



The Review

INSIGHTS, IDEAS & INFORMATION

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- EXECUTION
- BUILDING EFFECTIVE TEAMS
- BOOKS
- WEB SITES
- NEWS

White Maple is a strategy consulting firm. We aim to deliver results for clients that produce lasting improvements to performance through facilitating alignment between strategy, the market and brand, and the organisation's people, structure and processes.



We focus on working with service organisations. Principal sectors include:

- Commercial (business-to-business)
- Government
- Member organisations and charities
- Professional services

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Execution: messy but necessary!

BY BOB EMPSON

Implementation (or execution) is not the glamorous part of the strategy process: it is usually hard work and complicated. Many organisations may start implementation (and some don't even get that far) but then energy, enthusiasm, confidence and focus soon fade. This article discusses some of the principal implementation challenges. In the side bar on the next page are some headline ideas for "surviving the cut and thrust of execution."

Strategy formulation can be exciting: a journey of discovery. Analysis may produce new ways of looking at your organisation, its markets and its environment. Creative thinking is frequently a source of ideas, possibilities and solutions to both current and future challenges. A senior team will typically dedicate considerable time over a few weeks or months to craft a strategy for the organisation or a business unit. There is often excitement, or perhaps relief, when the documented strategy is agreed and approved. Unfortunately this is sometimes seen as the end of the process, or at least the completion of the most important step. In fact, the crucial phase is yet to come: execution.

As a consultant for some 20 years, I have often witnessed the frustration, confusion and even anger at the failure to implement agreed business strategies that would seem to have been suitable and feasible. Some of the most common reasons, many of which are usually within an organisation's control, are discussed below.

COMMUNICATION

In many organisations, if one asks people below the senior management tiers if they know what the organisation's strategy is, they often don't know. It is unsurprising then that they will not know how they can contribute to effective implementation. Communication involves more than just broadcasting what the strategy is. People need to be helped to understand, through dialogue, the basis for the strategy and its priorities. Performance management systems can also assist communication through the process of agreeing performance objectives that are aligned with the organisation's overall goals.

ACTION PLANNING

Effective implementation can be impaired because business planning and budgeting processes are not aligned with the strategy formulation process. This can occur because, for example, the strategy context is not



provided to business units before they start preparing their detailed plans. I have also seen organisations that have developed overall organisational strategies and then have had no process at all for translating this into operational plans. Another surprisingly common, and rather basic, problem is the failure of management to agree the precise "what, who, when" of actions (a test that you might like to try is to review at the end of a meeting all the actions agreed during the meeting; you will almost invariably find that there is a lack of clarity, or even disagreement, about what everyone thought had been confirmed earlier!).

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Strategy implementation often takes the form of a series of projects. Implementation can fail because, for example: the projects are not defined and documented; the programme of projects is too extensive; the roles of key stakeholders in the projects are not understood (useful for this is the tried and tested RACI model that defines who are Responsible and Accountable and who

"...RESISTANCE TO IMPLEMENTATION...IS OFTEN COVERT..."

SURVIVING EXECUTION!

Implementing strategic change (or even what may, at first, seem just a minor operational modification) can be quite frustrating for those responsible for leading the change: things often go wrong or have unexpected consequences. So what can one do to survive the cut and thrust of execution? A few ideas...

Be philosophical. Accept that major change in an organisation will not be easy and that things will go wrong.

Manage risks. Anticipate potential problems and create plans to manage the risks of these occurring.

Learn. Help your organisation to see mistakes and failures as opportunities to learn.

Be patient. Manage your own expectations: significant results will rarely be immediately visible.

Celebrate successes. Take time to review progress and to celebrate successes and achievements.

Share experiences. Perhaps talk to someone you trust who has experienced similar situations. It can be comforting to know that others have felt the same way (and they may be able to give you some useful advice too!).

Take time out. If you have a "day job" as well as responsibilities for leading wider organisational change, perhaps regain strength from immersing yourself for a time (perhaps just a day) in an area where you feel comfortable and confident. And, of course, don't forget to take real breaks: other interests and holidays!



needs to be Consulted and kept Informed); there is weak co-ordination and management across the programme of strategic projects; or there are a lack of project management skills, experience and/or tools. Implementation through projects requires programme and project management skills, processes and discipline.



