

CHAPTER 1

The Beginning of the Middle

Why New Strategies Stall After the Exciting Kickoff

Before we begin, let's talk about the very first moments of your new strategy. The beginning is great. You are clear, focused, ambitious, ready—and your motivation to move forward seems like the most natural and obvious thing in the world. This new initiative is seriously important to your company and your career. Everyone is on board. You are very committed.

But at this point—at the beginning—it's important to realize that your new strategy is fragile. It hasn't taken hold yet. Think of the launch of your new strategy like your first week of a gym membership: Will you really go to the gym every week and transform your life? Or will you go back to your old habits, and get busy with all the other stuff in your life after the initial inspiration wears off?

What you are facing is the long and vast abyss of the “Middle.” The Middle is where the transformation will happen—or not. One of the undeniable realities of the Middle is that it's the long part—and the simple, human fact is that:

It's really hard for anyone, not to mention a whole organization, to stay focused and motivated on doing new and difficult things for a long time.

This is the challenge your business transformation is facing. How will you and your team keep the focus and motivation to do the new, hard work every day, for the next 12–24 months, when it's just so much easier to . . . well . . . not to?

As the leader of a transformation, you are committed and probably feeling substantial pressure to drive this transformation. You may have been brought into this role because others before you have failed. It is very clear in your mind where the business must go, and how it must transform to meet the needs of a changing market or new opportunity. You are ready to forge ahead. So you launch your new strategy with great fanfare in a big, company-wide, all-hands meeting with ice cream . . .

WHAT EVERYONE IS THINKING

I've eaten the ice cream . . .

This is a new thing I'm hearing about for the first time. It sounds like a new important strategy, but who knows for sure. I've seen new strategies come and go; most of the time it doesn't impact my life very much. In a few weeks or months, probably no one will be talking about this anymore. And since I'm already overworked, why bother investing more energy at this point. I'll just wait this one out.

Tell Me If You've Been in This Meeting

You're at a strategic off-site meeting to clarify your new strategy. You talk about the key, long-term things your business must invent, optimize, fix, change, or create. You use the words “game changing” and “innovative” when you talk about these ideas. You may have hired expensive consultants to create your new innovative and game changing strategy. There is tremendous investment, effort, and energy that goes into the beginning of a new strategy. Reaching the point of defining and aligning on a new strategy seems like a huge achievement in itself—and it is.

But then . . .

Everyone goes back to work.

Everyone stays busy on what they were already working on.

The new thing falls victim to the Middle.

The *beginning* is really clear and strong, with lots of investment, excitement, and great intentions. And the *end* is really well defined. But the problem most strategies face is that there is no real plan for the Middle—which is where everything needs to happen!

I have led several successful business transformations in my career. One of the things they all shared was a broken beginning and an inspiring end goal. But as with all transformations they also all shared a long, scary abyss in the Middle.

I learned early on from mentors and trial and error that, if you want to get anything serious done, it's not the goal setting and strategy that is the problem. It's the doing. And the doing is hard because it takes doing for a long time. Without the element of time, there is no real transformation.

It's easy to get an organization focused on a sprint. But in a transformation, you need to keep a whole organization moving in an often unnatural direction for a long period of time. And since human nature is not really built to naturally keep people engaged and focused over a long period of time, to succeed you need to really focus on this ambiguous expanse in the Middle and do many things on purpose to keep people in the game.

Later, in Part 4 (E = Everyone), I'll talk about how I convinced a whole organization of the need for change, and in Part 2 (O = Organization), how I restructured the team; but it's important to note that both of those things, while critical, are still only *beginning* things. Even though creating the right organization and engaging employees required work that is far from obvious and trivial, doing them well still left a long journey through the Middle that no one would be able to see, feel, or measure unless we clearly charted the points along the way to remove the ambiguity.

A GOOD STRATEGY DESCRIBES WHAT YOU WILL DO DURING THE MIDDLE

A big reason for the stalls that too often occur in the Middle is that many organizations mistake listing end goals as a strategy: *Our strategy is to double our revenue in these two key market segments. Our strategy is to provide innovative products that create a new market. Our strategy is to develop the strongest indirect channel.*

You become excited about the wonderful achievement at the end, but there is nothing in the definition of that end goal that tells you specifically what to do, which way to go about it, what problems you

need to solve, or what you need to fix, change, stop, or invent to get there—these are all things that need to happen in the Middle. These are all things that describe what you will *do*. I'll talk about how to accomplish this in the next chapter: Concrete Outcomes.

LEADERS: EXECUTION IS NOT BENEATH YOU

But first, here is an important point about leading execution. I see so many executives who keep their role in strategy at the big, exciting goal level. Many leaders resist getting involved with execution. It's as though they believe that once they communicate the strategy, people throughout the organization will suddenly understand what new work they have to do; resources will be automatically reassigned without any pain; and individuals will understand how to prioritize new tasks over current work, so it will just get done. It won't.

Just because you said what the strategy is, it doesn't mean people will do the right things to implement it.

Your job at making the strategy come true does not stop after you announce it. One of the hardest things to do is to get an organization to *stop* doing what it is currently doing and *start* doing the different thing that it needs to be doing. You can't just expect your team to find its way through the Middle. Without your involvement, your organization will go back to doing what it is already doing.

As a leader you need to get involved enough in defining outcomes and measures and holding people accountable to specific things, to make sure that the strategy is taking hold and is moving forward through the Middle. Managing execution is not micromanaging, and it is not beneath you.

You need to take personal responsibility for what happens in the Middle, because what happens in the Middle is the part where stuff actually gets done!

I see leaders struggle with two things when it comes to managing execution:

1. **They feel like it's low-level work.** They act as though it's not worth their brilliant strategic time to focus on what people are actually doing. They view execution as a low-level job for other, less important, less strategic people to deal with.
2. **It's hard and boring.** Measuring, tracking, and communicating something that has already been defined is not nearly as exciting as pursuing a big, strategic deal or creating something new.

This “above it all” approach is dangerous. Execution does not happen without leadership involvement. Period.

TEAM: DON'T WAIT—START HELPING

You can choose to wait, or you can choose to proactively help. You can choose to stay in the shadows and be invisible; you can choose to resist or undermine; or you can choose to step forward and help, and to be a bright spot moving the transformation forward.

What strong personal leadership looks like at the beginning of the Middle is keeping yourself educated on the business drivers that are causing the need for this change in the first place. This knowledge will give you the insight and power to lead your own piece of this transformation, and to never be caught off guard by changes you didn't anticipate.

Remember, executive management can lead transformation, but they can't *do* transformation without you. You have a real opportunity to stand out by helping define what is required in your part of the organization through the long Middle. You can stand out by helping your peers get on board as well. The success of the business depends on getting you and enough of your peers and teams to take personal ownership to define and do new things.

Don't wait to be asked and certainly don't wait to be pushed. Personal leadership in transformation is important at every level.

It's not only the job of executive management to think strategically and creatively about implementing strategy. We all must. The following chapters in Part 1 (M = The Middle) will give you the tools to contribute, at a more strategic level, to getting your own team ready to lead your part of the transformation to move the business forward. And by contributing to the forward progress of the business at a more strategic level, you'll add real value and develop your career in the process.

NEXT

Now that you have started to consider what needs to happen in the Middle, define it in terms of concrete outcomes that will make specific actions obvious.

Read on . . .

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