



MIDDLE MANAGERS, STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION AND INFLUENCING

Use brain circuits for strategy implementation

1. Fear is the most powerful emotion by far. In most cases it will hinder strategy implementation far more that it will help. Do everything you can to create a context where your people feel safe.
2. Safe environments are not simply places that are free from physical threat. In today's organisations, interpersonal relations will likely be a far bigger and more constant source of emotional stimuli. All too often people's threat detectors are activated in exchanges at work.
3. More significant events usually carry a greater emotional response.

A negative is that major bust-ups are likely to reverberate for a lot longer than might be anticipated. Relationship repair may begin with a simple sorry, but that's unlikely to be enough, especially if it's a repeat incident!

On the plus side, ensure you make the most of events with strong positive emotions. Strong, positive patterns from the past can be powerful stimulants for optimistic thinking – which, incidentally, is a great antidote for fear!

At war within!

One of UGM's clients recently shared a dilemma they're having with a senior colleague's dismissive behaviour. They are concerned because it's impacting their own enjoyment of work and also their performance. It won't surprise you at all, based on what they said: "If John doesn't think it's his idea, it's unlikely to fly. And, he can get really nasty, especially when someone comes up with a better idea than his. You'd think he'd appreciate that kind of input, but he absolutely doesn't. You get punished instead!"

Hopefully the bad behaviours described above don't happen in your organisation, especially since organisations are formed to leverage synergies from mutual collaboration. Yet, despite this crucial purpose, organisations frequently dissipate vast amounts of energy as result of behaviours which aren't aligned with organisational purpose or priorities. It's not a good influence on performance.

Focussing on middle managers

Bad behaviour can be found at all levels in the organisation. As it happens though, the incident outlined involved someone who could be described as 'middle management'. UGM believes that middle managers are a pivotal grouping within organisations. So, we keep a close eye on related emerging research and even focus some of our own studies in this area.

Various studies, including our own, highlight the vital role that middle managers play in executing organisational strategy. Even though many middle managers would like to have greater influence over strategic direction, it is strategy implementation for which they are directly accountable. Inevitably this comprises coordinating the actions of others and, not infrequently, this involves a lot of people who themselves are enmeshed in continuous change.

Given their business objectives, you'd think that middle managers would do everything at their disposal to get the best out of their people. As a matter of interest, it's more than just common sense. Recent research by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) found a massive difference between the focus on strategic alignment of middle manager behaviour in high performing organisations and low performing organisations.

The i4cp study found that high performing organisations were 9.5x more likely address middle manager behaviour, to ensure it was consistent with strategy, than low performing organisations. This was the biggest difference by far out of the 25 Key Performance Indicators. Of note is the very strong .45 statistical correlation of this item with market performance, the second highest of all the 25 factors.

The negative impact on brainpower

The greatest resource available to middle managers is likely to be the skills and energy of the people with whom they have some reporting relationship. Thinking a little more inclusively, a close second is likely to be the skills and energy of all the others in the organisation! Ultimately, that comes down to the making best use of the combined brainpower available. Even more specifically it's the aggregate of effort, one brain at a time.

Badly behaved middle manager John is not only failing to harness individual effort for the strategic good. His actions are actually also negatively impacting on other elements of strategic implementation. Both individuals and the organisation are paying a price much higher than just the costs associated with his undesirable 'episodes' in meetings.

Becoming aware of just three important ways in which brains work could have a substantial impact on the way John views his business context. Importantly, those insights should also result in him influencing quite differently, and more effectively!

Three brain-based insights for John

First, and by far the most important, is the enormous impact that John's behaviour is having on the emotional register of his people. Fear is the strongest of the emotions and John's actions are ensuring it colours much of what his people do. The natural response to fear is self-preservation, so his people will spend more time on that than on ensuring implementation is aligned with strategy. This includes behaviours such as avoidance and withdrawal. Furthermore, the fear will permeate unconscious decision making, where most decisions are made. Seriously unhelpful for high performance.

Secondly, the consequences John dispenses for suggesting alternative ideas are punishing. That doesn't sit with well with the brain's reward centre. At its most simple, people move toward pleasure and away from pain. Instead of finding quality strategy implementation for John rewarding (pleasurable), people find it painful. Simple solution – avoid trying to do quality strategy implementation work where John is involved. Associated solution – avoid John altogether. Not a great influencing technique!

Finally, John's people are continually refining their memories or patterns. It's quite possible that their fear of John will translate to a more general fear (experienced, for example, as distrust) of management and the business. So, even when John moves on, those negative patterns are likely to take some time dissipate. Truth is, John's bad behaviour may negatively impact strategy implementation long after John has departed the division or even the business altogether.