In late 2000, IBM launched a process to inculcate strategic leadership throughout the organization’s senior teams. IBM’s Corporate Strategy Senior VP Bruce Harreld wanted to move away from a strategy process that was staff driven and document focused to one that was personally led by the General Managers and was issue focused. Importantly, he also wanted an approach to strategy that was inextricably linked to execution. He first introduced a series of issue-focused, rolling strategy reviews at the corporate level. Next, he and his team launched a series of offsite workshops for GM-led teams across the business. By early 2003, over 60 teams and 1000 business executives had participated in these Strategic Leadership Forums, which are held at Harvard Business School. The Forums combine executive education with facilitated team breakout sessions designed to work on specific IBM issues.

Each Forum begins with a day on strategy that focuses on marketplace insight and business design. Days two and three are led by Professors Michael Tushman of HBS and Charles O’Reilly of Stanford. Classroom time is spent reviewing material on change and innovation and applying lessons to IBM. Working with the faculty, IBM has developed a rich Business Leadership Model that combines IBM’s strategy formulation approach with the Congruence Model framework and gap analysis/root cause process used by Tushman and O’Reilly. During the intense three-day Forum, participants spend seventeen hours in team breakouts applying what they learned to a key business issue that is central to the team’s actual success.

The Forums have consistently been rated very highly by participants who come to HBS. Why do the Forums work so well? Here are some key design decisions that are believed to have contributed to their success:

- Content: strategy development and execution rather than more traditional skills-based leadership training or generic general management education
- Participants: Teams, often with members that are cross-unit and cross-functional, not individuals
- Schedule: Extensive time devoted to team’s real strategic issues
- Follow-on: Leave with action plans
Most participants point to the benefits of getting a management team in one place offsite to work with a facilitator and focus on an issue. Others cite the benefit of being able to pause to focus on strategy, which then signals to all that strategy is important. The Forums were described by one participant as “very good—a forced-march approach to getting things worked out.” Another participant pointed to the cross-functional nature of the team that participated.

IBM’s Corporate Strategy leadership believes that by combining education with the action workouts, executives are forced into a more strategic mindset. Otherwise, discussions will tend to revert to a more routine, operational focus. By inviting four to six teams to each Forum, IBM is able to affect the internal culture of the organization, encouraging cross-unit sharing of experiences and strategic analysis.

The participants point to the importance of pre-work as contributing to the success of the effort. Assembling a package of known information in advance, and sharing this across the team before the meeting, makes a big difference in how far the teams get during their sessions.

In addition to the Forums, IBM has licensed the materials from the multimedia resource, *Leading Change & Organizational Renewal*, for its intranet strategy Web site, enabling Forum attendees to review the materials before they attend a Forum, and to use the materials with others in their organizations who need to understand and contribute to the success of a unit’s action plans. Additional materials describing the IBM Business Leadership Model are being integrated into the standard training program for managers, virtually assuring that the vocabulary and frameworks for continuous strategy development and assessment become part of the IBM culture.

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