synopsis

manageris

Obtaining commitment through participation

Capitalize on a key driver of motivation and initiative

Didier Avril, série Storytelling

Our sources

This synopsis is based on the publications presented below and on the back page.

The Art of Engagement
Jim Haudan, McGraw-Hill,
2008, 251 pages.

The CEO, Chief Engagement Officer
John Smythe, Gower,
2007, 212 pages.

In their 1996 book The Balanced Scorecard, Robert Kaplan and David Norton sounded the alarm when they noted that only 10 percent of stated business strategies are actually implemented. The problem is not that these strategies are rejected as unfeasible or unreasonable, but rather that the organization is not able to rally people sufficiently to implement them.

What many companies lack is truly committed employees, that is, people who feel personally responsible for contributing to the success of the company strategy, implementing necessary changes, and ensuring that the business operates efficiently from day to day.

To restore this mindset—frequently observed in startups—there is nothing like getting people to participate in developing the decisions that they will be asked to implement. The publications that we have analyzed propose three steps to build this type of commitment:

- **Provide the entire organization with a complete vision of the company's opportunities and challenges. Use simple terms, but without masking the complexity of the situation.**
- **Do not furnish ready-made answers to the challenges ahead, but allow people to search for solutions and draw their own conclusions.**
- **Create an environment that encourages initiative by allowing people to experiment and take risks.**

In this synopsis...

1 A growing need for **commitment**

Companies today need committed employees. In every industry and business, the most successful organizations are those whose people feel personally committed to ensuring that the company strategy succeeds, that necessary changes are implemented, and that the business runs efficiently from day to day.

True commitment is a huge driver of performance **(Figure A)**. Chrysler, for example, was on the edge of bankruptcy in the mid-eighties after having been at the top of the auto industry for decades. Following long discussions, the U.S. government agreed to bail the company out with a loan to be repaid once the crisis had passed. A Chrysler executive recounts in *The Art of Engagement* that this was an amazing experience for him. Far from being disheartened by this crisis, employees bonded together. They were filled with a powerful sense of belonging tinged with patriotism, e.g. *"We won't let our country down!"* Practically to a man, employees threw themselves body and soul into the challenge of turning Chrysler around. Everyone worked towards a common goal, and was willing to commit more than their theoretical working hours. The bureaucracy and inertia that had hitherto characterized the company seemed to evaporate overnight. *"We had a shared objective and all of us were fully committed to attaining it."* The company performed better than it ever had before. Paradoxically, once the debt was paid back, this drive disappeared, as the previous challenge was not replaced by another that could mobilize people in the same way. After years of drifting, the company was sold and resold without ever recovering its old momentum.

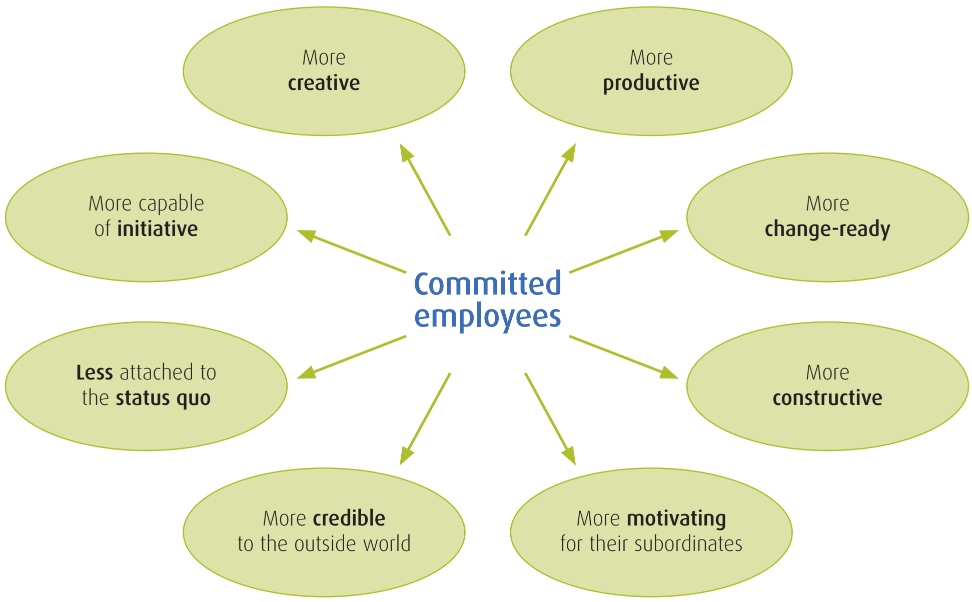
> **Simply following orders from superiors is no longer enough.**

