

## Healthy Companies Follow through on Strategy

By Virginia Swain

With so many businesses and nonprofits going belly-up, it may be time to give your organization a thorough physical. Everyone knows when their business culture is unhealthy, though most will not admit it. Take your company's temperature. Assess current operations and strategize future directions. If you uncover unhealthy behavior, it is time to implement change. Ignoring these problems today could mean long-term bottom-line damage.

Are any of these symptoms familiar?

- People recognize something is wrong but do not respond
- Mistakes and problems habitually hidden or shelved
- Maintaining status more important than problem solving
- Nonconformity frowned upon
- Managers feel alone in trying to get things done
- Orders, policies, and procedures do not get conducted as intended
- Input from lower-level staff not solicited
- Decision-making gets bottlenecked at the top.

A 2005 study by consultants Booz Allen Hamilton looked at 50,000 businesses and concluded that unhealthy organizations cannot convert strategy into action. People say the right things, but nobody follows through. By acknowledging this pattern and strategically transforming their processes, companies can save up to 50 percent of their cost base.

In a recent consultation with a mid-size organization – with the agreement of top managers – I implemented a company-wide "historicizing" process initiative to transform unhealthy behaviors engrained in corporate culture.

"Historicizing" involves a period of historical reflection using a timeline spread out along a wall. Each participant makes a confidential timeline then creates a group timeline, proceeding backward from the present to recall some of the business' most important historical events.

In this case, we talked about critical incidents going back one, then three years. It was important to guide everyone through the organization's entire history. Even though there

may not have been anyone in the group during the formative years, we recorded stories from that era, providing a goldmine of information. The timeline stayed where people could review it, debate its contents, and make changes.

A timeline review identifies the tacit norms of a company's process, those unconscious rules that govern behavior. Participants reflected on tacit norms that could prevent them from progressing and made strategic decisions to change both personal and organizational behavior.

After the historicizing process, the group noted healthy behaviors such as: employees widely shared objectives and consistently applied energy toward them; openness to change, non-defensiveness, letting go of "turf" for the good of the company; freedom to point out difficulties because they would have input on how to address them; noticeable sense of "team" in planning, performance, discipline and shared responsibility; and ideas respected from all levels.

Following strategy, turning decisions into action without backsliding, is challenging. It requires constant monitoring. But recognizing that your company needs to take its temperature could be the first step to ensuring your company's survival.

*As a specialist in leadership, conflict, team building and change management, Virginia Swain, Director, Institute for Global Leadership ([www.global-leader.org](http://www.global-leader.org)), consulted on the Thomas Cook/American Express merger as well as many other change implementations.*

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