



The MWB Journey

Must-win battle is a phrase that creates energy. The word *battle* suggests that there are competitors to be fought and defeated, and *must-win* implies the battles are urgent and important. So it is not surprising that senior managers who are unhappy with the current performance of their business find the idea of MWBs intuitively appealing, and it is not difficult to convince them that they ought to take their top teams away for a week to identify their MWBs and figure out how to win them.

And that is where we started, five years ago.

Since then, we have learned a lot. About how to choose the battles and how to win them. That reaching consensus and building commitment at the opening offsite event is, indeed, just the beginning of the journey. The bigger challenge is to mobilize the broader organization behind the chosen battles on an ongoing basis. An MWB can require a year or more of sustained effort, as is amply demonstrated in the Unilever Ice Cream journey recounted by its leader, Kees van der Graaf, in Chapter 8, “From Tent to Tent: The Unilever Ice Cream Journey.” As Kees makes clear, the journey does not get easier as it progresses—at no time can the leader sit back and relax, assuming that the journey will progress on autopilot.

The second thing that we have learned is that the must-win battle (MWB) journey should not be just an intellectual journey—figuring out what to do—it must also be an emotional journey. To win your MWBs you need people at all organizational levels to make an emotional commitment to the chosen battles and to begin to truly work together as members of a single team with shared objectives. The walls of the organizational silos have to be breached—permanently. This will take a shift in mind set, and that will not happen through a solely intellectual journey.

Our final learning is about leadership. We have worked with more than two dozen senior managers leading MWB journeys. Some are CEOs of major corporations, some are divisional managers within very large organizations, some are heads of medium-sized or smaller companies. Whatever their background and position, most find the MWB process becomes a personal leadership journey, as they discover that they cannot rely solely on the power of their position to force the organization forward. The same applies to their leadership teams. The focus has to shift to listening, assessing, persuading, and varying one's management style as the situation changes. As we discuss in Chapter 3, "What Does It Take to Lead an MWB Journey?" "emotional intelligence" helps, but it is usually not sufficient. Sometimes the leader needs to take an unpopular position—disappointing key people—and courage becomes the order of the day. But these are not just isolated acts of bravery, the leader needs stamina, the courage to keep on asking the right questions, to keep pushing the organization toward the chosen goals when energy may be flagging.

As you will see, these three learnings underpin our approach to designing and leading MWB journeys. Although none of the elements is new, combining them has proved very useful for leaders who want to cut through an array of uncoordinated initiatives, and bring focus and renewed energy to their organizations.

A Brief Aside: The Limits of the Military Metaphor

Before we start, it is worth saying a couple of words about the term *must-win battles* and its implied association with military strategy. Clearly, business and war are very different, both in their origins and their outcomes, and it would be disingenuous to compare the

importance of adding to shareholder value with matters of life and death. However, frequently the military metaphor is applied in business, and there are significant lessons business can, and often does, learn about strategy and organizational leadership from military thinking. Military and business are both concerned with leading groups of people against purposeful and ever-changing opponents, with one engagement not being an endpoint in and of itself but rather leading to yet another period of engagement. Both also recognize the importance of harnessing the intellect and the emotional commitment of their people toward a common external goal. But that is where the metaphor ends.

This book is intended for business organizations, led by leadership teams that are focused on winning in the markets in which they compete. It is about prioritization and choice. It is about intellect and emotion. It is about harnessing the power of the collective organization. It is also about, at each stage in the journey, taking stock and refocusing on the challenges ahead.

While winning each individual MWB is vital, the longer-term victory is to transform the organization into a cohesive team that can win these battles again and again.

We have written this book to provide a road map for managers who are sure the MWB approach is just what they need and who want advice on how to lead such a journey. But we have also written it for managers who are less sure of the approach but want to understand more fully what demands it would make on them and their organizations before they make a decision as to whether or not to proceed. So let's begin.

What Are Must-Win Battles?

The name says it all. MWBs are the three to five key battles that your organization absolutely must win to achieve its key objectives. That is a pretty short list. And although we find that most teams readily agree that focus is a good thing, they invariably find it difficult to agree on such a shortlist. Someone's priorities will not make the final cut. But avoid the trap of creating a long list of MWBs, because you will need to concentrate all your resources, and all management's attention, on your chosen MWBs. If the list is too long, both resources and attention will be dissipated, and you will end up with inadequate support for every battle. So be disciplined and be tough.

A well-chosen MWB has five characteristics.

An MWB should:

1. **Make a real difference.** The major criterion for determining what is and is not an MWB is impact. The key question is: “If we win this battle, what difference will it make?” The answer has to be that it will make a huge difference—not just to one part of the organization, but to the achievement of the company’s overall objectives.

This means, of course, that before you get serious about defining MWBs, your team needs to agree on what its overall objectives are. Most companies have a “mission” or “vision” statement, and these may be useful, but often they are too broad to provide the basis for developing MWBs. So what you need to identify before selecting MWBs are objectives that the management team really feel passionate about, along with the quantitative targets they need to meet to keep corporate office and/or shareholders on board.

When Unilever in Africa embarked on its MWB journey, the first thing it created was a new vision statement that generated a lot of excitement: “We will touch the lives of all Africans by better anticipating and fulfilling their cleaning, caring, and nutritional needs, everyday, everywhere.” *Everyday* was a key word, as it meant that products had to be low priced, in small packages, and distributed widely so they could be purchased on a daily basis. *Everywhere* meant that the parts of Africa where the company was doing less well, such as West Africa, would receive renewed attention. The vision was backed up by an ambitious target: “To double the sales in Africa in five years from €1.8 billion to €3.6 billion and deliver above Unilever average value creation.”¹ With this agreed vision and targets in place, the management team created five MWBs, presented in the following box.

