

***Why Strategy Implementation Fails**

When it comes to strategic planning, the humorist Sam Levenson makes a keen observation: “Some people are so good at learning the tricks of the trade, that they never get to learn the trade.” The result is that we have a document that is so generic – full of platitudes and fancy words (the tricks of the trade) – that we end up with something no one can really relate to. And if we can’t relate to something, we seldom become involved. Here are nine more reasons why strategy implementation never pans out as intended:

1. The map does not closely resemble the territory.

Just like a map, a strategy can show us where we are, where we need to be and the way to get there. But if it does not accurately reflect what is on the ground (i.e. the territory) it is just a piece of paper (or useless GPS device). Obstacles then arise ‘out of nowhere’ and the strategy becomes a lame duck.

2. The strategy is told not sold.

Although strategic direction is set by senior management, the implementation depends on the buy-in of everyone. Even if the strategy is clear, that does not mean everyone has bought into the ‘spirit’ of the plan. This often creates a baffling situation of why people aren’t ‘doing the right thing’.

3. The structure does not exist. Neither does the system.

It’s all very well having a focused strategy that is clear, but if the resources are not aligned, then the whole process is pretty much academic. Putting in the required structure and systems also makes the process tangible – and sends out a serious message: the strategy will be implemented.

4. Time periods are unrealistic.

Strangely enough, time is not a linear commodity – if we do one thing on Monday, it does not mean we will have done 5 things by Friday. The situation, and our personal motivation, is not a constant. Shorter time frames tend to deliver exponentially less, or as Bill Gates explains: “Most people overestimate what they can do in a year and underestimate what they can do in ten years.”

5. Deliberate vs emergent.

Many industry sectors have learned that ‘business as usual’ is a dangerous concept. Once we have completed the strategic plan, we have constructed what could be defined as a deliberate strategy: we expect action A to produce result B. However, effective strategies can also emerge from what we do in response to what we experience in real time.

6. The gaps are too large.

The people on the ground who need to implement the strategy, and who might not have been involved in the strategic planning process, find it difficult to see the plan in perspective. Instead of evolving, it just appears. The strategy does not take into account departmental or individual objectives, so there is too far a stretch between what the strategy dictates and what is being done on a daily basis. These day to day activities might not be documented, but they are firmly entrenched in daily practice.

7. Things are expected to stay the same.

When a strategy is constructed, certain assumptions need to be made. These are akin to predictions and, as we are yet unable to tell the future, the best laid plans can, and often do, go awry. A strategic plan is an iterative process that needs to take into account that the environment is a dynamic one – targets are always moving.

8. There is no monitoring.

Once the plan has been formulated, we often see that as the end of a process as opposed to what it really is: the start. Regular management meetings are dictated by the order of the day as opposed to the plan for the year. Operational issues are often seen as more important, relegating strategy to an infrequent discussion ‘when time allows’.

9. It does not engage.

The style of communication is not relevant to the implementers leaving them to wonder what it’s all about. This is a barrier to action. People must know what they need to stop doing, start doing or do differently. A strategy demands a change in habits – merely knowing is very different from knowing what you have to do. And habits are hard to break.

Strategies need to be inspiring. There is a cost in terms of time and energy for anyone who needs to implement it. Sometimes we just must dream a little, ignoring ‘what is’ at the expense of ‘what could be’. As Sam Levenson wisely says: “One of the virtues of being very young is that you don’t let the facts get in the way of your imagination.”

***Adapted from Sid Peimer**