



OUR INSIGHTS

If You're Serious About Your Strategic Plan . . . Don't Make the "People" Mistake: Interview with Bob Briggs

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Bob Briggs is the president and chief executive officer (CEO) of [PeopleWorks International](#), an international business performance consultancy. For the past 35 years he has consulted on organizational change and strategic planning from small businesses to Fortune 50 giants.

JATHAN JANOVE: Companies often identify the need for organizational change and develop strategic plans. Yet these plans frequently fail. What typically goes wrong?

BOB BRIGGS: In my experience, companies often develop carefully crafted strategic plans, but can't execute them because they fail to take a balanced approach and integrate the people with the process.

JJ: What do you mean?

BB: A good strategic plan accounts for more than just the financial aspects of the business. Financial results are an outcome of how well you plan and execute on the people, process, and customer sides. The "process" refers to your internal organizational systems—production, service, delivery, quality, efficiency, and so forth. Process change involves examining existing structures and operations in order to make improvements. However, even great improvement ideas will fail if they lack support from employees—that's the "people" side.

JJ: Can you share an example?

BB: We were brought in to work with a large manufacturing company after its strategic plan failed. Its leaders had decided the company needed to make a commitment to manufacturing excellence to remain competitive in its industry. It hired a consultant who visited its plants, applied "[Lean](#)" and "[Kaizen](#)" concepts—two philosophies on how to improve process in an organization—and recommended specific steps the company could take to improve its processes and deliver better results. However, after spending millions of dollars and countless labor hours, there were no results to show. The initiatives failed at plant after plant.

JJ: Why?

BB: It wasn't the recommendations. They were mostly sound. When we later conducted our own process analysis, we incorporated some of them. The problem arose from the failure to integrate the people into the process change and ultimately to change the culture. Although the changes would have benefited the company—its customers *and* the employees—there was no buy-in. Instead, responses tended to range from passive non-acceptance to active resistance. Without employee support, meaningful culture change was impossible.

JJ: What lessons can be drawn from experiences like this?

BB: Organizational change is a critical leadership competency. Unfortunately, most leaders don't possess it.

JJ: How do companies overcome this problem?

BB: After you identify the challenge or opportunity and articulate the goals and objectives, conduct thorough measurement, starting with the potential capability of your leaders to manage and lead change. At PeopleWorks, we use arguably the best set of validated assessment tools and conduct 360-degree surveys to identify three types of leaders:

- potential stars that can help drive the change process;
- average-level leaders who may need to be moved to better-suited positions or receive coaching; and
- people who are incapable of leading change and will be obstacles.

The company needs to get individuals from the third group out of the organization. If not, their strategic plans will never achieve full potential. Also, rather than sugarcoat the process, companies should use their departure as an opportunity to reinforce their commitment to the strategic plan.

JJ: What else should a company measure?

BB: Make a thorough assessment of existing operations. What processes are working well? What processes need improvement? You should also assess the current engagement level of your employees. This step is critical to the people/process integration. Before you implement your strategic plan, you need to know what your employees think and anticipate how they'll respond. The worst mistake companies that measure engagement make, is they do nothing with the results, which actually makes engagement worse. You should analyze existing data such as your key performance indicators (KPIs) and employee engagement leading indicators such as turnover and absenteeism rates. Don't buy excuses like "We're in a high-turnover industry," or "Our attendance/leave policy is too generous." I often show CEOs industry-specific best practices information demonstrating that these excuses aren't valid—their people simply don't want to come to work for them or don't want to stay working for them.

JJ: How do you best use the data you gather and analyze?

BB: We use it to drive our recommendations and target specific outcomes. If you're using an outside consultant, don't make the "guru" mistake by assuming your consultant knows everything. Let the data and facts drive the plan rather than a know-it-all consultant making assumptions. Instead of outside-in, your strategic plan should be developed inside-out, meaning your consultant plays a facilitative role while your company's leaders take ownership of the process and partner with the consultant to build and own the plan.

JJ: What other advice would you offer for effective strategic plan implementation?

BB:

1. Adopt a continuous "listening and learning" paradigm versus a "talking and telling" paradigm.
2. Maintain absolute clarity about what you're doing, why you're doing it, and how each employee's role fits

into the strategic plan. Clarification of roles and responsibilities in relation to goals, objectives, and expected benefits is essential. Don't forget the What's In It For Me? (WIIFM) principle—continually explain how the change will benefit *employees*.

3. Although the term “accountability” is overused, it's still essential. However, accountability should be maintained through process tools and leading, not a two-by-four. Far too many people have the misguided notion that accountability means “Command and Control” and has to be punishment based. They think to get people's support you have to make them afraid of the consequences of not doing so. This is a huge mistake. Managers who carry two-by-fours do enormous damage. Moreover, most leaders aren't suited to the Command and Control model. Instead, they avoid holding people accountable altogether!

JJ: How do you maintain accountability?

BB: When we work with a company on a project, we develop a checklist that covers the specific steps that will ensure accountability. More often than not, we have to do some training with the leaders on accountability and how to keep your people focused. This may include the implementation of W-3 discipline (**who** does **what** by **when**) or other tools to help the team focus on achieving results—another critical leadership competency.

Bob Briggs is president and CEO of [PeopleWorks International](#). He can be reached at bbriggs@peopleworksmail.com.

Jathan Janove, a former Ogletree Deakins shareholder and Director of Employee Engagement Solutions, is the Principal of Janove Organization Solutions (www.jathanjanove.com). Through consulting, executive coaching, and training, he helps organizations maximize the human potential within. He can be reached at jjatpdx@gmail.com.