Organizations where people simply follow orders clearly suffer from enormous competitive disadvantages:

- Great responsiveness is needed to adapt to an environment that is changing at accelerating speed. Companies cannot afford to wait until feedback reaches the top of the organization, is analyzed and used to make decisions, which are then cascaded down through the hierarchy so that people will know what to do. Today, teams on the ground must be able to grasp opportunities as they arise, identify emerging needs and adapt rapidly to shifts in the environment.
- The ability to take initiative becomes more critical as companies become more global, with headquarters often far from the field. The more geographically dispersed the company, the more employees must understand specific local needs and adapt directives to this context. In the same manner, the more diversified the company, the more executives must rely on the skills of specialists in every field.
- Finally, in today's knowledge economy, employees are generally expected to do more than just exe-

FIGURE A Why is it important to have committed employees?

A study, conducted with the McKinsey & Company management consulting firm by the author of *The CEO, Chief Engagement Officer*, shows that having committed teams is an essential performance factor. Engagement is effectively correlated with the following behaviors:



Based on ***The CEO, Chief Engagement Officer***, John Smythe, Gower, 2007.

cute predefined processes correctly, but to exercise good judgment and continuously show discernment. Needless to say, giving them predefined instructions no longer makes sense!

The traditional hierarchical model is thus widely considered to be obsolete, and has given way to a committed workforce capable of showing discernment and taking initiative and risks when necessary.

Now, this type of commitment is frequently observed when launching new businesses or when businesses are very small, but is difficult to maintain over time, particularly in large organizations.

The author of *The CEO, Chief Engagement Officer* worked with the McKinsey consulting firm to analyze this concept of commitment. His study pointed out that among the various ways to get people engaged, the most effective is to have them participate in developing the decisions they will be asked to implement **(Figure B)**.

Getting employees to participate in developing strategy is not easy, and certainly will not happen spontaneously. Company leaders may even consider that any attempt at participative design is not only a waste of time, but may even be detrimental to the company's responsiveness and efficiency. Yet, sharing decision making authority is truly the best way to inspire people and get them engaged.

Three conditions are needed to obtain greater commitment:

- Help people understand what they are contributing to build;
- Allow people to participate in developing solutions;
- Create an environment that is conducive to taking initiative.

2 A broader **vision**

Companies that want commitment must ensure that people deeply understand the challenges facing the business **(Figure C)**. This enables them to not only know what changes are required, but also emotionally feel the need or even desire for them. This understanding is also necessary for people to channel their energy and efforts in the right direction.

That is why all employees must understand the overall company strategy and how their responsibilities fit into it. Because they often take employee commitment for granted, leaders will underestimate the importance of giving meaning to individual efforts and assume that the objectives are obvious to everyone. They tend to forget that, while they are in a position as senior decision-makers to have a clear overview of the company's challenges, this is far from being the case for the majority of employees further down in the organization.

> To participate mindfully, people must understand what they are helping to build.

Three principles appear to be particularly useful in reaching this objective:

Provide everyone with the "full picture"

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge noted, "*We are taught to break problems down to resolve them more effectively. But this creates new problems, in that*

FIGURE B Four approaches to get people engaged

Among the various potential approaches to motivate employees to implement the strategy, the most effective is working with them to jointly develop solutions to the company's challenges.