LEADERSHIP

The senior leadership will, of course, have a central role in providing organisational direction through formulating strategy. However, implementation fails when leaders turn their attention to the next "big idea" before translating the strategy into action and then continually keeping the organisation focused on its priorities. Effective execution needs leaders to pay close attention to the detail of implementation.

COMMITMENT

Implementation may not happen because there was not the commitment amongst key people to the strategy in the first place. For example, senior managers have told me how colleagues, or even they themselves, have been involved with formulating and agreeing strategies in which they had no belief and no intention of implementing. Their resistance to implementation of the strategy, and to the changes entailed, is often covert, rather than overt. Having some resistance to change is rarely always bad (the resisters may be right and their challenges may guide the organisation to refine and strengthen its strategy); however, implementation of strategy requires commitment and resistance to be surfaced and the use of targeted education, participation, incentives or "coercion" to gain commitment to implementation.

TEAM WORK

Strategy implementation usually entails projects that cut across functional and business units. Problems arise when managers continue to focus on their functional "silos" rather than work effectively as a team to address cross-cutting issues. See also the article on the next page about developing effective teams.

COMPETENCE

Sometimes implementation is not successful because, simply, the organisation does not have the knowledge, skills and experience to do what is required. As one

Chief Executive once put it to me: "we couldn't do it because we didn't even understand the essay question." Ideally there would be an assessment of what competences are required as part of the feasibility review of the emerging strategy. Organisations cannot always afford to create permanent posts (and, indeed, this is not always necessary or appropriate). Alternatives include: training/development of existing staff; short term contracts; and (of course!) input from consultants.

RESOURCES

Another frequent barrier to implementation is a failure to identify the resources (e.g. money, systems, equipment, people and time) needed to make the strategy happen. There might also be a reluctance to invest additional resources that may be needed. However, more often than not, reallocation of existing resources to strategic initiatives will satisfy most of the requirements. Strategy and its implementation is just as much about making choices (and thus stopping doing some things) and reallocating resources, as it is about new initiatives.

MEASUREMENT

An inability to measure progress with implementation can lead to a loss of momentum and direction. Monitoring performance against measurable shorter term targets can, where they are achieved, be a source of positive feedback. Likewise, identifying slippage against the strategy's milestones can help organisations to get the implementation programme back on track by refocusing resources and effort. (You may find it useful to look back at the article on metrics in Issue 3, available on White Maple's web site).

FATIGUE

Another threat to effective implementation is the fatigue that can grow from having to cope with both a continuous stream of new initiatives, projects and challenges and also frequent exhortations about the need to improve, change and deliver. People can become weary, stale, passive and even cynical and destructive. The potential for fatigue can be reduced through, for example: careful prioritisation and phasing of initiatives; selective and targeted communications that focus on issues which are relevant and important to the audiences; and, perhaps, just occasionally taking the foot off the pedal.

For further reading on the subject of strategy implementation, you may wish to have a look at the books reviewed in Issue 4 of The Review.

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Building effective teams

BY JIM CANNON

Creating successful teams quickly has always been a major component of business success. It has never been more critical in an age of rapidly changing organisations. Yet team building processes often get no further than a fun day out followed by a few drinks. This article explores a tried and tested approach for building effective teams quickly.

But what is a team? Several characteristics differentiate a team from a social group. Teams:

- have shared goals and are committed to them;
- have interdependencies – Benjamin Franklin famously remarked: “if we don’t hang together we will surely hang separately”;
- work together;
- trust each other – at least in the context of achieving their goals.

The model involves a sequence of steps (see the diagram): agree goals; clarify roles and interdependencies; develop efficient processes; work on team dynamics; and improve personal relationships.

1. AGREE GOALS

The first step is to clarify the goals of the team and the strategy to accomplish them. Team development starts with discussion on the vision, mission and goals of the team. What do they want to accomplish? What is driving them? What threats and competitive pressures have to be responded to? What incentives exist that will help to sustain effort? Trust and confidence in a team stems as much from *how* they tackle such issues as *what* issues to tackle. If goals and strategies are imposed without discussion, enthusiasm and commitment are diminished. Facilitation to engage and enthuse team members at the outset is important for subsequent team resilience in the face of adversity.

2. ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The second step is to establish role responsibilities and relationships. Until there is clarity about who is doing what, the team rests on shaky foundations. The team therefore needs to work together to review: who does what; how what each does relates to their shared goals; and, most importantly, what is not getting done.

