Guinness World Record in Organizational Transformation

October 1st, 2009: congratulations! I got this big job becoming the General Manager of Cisco in Israel; something I really wished for. So now what? Actually, the company's expectations weren't very high; a tiny operation of 250 employees in a tiny country; nothing significant to loose. At first I felt fear and doubt. What do we do now? What do I do now? Will I be able to lead this team? How do I create a successful operation? Can I do this at all?

Fast forward to December 31st, 2013: we finished another successful year doubling our in-country business; The President of Israel just awarded Cisco Israel a prestigious award for its impact on the economy of Israel; we broke a Guinness World Record connecting more than 10,000 high-school students in the largest ever virtual classroom that was delivered by the President of Israel and proved that technology can support the transformation of an education system (see YouTube). And, we recently hired our 2,000th employee.

So how did we get from there to here?

We knew we needed to set our direction. A "strategy" in the corporate world is a deck of 3-4 PowerPoint slides with great graphics. For me the most important thing was to make sure everyone connects with it. I knew that having a strategy doesn't mean people feel a part of it. In fact in most cases people seem to feel "it is not mine", "I don't agree with it", "the strategy is simply wrong and our executives don't get it". The result is – no alignment, no ownership, no sense of belonging.

So we had to take a different approach. We started by creating a common vocabulary in the organization: what do our Values mean to the company, but also to us as a team and to every one of us individually? What is the company's worldwide vision, strategy and execution plans? What is our wider regional game plan? And, what is the operating model of the company? We spent 4-5 days on that, over 3 months to achieve an understanding, a common vocabulary but this, obviously, was just the beginning.

We then moved to phase 2, which was focused on creating the right environment in the team. We invested the time to clean some of the legacy "toxic water" that we were operating inside of; fully discussing what was working and what was not at the team level and also the leadership team and myself. We were able to change some of the biggest negative perceptions and conversation of the team to more positive and empowering ones.

Only after completing Step 1 (common vocabulary) and Step 2 (cleaning the water and creating the right context in the organization) we could really start to imagine what was possible for us in our future.

Addressing the phases in the right order was critical. In fact I believe we couldn't have done it any other way. If you don't establish a common vocabulary people won't speak the same language (like the tower of Babylon). And, if you don't create the right environment of open, honest and courageous communications people won't bring a 100% of themselves to work.

And only then we moved into Phase 3: creating our strategy. But we did something different here too. Usually the strategy is established or dominated by the leader, the leadership team or the strategy & planning function. We decided to do it with the entire team, everyone together, in one room. So, for 2 full days we debated and argued for every sentence and word. But after 3 days – the strategy was ours! Everyone owned it. We allowed ourselves to think big about what we really wanted, even dream. And, we branded our strategies 'Strategic Promises' because they were our promises to ourselves for a better future.

The journey I described above wasn't perfect in any way. And, it was full of ups and downs everyday. However, it was enlightening and stimulating for all of us. And we all learned and grew so much.

Three of my key learning's were: (1) that setting big goals that drive the team to achieve extraordinary things is critical for building a high performance organization. In fact some of our biggest accomplishments were the things that at first seemed most unachievable, (2) that there are no shortcuts for a leader in creating a powerful team. We have to go through the alignment phase and create the right context for team discussion in order to truly create a meaningful organizational strategy. And lastly (3) that as a leader no matter how successful we become I have to stay focused on the source of the success, which is nurturing, empowering and coaching my people. This I sometime had to learn the hard way.

Boaz Maoz is General Manager Cisco Israel. Boaz is an extremely authentic and courageous transformational leader. He has driven extraordinary results by building a genuine team environment, empowering his people, developing leadership, and being relentless about open, honest and authentic communication. Connect with Boaz on LinkedIn.