Structured Abstract

A precarious skills gap is emerging among leaders around the world—that is, they lack the skills to implement the strategies they create. This paper argues that the current generation of leaders has been taught how to craft strategy but not how to execute it. Organizations that recognize this skills gap are providing the required training. The training addresses how leaders must be able to craft and implement strategy as well as stay constantly committed to its implementation through follow up. They are also responsible for creating the right conditions for the implementation and making adjustments as required.

Keywords: strategy, implementation, execution, action, leadership, skills

Today’s leaders need both the ability to craft the right strategy and the skills to implement it. There is, however, a precarious skills gap among leaders. They have been taught how to craft strategy but not how to implement it. This becomes a major contributor to why nine out 10 implementations fail.

Major corporations around the world recognize that their current leaders who attended university to earn a business degree were taught strategy but not strategy implementation. Every business school, for example, has a strategy professor but not an implementation professor. Students may have attended a module on operations management or change management, but this is different than strategy implementation. As a result, a critical skills gap exists today.

Change management, which is frequently the default approach for implementation, works well for projects and initiatives inside departments and divisions. However, it does not work for strategy implementation. If it did, then organizations as a whole would not have such a high implementation failure rate.

When leaders are asked to implement the strategy, they don’t know what to do!

After launching their new strategy, leaders return to their offices and repeat the same mistakes from previous implementation efforts. Sadly, they get the same poor results. To break the pattern of so many past failures, leaders need to be taught how to implement strategy. It’s a specific skill set. And when it’s missing, they underestimate the implementation challenge they face.

Typically, once the strategy is crafted, leaders delegate the implementation responsibility and take their attention off of it. But that doesn’t mean the implementation is a fait accompli. When they stop paying attention to the implementation, so do their staff members. This sets up a recipe for failure.

Implementing is as every bit as tough as crafting the right strategy. Yet, the only way to know if it’s the right strategy is after it’s executed. No leadership team walks into a conference room and declares, “Let’s create a bad strategy!” At that point, every member of that team thinks the strategy is great. But only when a successful implementation follows can this team be proven right.
Competitive Advantage

It’s critical for organizations to bridge this current strategy implementation skills gap because successful strategy implementation provides a competitive advantage. Oracle, for example, has made 100 acquisitions in the last five years. To support the company’s leaders in implementing the strategy, a program called “Leading to Win” is run. This program focuses on collaboration and learning the skills of implementation. As a result, leaders at Oracle now have the knowledge and skills to execute strategies well.

Universities such as Singapore Management and Duke University now offer modules on strategy implementation. In addition, Bridges Business Consultancy Int runs a one-day seminar called “Strategy Implementation for Leaders” in locations around the world.

Reduced Life Span

Because leaders are being called on more frequently than at any other time in history to craft and implement new strategies, it’s essential to resolve this skills gap. Not long ago, strategies had a life span of 10 to 15 years—a timeframe that has shrunk to three to five years today. As a result, leaders must craft and implement new strategies more quickly and frequently than ever before.

The global recession has also placed even more pressure on leaders to execute their strategies right the first time. In the past, when strategy implementation was failing, more money or people would be thrown at the implementation, or a new strategy would be crafted. These options are no longer viable. Once board members sign off on the new strategy, they place ever-increasing pressure on the organization’s leaders to implement it. Board members and leaders alike feel pressure to deliver on their strategy promises to the shareholders.

Strategy is about making the right choices; implementation is about taking the right actions.

Successful implementation depends on people taking the right actions. It follows then that leaders must ensure their employees are taking the right actions. But does that actually happen? Because staff members are always busy, the key question becomes, “Are the actions staff members taking today driving the implementation forward? If not, they’re not the right actions.”

Certainly staff members are assigned more work than they have hours in the day to complete. Still, successful implementation depends on employees taking the right actions. And leaders are responsible for overseeing that activity happening in a way that meets the objectives of the strategy.

Five Recommendations

To conduct a successful implementation, here are five recommendations for leaders:

1. *Focus on both crafting and implementing strategy* – Pay equal attention to both.

2. *Oversee and stay committed to the implementation* – Constantly be involved by sharing information, communicating with employees and checking the current status often.

3. *Adapt and amend the strategy and implementation as required* – Whatever was agreed to in the boardroom rarely happens in the implementation so adjustments must be made.
4. **Create the right conditions for the implementation** – Ensure you have set up a culture that supports the execution of the strategy.

5. **Follow up** – To achieve a successful implementation, follow up is the number one best practice for leaders to focus on.

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Robin Speculand is chief executive of Bridges Business Consultancy Int. His work begins once clients have crafted their strategy and are ready for the implementation journey. He is a masterful event facilitator, an engaging keynote speaker and the creator of The Implementation HUB, the first portal in the world dedicated to strategy implementation. A best-selling author, his latest book is *Beyond Strategy – The Leader’s Role in Successful Implementation*. 