2. **Be market-focused.** Managers are often tempted to create MWBs that emphasize winning internal battles. Don’t do it. Internal battles too often reflect the passion of executives who are competing among themselves for resources and attention. The point is to win in the

¹ See www.unilever.com/Images/2002%20Africa%20Regional%20Group%20presentation_tcm13-5214.pdf for further information on each of the MWBs chosen.

² Malnight, Thomas W., Killing, J. Peter, and Keys, Tracey S. (2004) “Must-Win Battles,” *IMD Perspectives for Managers*, Issue No. 106, March.

Unilever in Africa: Must-Win Battles²

Unilever's African Regional Group has a long history of success, which has resulted in leadership positions in most of its major product categories. Underlying this success was a deep knowledge of local markets, a high-quality local talent base, extensive distribution networks, and a consistent flow of innovations. But in 2001, regional management recognized that many of its sources of success could be imitated by competitors and that future success would require a new focus that would create new energy. To achieve this it developed five MWBs:

- Everywhere (ensuring Unilever brands are available everywhere in Africa)
- Everyone, Everyday for Life (providing for the everyday needs of all Africans)
- Priority Pillars for Growth (focusing resources around three key product categories critical for future growth)
- Winning West Africa (building West Africa to be as big as South Africa)
- Simply the Best (ensuring the strongest employees and operating culture working to the highest standards within the company, and with its communities)

The first MWB required a concerted effort to enter currently unserved geographic markets. The second meant that the group would build an additional €1 billion business in low-priced "popular products." The third involved focusing regional resources on product categories with the greatest long-term potential, even if they did not reflect corporate priorities in other markets. The fourth MWB involved balancing the regional geographic portfolio, moving away from a dependence on South Africa. Finally, the last MWB involved creating ways of working that would ensure the group could actually win the other four MWBs. Each MWB included specific measurable targets, and a specific set of actions required to win the battle.

Winning the MWBs would require managers who had been focused on delivering results within their territory to cooperate more broadly across the region. Some executives would become more dependent on others to meet their local objectives, losing much-valued independence. However, everyone realized that the collective opportunity could not be reached if each country continued to operate alone. And the commitment to a new way of working was made.

marketplace, not get a new transfer price from a sister division. Unilever Africa's management team created five MWBs, and one of those was an internal battle. That proportion is about right.

Specific targets underpinned each of these five battles, and sub-battles were identified that had to be won to support each of the main battles. We say more about the creation of supporting battles in Chapter 7, "Engaging the Organization."

- 3. Create excitement.** Your MWBs should be exciting—real challenges create real energy. Needless to say, you do not want your people charging off on hopeless quests that are impossible to win, but for maximum impact an MWB should focus on a collective objective that might previously have been thought impossible, such as dethroning a long-standing market leader. If your MWBs are not seen as exciting or meaningful by a large number of people in your organization, it will be difficult to maintain the commitment and resource trade-offs required to win them.

Some of your MWBs may be defensive—winning these battles will avoid calamities. Others will be more offensive in nature—moving into new markets, developing new technologies, taking market share from a larger rival, and so on. Both types of battles can be motivating, and in most organizations the final set of MWBs is a mixture of offensive and defensive challenges. There is no "rule" about this, the proportion of each will depend entirely on the circumstances in which the company finds itself. The Nestlé China example illustrates a situation in which defensive and offensive MWBs were under way at the same time. Both battles were won.

Nestlé China: Don't Kill the Cows

When Joe Mueller took over as head of Nestlé China in 1998, the business was not performing well. Financial results were poor, and the organization was demoralized. As Joe put it: "Nonachievement of targets had become a habit." Part of the problem was that the company was processing far more milk than it could sell, and inventories of milk powder and condensed milk were bulging. One solution being discussed when Joe arrived was to tell farmers that Nestlé would no longer take the milk that their cows produced. The result, in all probability, would

have been farmers with no means of livelihood, and slaughtered cows. One of Joe's first MWBs was to find a way to keep those cows alive! A classic defensive MWB.

At the same time, Joe wanted to make an offensive move in the local market that would get a "win" for the company, and provide a much-needed employee morale boost. Joe's decision, implemented in record time, was to create a "Chinese Kit Kat" chocolate bar designed exclusively for the Chinese market. The new bar, both smaller and lower priced than the Kit Kats sold in Europe, was exactly what was needed for local tastes and budgets.

Both MWBs were a success, and Nestlé China was turning in a strong financial performance within 18 months of Joe's arrival.

- 4. Be specific and tangible.** MWBs need to be tangible and specific enough to be measured. MWBs that say "we must innovate more!" or "get closer to customers!" or "reduce costs!" are not useful. Your MWBs need to be specific to your business situation, markets, and organization. If you find it difficult to create specific targets and actions required to win your battles, chances are your MWBs are not sufficiently specific or tangible.

Part of making MWBs tangible is to give them a reasonably short time frame. We usually find that more than half of the portfolio have a "time to victory" of two years or less. If the time frames are too long, the MWBs may not generate much energy, and may be constantly displaced by other things that appear to be more urgent. Kees van der Graaf felt that two years was about right for some of his ice cream business MWBs (see Chapter 8). But to Joe Mueller in Nestlé China, two years would have seemed much too long. He needed a quick win to boost morale, and he needed immediate action to get milk products flowing out of Nestlé warehouses so that farmers could continue supplying Nestlé with milk on a daily basis. Clearly, both company and industry conditions should have a major impact on the time to victory for your MWBs.

