

# Putting Your Strategy to Work

## Destination Implementation

By Amy L. Girst and Robert J. Schleyer

A strategy is only as strong as its implementation. While developing a strategy may be costly, a strategy can often be expressed in a few words and represents a few months' effort by a limited number of people. Strategy implementation, on the other hand, often requires tens of thousands of words, gigabytes of data, and the efforts of many people over several years. The costs of implementation soon dwarf the time and expense of strategy development. If strategy execution slows, the market may pass the company by. It's important to get implementation right.

As part of our series on executing business strategy, we discuss successful implementation, the second of the three critical factors in putting business strategy into operation:

- Keen understanding of the organization and how it must change
- Solid implementation planning and management
- Deep leadership engagement in strategy execution.

### Magnificent Details

Strategy implementation is often depicted in a road map, a high-level view of the broad streams of work to be conducted over projected time periods. The road map is a useful tool for conceptualizing and communicating, in a generalized manner,

the various efforts required get the firm from its current to its future state. Unfortunately, executives sometimes get stuck on the road map, leaving implementation to careen into the guardrails.

Successful execution lies largely in the details, which don't always appear in high-level road maps. Execution requires implementation plans that show not just the major thoroughfares but the narrow streets, alleys, gutters, and paths where the action occurs. Big-picture thinking plays a role in strategy execution, but both the project manager and the executive leader need to be in the midst of the ground-level action, dealing with detail.

issues, anticipate roadblocks, and ask hard questions. He or she is responsible for identifying risks, coaching managers, helping to solve problems, evaluating progress, and holding managers accountable. The executive must ensure that all projects in the portfolio remain on schedule, within budget, and in sync with other projects. This requires ground-level knowledge as well as an attention to the general plan. Without the details, the executive cannot successfully provide the leadership necessary for implementation.

This was the case with a key executive at a firm who asked us to analyze and recommend a solution to the mistaken billings that



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The project manager and team members need to know exactly what needs to be done on a day-to-day basis to manage each curve and detour, in the road. The executive, however, must see both the entire landscape and its details to raise

his firm was producing. He declared the volume of errors unacceptable; reducing these errors became his top priority. We performed a comprehensive review of the process. The executive was attentive during management meetings, and expressed support for our direction. He did not, how-

ever, absorb the particulars of the problems that we uncovered with the help of his team. Nor did he pay attention to the effort required to solve these problems.

As a result, the executive lacked sufficient information to effectively communicate and work with his people to ensure a consistent, committed effort toward the solution. At the end of our engagement the executive thanked us for the robust recommendations, invaluable analysis, and solid implementation plan, then assigned the project to a subordinate. The limited executive level engagement hindered completion of the solution.

work process. In another case, we found the standardization of defined business events smoothed out the processes and reduced errors in a cross-functional team. Potential quick hits often surface during discovery work at the beginning of projects. They give the team the immediate satisfaction of contributing to the organization and open the team up to other possibilities for success.

We have seen many 18 to 24 month project plans. Although rational, they are generally not sustainable. Rather than developing vague, long-term project plans, break down the high-level road map into short, discrete, attainable projects. Limit each project to three months whenever

Many corporate initiatives fail due to inadequate project management or insufficient coordination of the interdependent projects necessary to accomplish the corporate goal. Program management is the coordinated management set of projects that together will enable the firm to achieve the greater business objectives. It provides a common and consistent framework – a set of procedures and tools for the successful implementation of business strategies through multiple projects. It is the highway map, traffic regulations, city street map, and traffic signals all rolled into one.

The program management functions are often formalized into a Program Management Office (PMO), operated by a

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### Pacing

Strategy execution demands not only attention to detail and personal engagement, but also a sense of pacing and an understanding of the psychology involved. Success breeds success. Break a strategy into short term (0-2 years), midterm (2-5 years), and long-term goals. When developing implementation plans, build in the chance for early wins, even if they are small ones. Accomplishments in the initial stages buoy the team and make longer-term goals seem more real and achievable.

