

Insights on Successfully Leading Corporate Initiatives

By Gayla Hodges

Leaders who work for large corporations at the production level or in satellite or plant locations are often challenged with implementing corporate initiatives at their particular level. They are further challenged to implement them within the context of the local culture and of their own strategic goals. There are several reasons for this. One reason is that corporate strategies seem to be just that -- they apply across the whole company -- and might not seem to apply to the area they are leading, especially if it is a production area.

Since I just came back from the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) Conference in Atlanta, I'd like to use supplier diversity as an example of the kind of corporate initiative that might not seem to fit the strategic plan goals for the site or the type of operations performed. Many large corporations, and many mid-sized and even small corporations, are adopting supplier diversity initiatives in order to give smaller companies and diversity companies an opportunity to do business with them. There is a return on investment, and there are proven results from using this policy/philosophy. However, by the time they reach the plant level it is often hard to figure out how this is going to really help. *That's where the leader comes in.*

The leader needs to be the **corporate vision translator**. In other words, it is up to you as a leader to take the vision your company has for supplier diversity or just about any broad corporate initiative, and figure out "What's in it for us here at this location?" because this is exactly what leaders do: *leaders have a vision.*

The first step, then, is to take some focused time and attention to translate the corporate vision into your plant vision or your location vision. Many times that role falls to the people from corporate who might not understand the way you do business and what you are doing well enough to really translate it appropriately and compellingly to your people. But *you* do understand these things, and that's why it's up to you to make that translation.

For example, let's assume that there is a corporate initiative to get employees throughout all levels and sites of the company to volunteer some of their time to community projects. As the plant manager, you are informed that the quota for your plant is to have people giving 10% of the total number of hours each month to some important project in your community. Your job as translator is to break that out and translate it into terms your people can understand and get excited about. Your approach to achieving this assigned initiative, then, might be to commit your team to give 150 hours of time to a Habitat for Humanity home build in the community. You can easily explain the value of giving time for this kind of cause, both in terms of generally helping someone and in terms of the benefit to the company of local involvement in the community. In addition, you can lead by example by actually wielding a paintbrush and working alongside the volunteers.

Returning to the supplier diversity example, the corporate goal might be to have every division or plant commit 10% of their outsourcing or product purchasing to a minority- or woman-owned business. So you do your homework on the ROI of the initiative, you ask your procurement team to identify a pool of appropriate suppliers of products or services your plant might need during the next year. You identify who it is in your plant that purchases or contracts with the kind of people and services or products offered by minority or diversity businesses. You can then translate the vision of the company with regard to supplier diversity to your procurement, purchasing and HR team.

Once you've done that – and your supplier diversity people or human resources people would be delighted to help you define that vision for your specific area of business – you do **the second thing that leaders do, and that is to articulate the vision**. So you need to *share* that vision. Many times the vision will come in as an HR program and it will come in through the corporate human resources department to your location's human resources department. It doesn't quite bypass you, but it doesn't get the same attention as the production goals and initiatives that you planned locally.

I'm thinking also of things like the new performance development process. The corporate human resources people come in and train everyone how to do it, and you put your stamp of approval on it. But if you haven't taken the time to really figure out *your vision for how this is going to impact your operation*, you're losing an opportunity to make a new process or a corporate goal make a real difference in your area.

After you have defined that vision and you have articulated it, **you still need a small group of people to help you implement the vision**. Another mistake I see many leaders make is not including the people responsible for making the processes happen in the process of defining how to make this happen. It is even better to involve them in the visioning process. So these are the people we normally think of, our line management people, as the ones who are going to carry forth the message. And that's very true, and it's definitely your job to get them on board and get them to understand. But if you also team with your HR person, your supplier diversity person, your procurement person to build the vision, it shows them the support *you* have and it also gives them an opportunity to truly *support you* in making this initiative successful in your area.

When you have built this small group of people to implement that vision, putting the system in place is very important because it is critical for you to spend focused time and attention on each initiative that impacts your operation. That is sometimes a lot easier said than done! Depending on your support people to supply the type of support you need will go a long way in helping you achieve your corporate initiatives as well as your strategic plan initiatives. .

The last thing, then, is to go out and implement that vision. And it is important to recognize that your implementation might not look like the way it is being implemented in other areas, because you are going to *customize your implementation to the culture you*

are in. You are going to find ways to help your people understand *why* you are doing what you're doing and *how it benefits* your operation.

Here's an example. The supplier diversity folks' job is to make sure that the company is doing a certain amount of business with minority- and woman-owned businesses. Many times, as leaders, we see a corporate person coming in with a bunch of number goals that don't fit into our culture.

However, if we switch that and look at the supplier diversity person as a support in reaching those goals, that will shift the whole relationship with them. Their job is to help minority – and woman-owned suppliers to do work with your corporation. Their job is also to help you implement programs and processes at your location that will support that goal. So bringing them in as a partner -- bringing them into your strategic process in that particular area -- will make all the difference in the world. And don't forget to include them when you celebrate your success at the end of the year.

Another example would be when you are implementing a new performance management system. Many people look at performance management as an onerous extra task at the end of each year when you have to fill it out, and at the beginning of the year when you have to fill it out again. They don't see it or use it as a tool.

If you as a leader can communicate and work with your HR support team, to articulate the way this tool will help you achieve the results that you want, you can be successful. As intended, performance management is meant to reflect each person's individual role in meeting the corporate goals of your company. Breaking that down to the level of each individual on your team offers everyone a better understanding of the important role they have in the success of the company and of the importance of their work to the company.

So, going back to the idea of being the translator, if you work closely with your human resources support people you can define "How does this performance management system fit our operation?" "How are we going to make this work here?" "How does it fit here?" "What is going to be the benefit of using it here, and how can we express the benefit?" You will have a more successful rollout *and* you'll be using the tool as it was intended to be used, and it will help you reach the results that your company needs.

It might help to think of the leadership role in translating a corporate initiative to the plant or division level as creating a sort of cultural change. Edgar Schein called it creating the "climate" of the organization. The leader's role in winning acceptance and achievement of corporate initiatives at the plant level or the division level is to use the translating and articulating functions, as well as the activities related to gathering a small group of people to spearhead the effort to change the climate of the organization in order to achieve the goals.

Schein outlined six primary mechanisms by which leaders embed culture changes or climate changes:

- What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis.

- How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises.
- Observed criteria by which leaders allocate scarce resources.
- Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching.
- Observed criteria by which leaders allocate rewards and status.
- Observed criteria by which leaders recruit, select, promote, retire, and excommunicate organizational members.*

These six mechanisms can be the actions leaders take to translate, articulate and build buy-in and ultimate success in implementing the initiative. By embracing the initiative, translating it into a vision consistent with the goals and the culture of the specific plant or division of the organization, and articulating that vision through both words and actions, leading corporate initiatives can be enthusiastically embraced and goals achieved.

*Edgar Schein, *Corporate Culture and Leadership*.