

Are Your Employees Truly Aligned with Your Strategic Priorities?



A recent Harvard Business Review article revealed that only 29 percent of employees could correctly identify their employer's strategy when given a list of six strategic choices.

Most organizations dedicate considerable time, energy and resources to define their strategic priorities. Once these priorities are set, an organization typically focuses on implementing them and moving along to ongoing operational changes.

With an everyday focus on operations, many employees may not know how their activities contribute to their employers' strategic priorities. A recent *Harvard Business Review* [article](#) revealed that only 29 percent of employees could correctly identify their employer's strategy when given a list of six strategic choices.

The difference between employees who are in-sync with their strategic priorities and those who are not is revealed in the often-told story of the three bricklayers who are asked what they are doing. The first bricklayer gruffly says "I'm laying bricks." The second responds "I'm putting up a wall." The third bricklayer enthusiastically replies, "I'm building a cathedral!"

To ensure you are consistently employing "cathedral-builders" and not simply "bricklayers," periodically assess your employees' engagement with your strategic priorities following this two-step process.

Step 1: Assess Your Strategic Priorities

First, leaders should review their past month's work and determine how much of their time was spent fulfilling

their organization's strategic priorities. If that ratio is high (based on your organization's interests), that is great; you should be championing your organization's priorities to help others. If you are struggling to make the work/priority connection, it is highly likely that your team or department is experiencing similar challenges.

Ask your team or department to conduct a "maintenance check" to see if employees are properly spending their time and resources on your organization's top priorities. Essentially, this is a current state assessment to determine alignment between priorities and execution. Questions to ask include:

- Do my team members know our priorities?
- If yes, are team members spending the sufficient time focused on these priorities?
- If no, are there barriers preventing priority execution that can be resolved? What are they and can they be resolved?
- Do my team members have the knowledge, skills, abilities and tools necessary to accomplish our priorities?
- Do my employees know how their individual involvement contributes to fulfilling our priorities?

Your maintenance check can be as informal as simply asking your team members the questions posed above. Or it can be more formal and include a variety of quantitative and/or qualitative data.

For example, an organization focused on improving clinical documentation did an informal maintenance check by holding a team meeting with its clinical documentation improvement resources. This meeting revealed that team members did not believe their daily operations allotted enough time to share best practices with one another. The organization addressed this barrier by scheduling time for the CDI resources to meet throughout the year to discuss issues, share best practices and assign leads to implement change. From this activity, the CDI team's camaraderie improved and team members felt individually more empowered to contribute to the organization's priorities.

More than likely, your maintenance check will reveal opportunities for improvement. If that is the case, your task will be to re-energize your employees on your organization's priorities, stress why these priorities are important, and emphasize how individual contributions matter. Examples and stories paint a picture that people can remember.

When I began working in health care, I was an assistant to the CIO of a large health care organization. My day was filled with scheduling meetings, writing memos and preparing meeting material. I had no clue how I contributed to the organization's priorities until the CIO let me know how my work helped get important meetings on the calendar to reduce health care disparities for underserved communities. That changed my outlook about my work – from being routine to meaningful.

Step 2: Address Any Priority Barriers

If your maintenance check shows that employees are dealing with barriers toward fulfilling your strategic priorities, ask them to collectively discuss these barriers and suggest options for change. When discussing barriers, you will likely need to help employees differentiate between priority-specific and non-priority work, based on the following guide:

1. **Tied to a strategic priority** – These are activities directly impacting a strategic priority. For example, if your organization's priority is improving patient access to care, your team's barrier-focused dialogue might be around adding more providers in underserved areas, providing care before or after normal clinical working hours or implementing technology to support remote patient access to care.
2. **Not tied to a strategic priority** – These are activities that are typically operational. They may contribute to a strategic priority and they are not directly tied. For example, this could be work to support technical, legal, HR or other operational units. When discussing work not directly tied to a strategic priority, ask if there are opportunities to streamline services and/or obtain or reassign appropriate resources.
3. **Unsure if tied to a strategic priority** – These are activities that fall between strategy and operations. For example, if your team is updating claims policies and procedures and your strategic priority is improving access to care, some of this work may be priority-oriented while other parts may not.. If you are unsure whether an item is tied to a strategic priority, assign or engage resources to help make this determination.

This exercise will also likely help you establish a hierarchy of strategic priorities relative to your work group's everyday activities. You can rank your priorities based on their importance, urgency, cost or effort needed for completion, or a combination of all of these elements. Bottom-line, when you rank your priorities, your employees will be in a much stronger and more confident position to fulfill them.

Once you have rank-ordered your priorities, create an action plan to address them and assign or obtain sufficient resources for completion or ongoing maintenance. Assign and maintain guidelines for your team's adherence to these priorities. For example, how and when does an urgent priority trump an important one?

Conclusion

A key difference between health care and other industries is that health care organizations are typically mission-driven, amplifying their need to define and articulate their strategic priorities. For example, these priorities could be around improving patient safety, curing a disease, or making care more affordable or accessible. Whatever the priorities, employees who have a direct tie to their employer's mission, and understand how their individual contributions help move the organization forward, will be far more engaged and productive.