- 5. Be winnable.** There is often a fine line between creating MWBs that are exciting—both aspirational and inspirational—and just plain impossible. An underperforming European beverage company recently brought in a new CEO whose first job was to convince his best people—who were full of energy and ambition—that their first

task was not to overtake the industry leaders but simply to start making promises to stock market analysts that the company could actually meet. In other words, one of their first MWBs was to regain credibility with the financial markets after a stream of broken earnings promises. Later, they would focus on becoming number one in the business.

One reason that management teams sometimes do choose MWBs that prove to be unwinnable is that they assume the competition will not react to what they are doing. The logic is more or less “we will take this action and then that action to win our MWB, and the competition will be so surprised (or asleep) that they will just stand by and watch us do it.” Needless to say, this is not what usually happens, and one of the exercises that we describe in Chapter 4, “Opening Windows: Sharing Perspectives and Realities,” is designed to force the management team to get into the hearts and minds of stakeholders and competitors to prevent this “frozen competitors” assumption, which can easily lure the top team into unwinnable battles.

What Problem Are We Solving?

If MWBs are the solution, what’s the problem? Why do senior managers embark on MWB journeys? Although every manager we have worked with had his or her own reasons for the journey, what they had in common was a frustration with the current performance of their business and an impatience for improvement. They did not feel that incremental nudging or fine-tuning would bring about the necessary performance improvement. So they wanted to do something outside the norm to bring focus and energy to their teams, as their comments here indicate:

We had so-called priorities such as “innovate more,” which meant almost nothing. It was more a slogan than anything else. We needed to create real ownership of a few key priorities, that would bring us the passion, focus, risk taking, and entrepreneurship that we needed. Business as usual would not get us there.

We were too academic; we tried to make things perfect instead of making decisions. We were great at debates. Analysis drove out action.

We were a group of individuals in silos, not a team. There was no openness and even less trust. I had to break the prevailing mind set.

We were too internally focused, always talking about what we could and could not do. We need to concentrate on what we need to do to win in our markets and get on with it.

We were a group of talented people, producing mediocre results. The potential to do much, much better was there.

A careful reading of these quotes suggests that these managers actually faced two problems, in addition to the fundamental fact that their businesses were not performing well. One was that their organizations were not clear on where they were going because of too many initiatives or conflicting priorities, and the other was that their management “teams” were far from being teams. So one problem was a lack of shared strategic priorities, and the other had to do with the attitudes and behavior of the members of the management team. If this is the situation you face, your MWB journey needs to deal with both of these issues—it is no use focusing on one and ignoring the other.

Who Has Used the Must-Win Battle Approach?

A core premise of this book is that the MWB approach needs to be tailored to the situation facing each company and executive team intending to use it—it is not “one size fits all.” However, we have found that the key MWB concepts, and the focus on developing strategy and team commitment at the same time, have worked well in a wide variety of companies.

Some of the companies that have adopted the MWB concept have been small; one has less than 100 employees. The largest, on the other hand, has hundreds of thousands of employees and more than €21 billion in revenue. The companies also span a wide range of technologies and industries, including chemicals, pharmaceuticals, fast-moving consumer goods, beverages, professional services, and food ingredients. Although the businesses we have worked with have been based in many parts of the world—North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—some of the leadership teams have been culturally diverse while others have not. The MWB battle approach has been effective regardless of the degree of cultural diversity, although we usually find the process to be more challenging as the diversity of the management team increases.

The executives we worked with came from a variety of levels in their organizations. In some cases, we started at the very top of the organization and then cascaded the initiative to lower levels. In other organizations, the impetus came from senior managers, such as the head of a country, region, or business unit.

The breadth of this experience leads us to believe that the must-win battle concept can effectively be used by executives at many levels in an organization, in companies both large and small, and across industries and geographies. The challenge for you as a reader is to decide if this approach could help you address the issues you face in your business today, or those you expect to face in the future.

What Is an MWB Journey?

An MWB journey is an ongoing process, during which two things are happening simultaneously. One is that the top team is learning to behave as a team, with shared objectives and a common agenda. The other is that a series of MWBs are being identified, fought, and hopefully won. Each battle will move you closer to your overall vision, but because new battles will emerge over time and corporate objectives may change, this part of the journey will never end; there will always be the next battle to win. And although your senior managers may indeed become a team, as executives come and go the team will always be at least partially in flux and will need continued attention to reinforce the shared agenda and expected behaviors.

Before setting out, you need to prepare for the journey, as outlined in Figure 1.1. This requires making an assessment of the starting conditions facing your business. We discuss these shortly, but the key point is that not all MWB journeys are the same, and you need to tailor yours to the particular conditions that you face in your business. You also need to determine if you and your leadership team are ready to lead such a journey. It will not be “business as usual,” as we explain in Chapter 3.

Phase One entails running a kick-off event for your team. This typically brings together the most senior managers in the company for up to a week in an offsite location to identify, through intense discussion and debate, the company’s MWBs. The event ends with the selection of the

MWBs and the senior managers who will lead them, and each member of the top team publicly committing to support all of the chosen MWBs. This first phase of the journey tends to be short and intense.



Figure 1.1 The MWB journey roadmap: an overview.

Phase Two involves the motivation and mobilization of the broader organization to win the chosen MWBs (and, later, the battles that take the place of those won). For any given MWB, this phase might last as long as several years, during which the organization must take ownership of each MWB, assemble and mobilize the resources to fight it, and win. But each MWB will follow a different course—some will move quickly and achieve early victory, others may lose their way and need to be re-energized or redirected. This phase demands stamina and persistence on the part of the company's leaders, because it is very easy for the organization to lose focus on the MWBs as the evolving pressures of day-to-day business throw up potential new priorities. And people who do not support the must-win battles will do their best to slow things down and derail MWB activities. Such intransigents need to be identified and dealt with.

