

Hurdles To Executing Your Strategic Plan

by Patrick J. McKenna

Whenever I think about the effort that is required to go into implementing your firm's strategic plan, I'm reminded of a particular business book title that grabbed my attention when I first saw it . . . Hope Is Not A Strategy! To effectively transform your best intentions into best practices, there are several common hurdles that you need to overcome. Thinking through the following will help you make the leap.

1. Move seamlessly from strategizing to implementing.

This is, from my experience, the most significant hurdle. Planning is not doing. Unfortunately, some partners believe that implementing the strategy and “getting their hands dirty” is beneath them. They act as if implementation is something best left to the non-legal professionals in the firm. This view holds that one group does the innovative work (“the strategizing”), and then hands the ball off to lower levels. If things go awry, the problem is placed squarely at the feet of the “doers,” who somehow couldn't implement a “perfectly sound” plan.

Strategy and execution should be mutually dependent and cyclical in nature – the results of developing your strategic plan then drive your implementation efforts, which then requires that you think through the strategic implications. This is why execution needs the active engagement of those very same partners that came together to work on developing your strategy in the first place. In other words, it should be absolutely mandatory, when you first begin your strategic planning, to have those who agree to serve on your Strategic Planning Committee understand that they will also be required to serve when your Planning Committee transforms into your Implementation Committee. I have discovered repeatedly, that if the partners who formulated the strategy have no responsibility for executing the strategy, it threatens knowledge transfer, commitment to sought-after outcomes, and the entire implementation process.

2. Have a single point of ownership.

You need to make sure that you clarify specific accountabilities for each strategy and initiative. Each and every member of your Implementation Committee (formerly your Strategic Planning Committee) needs to voluntarily take ownership for being the liaison on some action element and take responsibility for ensuring that they pull together the right partners and people throughout the firm to execute that task. This doesn't necessarily mean that they have to roll-up-their-sleeves and do it (that can be their choice), but it does mean that they are accountable for seeing that it gets done.

3. Do away with “should”

For many firms, a pervasive problem in executing strategy is the existence of ambiguous wording, measurements and tracking mechanisms. Whenever I review some firm's prior strategic plan, I am always taken back by reading goal statements like: “We intend to clearly distinguish ourselves and rise above the pack.” Or, how about this for a meaningful strategy statement: “We should create a highly visible positive image in the markets in which we are determined to be a first choice” or “We should systematize cross-selling of

practice areas by facilitating identification of client opportunities.” All of these are perhaps very noble in principle, but without any hint of HOW it’s going to get done.

Without clarity, strategic execution becomes directionless work. Morale and support quickly erode. Alternatively, with clarity, you can create tasks and routines that keep incremental actions moving forward with holistic purpose and accountability.

4. Involve as many of your partners as possible.

Effective implementation involves many hands. Implementation always involves more people than the initial planning did, so communication throughout the firm or across different practice groups becomes an important ingredient. And linking strategic objectives with the day-to-day objectives at different offices and practice groups can become a demanding task. The complexity of execution increases as more people are involved – but that involvement is exactly what is needed for you to achieve any sense of alignment and success.

5. Think through the sequencing of your action plans.

Sometimes you need to focus your execution efforts by thinking about the timing and pacing. When might it be best to move forward on implementing certain elements? Are you going too fast? Are the action plans you want to move forward in the correct sequence? Think about how you might eat a good gourmet meal. Dessert doesn’t come first; in fact, the same dishes served in the wrong order, will disrupt your entire dining experience. To make your strategy work, you have to observe the right sequence of actions, the right timing and the right pacing.”

6. Meet on a regular monthly basis.

Implementation requires enormous time. Overall, successfully executing a plan takes even more time than the hours and weeks invested in developing the plan. It can be extraordinarily taxing to the billable-time expectations and client obligations of the partners and others involved. It takes stamina to stay the course—but if you can prepare for what lies ahead, you might just reach your goal.

Execution isn’t a short burst of activity on a quarterly basis; it is a continuous and ongoing exercise. Execution requires persistence in taking small incremental steps; it can’t easily be delegated. The challenge for the members of your implementation committee will be balancing the urgency of day-to-day client obligations and activities, versus the importance of working on the future. There is an old joke that goes, if you give a lawyer a project to work on and ask that they report to the group by this Friday, they will definitely start working on their project sometime of Thursday. Taking that behavior into account, it makes no sense to do anything but meet as an implementation group on a regular monthly basis with short turnaround times.

7. Get help when specialist expertise is required

While some firm may get their strategic planning right, they can then struggle with how to specifically transform some element of their plan into executable activities. For example, having a strategy that calls for developing Client Teams to provide enhanced value and service to a select group of your largest corporate clients is a sound approach. However,

determining how best to get your Client Teams working effectively may require expertise that does not currently reside in your firm. In those situations you need to retain the best resource you can find to educate or supplement your internal professionals.

8. Constantly measure your progress.

Assign resources and budgets to each initiative. Develop a means (such as a balanced scorecard) to measure results; focus on leading indicators; make the number of metrics small but significant in terms of impacting future goals. Continually monitor implementation to ensure the expected benefits are being realized.

Let's face it. If there was some secret or shortcut to effectively executing your firm's strategy – we would all be doing it. Unfortunately, there isn't. It requires a great deal of dedicated persistent effort and a lot of unbillable time. If there is any good news to this situation, it is that most of your competitors will not be able to pull it off. So can you be the exception and thereby reap the rewards?

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Patrick J. McKenna (www.patrickmckenna.com) has worked with the top management of premier law firms internationally to discuss, challenge and escalate their thinking on how to manage and compete effectively. He is co-author of business bestseller *First Among Equals* and his latest work, *Serving At The Pleasure of My Partners: Advice To The NEW Firm Leader* will be published by Thomson Reuters in July 2011. McKenna has worked with at least one of the top ten largest law firms in each of over a dozen different countries on issues associated with developing competitive strategies, improving profitability, client service excellence, and systems for effective practice governance.

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