The output of this second step is clarity about role responsibilities, who relies upon whom for what and the boundaries between roles to avoid the twin problems of ‘turf wars’ and ‘organisation black holes’. Creating an understanding of who relies upon whom helps to establish a greater sense of responsibility.

3. PROCESSES

Working together involves several generic processes that all teams need to establish, as well as processes unique to the team. Generic processes include decision-making, allocation of resources, dealing with differences of view and absent members. There is a range of options for establishing these processes, from prescribed rules and procedures to more flexible ways. Teams might have strong leaders, who decide how things are to be done, or more democratic means. There is not necessarily a right way, but the active agreement by team members that their mode of operating is right for them is crucial to success. In particular, teams need to find the right balance between planning and action. Teams can experience the ‘risky shift’ where they become risk averse and spend too much time in planning every eventuality, or the reverse, becoming too risky and rushing too quickly into action. Regardless of the final outcome, careful facilitation of these discussions helps to achieve conscious agreement, rather than by default.

4. TEAM DYNAMICS

Creating teams that are sufficiently confident with each other relies on working on the dynamics of their interaction. Whilst the model indicates that this is the fourth step, considerable progress should have been made if the group has been carefully facilitated through the first three steps. Building commitment starts with creating a sense of belonging of each member. Helping

people make a connection between themselves and the goal gives people a voice. In facilitating team meetings, it needs to be recognised that confidence comes from being valued. Tough things may need to be said, but they will be more readily accepted if people feel valued. Being “tough on the issue but supportive of the person” sums up the style that works best. Too often people confuse criticism with feedback, with a resulting defensiveness and lack of openness.

Dealing with conflict in teams in a way that increases commitment can be difficult if the emotions surrounding conflict are not dealt with properly. A useful discussion for any team is about how they make decisions. Options include: consensus (which takes time to build but has the highest commitment); decision by the leader after consultation; or majority voting (with a higher threshold if the team need to take account of minority views). In situations where increased speed is required then decisions without consultation may be necessary, but are likely to have looser commitment and a greater chance of being disputed if difficulties arise.

However, careful management is also needed to keep a balance between team commitment and commitment to the wider organisation. One danger of a too high team commitment is that other parts of the organisation are excluded or even denigrated.

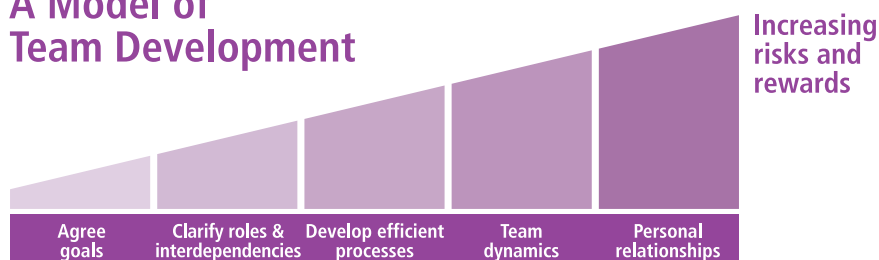
5. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Finally, work can focus on personal relationships. Helpful activities include: team members working together on projects for the team; social events; fun activities (especially where they might be competing with other teams); and situations where team members can build a memory of shared experiences (effective teams usually have their own shared stories, jokes and rituals, which help to create a sense of solidarity). However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the every act of spending time together working on each of the earlier steps increases team effectiveness as relationships are built, individuals become confident with each other and there are fewer subjects that are not, or cannot, be talked about.

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A Model of Team Development



Book Reviews

The only things that these two books have in common are the first letter of their subject matters (punctuation and people) and that they are both very good! *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* was a surprising (given its subject matter: punctuation!) best seller last Christmas; perhaps misunderstood emails have reminded us that accurate punctuation is important for effective communication? *Treat People Right!* would seem to be a common sense exhortation for any organisation; but it's not so simple to do: this book might help.

Eats, Shoots and Leaves

By Lynne Truss

This book's title encapsulates the importance of accurate punctuation. A panda has ordered a sandwich, eaten it, and then fired a gun before leaving the café. By way of explanation, he refers to a poorly punctuated wildlife book. The entry under panda states: "Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

Far from being boring or pedantic, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* is an easy-to-read, passionate and humorous guide to modern punctuation. It is also practical and is filled with good (and often funny) examples of both how to do it and how not to do it.

