

# Human Geert Vercaeren izing Strategy

How to Master Emotions,  
Values and Beliefs  
When You Execute Plans

Lannoo  
Campus

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*To all who inspired me,  
and all I wish to inspire*

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# Introduction

*'When you change the way you look at things,  
the things you look at change.'*

– Max Planck



## Why this book?

During my 25-year career as business consultant, coach, and executive in leading consulting firms, I have become painfully aware of the challenges of realizing strategies successfully. I have witnessed first-hand the ineffectiveness of many organizations and their inability to execute even the most well thought out strategies.

⋮ *With so much literature published on the subject, all the best practices*  
⋮ *available, and so many consulting firms out there, why do most*  
⋮ *strategies still fail?*

It's not a secret that most organizations struggle with strategy execution. Strategy execution is complex. Roughly 70 percent of efforts at transformation fail. People in organizations struggle to focus on the right priorities, fail to act in accordance with the strategic objectives, or simply do not engage with the vision of the CEO. Often, people are not convinced about the importance and urgency of the changes and simply do not buy-in to it. Leadership not setting sufficiently high aspirations and the lack of investment in critical skills, capabilities and behaviors (culture) are other major reasons why efforts at transformation fall short of desired results.

The current development towards digitalization and ecosystems that comprise many different parties will only increase complexity. The financial losses resulting from failed strategy implementation are tremendous, not to mention the operational and emotional disruption to the organization and its people.

What if you could lead an organization where plans and decisions are executed; where a team acts as ‘one team’; where people work together spontaneously across teams? What if you could lead an organization where people are inspired and committed to the strategy? What if you could build an organization with efficiency, values, trust and fun at its heart?

⋮ *‘Thinking is easy, acting is difficult, and to put one’s thoughts into  
⋮ action is the most difficult thing in the world.’*  
⋮ – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Values, beliefs and emotions have a proven impact on human motivation and thus influence our focus, decisions and actions. Yet these elements are often neglected in the professional world, thereby dehumanizing strategies and organizations.

Leading research shows that emotion-based barriers present a major threat to strategy execution within organizations. Mistrust and low sharing of useful and timely information, low receptivity to effortful change, mechanistic actions and complacency are examples of barriers that prevent the sense of urgency and commitment which is necessary for change to prevail.

Emotional and psychological factors are often neglected in the strategic process, but they have a significant impact on the performance of your organization and the successful realization of strategies. I believe there are several reasons for this. Lack of knowledge and risk aversion of senior management play a role, but so does anxiety about dealing with emotions. In short, our dominant professional logic often does not include emotions.

⋮ *No business strategy can afford to neglect emotional and psychological  
⋮ factors, because all strategies ultimately deal with people.*

In my experience, executing a strategy effectively requires going beyond fixing symptoms or introducing expensive short-term technical solutions. Interventions should start by exploring the root causes of the observed behaviours and integrating a solid business perspective complemented by psychology-informed approaches based on scientific tools. I strongly believe in an approach that focuses on visible technical elements such as structure,

governance, process and tools. Simultaneously, it is critical to tap into the world of values, beliefs, emotions and hidden underlying motivational forces that influence individual and collective behaviour.

My personal mission and the mission of the company I founded (B15) is to work with leaders to solve their most critical issues by including human-centred strategies that work in their unique context. I want to have a different conversation with leaders and offer them a different approach to strategy execution.

This book provides you with new insights, an unconventional approach on how to humanize your organization and make your strategy really work. Based on leading research, real stories, case studies and practical tools, I will take you into the world of values, beliefs, emotions and often hidden underlying motivational forces that influence individual and collective behaviours in organizations. I will show how dealing consciously and effectively with these human dynamics can have a significant impact on the performance of your organization and the successful realization of your strategy.

Take a quick test to check if this book is for you; answer the following questions with Yes or No:

1. Are you serious about making your strategy a success?
2. Do you have the patience to keep asking 'why'?
3. Do you have the courage to take a less conventional approach?

If you answered YES to these questions, you will find this book inspiring and useful.

## The structure of this book

Why is so much time, effort and energy in teams sidetracked by emotions, tensions and conflicts? Why don't we get rid of the silos within my organization? Why don't people in my organization act and focus in accordance with our strategic objectives? Why don't people in my organization engage with the vision I shared? Why is my organization not ready to deal effectively with the rapidly changing challenges?

These are examples of recurring challenges and frustrations that leaders of organizations share with me on a daily basis.

I am convinced by my experience that it is possible to deal with these challenges that often block the realization of their ambitions, aspirations and related strategies. It is possible to build high-performing teams, to make people work together spontaneously across teams, to make people act and focus in line with the strategy, to inspire and create commitment to strategy and to build a (more) future-proof organization.

### What are your challenges?

Why is so much time, effort and energy of team members sidetracked by emotions, tensions and conflicts?

Why don't we get rid of the silos within my organization?

Why do people in my organization not act and focus in accordance with our strategic objectives?

Why do people in my organization not engage with the vision I shared?

