

Welcome to the March 2002 issue of **Management Shorts**

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### **1. INTRO: The Challenge of Implementing Strategy**

**The hardest part of strategy is the implementation.** In most companies the critical players in strategy creation are members of the senior team, but **for implementation the critical players are often the front line managers and workers.** Management teams know this, but still struggle with bridging the gap between the picture in their minds and the daily activities of the worker in the cube down the hall.

This month's Management Short is a reflection on my own experience last fall as a "front line worker" in Team in Training (TNT), a fund raising program of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. Yes, there are some fundamental differences between high-tech strategy and biking an endurance race, but there are a number of techniques for goal setting and motivation that translate quite easily to the corporate arena.

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### **2. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Lessons From the Bike**

The goal of TNT is to raise money for research and patient services. Their strategy is an endurance training program that taps into the personal network of each individual participant. TNT is wildly successful (the Northern California chapter raised \$16 million last year), **because it has translated a high level strategy into specific tactics that guide and motivate each individual participant.**

This feat is even more impressive when you note that none of the participants gave up their day jobs – we all squeezed in the training and fundraising around our already busy lives. Kind of sounds like most strategic initiatives, doesn't it?

## CRYSTAL CLEAR GOALS

TNT has organizational goals of X millions of dollars raised and Y number of participants. I'm sure they are ambitious numbers, but I don't know what they are, and I don't really care. Those numbers can't give me any guidance in how to focus my fundraising and training efforts. And vague goals like "raise money" and "increase my biking endurance" wouldn't give me any guidance either.

TNT set very specific individual goals that kept me focused day in and day out. I had to raise a minimum of \$3,100 and I had to complete a 111-mile race on November 23<sup>rd</sup>. (Yes, I accomplished both!) There was no doubt about what I had to do to be successful.

In the business world only sales people get such specific goals. Staff in other departments get much fuzzier goals – sure you have release dates and product specs, but we all know how squishy it is to nail down quality and performance. That very ambiguity is why management has to work doubly hard to draw a vivid picture of what success looks like and to **show each worker what they can do individually to contribute to success**. Of course that is hard to do, but that is one of the critical functions of management! That's why we get the big bucks. ;-)

## CONCRETE ACTION STEPS

TNT not only gave me clear goals, they also gave me information and a model work plan – a calendar of daily work out routines, model fundraising letters, ideas for fundraising events, and data on average donations and return rate on solicitation letters. I could use my own judgement and creativity, but I didn't have to make it all up from scratch and I did have some guidelines to use in knowing where to focus my time and energy. (Did you know that an endurance athlete needs at least a gallon of water a day? If you're curious, I can tell you just what that translates to in terms of number of trips to the bathroom per day . . .)

In the business world it is rarely practical or possible to create such specific guidelines, but **the more specific you are, the easier it is for each employee to do the right thing** (Yes! The vast majority of employees want very much to do the right thing, if only they could figure out what that was!).

This is where most strategies fall apart – the senior team hasn't spent the necessary time thinking through what it would look like to implement the strategy. **Successful leaders know that strategy is all very nice, but execution is what makes or breaks the company.**

One client brought together a cross section of directors from all functions for a day of discussion in the **early stages** of strategy development. Senior management had identified a strategic direction that looked promising at a macro level, but knew they were missing the nitty-gritty implications of implementation.

A day with the directors gave them excellent feedback and the next iteration of the strategy was much more grounded in the realities of execution.

## **MEASUREMENTS & MILESTONES**

Crystal clear goals are great, but sometimes not enough if the end point is too far out. The TNT training program was 4 months long and some mornings it was hard to remember why an extra hour of sleep wasn't better than a chilly ride before work. But each Saturday I showed up for a team training ride that was longer and harder each week. If I didn't do my training during the week, I couldn't keep up with my training group and risked being dropped into a slower group. Falling behind is very public – no hiding! So, each Saturday I got a public kick in the pants that kept me going through the rest of the week. On the positive side, accomplishing longer and harder rides each week gave me confidence that by race date I'd be ready. The fund raising side had similar milestones and measurements.

So, in the business world, as tedious as the weekly update is, it serves an important purpose. This is even more critical for the strategic initiatives that often get pushed aside for the daily block and tackle work. I have one client team that spends 6 hours every month reviewing progress on the most critical strategic initiatives. It not only keeps everyone moving forward on large projects, and signals that the project is truly important, but also serves as a productive problem solving session to identify and resolve impediments.

## **COMMITMENT TO THE TEAM**

At the TNT kickoff event we were introduced to all the people who were working to support us. Each group stood as they were introduced – team honorees, team captains, head coaches, assistant coaches, and mentors. At the end of the introductions there were more people standing than sitting! I remember thinking, **“Oh, my God! I can't let all these people down!”** That thought was with me every week as I interacted with this army of supporters and on Saturday rides where my progress was visible to all of them.

Peer pressure is a powerful thing, which is one reason why teams are so valuable in companies. It is one thing to tell my boss that I'm not delivering and quite another to let down my whole team. A future newsletter will go into more depth on concrete steps that you can take to build cohesion and team commitment. (Call me if you need that information now!)

## **SUPPORT**

The kickoff event also sent a powerful message about the culture of TNT – **all of these senior and more experienced people were in their roles to support me in being successful.** This is analogous to the CEO who draws his

organizational chart upside down to emphasize that senior management works for the front line employees.

On a practical level I had a mentor who met me on the first day, helped me get oriented, and checked in with me once a week to see how I was doing and offer advice and encouragement. I jokingly started to call him “boss” and he replied, “No, you’ve got it backwards, I work for you.” Wouldn’t it be great if every manager thought this way!

In the corporate setting, experienced employees may need a lighter touch, but they still need to know that help and advice is available when needed.

### **EXPERIENCING THE IMPACT OF OUR WORK**

TNT is all about helping people with blood-related cancers. But as a participant I spent most of my time and energy on training and fund raising – it could have been easy to lose sight of the end goal. (As compelling as serious illnesses are, my own daily reality was more about burning thighs and saddle sores.) This was the purpose of our team honorees – people living with blood-related cancers. They rode with us, they staffed our rest stops, and they shared their stories with us. Particularly motivating for me was the story of Bennet, who took part in a trial of a drug developed with funds raised by TNT. With none of the debilitating side effects of traditional chemotherapy, the drug allowed Bennet to train with us all through his treatment. Watching him whiz by me at top speed was a wonderful and motivating sight to see.

Okay, the next iteration of a web browser isn’t quite as exciting as cancer research, but **everyone cares about making a contribution** and the more they see and experience that contribution, the more motivated they are. Give your engineers an opportunity to interact with customers. Let your support staff know how they make their internal customers happy and productive. Nothing is more demotivating than the thought that your work doesn’t matter. **The more distant the work is from the end goal, the more time you as a manager have to devote to making that connection.**

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### **3. FINAL THOUGHTS: A System That Creates Competitive Advantage**

TNT is effective because they’ve built an **entire system** to attract, train, and motivate thousands of volunteers. Other fund raising organizations can copy bits and pieces, but replicating the entire program is a huge challenge. If TNT were a commercial enterprise we’d say they had a commanding competitive advantage. The strategy isn’t fancy or complex, but the implementation is masterful – and it doesn’t happen by accident.

**Does your company have a system for aligning the work of front line workers and managers with corporate strategy?** Not sure how to start? Give me a call to discuss tactics that would work for your company.

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Please forward this issue of Management Shorts to colleagues and friends who count on others to implement their plans.

Warm regards,  
Andrea

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About Management Shorts

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**Management Shorts** is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.

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