Each phase of the MWB journey involves two subjourneys, one emotional and one intellectual. The intellectual journey is necessary to ensure first that you select the right MWBs, and then that you choose the right supporting battles that need to be won to ensure victory in the

main battles. The emotional journey should lead first to a new level of openness that will underpin the creation of a top management team that truly functions as a team, and then to a series of focused teams committed to winning each of the MWBs. Depending on where you are starting from, you may find one of these subjourneys longer and more difficult than the other, and the exact balance between the subjourneys needs to be tailored to your particular needs. One size does not fit all, when it comes to designing MWB journeys.

We believe strongly that these subjourneys need to run simultaneously. Some leaders are inclined to say, “Let’s do the team building first and then we’ll get to choosing the battles later,” whereas others want to do the reverse. Our experience is that these approaches do not work well. Team building that does not focus on real issues does not take you very far, and MWB choices that have no emotional commitment to the result are a waste of time as they result in decisions that are never wholeheartedly implemented. And as the boxed commentary suggests, there is growing evidence that emotions and reason cannot be readily separated.

Emotions and Reason Are Inseparable

We recommend that your MWB journey place as much emphasis on generating emotional energy and commitment as on intellectual rigor. Why? Surely executives, in fact *any* business person, should be as rational as possible and make decisions based on reason, i.e. intellectual weighing of the pros and cons.

Although we like to think this is what really happens—and have “programmed” executives for decades to try to put emotions aside—it’s not. Huge advances in neurological sciences in the last decade or two suggest that emotions and reason are inseparable.³ The processes by which we think, experience situations, and respond to the dynamics in our environment are governed by a mix of emotional and rational

³ If you would like to read more on this topic, the following are books that we have found useful, though obviously there are many, many more to choose from:

- Antonio Damasio’s work including (1) *Descartes’ Error* (1994), Picador; (2) *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999), Harcourt Publishers Ltd.
- Howard Gardner (2004) *Changing Minds The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People’s Minds* Harvard Business School Press, USA.

responses. When we build experiences that we can apply to future situations, whether climbing a mountain or managing a change process in an organization, those embedded memories have emotions intertwined with “hard” facts. Think about how you responded when one of your team questioned an important aspect of the deal that you thought you had all agreed on, in front of the CEO of the prospective joint venture partner. Chances are, you had to control your anger and surprise before you could respond sensibly to this suggested change in plan (even if it was a good one). How much will you trust that person (“this traitor”) in future?

Such experiences leave “markers” in your brain that can act as shortcuts in future situations when you see similar patterns. Despite millennia of evolution, we still have the fight-or-flight instinct when we feel under threat—emotions are driving. Apply a similar concept to business experiences and you get “gut feeling.” Gut feeling is increasingly recognized as an important component of leadership. Because the situations leaders face are complex and often ambiguous, requiring the management of people and relationships as well as big-picture vision and planning, they rely on instinct to help them create shortcuts through the complexity. Many leaders are very good at recognizing patterns that activate, often unconsciously, experiences they have had before. These help them make choices faster and more surely than they might otherwise have done.

But—and it’s a big but—using these shortcuts can block as well as promote courses of action. Say the person who had embarrassed you at the meeting came to you with a new suggestion. How thoroughly would you consider it? If your relationship had not improved, odds are that you would not look at it in as positive a light as if someone you trusted had made the suggestion. The point is that the brain’s shortcuts include your emotions as well as your rational side. Unless you recognize these dynamics, it can be difficult to be open to new perspectives and opportunities.

And it’s not just being open with yourself about your emotions. Another key learning from psychology and neuroscience is that everyone has his own view of the world. Our information gathering is selective and biased by our own interpretations of events, which is based on our experiences, values, and beliefs, all of which have emotional and rational dimensions.



We each see the world differently—and this impacts the way we do business. So it is important to be open with the people around you, about emotions as well as intellectual ideas, and about how these impact your view of the world. Unless you understand how your world view colors your interpretations, it can be hard to find common ground with others.

Business people need to stop acting as if they can subjugate emotion to reason. Without recognizing and managing the impact of emotions, decision making and action will be impaired because we don't always challenge our shortcuts as we should, or appreciate that others see the world very differently.

The key is to recognize emotions as an equal partner of intellectual rigor and idea generation. If we succeed in doing this, the ability to foster strong relationships between people and to leverage the experience of the group and organization will not only improve decisions but also drive shared commitment to action. The MWB process is one way to recognize this interplay of emotion and reason—and get it into the open where it can be managed to greatest effect. Because you probably have the same marker in your head as we do: People make or break a strategy.

We now consider each phase of the journey in more detail.

Phase One: Engaging the Team

No two MWB journeys are exactly the same, nor should they be. Every business starts the journey from a different place and, as mentioned earlier, every executive who is to lead an MWB journey should begin by making a careful assessment of the “starting conditions” facing his or her business before designing the journey.

Assessing Starting Conditions

Starting conditions will impact on your choice of the MWBs, the urgency surrounding their execution, and the relative emphasis to be placed on the emotional side of the journey versus the intellectual side. You simply cannot plan for an optimum journey if you have not first had a close look at your starting conditions.

Every business sets out on its MWB journey from a different starting place. Some are in great financial health. Others are in crisis. Some have a management team that truly is a team, in others the team is in complete disarray. Some have a clear sense of the future, others have scarcely thought about it. And so on. These differences can mean, for example, that one organization could have a significant emotional challenge ahead of it to get everyone working toward the same objectives, whereas for others, who work well together but don't make good strategic choices, the challenge will be more on the intellectual side.