SAY	SELL	INCLUDE	JOINTLY DEVELOP
Tell employees what their leaders have decided.	**Convince employees of the value of what was decided by their leaders.**	**Ask employees to think about how to apply what has been decided.**	**Design the solution jointly with employees**
A good idea in the following situations: • Crisis situations • When leaders are sure of their solution and certain that people are willing to follow along	*A good idea in the following situations:* • When leaders are sure of their solution and want to oblige people to follow along • People are reluctant or skeptical	*A good idea in the following situations:* • The strategy must be adapted for different situations • People must have some freedom to make decisions	*A good idea in the following situations:* • Leaders need the knowledge of their employees in order to decide • Leaders and employees do not share the same perception of the problem
INSTRUCTIONS	ARGUMENTS	WORK GROUPS	JOINT REFLECTION

Based on ***The CEO, Chief Engagement Officer***, John Smythe, Gower, 2007.

we no longer see the consequences of our actions." In the attempt to simplify the work of their employees to optimize efficiency, companies ended up masking the impact of individual efforts on collective success. This observation was the starting point for the inventors of the "just-in-time" production system, who noted that mass production had optimized the productivity of each step in the production process, but did not necessarily optimize the process as a whole. The Harvard Business Review article *Staple yourself to an order* shows how entrusting employees with complete processes rather than disconnected tasks is an excellent way to improve overall performance. Indeed, when people are responsible for whole processes, they begin to be concerned about the whole system, rather than just their individual productivity, and tend to look more closely at what other people in other parts of the system are doing. They are also more inclined to point out the flaws they observe when they appreciate the chain reaction that can be triggered by an error.

Individuals must have a complete vision of the system before they can fully commit. This vision gives meaning to their efforts, as illustrated by the parable of the cathedral builders. To the question *"What are you doing?"*, one builder replies, *"I'm putting one stone upon another."* A second answers, *"I'm building a wall."* A third says *"I'm building a cathedral!"* To fully commit, people must have an opportunity to envision the cathedral they are building.

Simplify the message

Employees at the base frequently judge those at the top very harshly. They may feel that their leaders are incompetent, bogged down in power struggles, or even dishonest! How to feel committed under these circumstances?

An analysis of this phenomenon shows that this lack of trust is attributable in large part to the message communicated by executives. The difficulty expressing the strategy intelligibly, as well as the overuse of jargon and acronyms—TQM, CRM, ERP, supply chain, kaizen, six sigma, etc.—is taken as a sign of ignorance or dissimulation! Few leaders recognize this trap; they are so immersed in designing the strategy from the start that they think everything is naturally crystal clear to everyone.

To get people engaged, companies must translate strategic objectives into language that is simple and understandable to everyone. This takes time! As Mark Twain quipped, *"I would have written a shorter letter if I had had more time."* Even an excellent strategy is of no use if people can't transcribe it into their own words, because they will never be able to adopt it or interpret it correctly in the scope of their own activities if they don't understand it. A case in point is the "Beat Netscape" motto launched by Bill Gates in the nineties. Not only was this message extremely simple, it was also extremely effective in engaging each and every Microsoft employee.

Also communicate the complexity of the system

Expressing the strategy in clear and simple terms should not be done at the price of distorting reality. To avoid confusing people, executives sometimes decide to communicate a truncated version of the strategy. However, by denying the complexity of the challenges at hand, they end up losing credibility, as people get the feeling that the stated strategy has no link to the real world or even requires doing things that are mutually incompatible. However, the value of certain strategies sometimes lies precisely in their ability to resolve the paradoxes that obstruct performance. For instance, one manufacturer cited in *The Art of Engagement* took the time to talk with people about the apparent contradiction between two key objectives—reducing inventory and increasing the proportion of on-time deliveries. Rather than denying the contradiction, company executives admitted that their demands were complex. They took this opportunity to explain that they did not expect people to make alternate tradeoffs between the two objectives,

FIGURE C The pillars of commitment

Observation of numerous companies shows that four basic prerequisites must be filled for people to be committed.

Feel they are part of something "bigger"	Be able to give meaning to their efforts	Have a sense of belonging	Know that their contribution makes a difference
Vision, objectives, pride	Values, accomplishments, projects	Collectivity, relationships, community	Impact, connections, measurement

Based on ***The Art of Engagement***, Jim Haudan, McGraw-Hill, 2008.

but to find a way to attain both simultaneously. This discussion improved the organization's understanding of the company's overall objectives, enabling people to take initiatives more effectively in the desired direction. In a contrary example, another business executive cited in the same book was trapped by the erroneous assumption that people need a simple motto to commit effectively. High management turnover was a major problem for this particular firm, so company leaders decided to establish a loyalty indicator and make this a strategic priority. As a result, people became very committed to this measure; so committed, in fact, that they stopped paying sufficient attention to the company's fundamental business objectives!

