



BOOK: Humanizing Strategy: How to Master Emotions, Values and Beliefs When You Execute Plans¹



Geert Vercaeren
Consultant, Coach,
Founder of B15

ABSTRACT

The book ‘Humanizing Strategy’ provides you with new insights; an unconventional approach on how to humanize your strategy and make it really work. Based on leading research, real stories, case studies and practical tools, I take you into the world of often hidden underlying motivational forces that influence individual and collective behaviors in organizations. I will show how dealing consciously and effectively with these human dynamics can significantly impact the performance of organizations and the successful realization of strategies.

70 % of strategy implementations fail

It’s not a secret that most organizations struggle with strategy execution. Strategy execution is complex. Roughly 70 percent of efforts at transformation fail. People in organizations struggle to focus on the right priorities, fail to act in accordance with the strategic objectives, or simply do not engage with the vision of the CEO. Often, people are not convinced about the importance and urgency of the changes and simply do not buy-in to it. Leadership not setting sufficiently high aspirations and the lack of investment in critical skills, capabilities and behaviors (culture) are other major reasons why efforts at transformation fall short of desired results.

¹ [Here](#) you can watch the presentation given by Geert Vercaeren during the Belgian Financial Forum Webinar “De impact van de coronasituatie op de manier van werken in financiële instellingen: hoe aanpakken en wat brengt de toekomst?” on 3 December 2021.



The current development towards digitalization and ecosystems that comprise many different parties will only increase complexity. The financial losses resulting from failed strategy implementation are tremendous, not to mention the operational and emotional disruption to the organization and its people.

'Thinking is easy, acting is difficult, and to put one's thoughts into action is the most difficult thing in the world.' – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

What if you could lead an organization where plans and decisions are executed; where a team acts as 'one team'; where people work together spontaneously across teams? What if you could lead an organization where people are inspired and committed to the strategy? What if you could build an organization with efficiency, values, trust and fun at its heart?

No business strategy can afford to neglect emotional and psychological factors

Values, beliefs and emotions have a proven impact on human motivation and thus influence our focus, decisions and actions. Yet these elements are often neglected in the professional world, thereby dehumanizing strategies and organizations.

Leading research shows that emotion-based barriers present a major threat to strategy execution within organizations. Mistrust and low sharing of useful and timely information, low receptivity to effortful change, mechanistic actions and complacency are examples of barriers that prevent the sense of urgency and commitment which is necessary for change to prevail.

I believe there are several reasons why emotional and psychological factors are often neglected in the strategic process. Lack of knowledge and risk aversion of senior management play a role, but so does anxiety about dealing with emotions. In short, our dominant professional logic often does not include emotions.

The five key challenges and hopes of today's leaders

Why is so much time, effort and energy in teams side-tracked by emotions, tensions and conflicts? Why don't we get rid of the silos within my organization? Why don't people in my organization act and focus in accordance with our strategic objectives? Why don't people in my organization engage with the vision I shared? Why is my organization not ready to deal effectively with the rapidly changing challenges?

These are examples of recurring challenges and frustrations that leaders of organizations share with me on a daily basis.

I am convinced that it is possible to deal with these challenges that often block the realization of their ambitions, aspirations and related strategies. It is possible to build high-performing teams, to make people work together spontaneously across teams, to make people act and focus in line with the strategy, to inspire and create commitment to strategy and to build a (more) future-proof organization.



Pause for reflection

Looking at my organization today, the biggest challenges we have in realizing our strategy are:

- Much time, effort and energy of team members is side-tracked by emotions, tensions and conflicts (chapter 1).
- Getting rid of the silos within my organization (chapter 2).
- People in my organization do not act and focus in accordance with our strategic objectives (chapter 3).
- People in my organization do not engage with the vision I shared (chapter 4).
- My organization is not ready to deal effectively with the rapidly changing challenges (chapter 5).