Before embarking on an MWB journey, we suggest that the leader assesses the four starting conditions identified in Chapter 2, "Understanding Your Starting Conditions." These will impact both the design of the kick-off event and the subsequent activities required to engage the rest of the organization. We have found, for instance, that some organizations are eager to implement the MWBs chosen at the kick-off event, whereas others will greet the new imperatives with dismay and comments like "Here we go again, another flavor of the month—I wonder how long this one will last." The final starting condition, discussed in Chapter 3, is the readiness of the leader to lead the journey. It is a demanding challenge, and not everyone is ready for it, even if it is what the organization needs.

With the starting conditions identified, the leader can design the kick-off event, paying particular attention to who will attend, the topics to be discussed, and its duration. In our experience, the kick-off event can involve anywhere from 10 to 40 managers, and on occasion may consist of two shorter events rather than one longer one. However, we believe the offsite should include at least two and preferably three or four overnight stays, and should be held in an unusual location. You want people to get "away from the office" both mentally and physically.

Mapping Phase One of the Journey

The kick-off event should center on the three clusters of activity identified in Figure 1.2: Open windows, define and agree battles, and commit to one agenda. Your first reaction on looking at this figure may be, "Why all the fuss?" Why not simply start with defining and agreeing on the battles? Surely that has to be the first step, and then in Phase Two, you engage the organization to win the chosen battles. Well, yes and no. In fact, no.

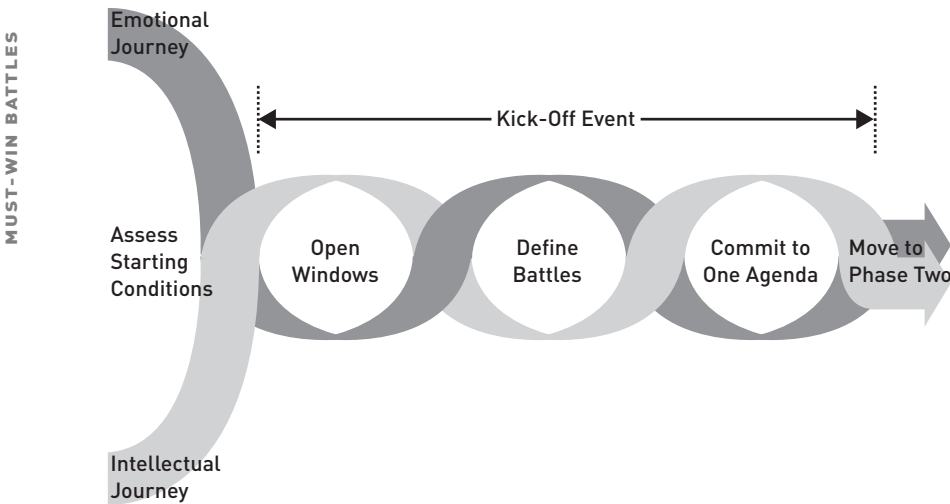


Figure 1.2 The MWB journey—Phase One: engaging the team.

The problem is that although you may think that defining a shortlist of MWBs would be an intellectual process—why this battle is more vital to the future of our organization than that one—it is also very much an emotional process involving personal aspirations and fears, such as, “will my projects and concerns make it onto the final list?” Because the chosen MWBs will receive the lion’s share of the firm’s resources and management attention for the coming months and years, other things will have to be cut back or eliminated. All of this means, of course, that creating a shortlist of MWBs is going to result in winners and losers among the management team members. So choosing MWBs is definitely an emotion-laden process.

The question is whether these emotions will come “on to the table” during the discussion or will be hidden, emerging much later to subvert the implementation process. To avoid this possibility, you want an open and honest debate when you are choosing your MWBs. But a full-blown MWB debate is a difficult context in which to start personal discussions, which is why we recommend that you engage in “opening windows”—especially emotional windows—before you move to debate the MWBs.

Opening Windows

Opening windows exercises are, in effect, “warm-up” events to start the group moving gently forward on both the intellectual and emotional

journeys in parallel. In Chapter 4, we describe seven exercises that we have used to “open windows” with a number of teams. The aims are to build a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the business, and at the same time have people discuss their personal feelings about how the team works together, and their role in it. The exercises range from personal ones such as asking each participant to describe their lifeline, to “outside-in perspectives” during which participants get into the “hearts and minds” of shareholders, customers, competitors, or perhaps regulators.

The more personal exercises will start the group on the emotional side of the MWB journey; the others build the intellectual side. Whether you choose to spend more time opening emotional windows or on intellectual exercises will depend on your starting conditions. The further you judge you have to go on the emotional side, the more emphasis you will put on opening the personal windows, and vice versa.

Defining MWBs: Colliding to Decide

Of course you cannot open windows forever, you need to get to the heart of the matter, which is deciding on the MWBs. The best way to begin is to review the criteria outlined earlier in this chapter, and then create a long list of potential battles. This gets everyone thinking about what is a MWB and what is not. As you begin to shorten the list, some battles may be repositioned as sub-battles of others. Others will be thrown out on the grounds of not having enough impact, not being winnable, and so on.

It will take several iterations to complete the list, and we recommend these discussions do not all take place on the same day—a night for reflection, talk at the bar, and a good night’s sleep are necessary parts of the process. When the list is finished, you need to review it to see whether all the battles taken together are winnable. Each on its own might be feasible, but as a group they may be too much. You cannot undertake them all with the resources you have. At that point the conversation often turns to timing issues—could we sequence the battles in such a way as to make the whole list feasible? This also leads to the question of which of the current activities we need to stop doing in order to free up the resources needed for our MWBs (the “must-stops”).

Defining and agreeing on your MWBs is likely to produce some real stress points on your MWB journey. Suddenly this process, which may have been regarded by some of your executives as a relatively harmless waste of time, is getting real. Everyone wants their pet projects or their part of the business to feature on the final list of MWBs. That is not going to happen.