Why is my organization not ready to deal effectively with the rapidly changing challenges?

### What do you hope for?

What if the team acts as ONE team?

What if the people in my organization work together spontaneously across teams?

What if people act and focus in line with the strategy, set the right priorities and execute plans and decisions taken?

What if I could inspire and create commitment to the strategy from within the organization?

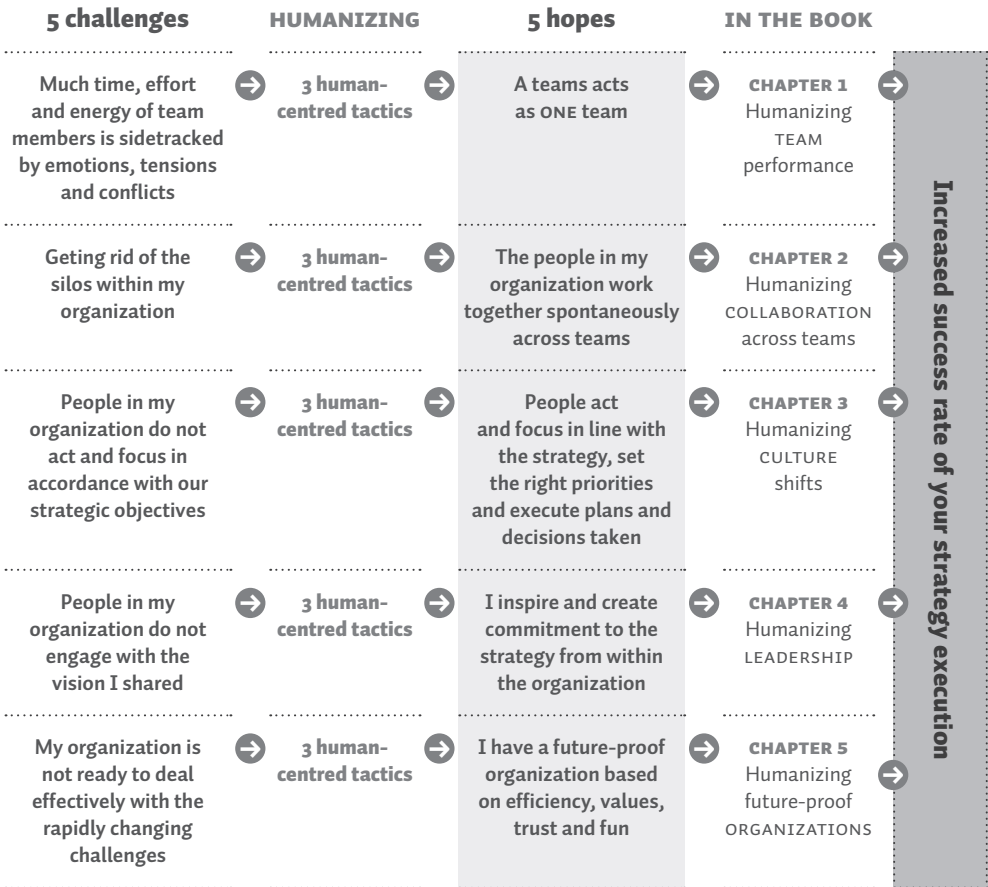
What if I could build a future-proof organization based on efficiency, values, trust and fun?

*Five key challenges and hopes of leaders*

This book is structured around these five challenges (frustrations, fears) and hopes (ambitions, aspirations) of today’s leaders.

It will give you insights and practical tools on how to deal with these critical challenges by taking a human-centred approach; it will show you how to humanize your strategy and make it really work.

The picture below visualizes the basic logic and structure of the book and explains how applying human-centred tactics in these five different domains will significantly increase the success rate of your strategy execution.



The logic of this book

Each of the chapters is structured in a similar way: in five parts. They start with ‘why it matters’: how the topic impacts the success of your organization (part 1). As there is already a lot of literature on this question, I do not elaborate extensively on this and provide you with a short personal perspective based on my experience. Afterwards I tell you a story about a project, initiative or intervention I conducted (part 2) followed by three less conventional, human-centred tactics that I experienced as highly impactful in dealing with this challenge (part 3). Each chapter ends with a summary of the main points (part 4) and gives you some practical instructions on how to get started (part 5). I also provide a list of key references and interesting additional reads on this topic.



*The structure and flow of a chapter*

In each chapter, you will also discover an illustration created by the artist Peter Moolan-Feroze, which shows his artistic interpretation of the topic. He has also constructed a short narrative around some of the key messages in the five chapters of this book. They explain the ideas behind the drawings, which all explore different human aspects of performance in organizations.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Humanizing TEAM performance

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Effective teamwork is identified as one of the core practices in high-performing organizations. The ability to quickly build, deploy, disband, and reform teams is a critical skill for today's organizations. The story '*From Me to We*' shows that effort and time within teams is easily sidetracked by emotions, tensions, and conflicts. Unconscious dynamics are often a source of ineffectiveness in a team. I elaborate on three less conventional, human-centred tactics, which I found highly impactful in building high-performing teams. Finally, I will provide you with practical tools to get started on acting as ONE team.