With 32 pages on the apostrophe, it covers much more than when to use it's and its. There are many rules about commas; but Truss also reminds us, with examples, of the fun of commas because of the "semantic havoc" that they can create when wrongly inserted or carelessly omitted. Many of us are cautious about the use of colons and semicolons; their chapter is very helpful (for example, are you aware of the "Yes!" type and "Ah" type colons?). Other punctuation marks covered include the ellipsis, dash, hyphen, italics, inverted commas, quotation marks, and the exclamation and question marks.

Whether you want to learn more about punctuation, a fun read, a reference book to sit alongside your dictionary and thesaurus or a gift for a needy colleague, this book is for you. A gem.

OVERALL RATING 

Profile Books, 2003. £9.99

Treat People Right!

By Edward E Lawler III

Lawler is clear that this is not a "feel-good" book. Nor does he suggest that treating people right is about being generous. He argues that organisations must ensure that their people are motivated and satisfied, and that employees must adopt behaviours that enable their organisations to perform. Win-win "virtuous spirals of success" are created when people are committed to performing because they are valued and rewarded.

There is an excellent chapter on what makes people effective. This contains an illuminating discussion on the causes of performance (Performance = Motivation x Ability) which includes a straightforward explanation of the psychological concept of expectancy theory of motivation. Lawler also argues against the commonly held belief that job satisfaction directly causes motivation or job performance.

Lawler suggests "Seven Principles" for treating people right. These relate to: creating a value proposition; recruitment practices; training; work design; mission and strategy; reward systems; and leadership.

But they are not seven quick fixes. He is explicit at the outset that implementation is not easy. Patience, effort, leadership, skilled management, commitment and dedication will all be needed. The result is a book that requires careful reading. If you can make the time to read it, you will be rewarded with well researched theories supported by many examples of good practice. It's worthy of the effort.

OVERALL RATING 

Jossey-Bass, 2003. £22.50

WEB SITES

This issue reviews five restaurant guides. Whether it's for business or pleasure, one of these sites should be able to help you to find a restaurant that meets your needs in the UK, Europe, the USA or further afield.

The Restaurant Guide

www.restaurant-guide.com

Claims that the restaurants are either listed in a major guide, or personally known to the 7th Earl of Bradford (!) or recommended by food writers. Covers Great Britain. Excellent search facilities, including by "dining experience". Has very good information about most restaurants listed and also some special offers.

OVERALL RATING 

FoodEU.com

www.foodeu.com

Claims to list more than 0.25 million restaurants and eating places across Europe. Advanced search facility. Detailed information on some restaurants (including photos).

OVERALL RATING 

HappyCow

www.happycow.net

Lists vegetarian and vegan sites around the world, including over 700 in Europe. Clear and simple descriptions. Search facility is rather basic and some of the geographic allocations are rather odd (e.g. Reading can be found in Outer London!). Lots of other veggie information.

OVERALL RATING 

London Restaurant Review

www.londonrestaurantreview.co.uk

Searchable only by tube (and some rail) stations and by alphabet/name. Reviews on all listed outlets (although some may be a few years old). Innovative automated email guest invitation service.

OVERALL RATING 

Zagatsurvey

www.zagat.com

This is the web version of the famous restaurant guides. Covers primarily major cities in the USA and Europe (including just London in the UK). You have to subscribe (\$19.95/year) to gain access to ratings and reviews and to receive contact details of restaurants that are part of a chain. Overall rating below covers the free service.

OVERALL RATING 

WHITE MAPLE NEWS

RECENT WORK

Over the last 12 months, White Maple has advised over 20 organisations. Work has included:

- Helping a leading printing business to refine its strategy. As part of this process, we created a model to evaluate and summarise key financial outcomes.
- Advising a professional services firm in the property sector on the development and implementation of its corporate plan.
- Assisting a working group to review the governance of a large charity.
- Facilitating the preparation of business and brand strategies for a housing association. This included a survey amongst key external stakeholders.
- Designing and facilitating an annual conference for some 65 executives of a growing firm of solicitors.

- Undertaking a wide variety of research and consultation work for a public body to gain the input of staff and external stakeholders regarding strategy and effective delivery.
- For a trade association, reviewing progress with strategy implementation.
- Working with the senior team of a fast growing rehabilitation equipment business to review its business strategy.

OTHER FORMATS

All issues of The Review, including this one, are available on our web site in the resources section. If, in the future, you would like us to email you The Review in pdf format, please let us know on info@whitemaple.net. A version can also be provided in Word to facilitate production as large print or in Braille.