

Team Processes & Tools #1

Aligning Your Initiative to the Business

(or How to get a senior executive to perk up, pay attention and sign on)

WHAT YOU NEED TO ACCOMPLISH:

- Align on and fully understand the business objective(s) driving the need for your solution
- Talk to executives on their own terms and help them to envision the potential in your idea

HOW TO DO IT:

1. Identify the business objective
2. Partner and align with your stakeholder(s)
3. Manage expectations

Identifying the business objective

Where to look

Often, business drivers are so highly visible that it is easy to identify them. Perhaps your CEO has hosted a Web conference to explain to employees that the company is about to launch a new product line. In another scenario, the EVP of human resources might have announced a work force reduction in a town hall meeting. Maybe the sales AVP has detailed a need to differentiate the company through your new service models.

In other cases, the business drivers may not be readily evident. A variety of resources can assist you in defining the key drivers within your organization. Helpful information may be found in the following:

- **Annual reports**—If your company is publicly traded, an annual report is produced to inform shareholders about past performance and future direction.
- **Quarterly reports**—While annual reports offer a wealth of great data, they only come out once a year, so the information can get a little stale. If you are six months past the annual report publication date and you need more recent data, quarterly reports offer a great solution.
- **Operational reports**—Statistics regarding operational performance are often highlighted in an operational status report.
- **Articles and press releases**—What is your company talking about? Often what is newsworthy is also aligned with the vision of the CEO and the business drivers.
- **Internal publications and newsletters**—What are the new buzzwords and hot projects? Where is your organization focusing its dollars and resources? This is another excellent way to begin to define the business drivers.

It is important to have a basis of understanding of the key business drivers before you approach the stakeholders or before they approach you.



Is it a Problem or an Opportunity?

When you meet with the stakeholder, the purpose will be to agree on the business need and the value of impacting that need. Interview the stakeholder to determine which pieces of the corporate vision he/she is responsible for executing. Ask the stakeholder about the business plan for achieving that vision so you can understand the greater context.

Keep in mind that *business needs focus on the operational goals and initiatives of the organization*. There are often two types of business needs—problems and opportunities.

- **Business problems** define a gap between what should be occurring operationally and what is actually occurring at the present time. Alternatively, a business problem can occur when someone in management feels “pain” about the deviation and is motivated to address the problem. Examples could be excessive waste, low sales, high production costs or reduced customer satisfaction ratings.

- **Business opportunities** focus on a future operational goal. No current problem needs to be fixed. Instead, an opportunity needs to be optimized. Examples of opportunities can occur when two companies merge and a return is expected with such a large investment. Or perhaps a company is bringing a new product into the marketplace, providing an opportunity that can be maximized.

Examples of Business Objectives

Improving Operations & Cost Avoidance	Increasing Revenue & Expanding Market Share	Enhancing Competitive Advantage
Improving efficiency	Increasing sales	Improving customer service
Eliminating bottlenecks	Improving profitability	Improving relationships with suppliers/partners
Improving employee morale	Launching a new product	Strengthening company image
Increasing capacity	Diversifying into new areas	Improving service levels
Decreasing expense	Attracting new customers	Improving internal communication
Reducing staff requirements	Differentiating from the competition	
	Displacing competition	



Partner and align with your stakeholders

Determine WIIFM & benefits

As you plan for your stakeholder meeting, it would be beneficial to define your stakeholder's "what's in it for me?" (WIIFM) proposition. When you request a meeting, let them know that you would like to establish a partnership that will benefit the stakeholder in specific ways. Use the following points to plan your pitch:

- Business Objective/Opening Statement
- WIIFM Benefit 1
- WIIFM Benefit 2
- WIIFM Benefit 3
- Closing Statement

A sample pitch

"Hello, my name is Sara Kindle. I am currently in the process of consulting with our leaders to make sure our planned initiative supports the goal of 20% growth by the end of year. The benefits to you include:

- Reducing sales team ramp-up time and preserving time in the field
- Increased product awareness and confidence in positioning
- Shortening the overall sales cycle

Are you available next Tuesday at 2:30 or Thursday at 9:00 to discuss?"

The interview

As you consult with each stakeholder, keep in mind that the primary question you are trying to answer is, "What are the business needs that you are seeking to impact?" During the meeting, begin by briefly stating your understanding of the business need and ask if you have an accurate understanding.

A good place to start is to ask the stakeholder what success means to them. This is the value of positively impacting the business objective. As success is described, ask quantifying questions where appropriate:

- Increased revenue? By how much? In which areas?
- Improved quality? Improved how?
- Reduction in turnover? What percent reduction?
- Improved sales? By how much?
- More satisfied customers? In what way?

To increase your context, it may be helpful to ask what the repercussions would be if the objective was not met. Through these questions, you should be able to define the business value associated with impacting the objective and set the stage for establishing project goals.



Sample chart to document your stakeholder conversation

Business Objective	Stakeholder	Link to Corporate Strategy	Business Problem or opportunity?	Impact Value	Consequences of not impacting
Raise sales of X product by 10% by the end of the fiscal year	George Smiley, VP Operations	Achieve the lead market position in integrated solutions	Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerated revenue growth; pre-empt competition in APJ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited revenue growth; loss of market share to Acme Corp; poor market penetration into APJ

Manage expectations

During this initial meeting with your stakeholder, it is critical to set expectations. Implementation of your solution will take resources and time. Realizing results also takes time. While it is not realistic to assume that major changes will take effect in a month, it is also not likely your stakeholders will be willing to wait a year to see results. **It is important that you manage your stakeholder's expectations regarding the deliverables and ability to see results.**

Most organizations operate on a “quarterly” calendar, set quarterly performance goals, publish quarterly numbers, etc. If your organization functions in this way, it is a good idea to set up your data collection and reporting timetable to follow the same timing. By doing so, you **ensure that your efforts remain in line with changing organizational goals and focus.**

Now that you know how your initiative links to the goals of the business, you can more confidently implement a solution that works, **measure your results in terms that leadership will understand and report results that impact the company where it matters.**

