

# The 'big conversations' are vital for success

Including employees in the bigger picture often elicits ideas and energy

**T**he way companies make strategy has a huge impact on their capacity-building. By involving more people in as many aspects of the process, they would raise their "strategic IQ" and ensure future competitiveness.

That's the view of Tony Manning, a management consultant and author of *Making Sense of Strategy*.

Manning argues that while business leaders routinely refer to people as their most important resource, they go out of their way to ensure that most people will underperform. They pay more attention to organisation structures than to soft factors such as human imagination and spirit. They are secretive, and give people little feedback on their performance.

"Executives spend a lot of time



**Talking cure ...**  
Tony Manning believes that talking to the people in the organisation can be the most powerful management tool at the disposal of any executive.

will pay attention to. If he or she talks about costs all the time, then others will pick up the cue and do something about costs."

Conversation, says Manning, is the number one leadership capability. The starting point is to have a clear point of view about where they aim to take their organisations, and how they intend getting there.

But this doesn't mean they should spend time writing new vision and mission statements. The real point is to give people a clear sense of direction and this can be done in a few bullet points.

Direction alone will not solve all a company's problems. It's common practice - especially in South Africa - to have many secrets and to keep most people in the dark.

If people are involved only in a firm's "small conversations", it should be no surprise that they never show initiative or reach their potential. By cutting them out of the knowledge loop, failure is assured.

Trust is a vital factor in unleashing human imagination and the

spirit - both of which must be given voluntarily. When leaders show they don't trust people, they court disaster. On the other hand, when they encourage people to share in the "big conversations", they quickly see a change. Morale rises, ideas flow and results improve.

The lack of management skill is the most serious crisis facing SA today, says Manning. The Skills Development Act will go some way towards redressing this situation. But the impact of training investments would be much greater if companies acknowledged that the most valuable training takes place not in the classroom, but on the job.

Strategic conversation is unmatched as a capacity-building activity. It equips people to think and act strategically, it empowers them to make sensible decisions and it gives them self-esteem.

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looking for the silver bullets that might save their sales and profits," says Manning, "but fail to see that their most powerful management tool is simply conversation.

"They know that what gets mea-

sured gets managed, but they miss the point that it's only what gets talked about that will be either measured or managed.

"If the boss is obsessed by customer service, that's what people