3 Broad **participation**

To be committed, employees must embrace the company strategy. Having them participate in developing the strategy is the most effective way to foster this. Contributing personally helps people not only understand the meaning of the strategy, but also feel like stakeholders in implementing it. The benefits of this approach are summarized remarkably well by a Chinese proverb, attributed to Confucius, *"Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember, have me participate and I will understand."*

Obviously, every employee cannot realistically be expected to imagine what the company strategy should be. Many leaders give up on the idea for fear of creating chaos or expectations they cannot meet, or for simple lack of time. It is nonetheless possible to involve people at their respective levels, on aspects where they can add value:

Give each employee a voice

A key role of leaders is to decide when to give subordinates a voice, who should speak and on what topics. The power to contribute is critical in creating a sense of involvement. The heartfelt cry of an auto worker in *The Art of Engagement* testifies to this fact: *"I've been working here for 20 years, and this is the first time I'm not being told what to do, but asked what I think."* His conclusion: *"This is the first time I have felt valued."* Employees were deeply touched by the sincere attempt of the company's leaders to listen to them, and became more engaged, which rapidly translated into better performance for the business.

Ask employees to seek solutions

Many executives reflexively propose their own solutions or appoint a team of experts to define the best solution. Yet, this ignores the fact that people derive a sense of accomplishment from seeking and finding solutions. Not to mention the fact that employees in the field have a perspective on operational realities very different from that of senior executives, and are thus often

FIGURE D Helping people seek solutions

People are more likely to be motivated to implement a solution they have contributed to developing, than one that is simply explained to them. Managers must support employees along this "path of discovery."

Stages of discovery	Support
CURIOSITY	• Stimulate curiosity by creating surprise or shock. For example, take people into the field to let them see for themselves the impact on customers of late delivery; invite people to consider the business from a completely new angle for them (e.g., profitability of each additional dollar invested in the business).
DATA	• Once their curiosity is piqued, provide facts upon which people can start forming their own opinion. It is important at this point to provide "raw" data unfiltered by analysis, and put them on a trend curve.
SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS	• Everything is interconnected in a business. However, most people do not think in terms of systems. They must consequently be helped to see the interconnections, by giving meaning to trends, pointing out the links between different facts, using images to illustrate the relationship between various dimensions, etc.
NEW IMAGES	• Following the preceding steps, people will naturally begin to see things in a new way. They must be helped to articulate these new images more precisely, with questions such as "What connection do you see between these different elements?" "What seems most important to you?" etc.
EXPERIMENTATION	• Finally, the discovery process is complete only once people have had a chance to put their new conception of the situation into practice. This new conception is fragile, and must be anchored and refined in the real world. At this stage, people should be focused on the "how," with questions like "How could we do such and such?"

Based on ***The Art of Engagement***, Jim Haudan, McGraw-Hill, 2008.

able to make valuable contributions to strategic thinking.

In fact, executives interviewed state their surprise at noting the energy that previously passive employees put into resolving issues they consider important. Rather than providing responses, leaders should help employees in their search for solutions **(Figure D)**.

Allow people to draw their own conclusions

"We tolerate the conclusions of the boss, but we act according to our own." As cynical as this observation may sound, it is an accurate reflection of what many leaders face. Who has never organized a kick-off seminar, obtained the support of attendees for changes decided "collectively," only to note a few weeks later that nothing had changed? Too often, such meetings are not really participative, because leaders listen to people, but sort and summarize the relevant conclusions themselves.

To get employees truly engaged, leaders must resist the temptation to tell them what they should think. The importance of this principle can be illustrated by the phenomenon that triggers laughter when people listen to a humorous story. A joke is only funny if listeners identify by themselves what is surprising or offbeat. If the narrator must explain the humor, it falls flat. Similarly, leaders must allow people to draw their own conclusions for them to truly embrace the analysis of the situation. This means that leaders must orchestrate thinking to encourage a certain convergence, but keep the process sufficiently flexible to ensure that employees actually do the thinking.

The most suitable approach is questioning, or "Socratic dialogue," which consists in asking successive questions to help people change the way they see things. This requires real conversation and two-way discussion, in which leaders are also willing to change their point of view based on these interactions **(Figure E)**.

