

Welcome to the January 2003 issue of **Management Shorts**

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### **1. INTRO: Traction Revisited**

I talk a lot about “getting traction”. From my tag line – “Helping Management Teams Get traction on the Critical Issues” – to my free white paper – “Getting Traction: How Management Teams Can Spend Less Time Spinning and More Time Getting Things Done”. I return to this idea over and over because the ability to execute on good ideas is so central to building successful companies.

So, what do we really mean when we talk about traction? One of my clients defines traction as “forward momentum – moving in the right direction on the right things”. Some people call it “execution” or “implementation”. I think of traction as coming to closure on complex decisions AND moving forward to action.

Traction sounds obvious, but can often be elusive. For that reason, I find that I constantly return to the topic with new ideas to help clients move forward from thinking to action.

This month I want to focus on the ever-open initiative that has strategic importance, yet never quite gets implemented. This is the action item that never gets checked off. It’s the one that causes CEOs to ask, “How do I hold my people accountable when we are all busy and overloaded?”

I’ve found that focusing on key “traction factors” can get a stalled project moving.

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### **2. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Traction Factors**

A client recently asked me to help his management team get traction on their action items. He was frustrated by what looked to him like a failure to deliver on

commitments. “We all agreed that these initiatives were strategically important, but week after week (and month after month!) goes by with no progress! How do I hold people accountable?”

When I met with the team, I started by asking them to list all the initiatives in the past two years on which they had been SUCCESSFUL in getting traction. This instantly changed the mood from one of defensiveness to one of pride and excitement – “look at how much we’ve accomplished!” Much to their surprise, there was a long list of successful projects – the focus on what wasn’t getting done had obscured their record of success (and left them feeling less capable than they really were).

Our next step was to identify the factors that made this success possible. What factors answer the question “Why were we able to get traction on these initiatives?” The discussion generated the following list of “Traction Factors”:

- One Clear Owner: Others might contribute, but only one individual is the owner and is ultimately accountable.
- Clear Priority and Importance
- Clearly Defined End Goals: If they are not clear, the first task of the owner is to define the desired outcomes
- Goal is Revenue (or Profit or Cost) Driven: A goal like “improve customer service” that isn’t clearly connected to a monetary benefit just doesn’t resonate strongly enough with this team – a goal like “reduce cycle time by 2 weeks” has an obvious cost savings that creates laser-like focus for the team.
- Measurable Goal: There’s no hiding when the owner and everyone else knows what success looks like.
- Milestones: Check-points along the way ensure that long term projects are moving along
- External Accountability: Often a customer deliverable.
- Event Driven: Conference, offsite, board meeting, etc.
- Visibility to Management Team: Members of the team put pressure on the owner if they don’t see progress
- Buy-In: The owner believes in the importance of the action item and sees the long term benefit
- Owner Feels Empowered: Owner can commit resources and take actions needed to implement

Quite a list. Notice what is NOT on the list. There is nothing about some individuals being better than others at getting things done. No “Joe always delivers on his commitments.” Of course there are people who are better at getting things done – those are the people who get promoted and end up in management positions. But when a senior team is struggling with execution, assigning individual blame is rarely the best place to look for a solution. (Yup, sometimes that is the problem, but it is the last factor to look at, not the first.)

Now that we have a list, how does this help us? The list changes the whole approach to accountability. The typical action item review tends to be about assigning – and avoiding – blame. With the list of Traction Factors we now have a different approach. Lets go back to my client group.

An initiative we'll call the ABC Project has been languishing for several months. Meetings are held, there is much talk and argument, minutes are distributed, but nothing concrete seems to happen. I ask the team to look at the Traction Factors and say, "How many of these factors are present in the ABC Project?" Silence. . . "precious few". No single owner, no clear outcome, no measurable goal, low buy-in from the individuals involved, little visibility to the management team and no clear vision of how this initiative will help the company achieve any of its strategic goals. Based on this quick diagnosis, the team could now take action and make the initiative more "actionable".

Let's look at a more concrete example. You are the VP of HR and the CEO says to you, "We need to reduce turnover. Bring a plan to our next staff meeting." Before you even start creating an action plan, you need to build in some traction factors. WHY do we need to reduce turnover? What is the current level of turnover and how does that impact the bottom-line and our ability to meet our strategic goals? Are we losing our most experienced technical people? Is that leading to missed deadlines or an inability to innovate ahead of the competition? Or is the turnover among junior people? What would success look like? A 10% reduction in turnover or a 50% reduction. By next quarter or by next year? How much money can you devote to solving this problem? Your first step as owner is to engage the CEO or the entire team in a conversation that answers these questions.

UPS was successful in solving the problem of very high turn over among its route drivers. There is a long learning curve among route drivers and UPS could document the difference in productivity and customer retention between new drivers and experienced drivers. For UPS, much of the value they deliver to customers depends on retaining experienced drivers. So the goal of reducing turnover had a clear strategic and financial importance. The next step was to figure out what was driving turnover. Would raising salaries improve turnover? Nope, it wasn't about money. Interviews and focus groups turned up a high level of dissatisfaction with the process of logging in and loading packages on trucks. Drivers found it tedious and burdensome. The solution was to split out the job function and hire lower skilled and lower paid workers to load the trucks. The learning curve for loading trucks is fairly short, so a high turnover among loaders had little negative impact on the business. This is an action plan with real traction.

In the UPS example you have a few traction factors present: In particular, you have a clear, measurable outcome that is cost driven and of obvious strategic

importance. To create traction you don't need ALL of the traction factors – that only happens in some utopia where management is a crisp scientific process, not in the real world of ambiguity and uncertainty where timely action is more important than perfect action. To get traction you need just ENOUGH traction factors so the project gets done.

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### **3. GETTING STARTED: Create Your Own List of Traction Factors**

You can use the Traction Factors list created by my client team, but you will be more successful (and get more traction!) if you involve your team in creating their own list. The list will be specific to the culture of your company AND your team will actually believe in the list and use it. Follow these steps:

1. List the projects that have been successfully completed over the past year or two. Create the list before stopping to analyze it. Get as many items up as possible.
2. Now ask “What are the factors that were important in getting these projects completed?” Don't worry about whether the factor was present in all or even most of the projects. Just list anything that was helpful in even one project.
3. If the list is too long, identify the top 10.
4. Now you are ready to make changes. You can focus on specific projects that have been languishing or you can take a broader view and discuss “ways we can increase the presence of the Traction Factors in our team or company.”

When the discussion is framed this way you can get right to the heart of the issues without the usual veiled comments and jockeying that are more focused on blame than on getting things done.

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### **4. A FINAL WORD: Appreciative Inquiry**

Those of you who are familiar with the concept of Appreciative Inquiry may recognize it here. The basic idea is that positive thought leads to positive action, so it is most productive to spend your time thinking and talking about what works, not about what doesn't work. If you'd like to learn more about Appreciative Inquiry, check out the July 2002 issue of Management Shorts. Back issues are available at <http://www.topica.com/lists/shorts/read>

Appreciative Inquiry doesn't take any fancy techniques. Take a look at a problem that has defied resolution. Can you change your perspective from “What is

wrong?” to “Under what circumstances are we good at this?” Go ahead and try it – what have you got to lose?

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Wishing you lots of traction in 2003!

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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