



# Communicating Strategy

Phil Jones

A **Gower** Book



# Communicating Strategy

*...so it is compelling, people get it, and execute it.*

## **Reviews for Communicating Strategy**

*'Everything in this book is obvious – after you have read it. It is a practical book you can use and apply every day, as well as being a guide to planning a larger communication strategy.'*

Martin Coombes, Partner, Innovation Ilp

*'The messages in this book are important for anyone interested in strategy! Phil Jones discusses the critical issue of communicating strategy – and what's best – he communicates his messages in a very engaging and easy to understand manner.'*

Bernard Marr, Chief Executive, The Advanced Performance Institute

*'Communicating Strategy communicates well – in direct and accessible language. Phil articulates a route to success by both building on the strengths of relationships at work and by demonstrating how to deal with the disconnect that can occur in leading change when strategy is not jointly owned. Phil's research has evidently been done and applied to his conclusions. Above all, it is apparent that he has walked the approach he advocates...well communicated.'*

Shelagh Grant, Chief Executive, The Housing Forum

*'Phil Jones gives practical skills for bridging the gap from mission, to transmission, of strategies for change in organizations. He draws comparisons with different models of change and gleans some "differences that make a difference". One of the ideas that make this book stand out is how it challenges some basic assumptions about change and more importantly about people. It is after all people who have to initiate, manage and embody or incorporate transformation and transition, if people do not feel safe, then it is unlikely that they will respond well to uncertainty.'*

*Though the busting of myths in management is a key component of the book, I feel more left with the idea that tasks get completed, or not, through relationship: that trust and generative collaboration are vessels that hold the possibility for success.*

*Having a background in the discipline of Neuro Linguistic Programming I appreciated the use of some of the technology, concepts and models throughout the book. As Neuro Linguistics is a technology which is used for building models of success, it is a well done application of the ideas.'*

Judith DeLozier, NLP University<sup>1</sup>

*'No worse than any other management book you have made me read.'*

Deborah Jones, The author's wife

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<sup>1</sup> Judith has been a trainer, co-developer, and designer of training programs in the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming since 1975. A member of Grinder and Bandler's original group of students, Judith has made fundamental contributions to the development of numerous NLP models and processes. Judith is a co-developer of a number of projects applying Systemic NLP, ranging from modeling leadership, to health care and cross-cultural competence. She is presently an associate of NLP University.

# Communicating Strategy

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# Preface

In early 2006, I noticed that my websites were getting a lot of activity on the topic of ‘communicating strategy’. It was closely behind ‘strategy’ as a topic of interest. As I researched the Internet to see what else was available on the topic, I realized it was a topic that was not well covered.

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However, within a few sites I came across one that suggested five principles of communicating strategy, of which one was, ‘You should not communicate your strategy, as you will leak your strategy to the competition.’ I was incensed by this idea, for two reasons. If your strategy is so unsustainable that your competitors can simply copy it that easily, then it is a pretty poor strategy. Secondly, if you don’t tell your people about your strategy, how can they possibly execute it and help you refine it and deliver it?

So, incensed by the ‘don’t communicate your strategy’ idea I looked for books on communicating strategy. There seemed to be none. There were plenty on strategy formulation, and strategy implementation. There were many on public relations. There were lots and lots of interpersonal communications. But there seemed to be nothing specifically on communicating strategy. So I decided to write one.

I have been helping organizations describe, develop, articulate and communicate their strategy more effectively for over 12 years. I have been privileged to work in some great consultancies with some great colleagues and wonderful clients. The experiences that make up this book come from a whole variety of different types of organizations. I have been on the receiving end of strategy, as a line manager, and helped to formulate it in a variety of organizations. When I worked for the originators of the balanced scorecard, Norton & Kaplan, the emphasis was always on the understanding and drivers of the strategy much more than just its measurement and management. Rather it has been about helping the management team be clear about the underlying thinking around the strategy, so they could walk out of their boardroom with a complete and consistent understanding in their heads of what they were trying to achieve, and why. Much of this has involved helping

them have a richer conversation as they develop and articulate it. They then have a deeper understanding of the assumptions and underlying thinking, so they can tell the story effectively to their people. The techniques I have seen, learnt and developed through these experiences are in this book.

