

How ABB Electrification's product managers learned to **drive strategy** with OKRs

ENERGY & SUSTAINABILITY · 105,000 EMPLOYEES · ABB ELECTRIFICATION

ABB Electrification set out to help its 650 product managers think and act strategically. Wave Nine brought OKR training, certification and one-on-one coaching into the program, so outcome-based thinking became part of daily work.

650

product managers in the OKR-based development program

5

Electrification divisions in one program

70%

of development through on-the-job application

AT A GLANCE

CLIENT

ABB, a multinational electrification and automation leader headquartered in Zürich, Switzerland. The program runs in its Electrification business area.

INDUSTRY

Energy & Sustainability

COMPANY SIZE

105,000

CHALLENGE

Help product managers across five divisions move from task lists to outcome-based OKRs that align with ABB's strategy, and make the shift to strategic thinking stick

SOLUTION

OKRs built into a competence-based development program, with Wave Nine Academy training and certification, one-on-one OKR coaching for every participant who requests it, and guidance during on-the-job application

RESULTS

Outcome-based, measurable OKRs, stretch goals worth striving for, OKRs that fit ABB's vision, mission and objectives such as innovation and sustainability, and a mindset change centered on strategy

THE CHALLENGE

FROM TASK EXECUTION TO STRATEGIC THINKING

ABB product managers use OKRs to think strategically and align their actions with ABB's vision.

ABB is a multinational electrification and automation leader working to build a sustainable future through resource-efficient technology. Headquartered in Zürich, Switzerland, ABB's 105,000 employees are dedicated to accelerating industrial transformation through four main business areas: Electrification, Motion, Process Automation, and Robotics & Discrete Automation.

ABB's Electrification business includes a broad portfolio of products and services, from low- and medium-voltage products to electric vehicle solutions and smart building technology. In the spirit of innovation, Franco Gatti and his Product Management Excellence team lead an initiative to help ABB Electrification's product managers build core competencies, so they can think strategically and align their efforts with ABB's larger purpose.



Our goal was to promote a mindset change in the product managers and provide the necessary tools to act strategically.

Franco Gatti

Product Management Excellence Lead, ABB Electrification



OUTPUT THINKING IS HARD TO SHAKE

In today's evolving business landscape, product managers play a more strategic role, working at the crossroads of many functions. To succeed in this environment, organizations like ABB are turning to OKRs. They offer a consistent approach for aligning teams, fostering innovation and achieving strategic objectives at scale, so product managers can excel and contribute to their organization's success, whatever their industry or product type.

The initiative involves internal training for 650 product managers in different roles across the Electrification business area, on-the-job application of what they learn, and coaching from Wave Nine to nurture the competencies and skills needed for strategic action.

ABB Electrification has strong technical capabilities and a long history of building high-quality products. Like many product organizations, it also had a recurring pattern: teams sometimes built things simply because they could. As Franco describes it, the default mindset was often:

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WE BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME.

Franco Gatti

Product Management Excellence Lead, ABB Electrification

That approach led to inconsistent success. Products and features were delivered, but the connection to customer value or business impact wasn't always clear. Even experienced product leaders, who understand the difference between outputs and outcomes in theory, tend to fall back into output thinking.

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The theory looks very simple... but it requires you to look beyond your area of expertise and comfort zone.

Franco Gatti

Product Management Excellence Lead, ABB Electrification

For technical teams, the "what" is familiar territory: features, specifications, delivery timelines. The "why" means stepping outside that comfort zone and engaging with customer problems, business impact and value creation.

TASK LISTS IN DISGUISE

B2B environments make output thinking even harder to escape. Customers often talk in terms of outputs and ask for specific features or solutions, which makes it easy for product teams to answer in kind and harder to step back and ask what problem the customer is trying to solve.

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If your customers are feeling comfortable discussing outputs, it's even more difficult to switch... you need to nudge them into 'why do you need this feature?'

Franco Gatti

Product Management Excellence Lead, ABB Electrification

When Franco reviewed the existing OKRs, before working with Wave Nine, he found that many product managers had simply reformulated their task lists. He quickly realized that without proper coaching, it would be difficult for product managers to write OKRs that led to a genuine mindset change. And a mindset change was the ultimate goal. ABB needed to:

01

Define outcome-based OKRs

Help product managers move beyond task lists to measurable, strategic results.

02

Align with corporate strategy

Make sure every OKR contributes to ABB's broader vision and long-term goals.

03

Drive a mindset shift

Support product managers as they evolve from operational execution to strategic leadership.

Professional development across five divisions

ABB Electrification consists of five divisions, each with a broad range of products and services:

Smart Power

Low-voltage electrical products and systems

Distribution Solutions

Medium-voltage electrical products and systems

Smart Buildings

Commercial and residential electrical solutions

Installation Products

Powering and protecting the world through reliable, sustainable electrical products

Service

A wide range of digital solutions

THE JOURNEY TO UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

Franco Gatti and his team designed a versatile program for product managers. They combined different learning formats and competency areas to meet the needs of each division, because product management varies significantly with the type of product.