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## CHAPTER 2

### Humanizing COLLABORATION across teams

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Inter-group collaboration is often ineffective. It does not create the intended value and even destroys company value. In this chapter, we discuss the highly complex phenomenon of collaboration. The story '*Us versus Them*' shows that although the start of a collaboration can be conscious and rational, the process is often influenced by hidden emotional and unconscious motives and dynamics. I elaborate on three less conventional, human-centred tactics that, in my experience, are highly impactful in helping teams to work together. Finally, I will provide you with practical tools to start getting rid of your silos.

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## CHAPTER 3

### Humanizing CULTURE shifts

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'The way we do things around here', or the culture of an organization, exerts a powerful influence on its success. Defining your desired culture is not that difficult. The story '*Who needs to change first?*' shows that the proof of the pudding is in the eating; embedding new behaviours is a challenging journey, but achievable. I elaborate on three less conventional, human-centred tactics that I have seen to be highly impactful to shift towards desired behaviours

supporting your strategy. Finally, I will provide you with practical tools to start getting your people to behave in line with your strategic objectives.

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#### CHAPTER 4

### Humanizing LEADERSHIP

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If the leadership dimension is not properly in place, organizations simply cannot be successful. Effective leadership corresponds directly with organizational performance; a single change in the behaviour of a leader can trigger a significant impact on the performance of the business, either positively or negatively. The story '*Uncomfortable reflections*' shows that reflection is not part of the dominant logic in our (professional) lives and that self-awareness is the essential starting point to trigger potential shifts in mindset and behaviour as a leader. I elaborate on three less conventional, human-centred tactics that I experienced as highly impactful for leaders in inspiring and creating commitment to the strategy from within the organization. Finally, I will provide practical tools to get you started in making this happen.

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#### CHAPTER 5

### Humanizing future-proof ORGANIZATIONS

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Organizations today operate in the context of increased complexity, uncertainty, and continuous change. How future work is organized within organizations and within the broader ecosystems is a significant accelerator in the performance of organizations. It significantly impacts future value creation, staying relevant and survival. The story '*Speed, Gears and Brakes*' shows how to build an organization that is able to deal effectively with the challenges of rapid change and to stay relevant in the future. I elaborate on three less conventional, human-centred tactics that are highly impactful in building future-proof organizations. Then, I will give you the toolkit for building your future-proof organization based on efficiency, values, trust, and fun.



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## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Bringing it all together**

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This chapter brings the five previous chapters together; it is a summary of how to humanize the realization of your strategy from a methodological perspective. I describe the five critical steps of the methodology and approach to humanize strategies. I elaborate on the socio-technical approach, which combines a structural, technical perspective with a psychological perspective focusing on human dynamics (systems psychodynamics). I also emphasize on the critical role of the leader, and of the consultant/coach as external facilitator, in this process.

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### **My concluding letter to you as a leader**

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I end the book with a letter to you as a leader, in which I share some final thoughts and give you my final piece of advice.

## How to read this book

This book is built up in a way that allows you to read it as a whole or as separate parts. Each chapter is a module on its own.

To explore the relevance of the different parts in your specific context, you might want to use one of the two questionnaires below in order to set your reading priorities. You can choose the angle you like to set priorities: challenges (questionnaire 1) in case you would like to start from your pain points, or hopes (questionnaire 2) in case you would like to start from your ambitions and aspirations.

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### QUESTIONNAIRE 1

#### Your challenges in order of priority

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*Looking at my organization today, the biggest challenges we have in realizing our strategy are:*

- Much time, effort and energy of team members is sidetracked by emotions, tensions and conflicts (*chapter 1*).
- Getting rid of the silos within my organization (*chapter 2*).
- People in my organization do not act and focus in accordance with our strategic objectives (*chapter 3*).
- People in my organization do not engage with the vision I shared (*chapter 4*).
- My organization is not ready to deal effectively with the rapidly changing challenges (*chapter 5*).

Rank the statements you selected, based on the impact that dealing with these challenges will have on successfully realizing your strategy. You might want to start reading the chapters in this order.

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## QUESTIONNAIRE 2

### Your priorities of hope

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*Looking at my organization today, investing in one or more of the following areas will have a positive impact on the successful realization of our strategy:*

- A team acts as ONE team (*chapter 1*).
- The people in my organization work together spontaneously across teams (*chapter 2*).
- People act and focus in line with the strategy, set the right priorities and execute plans and decisions taken (*chapter 3*).
- I inspire and create commitment to the strategy from within the organization (*chapter 4*).
- I have a future-proof organization based on efficiency, values, trust and fun (*chapter 5*).

Rank the statements you selected, based on the impact they will have on successfully realizing your strategy. You might want to start reading the chapters in this order.

## CHAPTER 1

# Humanizing TEAM performance

A HUMAN-centred approach to building  
high-performing teams