This book started as a short e-book, but soon developed into this fuller book. Its working title was 'Heads, hearts and hands', which reflected the strategy being in the head, as a logically correct thing to do; being in the heart, as an emotional response and engagement; and being in the hands, so it is executed.

Part of the reason for the growth in the content was the need to explain the many practical ways in which the strategy is communicated. It is easy to say what should be done. It takes longer to explain how to do it, and I wanted the 'how to do it' in this book. I also wanted to provide people with options. There is no one way to communicate strategy well. This is a book of strategy communication tactics that people can pick and choose from as they see fit.

My work with clients has often involved coaching them in language and presentation techniques to help get the message across. Many of these techniques I have learnt in my training as a facilitator and presenter. Some come from my training as a Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) master practitioner. However, I rarely tell my clients that they are using NLP techniques, preferring just to show people great ways to do things. Of course if they ask, I tell them (and I have had several side conversations that go, 'You are using NLP techniques, aren't you?'). You will recognize techniques from a variety of sources. No prior understanding of these techniques or approaches is required for this book.

I recently bumped into a chief executive I had worked with around 3 years earlier. She said that one of the biggest differences the work had made was to the middle managers, who were now engaged with the bigger picture. They were no longer working in silos, but making a much larger contribution to the organization. I like to think that this has not only helped the senior managers, but has made the working lives of those middle managers better, as well as those of the organization's customers.

Throughout this book there are many examples that illustrate points or provide an example. They have come from my many clients over the years and some I have interviewed for research. It is in the nature of strategy work that it remains confidential. They know who they are. There are many others, such as fellow consultants and colleagues, who have also contributed to this work in so many ways that they are probably not aware of.

I am grateful to my colleague Liz Morrison, who read an early draft and encouraged me to develop the book properly. Also to Jonathan Norman of Gower, who saw the value of such a title and on reading a version

kindly referred to it as 'a lovely little book'. Gower has moved away from their normal practice and are publishing this as a paperback rather than a hardback. I thank him for his support.

Finally I would like to thank my wife Deborah, who read through the various versions, tidying up my language, checking for errors and correcting my grammar. Any remaining errors are mine. The final recommendation comes from her, when she said, 'This is no worse than any other management book I have read.'

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# 1 They Don't Get the Strategy

These were precisely the words the chief executive used, 'They don't get the strategy.' This was not a small company: it was listed on the FTSE100. It was not a particularly new strategy, as they had been implementing it for around 2 years. It wasn't a particularly new management team, and the chief executive had been in post around 4 years. It was a well researched and documented strategy. It was so well documented that it took me a week to go through all the strategy documents I had been given as background reading.

Yet the chief executive was still frustrated. As far as he was concerned, 'They didn't get the strategy.' If they don't get it, then it is unlikely to be implemented or deliver the results. He was right to be frustrated.

He is not alone and the problem is not peculiar to his type of organization. I have heard this complaint, in all sorts of organizations from large commercial, to public sector bodies, from medium-sized listed companies, to family and privately-owned organizations. Despite all the valiant efforts of the management team, the message is not getting through as intended by the person who conceived it.

Yet some organizations communicate their strategy really well. They manage to communicate what they want to achieve and how they will go about it. They get people motivated and remove the blocks that have prevented the strategy from working in the past; blocks that may be deeply embedded within the culture of the organization. They get people behind the strategy, adding to it and making it work in their part of the business. In short, they make it happen.

This book is about what you can do to make the difference in communicating your strategy. It provides you with the tools you can use to plan how the strategy will be communicated. It presents techniques to help communicate the strategy. It equips you with ways to think about how strategy is communicated, analyze what might have gone wrong in the past and make decisions about the best way to get your strategy across. There are some techniques you will be able to apply immediately and others you can incorporate into your communication plans.