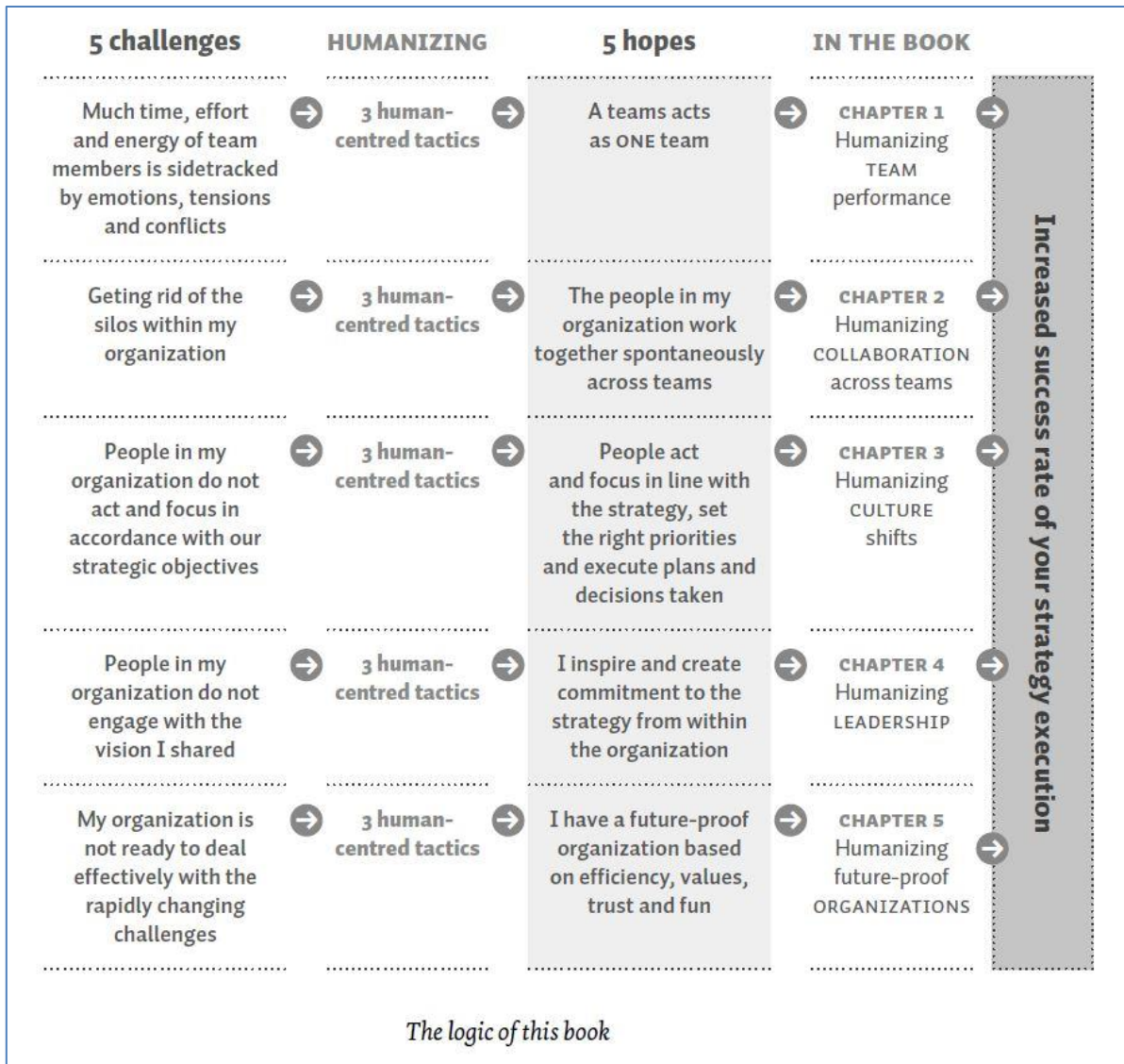
OR

Looking at my organization today, investing in one or more of the following areas will have a positive impact on the successful realization of our strategy:

- A team acts as ONE team (chapter 1).
- The people in my organization work together spontaneously across teams (chapter 2).
- People act and focus in line with the strategy, set the right priorities and execute plans and decisions taken (chapter 3).
- I inspire and create commitment to the strategy from within the organization (chapter 4).
- I have a future-proof organization based on efficiency, values, trust and fun (chapter 5).

My book is structured around these five challenges (frustrations, fears) and hopes (ambitions, aspirations) of today's leaders. It gives the reader insights and practical tools on how to deal with these critical challenges by taking a human-centered approach; it shows how to humanize your strategy and make it really work. The picture below visualizes the basic logic and structure of the book and explains how applying human-centered tactics in these five different domains will significantly increase the success rate of your strategy execution.