“Product management is one of our most strategic roles, and we need them to drive strategy with a clarity of purpose linked to our high-level business strategy.

Franco Gatti

Product Management Excellence Lead, ABB Electrification

The program is built on the "Four Stages of Competence" model, which describes four distinct stages in learning any new skill. Everyone starts at unconscious incompetence, where we don't know what we don't know. The goal is to reach unconscious competence, where the knowledge is so ingrained that there's room for improvisation and the many insights that spring from intuition.

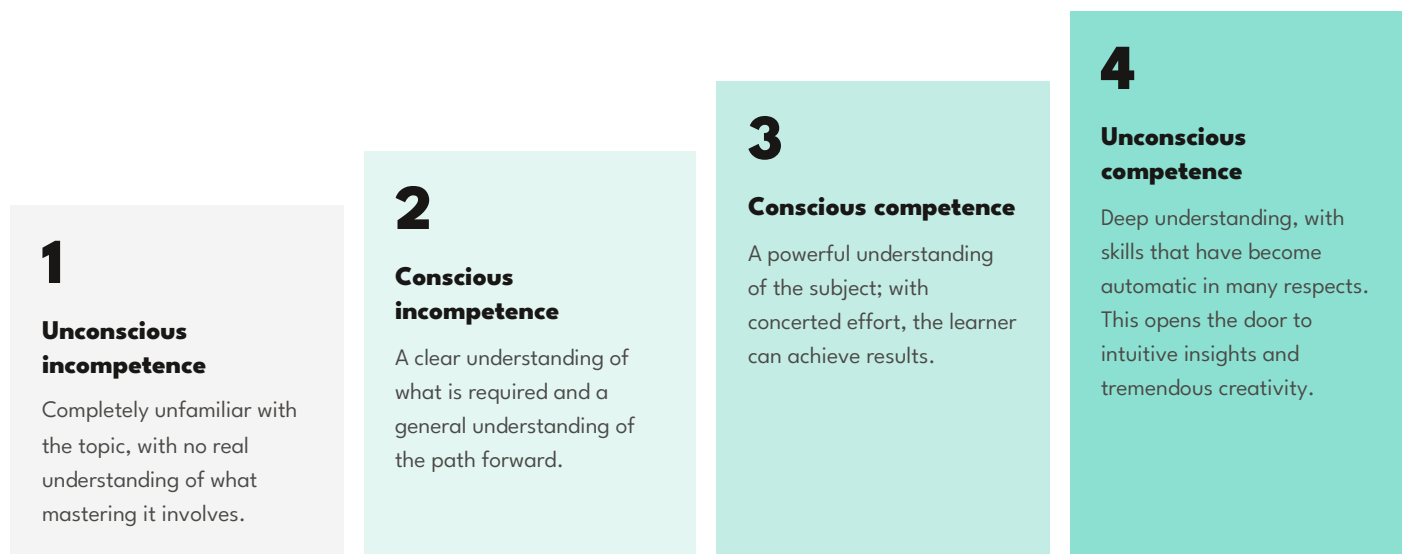
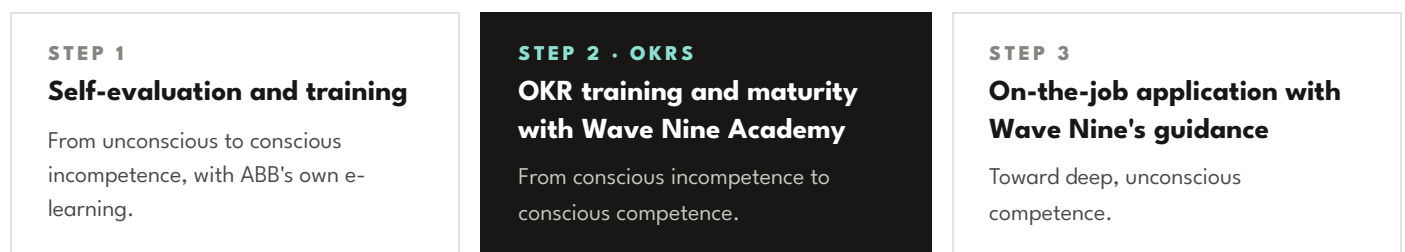


ABB defined three steps in its development process, to identify areas for improvement and plan how to develop and master new skills. OKRs come in during the second step:



STEPS 1 AND 2: FROM SELF-EVALUATION TO OKR MATURITY

Step 1: Self-evaluation and training

Participating product managers evaluate themselves on a set of skills, such as market knowledge, portfolio planning and driving strategy, and identify their position in the four-stage model for each subject. They then use an internal e-learning program created by ABB to move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence in the most important areas.

Step 2: OKR training and maturity with Wave Nine Academy

ABB introduces OKRs at the conscious incompetence stage. Wave Nine provides an end-to-end OKR education solution through Wave Nine Academy, working with product managers to build an OKR foundation through on-demand learning and virtual and on-site OKR certification classes.

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It's important for product managers to learn the frameworks required to excel at their jobs, from soft skills to hard skills. We made the deliberate decision to bring OKRs into the program, helping them move from conscious incompetence to conscious competence and beyond.