As we discuss in Chapters 3 and 5, this is a testing time for the leader. The key is making sure you get the real issues on the table during the debates, and deciding how long to let the debates run. The leader who arrives at the kick-off event with a fixed idea of the right list of MWBs and imposes his or her will is in trouble. There will be no buy-in and the battles are unlikely to be won. On the other hand, as we point out later, selecting MWBs is neither a democratic process nor a popularity contest. If the MWBs are chosen on the basis of who is supporting them rather than intellectual rigor, you have a problem.

In addition, the losers—for there will be managers who perceive themselves as losers in this process—have to be kept on board, because you will need everyone to do their part in ensuring that the chosen battles are won, even those who did not support all items on the list as it was being created.

Committing to One Agenda

The final stage of the kick-off event, committing to one agenda, is one of the most important parts of the emotional side of the MWB journey. It is a vital step in the process of building a real team at the top of the organization. Not only are the most senior managers in the company committing to give their full support to all of the chosen MWBs, whether they are directly involved in them or not (or initially supported them or not), they are also committing to working together as a team at the top. Shared goals and shared accountability will be the order of the day from this point forward. Silo walls are coming down, for good. This new attitude is perhaps best captured by the manager who explained: “If I win the MWB that I am leading by using all of the resources you need to win yours, that is not a win.”

Leaders who want to get the members of their team to commit to the chosen MWBs and begin to adopt new supportive behaviors usually use a combination of “carrot” and “stick” approaches. The carrot is, “look at the great and successful future we can build together—which is so

much better than our situation today.” The stick is, “if you do not support these MWBs and adopt this new behavior, there will be no place for you in the organization.” We do not believe that fear is a successful long-term motivator, and you do not want to begin your journey with everyone feeling that they have been coerced into joining the trip. So the more you can use the carrot approach, the better.

If you are a new leader, you will learn a lot about your senior people during the kick-off event. You may learn that some are not willing to come on the MWB journey with you. Especially on the final day, when people are committing to new ways of working together, you are likely to be challenged by key players who do not want change. They may even have formed a coalition to stop the MWB journey before it gets started and decided to push you to the limit. “Do you really intend to go through with this?” will be the question, in one form or another. Your answer, demonstrated in both words and deeds, has to be yes.

Of course, creating an emotionally charged day during which managers pledge to work together and behave differently to support one another in the future is only a beginning. The real test is in what happens in subsequent weeks and months. But it is an important beginning, and the end of the first phase of the MWB journey. So what should you have achieved by the end of Phase One? These are the outcomes that we believe you should shoot for in your kick-off event:

- 1. Shared understanding of the challenges and options facing the organization.** Opening windows is critical to get everyone on the same page in terms of understanding the full picture of the challenges that are facing the organization and the options for addressing them. In particular, this part of the process has to promote openness between the team members that allows them to appreciate the different perspectives that others may bring, as well as laying the foundation for improving teamwork and cooperation across traditional organizational barriers or boundaries.
- 2. An agreed list of three to five MWBs.** These are the critical battles that the organization needs to win in the next year or two to move toward its desired vision of the future, both in terms of business performance and how the organization works together.
- 3. A committed team for each MWB.** During the second half of the kick-off event, the leader will assign the team leaders responsible for each MWB. Others may be added to each team when the group returns to the office.

4. **A high-level action plan for each MWB.** High-level action plans will be created for each MWB during the kick-off event. More detail and depth will be added to the plans once the group returns to the office and expanded teams are created.
5. **New ways of working together.** The whole group will leave the kick-off event, having committed to new ways of working together. This group agenda is broader than any individual MWB, and should lead to a permanent change in behavior.
6. **Individual commitments.** Each individual at the kick-off event will commit to personal actions and behaviors necessary to win the MWBs and to support the new group behavior. This means not only supporting colleagues but also holding each other accountable for achieving targets.
7. **An initial assessment of the starting conditions for engaging the organization.** Before returning home after the kick-off event, the team need to think through how members of the organization will react to the MWB agenda and how best to engage them. And, of course, what needs to be done immediately on return to the office.

Phase Two: Engaging the Organization

As you return to the office with your team, you must communicate to the broader organization the decisions that you have made, why you have made them, and the team's commitment to the new agenda. For greatest impact the team should appear personally in front of an audience of key people and explain what they went through—both intellectually and emotionally—during the kick-off event. Pull no punches. Explain the debates and why the group came out where it did on the key issues. Make it clear that the team saw the week as a turning point for them as individuals and as a group. And as a turning point for the organization. Leave no one in any doubt that things are going to be different.

The danger in returning to work (back to the “swamp” as we call it in Chapter 7) is that the team will be sucked inexorably back into the day-to-day activities that they have been away from for a week, and within three weeks it will seem as if the kick-off event never happened. Difficult as it is, it is the job of the leader—and the team—to prevent this.

In Chapter 7, we discuss in detail the stages of the engagement process highlighted in Figure 1.3. As with the kick-off event, this process requires addressing both intellectual and emotional journeys. Intellectually the challenge is to demonstrate to the entire company that the MWBs make sense. Given the situation the business faces, these are the key challenges, and their selection was driven by reason, not politics.

Emotionally, the challenge is to motivate people to commit to their part of the journey.

Emotionally, the challenge is to motivate people to commit to their part of the journey, even though this is likely to mean working across silos in ways they have never done before. You need to create energy and forward momentum throughout the organization. Without winning both the intellectual and emotional journeys, the whole effort will become just another initiative that went nowhere, and the question “So what’s different after this offsite?” will be perfectly valid.