Look for improvements that can be made rapidly and make an impact on the organization. Early in one of our projects implementing an imaging solution, we found that the simple act of removing staplers from the desks of the file assembler's immediately increased the speed of their

possible and rarely allow it to go beyond six months. Team leaders and members wear down over an extended stretch of time. People need endings, not just milestones. Moreover, the business changes, as does the market, which can make a long-term project obsolete before its completion. Tasks always take longer than planned, unexpected problems crop up, and resources may not be available. These factors generally make detailed planning far into the future a wasted effort.

### Program Management

The complexity of implementing a strategy often calls for design of a program – a coordinated set of related projects aligned toward the overall objective. Each project within the program drives toward a portion of the larger corporate goal.

Program Director. Common PMO activities include:

- Creating a program plan that incorporates all project plans and indicates project interdependencies;
- Creating common reporting tools for use by all related projects;
- Tracking progress and costs of each project to ensure that each is on schedule so it does not delay dependent projects, exceed budget, or interfere with resource deployment;
- Tracking resource utilization of each project against its resource allocation;
- Reporting project status, budget, and resource utilization status to program sponsors on a periodic basis.

These are important functions that appropriately reside in the PMO; however, this list is not exhaustive. Many companies limit their PMOs, thus turning them into project audit offices. At its best, a PMO is a resource on project management; it's a good place to get information and feel the pulse of what is happening in the program.

When allowed to perform at full capacity, a PMO director anticipates problems and facilitates cross-project sessions that make broad integrated implementation possible. In the best scenario, PMO sessions provide a forum to resolve project issues, identify program risks, propose resolutions, articulate change management needs, and agree upon actions. Project managers grow, working relationships evolve, and program sponsors become more deeply immersed in the program when PMOs are fully functional. Such PMO plays a vital role in a multi-project endeavor, which includes most strategy implementation initiatives. When limited to reporting and oversight, a PMO is sometimes viewed by project managers as a watchdog, an adversarial bureaucracy creating make-work that distracts managers from driving their projects.

### Managing Change

As business changes are introduced in the course of strategy execution, their impact on the individual is often underestimated. Even changes that improve and enrich the work experience can be traumatic and disruptive to people. Without effective change management, the best plans and projects will fail due to resistance to change. Successful change management reduces resistance and encourages the behaviors desired in the future state of the organization.

Specific change management tasks must be built into work plans at the outset of strategic implementation. Tasks aimed at change management activities include:

- Assessing the current state and culture, defining the future state, and developing

## Tips for Change Management

- Committing adequate time and resources to the strategy implementation effort;
- Understanding peoples' values and beliefs;
- Estimating correctly the power of change "inhibitors";
- Communicating clearly and frequently about the effects of the new initiative: its benefits, its costs in time and effort, and the changes it will bring;
- Understanding that, while behavioral change occurs at the emotional, not the intellectual level, an organization's logical, concrete steps can foster behavioral change;
- Accepting that business changes will make some unhappy;
- Continuing to move forward when people resist;
- Ensuring that the same discipline and rigor applied to the other aspects of project management are applied to change management activities.

transition plans to achieve the future state, as discussed in "Putting Your Strategy to Work: Understanding Your Organization and How It Must Change," (see TODAY Magazine, December, 2004) the first in this series on operationalizing business;

- Identifying the behaviors associates need to exhibit in the future state, whether they are directly or indirectly affected by the change; this is also discussed in the first article in this series;
- Designing and delivering communications, training programs, and incentives that diminish resistance and foster the desired behaviors.

Clarity of direction, emotional connection, training, constant communication, and feedback are the cornerstones of change management.

### Conclusion

The importance of skilled, detailed implementation planning and management, including change management, cannot be overemphasized. The need for a comprehensive understanding of implementation activities at the executive level is too often underestimated, jeopardizing the success of the strategy and the reputation of the firm internally and in the marketplace. Executives must be fully engaged in implementation if the business strategy is to be fully actualized on time and within budget. The Program Management Office should be chartered not only to report on projects, but also to support and coach project managers, and to assist in the management of risks and change. The success of your strategy depends on these factors. ■

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