Managing Intent

Delivering on Promises and Avoiding Disappointment

Overview

On average, only three in ten strategic initiatives succeed in fully accomplishing what they set out to do. Intent management keeps an initiative from becoming another statistic by shifting thinking from installation (accomplishing interim goals) to realization (achieving the original vision).

Typically, strategic initiatives result in underdelivery or overdelivery (too expensive to sustain), or they don’t resemble what was sought and wanted at all. When poor outcomes occur, it is clear that a gap existed between what was expected and what was created. Senior management usually responds with surprise, disappointment, and anxiety. Often, they cannot put their finger on where the initiative went wrong; they just know it doesn’t taste, feel, or smell like what they had envisioned. Intent management eliminates the gap by keeping the expectation—the intent—in focus throughout the execution.

Intent management isn’t a turnkey solution. It requires monitoring, adjustments, and creativity along the way. The main route is from clarity (aligning on a precise and explicit purpose) to expression (impeccably communicating the purpose) to integrity (not being sidelined away from the original destination).
Managing Intent: Delivering on Promises and Avoiding Disappointment

It’s likely that anyone who hasn’t been away from all media for the past year has at least heard of Apple’s iPod. It has created a new market in digital music, and since its launch, Apple’s value has increased by almost 500 percent. The iPod was not the first digital music player—it has many competitors—and Apple spent less than others developing the space. So what is different about the iPod? Is it all just timing? Or even luck? Although competitors may wish it to be so, it is neither of these. There are two keys to the iPod’s success: It is a complete product and it has absolute integrity. The iPod was not conceived as a device—the object that you hold in your hand. The device is well designed, but that is just part of its allure. The software that organizes the music, the ease of getting music onto the iPod, the music store that lets consumers buy new music or books—they all are part of the product. The iPod is about experiencing music, and Apple has delivered a perfect, or near perfect, experience.

Envisioning the complete experience—all the components working together to realize the promise of portable, digital music—is important, but it’s not the whole story. The integrity of those aspects to the underlying promise is critical. The more elements that exist, the more important it is that they all are oriented around a specific, well-articulated promise that the product represents: “This is what you’ll get.” Each part must maintain its integrity as well as its place in the overall solution. This sense of a unified whole stretches beyond the product itself and into how it is seen and experienced—the marketing and advertising, the retailing, etc.

To be successful, Apple conceived a complete product, communicated it to not just one but many development teams that translated it into reality, and maintained the integrity of the vision throughout the process. The essence or idea of the iPod was defined early, and all the components conformed to that idea. This was not a trial-and-error approach; it was deliberate and measured. There was clarity around the outcome from the beginning and it was maintained as the product was brought to market.

Individuals responsible for implementing a major strategic initiative may not have responsibility for launching a product like the iPod, but they will face the same challenges. Will their initiative be as successful as the iPod, or will it merely rest among the many other products or initiatives in a given space?

The approach for leading or launching a strategic initiative is familiar. Vision is translated into goals, and goals become plans—these steps exist in all strategic projects. Yet, it is clear that many challenges and obstacles arise between vision and reality. As a result, there is a second pattern in strategic projects that is also all too familiar. Early on, excitement and enthusiasm prevail. Participants feel achievement as milestones occur. Progress creates a sense of security and confidence. There is a faith and trust in the outcome, though often it is not visible. All strategic projects experience challenges—detours, derailments, and delays. In too many, excitement and enthusiasm are replaced by disappointment and disillusionment. This shift is a corner on the project road that is surprisingly sharp. On many projects, the switch from positive to negative emotion is dramatic and sudden. People often express surprise about this sudden change, which is strange given the statistics on strategic initiatives—fewer than three in ten
succeed. Does it have to be that way? Is there a better process than vision, goals, plans…and hope?

The key to success is disciplined and focused attention on intent: being clear about the true purpose behind the entire endeavor early in the process, expressing it in such a way that it can be understood by all and can be implemented, and rigorously managing its integrity through delivery. Intent management is the difference between celebrating success and masking disappointment.