> **People are more proactive and efficient in implementing a strategy to whose development they have contributed.**

4 An **environment** that encourages initiative

Being engaged means contributing a personal touch. People are vulnerable when they do this, because it involves taking risks. Many companies deplore the lack of commitment of their employees without realizing that their working environment makes it very difficult for them to take initiative.

Four aspects must be watched with particular care:

Free the minds of employees

People must be given a certain leeway in order to take initiative. When employees are under too much pressure—lack available time, feel obliged to succeed or comply with predefined standards—they cannot think, be creative and take advantage of their creativity at their leisure.

A first step in promoting commitment is to identify and attempt to minimize overwork. Otherwise, everyone will focus only on the most urgent matters and be unable to furnish the effort required for personal

FIGURE E Prefer dialogue to debate

Getting people to participate requires real dialogue. This often takes two prior steps, debate followed by discussion, before arriving at a real two-way dialogue.

Debate

People explain and defend their respective positions. This often ends up underlining disagreements.

Objective:

Clarify the opening positions of the various parties.

Suggestions:

- Ensure that individuals are given a chance to express their respective positions, despite the divergences of opinion.
- Don't surrender to the temptation to end discussion on a point of disagreement.

Discussion

People attempt to prove they are right. Arguments are exchanged, in an environment that is often confrontational.

Objective:

Analyze the relevance of the arguments of each individual.

Suggestions:

- Minimize sterile conflicts (interpersonal conflicts, etc.)
- Ask people to justify their positions concretely.
- Facilitate the expression of minority opinions.

Dialogue

The conversation becomes less confrontational to arrive at a collaborative phase in the form of two-way dialogue.

Objective:

Develop a shared vision of the problem, then a shared solution.

Suggestions:

- Change locations, take a break to allow people to cool down and be less confrontational.
- Ask questions that refer to the different points of view expressed.
- Suggest ideas that take arguments expressed into account.

Based on ***Leadership Unplugged***, Jacqueline Moore et Steven Sonsino, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

engagement. During a team seminar, a regional Taco Bell manager created a collage with the directives communicated by the company over the previous six months. The image was striking, as people could physically see the multitude of sometimes contradictory orders that were making it impossible for employees not only to understand the meaning of what was expected of them, but also simply to find time to satisfy even half of these demands. Similarly, a technology company estimated that each employee should work

> People will commit themselves only in environments that permit risk taking.

on 25 to 40 major strategic projects over the following twelve months. This kind of pressure left absolutely no room for personal initiative. Sorting out priorities is thus a basic requirement to restore commitment, in line with the precepts of the management guru, Peter Drucker. Asked how he would assess the performance of a leader, he answered, *"I would ask him what he had stopped doing in the past two months."*

Encourage "free and open discussion"

People generally won't show initiative unless they can express themselves freely. Indeed, employees who remain guarded and fear being judged on the ideas they express are less likely to let their imagination run freely to solve the problems they encounter. They also tend to hold back their ideas for potential initiatives until they have had the chance to test these ideas liberally in unrestricted discussions. Leaders must consequently promote a culture of two-way communication and frank, tactful discussion. To do this, they must show that they themselves are capable of listening sincerely and value the opinion of all their employees, including those who raise sensitive topics the organization may be reluctant to address. In particular, they should avoid being too formal, because leaders who adopt a very formal attitude are observed to inspire less trust than those who behave naturally and try to get a bit closer to people.

Allow people to experiment without fear

People are generally much more willing to commit when they are not afraid! Employees must feel empowered to test their ideas, even if these don't work out in the end. Promoting experimentation is very helpful in this regard. The video rental chain Blockbuster, for example, made "beta-testing" a regular part of its operating processes. New advances are systematically conducted according to a rationale of testing and improvement. In this way, mistakes are accepted and even considered to be a learning opportunity. This type of approach also fosters a culture of constructive feedback and naturally gets people used to commenting on the initiatives of their coworkers, even outside the immediate scope of their responsibilities. In this way, Blockbuster developed a very powerful capacity for learning. Other companies use simulators or e-learning modules, designed to enable employees to test various approaches without taking personal risks.