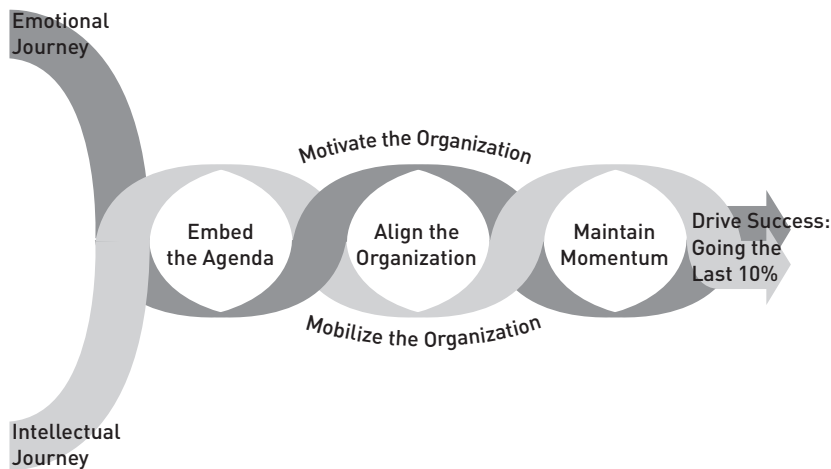


Figure 1.3 The MWB journey—Phase Two: engaging the organization.

Embedding the Agenda

In the weeks following the kick-off event, you need to start the process of embedding the MWB agenda at the “heart” of the organization, to make it the central focus that will guide all future priorities and actions. The first step is to establish communication of the type we previously described: personal, open, face-to-face, and consistent. It’s not a one-time “this is what we did on our offsite” exercise; you need to put in place channels for ongoing communications, which you will use again and again after the first waves of excitement about MWBs start to ebb. (They will.) Lou Gerstner, Chairman and CEO of IBM from 1993 to 2002, and current Chairman of the Carlyle Group, says so, and so do we.⁴

Then the leader of each MWB needs to start bringing on board the people who will become important members of the MWB teams but were not at the kick-off event. These teams are very likely to have a cross-silo composition. Their first task is to create more detailed versions of the action plans sketched out at the kick-off. The early plans will not be perfect, but you need them now because until you have a first cut on the who, what, when, where and how, the MWBs cannot start to move forward. Because the teams will often bring together people who may not know each other, it is important that as they develop the detailed plans, they use many of the same exercises as the team at the kick-off event. Opening windows, debating the critical actions, and discussing team and individual roles and behaviors will build the shared understanding of the actions, resources, and capabilities required to win, and the commitment to the new ways of working that will underpin delivery of their action plan.

Your plans are an important first step, but you are also going to need the core processes of the organization, meaning the planning, budgeting, monitoring, and reward systems, to support the new direction. Often these systems are difficult to alter but you need to do it because if you do not the old systems—which support the old behavior—will prevent progress. It will take more than a couple of weeks to make these changes, but get started now—because changing how performance is monitored and how people are paid, just to pick two examples, will tell the broader organization that you are serious

⁴ Gerstner, Louis V., Jr. (2002) *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance: Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround*, HarperCollins Publishers, London.

about the new agenda. And make sure that reviewing MWB progress is front and center at all leadership team meetings. If the MWBs are to become the priority for the organization, they must be the continual focus of the team.

The final, and probably most difficult, part of embedding the MWBs is making available the time and resources for whole-hearted action. You cannot simply add the MWB agenda on top of ongoing activities—the result will be widespread burnout and cynicism. At the offsite, you and your team decided what the organization would have to stop doing to free up the time, resources, and energy to win the MWBs. Now you have to make those “must-stops” a reality. This will be a challenge, because some of them are likely to be fiercely resisted. To win the battle of the must-stops, you will need an aligned organization.

Aligning the Organization

No company can win its MWBs through the efforts of the leadership team alone. The broader organization has to buy in to the new agenda. How you create this buy-in will very much depend on how ready various parts of the organization are to embrace the MWBs. When they learn of them, are people going to say, “Thank goodness, at last we are moving forward” or “They must be kidding, that is not possible”? Getting the organization aligned behind the MWB agenda has to be planned carefully—both in terms of where to start and how fast to move. But again, don’t delay, because building a broad organizational commitment to winning the battles is going to take time, so the sooner you get started the better.

Getting the organization on board and ready for action requires several steps. First the team as a whole has to make very visible its commitment to the new agenda, as discussed previously. The MWB agenda must then be cascaded through the different organizational units of the company, through mini-versions of the kick-off event, because their active buy-in and support are critical to delivering the MWB agenda. The original MWBs are not up for debate, but the supporting battles, which need to be won to bring victory in the overall battles, need to be identified, agreed, and implemented. Then you need to repeat the cascade events down into the organization as necessary, with senior managers running the events, making the link to previous events, and removing roadblocks when needed.

The final component of getting the organization aligned is to bring on board those much-maligned (depending on which side of the fence you sit) staff people at headquarters. Generally the corporate center does not have external markets, so it is not likely to have MWBs of its own. However, the expertise of the central staff can be very important in helping the various MWB teams. So use the staff groups, do not isolate them. If they feel left out, they may hamper the journey.

Maintaining Momentum

As the MWB cascade continues, you will need to actively encourage and support the new management behavior that everyone committed to at the kick-off event, as well as keep track of how well the MWBs are delivering against their milestones and targets.

We suggest that you start reviewing MWB progress on a regular basis, beginning about six months after the kick-off event. Monitor both movement toward “hard” targets such as revenues, new markets entered, or products launched, and softer behavioral issues. The latter are very important because managers who are resisting the new ways of working can destroy the atmosphere that you want to create. Do not allow the reviews to become endless debates. Make decisions, and ensure that there is wide recognition for exceptional performance and visible consequences for underperformance.