A Focus on Intent

Strategic initiatives are, by nature, typically complex undertakings. They involve and affect many people. They may take months, or even years, to realize. They often include new ideas, concepts, or practices. Usually, they are conceived by a few people but cannot be brought to fruition without large and often diverse teams. It is no wonder that the result is often unrecognizable to those who originated the process. Intent management is a key tool in bridging the gap.

Promises are powerful forces when they are accepted as relevant and likely to come true. People either become excited that an alluring opportunity will unfold or they become hopeful that a troubling problem will be resolved. In this context, **intent** is a complete, concise, and clear expression of the expectations for the initiative. **Management** of that intent is clarifying it, expressing it, and holding true to its integrity. The combination forms an irreplaceable tool in the struggle to deliver on the promises that justify the initiatives leaders pursue.

Intent: Definition

*Intent is a complete, concise, and clear expression of the expectations for an initiative:*

- It is complete so that the full understanding of what will be delivered is in one place.
- It is concise so that everyone can be continually aware of the intent at all times. Once the intent becomes too complex for people to remember, their decisions will begin to diverge from it.
- It is clear so that it can be easily communicated to and understood by all involved in executing the strategy.

The leadership team that initiates and sponsors the initiative establishes intent. It has a responsibility to communicate that intent to all involved in delivering the initiative. It is the leaders’ statement of what they expect. It must drive the initiative, guide decisions, and answer questions.

Getting clear on intent is so much more than words shared among the senior team. The words are merely a starting point for the team to connect with the true purpose at a much deeper level. Ultimately, the leadership team must commit to the intent. That commitment requires moving from words to shared meaning to believing in the possibility created, aligning with that vision as a team, committing resources and funding it, and, most importantly, staking their reputation on delivering on the intent.

All of these things—words, meaning, belief, alignment, and commitment—must exist in parallel. The **words** consist of the language used to articulate realization of the desired outcome. The
meaning is the interpretation people have of the words used. Belief refers to how plausible the endeavor is perceived to be, given the human and financial resources available. Alignment is the visible, political stance taken in support of the words, meaning, and credibility applied to the desired outcome. Commitment requires that people’s internal belief and overt actions reflect an imperative to attain the true purpose of the initiative—not just its installed appearance.

Is intent a constraint or a straitjacket for implementation teams? Will they be frustrated by its rigidity? Quite the contrary. When used appropriately, intent enables large teams to be engaged in executing strategy, leverage their creativity and innovation, and still have confidence that they will produce the expected results. Without clear intent, the implementation team is constantly trying to guess what was in the mind of leadership. It proves to be a frustrating exercise even when they guess correctly, which they do about once in every three decisions. Intent provides direction while still giving them the freedom to be creative. The U.S. Marines use the concept of intent to guide troops in achieving the goals set by the commander in what is called “the fog of war.” The Marines believe that guiding with intent promotes independence and improvisation.

**Intent Management: Definition**

*Intent management is clarifying purpose, expressing it, and holding true to its integrity.*

**Installation Versus Realization**

When key projects or transformation efforts are not managed effectively, they sometimes melt down or never get off the ground. More often, what happens is that installation occurs, but not realization. In other words, something is put into place, but that “something” doesn’t attain what was intended and desired.

All change efforts go through installation as a phase. Here, attention focuses primarily on the physical insertion of solutions into the work environment. An organization has installed an initiative when it has announced, placed, and set up any needed support for the new solution—and when it has trained people in its appropriate use. The work to achieve installation is practical, tangible, and task oriented. A common example is the introduction of new software. Installation involves acquiring it, customizing it, plugging it in, and training people on how to use it. Its value is only realized when people are using it as it was envisioned and the true intent behind providing the new software has been accomplished—such as reducing customer service complaints, boosting sales numbers, or achieving whatever fundamental promise justified the investment. Installation can also have to do with establishing new assignments, roles, or responsibilities; defining new organizational structures; scheduling events; and myriad other activities. Installation gets the software working; realization changes the business performance. All initiatives must go through installation to get to realization. But as necessary as installation is to achieving both interim and ultimate goals, it is not the end state.