## ONLY FIVE PER CENT UNDERSTAND THE STRATEGY

Some research was conducted into why many strategies seem well conceived but poorly executed.<sup>1</sup> It concluded that whilst many organizations have some success with their strategy, almost nine out of ten organizations failed to *fully* implement their strategy as they had planned. The first figure in this research suggested that, of all the staff in the organizations involved, only 5 per cent of them understood the strategy. A different and more recent survey suggested that this figure was around 8 per cent. I suspect the difference is not significant.

This limited understanding of strategy amongst its staff is an important issue for an organization. Even if the figures were out by a factor of ten, that means only half know what you are trying to achieve. If only one person in 20 understands your strategy (and presumably that one is executing the strategy) what opportunity are you missing with the other 19? It also raises the question, 'Whose strategies are the other 19 executing?'

It is not just a question of communication. It is also a question of trust. In a 2005 survey of 1 100 employees by Mercer Human Resource Consulting in the UK, just 36 per cent of workers trusted management 'to always communicate honestly'. A similar survey of 800 US employees found that 40 per cent of respondents felt the same.<sup>2</sup>

I suspect these figures also reflect different populations within the organization, and would vary with different levels of management and employee. Nonetheless, if you truly believe that your employees are a critical asset and fundamental to your success, can you afford to have so few of them trusting, understanding and helping you to implement your strategy?

## HEADS, HEARTS AND HANDS

Lots of time is spent developing a strategy and planning its implementation. Yet a simple fact remains: no matter how good the thinking behind the strategy, it is a waste of time if it is not in the heads, hearts and hands of the people who need to execute it. Of course, it is helpful to have it available for reference on the shelf or in the computer, and to keep the auditors happy. If that is where it stays, it is a waste of paper, and it has been a waste of management time and effort.

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<sup>1</sup> This survey was conducted by Renaissance Worldwide in 1996. The other three main issues that prevented strategy being executed were: a lack of alignment in the organisation to support the strategy, the misalignment of incentives and the lack of time executives spent discussing strategy.

<sup>2</sup> CFO Europe, Edward Teach, *Suspicious Minds*, June 2006, [www.cfoeurope.com/displayStory.cfm/7013332](http://www.cfoeurope.com/displayStory.cfm/7013332).

This book is about communicating that strategy, getting that engagement and getting feedback from it. As you read through this book and think about the questions it raises, the suggestions it makes and the examples it uses, you will see how it is designed to help you get the strategy into the heads of your people and develop that engagement.

The book is designed to help you build skills, think through the issues and develop a plan for communicating your strategy. Of course, that plan should be in your head, which is why it is not formalized until the end of the book. By the time you reach it you will have developed lots of ideas and have started putting them into action.

A wide range of experiences in a wide variety of sizes and types of organization has gone into this book. These organizations range from large commercial and multinational companies to small family-run businesses, from large public sector bodies to city councils, from dot.coms, through traditional manufacturing companies to pure service organizations. You can apply the ideas and experience in this book to them all.

At a minimum, the strategy must address the simple logic of, 'Where are we going and how are we going to get there?' It will engage the heads of your staff. But that is not enough. It is also about getting to the hearts of your people. Whilst the cold logic of *Star Trek's* Mr Spock is useful, it is the emotional commitment and engagement that often makes the biggest difference. The passion with which people engage customers or commit to activities makes a massive difference to people's productivity and results. It also makes a big difference to how people feel about being at work and how the organization's community and society plays in their lives. This passion and commitment will come from the passion and commitment you have when you communicate the strategy.

It is also about getting it into the hands of people, so actions are taken. Many strategies have had compelling logic and been passionately delivered, but have still failed in their execution. Sometimes the organization itself acts to stop change happening. Sometimes people need a compelling wake-up call. Sometimes, people simply need to know that they have permission to act differently and no longer be constrained by the rules that bound them. So, whilst this book is about communicating your strategy in an organization, it is applicable to communicating all sorts of changes in an organization, its culture and its values.

## THE APPROACH AND STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Many books suggest what you should do to solve various problems. They focus on what to do and how to do it. My experience is that such advice is often limited in its usefulness. It is not just doing things that matters; it is