

SIX CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLANS

So you have just completed your strategic planning sessions. Your planning team is fired up and ready to make things happen. The workshops left your team energized and optimistic about the future. You feel that your organization is on its way to a new place in the competitive playing field; you are confident that your organization will implement its plans and realize the changes required under your vision.

However, the odds are that you could be disappointed in the ultimate outcomes of your planning work. Research over the years has shown that many managers can do a reasonably good job of planning, but that far fewer are able to achieve successful implementation of their plans. Many organizations seem to falter at the implementation stage. Just how can leaders help assure that their strategic planning will have a strong, positive impact?

My work shows that leaders must pay attention to six critical factors for successful strategy implementation:

- Get your people involved;
- Do your homework before the planning session;
- Be realistic about the changes you wish to make in your organization;
- Over-communicate your vision and strategies;
- Plan for the transition from the planning task forces to the people who must live with the changes; and
- Insist on accountability.

Get Your People Involved

Savvy leaders build advance support for their plans by generating broad involvement in the planning process. While this is true for all organizations, it is particularly necessary for nonprofit associations who rely on the voluntary support of their members. Prior to the planning sessions, the use of surveys, interviews and focus groups gives people a chance to be heard. This is an absolute must if managers expect these people to participate later on in any implementation.

Example: The Colorado Society of Association Executives recently canvassed all of their members to generate input for a discussion of core values, core purpose and future vision. Surveys were sent out to the members and the results were summarized for inclusion in the workbooks for the planning team. Not everyone will respond to surveys, but no one can claim that they did not have an opportunity to become involved.

Do Your Homework before the Planning Session

In addition to broad, grass-roots input, leaders need to orchestrate a rigorous review of internal and external trends. This requires research of actual facts and interpretation of the facts for the planning meeting. This research can be boiled down into areas dealing with for instance, competition and competitors, legislation and regulation, markets and customers, and technology. It is important to obtain *actual information* about the competitive environment and the organization itself. Plans built on a foundation of opinions and feelings will not be implemented effectively, or if implemented, will not produce the desired results for the organization.

Example: Senior management at Walbridge Aldinger, an international construction services company, assigns ten to twelve topics to teams of two to three middle managers for research and presentation at planning sessions. Each presenting team is given about 15 minutes for presentation; management allots another 10 to 15 minutes for questions and answers for each group. These professionals present solid information to assist in a robust, strategic decision-making process

Be Realistic About the Changes You Wish to Make in Your Organization

Organizational change can be difficult to implement under the best of conditions. Broad, sweeping changes increasingly may be called for as entire industries change their business model. Discontinuous change in the business environment may force many organizations to make dramatic changes.

On the other hand, some organizations do not have the resources to make such radical strategic shifts. When I use “resources” here, I mean not only money and the right quantity of people, but also the quality of the people—their skills and capacity to learn to change. Similarly, organizational change requires that the people at the top lead by example. Often one of the barriers to realizing a new vision of the future is the inability of the people at the top to coalesce into a unified force for change. Some may not be willing personally to “walk the talk.”

Example: One of my clients developed a strategic vision that would have their organization providing a multitude of new services in their marketplace. It was an exciting vision. The planning team was very enthusiastic about it until the topic of selecting sponsors for each new service came up. At that point, it became apparent that none of the leaders had the desire or the energy to personally champion or sponsor the new service offerings. Had they continued with the plan, they would have failed dismally. In doing so, they would have lost credibility with their people.

Over-Communicate Your Vision and Strategies

Research tells us that change leaders must communicate their message at least seven times to their followers. Communication regarding the change must be persistent and consistent. Unfortunately, many managers stop significantly short in communicating the vision and its impact on their people. This is somewhat understandable. By the time a management team has created a new vision, they have spent some significant, intense time working together on the vision. Unfortunately, the people to whom it is rolled out do not have the benefit of all that time together. This requires leaders to frame up the vision for their followers—why is it necessary and relevant—as well as to help followers understand its effect on them and their work. And the message must be repeated!

Example: The Colorado Contractors Association published its stretch vision in multiple issues of its monthly newsletter, as well as its year-end report. Management understands the need to be clear about where the organization is headed.

Plan for the Transition

Involving the right people is important when you begin to do your planning. It continues to be an important factor when you are ready to begin your implementation. Planning participants often have a direct role in implementation of the plan. In most organizations, though, at least parts of the plan are handed off to others for implementation. This is a critical phase. Transition teams should involve both the members of the planning group and the people who have to live with the implementation. The transition process creates a bridge from the planning team to the implementation team.

Example: A professional association recently laid out its plan, and with it, a matrix identifying who on the planning team would work with each volunteer committee to communicate the vision and intent, and see that committee work-plans are aligned with the vision and core philosophy. Management and leadership recognize that a smooth handoff is impossible without appropriate transition processes and linkages.

Insist on Accountability

The real key to getting anything done is to maintain accountability throughout the organization. Accountability means that people have clear assignments and due dates for completion of the assignments. It means that leaders use a system to track progress, not only against agreed action plans, but also against the vision targets, or measurable outcomes, that should result from the actions taken.

Accountability requires that a single person be held responsible for a specific outcome. Single point responsibility is an absolute must. Savvy managers do not leave important outcomes vaguely assigned to a group without a clear leader. Furthermore, measure-

ment alone will not guarantee success. What gets measured often gets done, but what gets recognized and rewarded continues to be implemented. Celebrations of success and public recognition for achievement of goals are as important as monitoring the progress. For one thing, when you celebrate successes, you recognize the positive energy being created from the planning work. For another, celebration of successes helps publicize the fact that the plan is working. It helps move the skeptics from “sitting on the fence” to actually participating in the forward momentum of the plan. It builds synergy.

Conducting strategic planning can involve a significant investment of money and time. By paying attention to these factors, managers and leaders can realize a significant return on their planning investment.

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