Each of the chapters is structured in a similar way: in five parts. They start with 'why it matters': how the topic impacts the success of your organization (part 1). Afterwards I tell you a story about a project, initiative or intervention I conducted (part 2) followed by three less conventional, human-centered tactics that I experienced as highly impactful in dealing with this challenge (part 3). Each chapter ends with a summary of the main points (part 4) and gives you some practical instructions on how to get started (part 5).



Increased success rate of your strategy execution

A five-step approach to humanize your strategy

Often interventions to build high-performing teams, improve collaboration across teams, develop leaders, shift cultures and build future-proof organizations do not tackle the root cause but simply fix its manifestations.

For me it is critical to identify the type of challenge you are dealing with: adaptive or technical. A technical challenge is defined as one that can be solved by the knowledge of experts, whereas the adaptive challenge



requires new learning. When the problem definition, solution, and implementation is clear, I call this technical challenge. Adaptive challenges are characterized by changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties, and require learning during the process of problem definition and solution.

The biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems

It is key to name the real issues so we can start implementing the appropriate structural and behavioral tactics to deal with these. Examples of behavioral strategies are installing trust and psychological safety, creating shifts in mindset, and changing behaviors, etc. Using mental tools to facilitate changing behaviors is another practice I often apply and that pays off. The figure opposite explains the difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges as well as how to deal with them.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS VERSUS ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES	
Technical problems <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Easy to identify2. Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert4. Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions6. Solutions can often be implemented quickly	Adaptive challenges <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Difficult to identify (easy to deny)2. Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships & approaches to work3. People with the problem do the work of solving it4. Require change in numerous places; usually cross-organizational boundaries5. People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges6. 'Solutions' require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

The difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges (Source: The Practice of Adaptive Leadership by Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky)

The approach in dealing with the challenges described above is what I call a socio-technical approach; the approach combines a structural, technical perspective with a psychological one, focusing on human dynamics. In my experience, the structural, technical dimension is mostly well embedded in the basic logic of leaders in dealing with strategic challenges. The more human and psychological part is often missing in terms of perspective, approach, and solutions. Therefore, I emphasize the human-centrism of the approach in this book.

Each of the three human-centered tactics explained in the different chapters fit into a five-step approach, as visualized in the figure below; this is the approach I developed and apply to humanize strategies and it significantly increases the success of realizing them.

The 5 critical steps are:

1. State (what you think is) the issue.
2. Explore and discover insights related to the challenges above (visible) and below (invisible) the surface.
3. Name the real issue and create an understanding as to why it happens and its impact on performance.
4. Implement structural and behavioral tactics to solve the real issue.
5. Reinforce and embed the change.





Some final piece of advice to leaders

At the end of my book I share some final thoughts and advice with leaders to make the realization of strategies a success by taking a more radical human-centered perspective.

When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.'
– Max Planck

Advice # 1: Find the real issue, and root cause before you start solving it.

I recommend to 'keep asking why' for much longer. Nowadays, I find that all too often solutions are implemented that fix symptoms. They are expensive short-term technical solutions with limited to no impact. I recommend leaders to focus more on the emotional and psychological factors at stake. Keep in mind that there is a rationale behind every human act – a logical explanation – even for actions that seem irrational.

Advice # 2: As a leader, be more self-aware about your own emotions and functioning.

Every day as a leader you make many decisions. These decisions involve interactions, and each of these can either support or harm the main effort of your organization. Be aware that because of the role modelling dimension you have as leader, the impact of a single behavior on the whole organization can be huge in a positive or negative sense. Self-reflection is a good starting point to create more awareness about your emotions and functioning as a leader.

Advice #3: Never stop investing in trusted relationships and psychological safety.

I strongly believe trust lies at the heart of effective interactions between people. It is the foundation of effective collaboration and teamwork and leads to open and constructive dialogue, accountability, high performance and results. Psychological safety (can we take risks in this team without feeling insecure or embarrassed?) is far and away the most important dynamic for building high-performing teams and organizations.

Are you ready for this?

1. Are you serious about making your strategy a success?
2. Do you have the patience to keep asking "why"?
3. Do you have the courage to take a less conventional approach?

If you answered YES to these questions, you will find this book inspiring and useful.

###

For more information about the book, please visit www.humanizingstrategy.com.

Order your copy at <https://www.lannoopublishers.com/en/humanizing-strategy>

