they are going down, there's a good chance direction is the culprit.

### Tip No. 4: Messaging

Communications is the art that supports the science of strategy. But the communication direction that supports strategy tends to be top down. The messaging I refer to here is to develop a communication strategy that focuses on two-way communications.

In order to entice employees to share information (without fear of ridicule or managerial disdain), a very clear message of “sharing the pulse” of the organization has to be set up and maintained. Employees and mid-level managers need to know that if they talk about lack of direction, it's OK.

There's still too much fear of speaking up in many organizations, even though there is an adequate amount of one-way and top-down communications. Building a culture of listening and sharing, even with the abundance of e-mail, text messaging and blogs remains difficult. As we tumble into a recession, fear of losing one's job will increase, making it more risky for employees to share. Thus, the key job of the communicator, to build a message of two-way dialogue, will be critical for sustaining high performance.

### Summary

The importance of direction is not a big-company problem; it is not limited to the United States. In every data set I study, around the world, I see the same phenomenon cropping up. Direction is trumping strategy, and the organizations that act on this knowledge by finding solutions will gain a strong competitive advantage in the market. The communication leaders who support their leaders in not only under

standing the importance of this new trend but in building systems to help enable all employees to solve the problem will be on the cutting edge of creating high, measurable value for their stakeholders. ■