A solution reaches its promised end state when it fully achieves the ultimate desired outcome. Only then does an organization realize the value of its investment in a solution. Realization is about accomplishing what was originally agreed to when the money was allocated to build or buy the solution. Like installation, realization involves tangible, quantifiable indicators of success. Unlike installation, however, it also has subjective, though still measurable, aspects—the taste, feel, and smell of the solution’s desired effect. These aspects may sound too “soft” to

---

1 From *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions* by Gary Klein (The MIT Press)
be meaningful, but they are essential to the experience of what the situation or environment will be like when the hoped-for outcome is consummated.

To achieve realization, people must demonstrate the sought-after behaviors in a quality manner and sustain them over the appropriate amount of time. Therefore, intent management must take into account not only objective goals, but also the experience of working within the new environment created by the change. When intent management is successful, behavior, quality, and sustainability converge to produce the called-for result.

**When Intent Goes Awry**

Organizations often succeed in installing change, but it’s more difficult to achieve realization—the true intent. Most of the time, the results of key initiatives are:

- **Unrecognizable:** Having little resemblance to the original goals.
- **Underdelivered:** Yielding less than the intended result.
- **Overdelivered:** Achieving more than the intended result—usually with time and cost implications that limit sustainability. On the face of it, overdelivery doesn’t sound so bad. But it can actually be worse than underdelivery when the final solution proves to be too expensive to maintain. Overdelivery sets up high expectations, which can often lead to the solution being abandoned.

When any of these outcomes occurs, a gap exists between what was expected and what was produced. Senior management’s response is usually one of surprise, disappointment, and anxiety. Often, they cannot put their finger on where it went wrong; they just know that what they ended up with isn’t what they had envisioned.

Here are some actual responses from executives:

- “That’s not what we thought it would look like.”
- “The vision was great, but somewhere on the journey we lost our way.”
- “I can’t put my finger on it, but I don’t think they got it.”
- “How did it get from what we approved to what we’ve got now?”
- “It has the appearance of what we wanted, but somehow the essence of what we were really after just isn’t there.”

**Symptoms of Intent Mismanagement**

Indicators that intent has been poorly orchestrated include:

- **Lack of relevance:** The primary purpose is stated in such a way that the initiative appears to be unrelated to what is important to the target population.
- **Overly complex:** The intent is expressed in such detail and length that it becomes overwhelming. This is evidenced by thick books, consultant reports, and detail that clouds the basic intent. Such complexity limits the target audience’s ability to focus on the right things at the right time. The result? An inability to see the forest for the trees. To illustrate further, sometimes when people are visiting a foreign country and they’re having trouble being understood, they tend to speak louder. In a strategic project, the equivalent of
speaking louder—which is just as ineffective—is to say more, which typically results in large, bulky binders that no one reads.

- **Inaccurate retelling:** In any change initiative, the intent will undergo a series of retellings—level to level, person to person. We liken it to the “telephone game” we all played as kids in which each player repeats a phrase in the ear of the next person. By the time the message is said aloud by the person at the end of the line, it no longer matches the original phrase. Even a 5 percent error or omission in a retelling can cause a multiplier effect—a distortion of a distortion—that reproduces and radically changes the original intent.

- **Lack of internalization:** People don’t make the intent their own by fully aligning their actions with the new direction. It’s a fact of life that we all know well. People can behave publicly in ways that are consistent with the intent of an endeavor while their beliefs and private behaviors do not change—and, therefore, are not consistent with the true intent of the endeavor.