If your early reviews show that your team is coming together, energy levels are high, and the MWB battles are well defined and starting to be fought, you can give yourself a pat on the back. At this point, your journey is truly under way. But—and there is always a but—there will inevitably be hiccups along the way. Some battles may get derailed, others will just never really get going. It is important to recognize (early, hopefully, because the battles are constantly on the team agenda) when things are off track. Often you will need to re-energize the battle, perhaps by making some personnel changes. But sometimes you will need to refocus the battle or abandon it. In a changing world, fixed strategic priorities are seldom a recipe for success. So the last big challenge is to know when to declare victory and replace an existing MWB with a new one. After a significant investment of emotional energy and resources, parting with an “old friend” may be difficult, but do it. The next challenge is waiting for you.

Getting an organization moving in a new direction, and keeping it moving, can be exhausting. Some teams have compared the early

months of an MWB journey to trying to get a heavy flywheel moving. They put in lots of energy, but there is little visible movement. To build momentum, you and your team will continually need to support each other to sustain your collective commitment and your ability to keep generating energy in others. Clearly, positive early results help, so be sure to celebrate these and broadcast them extensively. But also create opportunities which will allow the team to maintain and reinforce the emotional relationships they have built. If the team lose spirit, you do not have much hope of moving the rest of the organization forward.

In Chapter 7, we suggest that the final determinant of success is “going the last 10 percent”—doing the small things that are hard to describe because they are so varied, from sending a handwritten thank-you note, to throwing a party, to just showing up when you are not expected. These seemingly small acts can make a huge difference to the mind set of the organization and become the stuff of enduring organizational legend.

Creating a Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Most MWBs focus on market-related initiatives: developing and introducing new products, reviving a brand, entering a distant geographic market, or a new segment in a home market, and so on. By definition these battles are important. But competitors will respond to your moves—doing their best to copy or exceed your efforts, and acting in ways that will take away the uniqueness of your offering to customers. It is very difficult, in short, to create a *sustainable* competitive advantage. A better market objective in today’s world is often to create a *renewable* competitive advantage.

But we believe that you can use your MWB journey to create a real sustainable competitive advantage. This is the creation of a management team that truly functions as a team. As we have argued, and will again in Chapter 3, top managers rarely function as teams. So if you can build your key players into a real team, you will have a competitive advantage that will be very difficult for competitors to match. Your top team, operating as a team, should be able to implement new initiatives more quickly and with more force than competitors. In other words, having a sustainable competitive advantage in the way people work together at the top of your organization should allow you to create a series of renewable competitive advantages in the marketplace.

As the leader your most important job is to take that group of people at the top and turn them into a team. It will not be done overnight, and it may not be possible with the cast of characters that you have in place right now. The MWB journey is a tool we have seen managers use to build such a team, but let us re-emphasize that the key is to simultaneously lead your people on a journey that is both intellectual and emotional. This is difficult because it means that the leader has to continuously embody the blend of both intellectual and emotional openness that he or she is asking of others. The rewards, however, in terms of business results as well as the personal development of the leader and of the team members, are great.

If you are attracted by the possibility of using an MWB journey to create focus, energy, and a real team in your business, read on. We offer you a guide to the journey, including tools and techniques that can be used at each stage, plus advice on how to use them. These are not just nice ideas, we have personally used these tools, and seen MWB leaders use them. They work.

Is This the Right Approach for You?

As you move forward through the book, you may wonder about whether the MWB approach is right for your company—and for yourself as a leader. The questions below are, hopefully, useful prompts for your deliberations.

1. Is an MWB journey what our business needs?

Assess the health of your business, senior management team, and organization. If performance is good, the top team is functioning well, your strategic priorities are appropriate, and the organization is working effectively, you probably do not need an MWB journey. If this is not the case, you should consider the ideas and examples in the book and decide if the journey would make sense for you.

2. Could we move forward on simultaneous intellectual and emotional journeys?

The power of the must-win battle approach is in building commitment to action at the same time as defining strategic priorities. If you are comfortable with this idea, and your business needs to improve on both dimensions, then keep reading. If, on the

other hand, you feel that separating strategic planning and team-building is the best way forward, then must-win battles are not the right solution for you.

3. Are most senior managers capable of handling such a major change?

Most top teams need to change their behavior and mindset in order to lead a successful MWB journey. This change process can be particularly difficult if your organization is made up of independent fiefdoms led by strong-willed senior managers. Building these executives into a team will require a lot of debate and conflict, and as the leader you will need to manage the process. And in spite of the fact that some managers will see themselves as losers in these debates, you need to keep them on board, because you need everyone participating in your team.

4. If we get started, will we be able to sustain the momentum?

After the kick-off event, you will need to build a broad coalition of managers from all levels who will drive the MWB initiatives deep into the organization. How difficult will this be? How willingly will the organization at large embrace the idea of must-win battles? You will have to monitor progress carefully and find ways to re-energize the MWBs as you go.

5. Given the challenges, are you ready to lead the journey?

Do you have the skills and deep desire to lead such a journey? You will have to demonstrate a lot of flexibility and be willing to enter debates with an open mind, not always insisting on getting your way. And this will be an ongoing journey. Do you have the stamina? Stopping part way through is worse than not starting.

If your answer is yes to most of these questions, you should give serious thought to undertaking an MWB journey. If not, we nonetheless hope that you will find food for thought in these pages, and recognize the power of combining clarity of strategic focus with emotional commitment, however you achieve it.

★ ★ ★

Now, meet John Ryan. He's a fictional character, but knows many of the senior managers we have worked with intimately because each of them is part of him.