Franco Gatti

Product Management Excellence Lead, ABB Electrification

Wave Nine Academy - Enterprise is Wave Nine's OKR education solution for large and international organizations. It gives employees high-quality, personalized and company-specific knowledge of strategy execution and OKRs, for newcomers and seasoned practitioners alike. For ABB, it includes:

01 OKR Online Masterclass	02 Live introduction classes	03 OKR Coach Certification	04 One-on-one OKR coaching	05 Live topic-driven sessions
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The ABB OKR Online Masterclass

Self-paced courses that build internal OKR expertise and a common understanding of OKRs across ABB, with videos, tactical advice including real-life examples and best practices, case studies, templates and checklists.

STEP 3: ON-THE-JOB APPLICATION WITH WAVE NINE'S GUIDANCE



Franco and his team never intended the core competency program to be purely theoretical. They planned for 70% of each employee's development to happen through real-world, on-the-job engagement, with 20% of their time spent on coaching and 10% on e-learning.

70%**On-the-job application****20%****Coaching****10%****E-learning**

Wave Nine's live, one-on-one OKR coaching gives ABB's product managers the chance to put OKR theory into practice, adapting it to real-world conditions to spark innovation and ensure alignment. It also helps them work toward deep, unconscious competence in the areas that matter most for their performance and for ABB's business objectives.

ABB invests heavily in coaching and on-the-job application. Product managers apply OKRs in real situations, refine them over time and build the ability to define meaningful outcomes within each product domain. Franco describes this as a mindset shift across the entire value chain, reaching beyond the product teams. In many cases, even customers need to be guided toward outcome-based thinking.

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It's a simple concept, but it's actually very difficult to implement in an effective way, and that's where coaching comes in. You can't just start writing, it requires thoughtful analysis.

Franco Gatti

Product Management Excellence Lead, ABB Electrification

OKRS THAT DRIVE STRATEGY

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OKRs aren't only for setting goals, they're also about managing them. That's why our training covers the entire OKR cycle, supporting teams from start to finish.

Jessica Stimac

Director, Wave Nine

With Wave Nine's guidance, ABB Electrification's product managers started formulating impactful, actionable OKRs that fit the company's broader strategic objectives, such as groundbreaking innovation and sustainability. ABB offers coaching and training through Wave Nine to every participant who requests it, and Wave Nine's coaching helps product managers to:

- **Set outcome-based, measurable OKRs** in place of reformulated task lists
- **Avoid the temptation** to simply list tasks
- **Identify stretch goals** worth striving for
- **Drive a mindset change** centered on strategy
- **Make sure all OKRs fit** into ABB's larger vision and mission

■ Key results as a filter for decisions

Key results play a central role in that shift. A feature-based mindset can survive in an objective, but it breaks down when you try to define measurable outcomes: a meaningful key result can't be written around "build X." Teams have to define what success looks like in terms of impact. Competition shows the difference:

OUTPUT-DRIVEN

- 1 A competitor releases a new feature
- 2 The team builds the same feature
- 3 Feature parity and price competition

OUTCOME-FOCUSED

- 1 A competitor releases a new feature
- 2 What problem is the competitor solving?
- 3 Is there a better way to solve it?

BUILDING WITH CLEARER INTENT

Key results become a filter for decision-making. If a proposed initiative can't be tied to a clear outcome, it becomes much harder to justify.

The way teams work during the quarter changes too. Teams look for earlier signals that show whether they are moving toward the intended outcome, well before final delivery. Agile teams know iteration and feedback, but Franco observed that those cycles often still focus on outputs. OKRs extend that thinking to outcomes and make teams ask whether their work is creating value.

The result is a more disciplined approach to product development. Teams still build, now with clearer intent, better feedback loops and a stronger connection to strategy.

HOW TEAMS BUILD NOW

- 1 Clearer intent behind every initiative
- 2 Earlier signals during the quarter
- 3 Better feedback loops
- 4 A stronger connection to strategy



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM ABB'S PROGRAM

Task lists in disguise are the most common OKR trap

Even experienced product leaders fall back into output thinking, and B2B customers who ask for features make it easier still.

Key results force the shift to outcomes

A good key result describes impact, which makes it a natural filter for what's worth building.

Coaching turns theory into practice

OKRs are simple in concept and hard to apply well. One-on-one coaching on real work makes the difference.

Learning happens on the job

ABB puts 70% of development into on-the-job application, supported by 20% coaching and 10% e-learning.

“Working with Wave Nine was a great experience. They were conscious of the challenges we faced, coming up with ideas and solutions to address them proactively.”

Franco Gatti

Product Management Excellence Lead, ABB Electrification

STRATEGY EXECUTION WITH OKRS AND AI

Let's talk about what this could look like in your organization.

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About Wave Nine. Wave Nine are AI and OKR consultants for complex organizations. Founded in Silicon Valley, we have guided 300+ transformations in 30+ countries, trained 50,000+ people and are the No. 1 implementation partner for WorkBoard AI. We help leadership teams turn strategy into results: the right goals, a steady operating rhythm, and AI that the whole organization uses to run the business.

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