- **Compounded compromises:** Concession making and tradeoffs are inherent in the successful execution of major change. Some compromises are necessary and justified, but too many piled on can bring down an initiative. One bee sting might hurt, but a thousand can kill. In the case of poor intent management, it’s death by a thousand good, or misguided, intentions. Every decision along the way must be evaluated not only on its individual merits, but also against the overall intent.

**A Line of Sight**

To deliver on expectations, we must be able to draw a line from intent to realized outcome.

The *line of sight* for intent management is from *clarity* to *expression* to *integrity*.

Intent *clarity* is our starting point. Clarity means starting with the end in mind. It is a statement of the desired end state—but not by painting a picture of it, which is often impossible at the outset. Rather, it is a statement of expectations. Questions often asked in the process of clarifying intent are, “How will we judge success when we are finished?” and “What will we look for in the result that will make us proud of the effort?” The challenge is that clarity is not just for an individual, but also for the leadership team that is sponsoring the initiative. It is surprising how often a senior team can sit around a table, agree to fund an initiative, and be in apparent agreement on the initiative, yet each member of the team sees it differently. To be successful, the team must share the clarity and commit to the intent. Once the intent is clear and unambiguous within the leadership team, it must be imparted to others. Few strategic initiatives can be realized through the work of the leaders alone.

The second ingredient in intent is *expression*—the ability to articulate the intent to all who need to participate in its realization. Everyone who will be involved must understand the intent with equal clarity. The intent is an expression of what is in the minds and hearts of the leaders sponsoring the initiative. Without understanding the sponsor’s vision, the implementation team will either be constantly guessing what the leaders really wanted or continually returning to ask questions. The former will inevitably lead to an unsuccessful result. The latter leads to frustration on both sides as well as delays.

The third component of intent management is *integrity*. The intent that is now clear, expressed, and understood must be managed. Between vision and reality there are hundreds and even thousands of decisions that must be made. Each decision has the potential to bring the desired result into sharper focus or to blur it. Managing the integrity of intent means ensuring that each
decision on the path is in line with the true purpose of the overall effort. This seems obvious, but with the multitude of pressures that are inevitable during execution regarding time, resources, and funding, the intent often becomes lost in the decisions being made. Usually, a project has one person or group watching the time and often someone else watching the spending, but rarely is anyone charged with guarding the vision.

Can't this all be handled by the project manager? Experience tells us that on a major initiative, the answer is an unequivocal “no.” There is always tension around time, funding, and vision. The first two deal with installation and the last with realization. Yet, most project managers are focused and rewarded based on installation metrics. An intent architect is rewarded on realization and, therefore, must maintain tight vigilance on the integrity of the sponsor’s promise.

**Intent Integrity in Action**

The power of managing integrity was first highlighted in the automobile industry. Companies were frequently disappointed when the car that finally came off the production line bore little resemblance to the one they expected—the one they knew there was a market for. The complexity of realizing the vision for a new car—product design, marketing, production design, regulations, and affordability—requires thousands of decisions to be made. Each of these disciplines had someone looking out for its interests, and all made their decisions for good reason. But no one person had responsibility for the integrity of the vision. Honda was the first to introduce an integrity manager—a person whose sole role was to guard the vision at each step along the way, in each decision that was made. The first car produced this way was the third-generation Honda Accord, one of the most successful and enduring cars ever made.

**Intent Management: The Bottom Line**

Collectively, businesses spend hundreds of billions of dollars on strategic initiatives each year. The evidence is clear that, utilizing traditional planning and delivery approaches, each initiative begins with a 70 percent chance of failing. Lack of clarity, poor expression, and inadequate attention toward integrity all contribute to the failures. It doesn’t have to be that way.

For leaders, the cost is more than the dollars invested. A promise is made—to the boss, the board, the shareholders, and the employees—when funding for the project is secured. The leader’s reputation is on the line. Explicit and deliberate management of intent not only avoids disappointment, but it also protects one’s reputation. And, most importantly, it provides the critical starting point for creating transformational results in the organization.