



WITI BUSINESS

Making the Business Everyone's Business

By Beth Zimmerman



More than ever, winning in business today demands alignment around common strategic objectives. Competitors are too many, and too savvy, for the disorganized organization to succeed. Yet in many technology companies, there is a schism between the technical staff and those that manage them, putting both near- and long-term business success in peril. This article discusses how these seemingly disparate roles—the technician and the executive—can better align to deliver consistent and outstanding business performance.

Most companies of size are home to legions of specialists. This is especially true for technology companies, where highly specific and unique skills are required to deliver increasingly sophisticated products and services to market. Even the once lowly mobile phone demands significant technological prowess, since making telephone calls is but one of many functions these tiny, computers in miniature can perform. They now allow people to send and receive email, text, picture and video messages, maintain contacts and calendars, download and listen to music, vote for their favorite American Idol, even use as a mobile wallet for micro-purchases. As both consumers and businesses continue to demand high-tech products, and technology itself is fast becoming the bedrock of even non-technological businesses (witness the Internet), companies need to work harder to excel not just at technology, but at the business of technology as well.

It is not unusual to find people in highly technical roles—engineers, production staff, researchers and tinkerers—segregated from other key functions of an organization. They are the problem solvers, the producers, the doers, the brainiacs, collectively tasked with solving a specific customer challenge through the use or deployment of technology. Yet not only are they removed from their peers across the enterprise, but from customers as well—in spite of the fact that they are at the heart of addressing customers' problems. On the other hand, executives and managers who oversee the technical process are typically engaged across large swaths of the business, working with colleagues in legal, marketing, sales, account management, strategy and distribution, among others, as part of their functional responsibilities. It should come as no small surprise, then, when products of remarkable technical craft come to market that fail to ignite customer interest. Worst are those that are stunning for their engineering prowess, yet are so difficult to use or so seemingly disconnected from what customers want or need.

What we have is a failure to communicate the business strategy.

Why does a technician need to understand business strategy? Because without it, there is little meaningful context—beyond perfunctory parameters like time, budget and the like—in which to make sound technical decisions. At the very least, communicating business context provides a much deeper connection—for all employees—to the business at hand; they see their part in the greater whole and feel a stronger sense of purpose in their work. And understanding the business environment liberates technical personnel, too often divorced from anything that does not bear directly on their craft, to seek innovative and relevant solutions to customer problems that might never have been considered.

Simply put, it's good business to talk about the business. When a company is committed to giving its employees all the tools they need to succeed, no single tool is as critical as the strategy of the business—especially for capital-intensive, fast-paced technological initiatives. It is the obligation of those that manage technical teams, departments or personnel to provide appropriate business context for their work, and to reinforce that the business strategy through regular and ongoing activities:

- Project inception: no better time to frame the business strategy, and where a particular project or task figures into the company's agenda, than when before pencil hits the paper
- Regular staff and project meetings: business objectives are an excellent 'table setting' for discussion of project status, task assignments, roles and responsibilities, etc., and help keep diverse teams aligned to a common purpose
- Performance reviews: nothing reinforces an employee's relationship to the company's mission better than compensation; just be sure that these parameters are established up front and that people aren't being rewarded—or punished—for goals they were unaware they were expected to meet

Communicating the business strategy, however, is not the sole province of those in management; technical personnel need to insist, if needed, that managers convey the broader business context of their work. And while not everyone is entitled to a copy of the strategic plan before starting a project or task, all employees deserve to know the few essential components of their company's business strategy:

- Vision: what the company aspires to be in five or 10 years; the *über* context for everyone's work
- Values: fundamental principles by which the company operates and that guide how everyone within it must think, act and deliver at all times, in all situations
- Strategic business goals: what the enterprise aims to accomplish over the next 12-18 months and that most powerfully shape the complexion of a product or service portfolio at any given time
- Customer choice drivers: what customers care about most in selecting a particular product or service, which can be translated easily into functional criteria, feature sets, operational parameters and preferred technical platforms

At the end of the day, business strategy becomes the *lingua franca*, or common language, of today's technologically driven business. It is management's obligation to share and employees' right to expect if the organization wants to position itself for sustained business success.

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