Take advantage of what already exists

Finally, to get employees committed to and engaged in implementing changes, leaders must be careful not to place excessive focus on the future vision. Although senior executives may see this vision as an inspiring goal, those lower down in the organization may find this vision unrealistic or even disparaging to decisions they contributed to making in the past. Leveraging what already exists is consequently very important. In particular, it is recommended to create stepping stones between the current situation and the future vision. Employees will be committed only if they feel that the vision they are pursuing is based on a realistic appreciation of the current situation. Management must also be careful not to criticize the decisions of the past without reason. Very often, decisions that seem inappropriate today were made in a different context and made sense at the time. Too many leaders demoralize people by challenging offhand what was done in the past. Instead, they would be better off trying to understand what motivated people in the past in order to avail themselves of similar drivers and incentives in the future.

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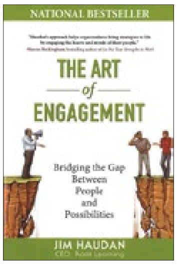
Getting people to participate in developing strategy is the prime path to obtaining their commitment. However, it takes more than just asking them to do it! They must first have a sufficiently complete vision of the company's objectives, well beyond the scope of their own responsibilities. They must also have opportunities to participate in upstream thinking. Finally, they must work in an environment that tolerates risk-taking and testing; otherwise, they will tend to safely stick to following explicit orders rather than taking a chance.

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

The Art of Engagement

Jim Haudan, McGraw-Hill, 2008.



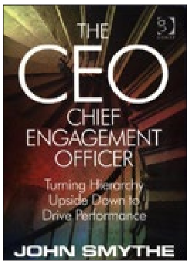
The author of this book, a strategy consultant, observes that companies do not need help in defining new strategies, as much as help in deploying the strategies they already have. In short, how to ensure that employees embrace the vision and move the company closer to achieve it in their day-to-day work?

In most organizations, there is a huge gap between what is theoretically possible and the reality, explained in large part by the lack of individual motivation. The author uses his experience to analyze in detail the reasons for this commonplace lack of engagement, i.e., overwork and too many often contradictory messages, an obscure and often obtuse strategy, fear of being vulnerable, excessively narrow vision of the company's business, lack of acceptance, perceived disconnect between the strategy and operational reality, etc. He proposes practical tools to promote commitment, tested in the scope of his consulting projects. Several examples, such as those of Taco Bell, Pepsi, Blockbuster, Chrysler and Harley Davidson, are described in particular detail. They are a particularly good illustration of how organizations have used techniques such as the clarification of complex concepts with drawings or simulations to rebuild commitment and engagement.

A book full of common sense that adopts just the right tone to remind us that businesses are nothing without people, and offers numerous tips on inspiring people to be as committed as they once were when the company was originally founded.

The CEO, Chief Engagement Officer

John Smythe, Gower, 2007.



John Smythe worked with the McKinsey & Company management consulting firm to perform a detailed study on employee engagement. This book describes the conclusions of that study and outlines operational findings for company leaders. Although generally rather dry in its linear format, it nonetheless contains a few choice morsels that practitioners will be more than delighted to put into practice.

The main conclusion of the author is that engagement does not arise from employee satisfaction or from manipulation by leaders adept at internal marketing. The key to commitment, concludes the study, is proving to people that they are trusted. Employees must consequently be given sufficient freedom to find their own solutions so that they can manage their projects and their assigned duties most effectively. In short, they must feel empowered to produce a value-added result. Chapter 3 in particular provides a detailed study of the various approaches for obtaining commitment—say, sell, integrate, jointly develop—and shows the clear superiority of the latter approach in many situations and over time. Replete with examples and quotes, this chapter incites readers to put the situations in which each approach is best suited into perspective.

The key drivers of commitment are presented in the second part of the book, sometimes a bit too superficially. Nonetheless, readers will find very relevant recommendations here, specifically with regard to testing and self-discovery. This book should be complemented with additional sources for more precise information on practical implementation.

Further readings

To explore this topic further:

- ***Making work more meaningful***
  (Manageris synopsis 148a)
  Improve employee motivation by giving more meaning to their work.
- ***Conversation, an essential leadership tool***
  (Manageris synopsis 129a)
  Develop the ability to convince people though well-conducted conversations.
- ***Keys to successful participative management seminars***
  (Manageris synopsis 143a)
  Combine the creativity and knowledge of a large group in a matter of days.
- ***Get people engaged around the vision***
  (Manageris synopsis 123a)
  Design and communicate a compelling vision.

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