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BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED STRATEGIES

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If strategy is the future of an organisation, implementation is its bridge. And successful implementation should be straightforward. But it isn't. A new website has the answers

CEOs and leaders have just 63 seconds to think about strategy and take the right action, says **Robin Speculand** in his tongue-in-cheek look at strategy implementation (<http://youtu.be/o1UTH8woW3w>). The short video launched the world's first website dedicated to strategy implementation. But why 63 seconds, and not 64, or even 65 seconds? Some quick statistics are in order, he says.

"Based on a life span of 76 years, leaders spend 14.3 years at work, of which 9.44 years are spent attending meetings, with 10 days looking for the car keys. And finally, after all obligations, including family, are calculated, this leaves just 63 seconds in your day to think about your strategy and to take the right actions." In short, Speculand told *Perspectives@SMU*, "Life is too short, don't waste it."

Companies are now starting to appreciate that implementation is critical: leaders not only have to craft a strategy for the future of their firm or organisation, but are also responsible for overseeing its implementation.

Implementation has only been part of the C-Suite since the early 2000s, a relative youngster compared with Strategy, which has been a part of management education since the 1960s.

"Strategy is not noticed by your customers (or your revenue)," Speculand emphasises. "Implementation is. So it's critical that leaders deliver."

The new discipline came to prominence following the global recession of 2008.

Previously, when leaders presented their strategy to their boards of directors, if it didn't work, the solution offered was simply more money or more people. Now an impossible dream in the post-2008 reality of freezing hires or less working capital, there is increased emphasis on implementation because leaders are under pressure to deliver what they promised in their strategies.

Even so, too many leaders underestimate the implementation challenge, he adds.

"They think once we've got a strategy, we've done the hard work and can sit back and relax. And they take their eyes off the implementation. But as soon as they do this, so does the rest of the organisation, and this is one of the key reasons why it doesn't succeed."

Although many leaders and CEOs are now aware of the finding by Speculand's team, that in 2002, nine out of 10 implementations fail — a horrendous failure rate, he adds. Of more interest is what that one company in 10 is doing that makes it succeed at implementation.

BEST PRACTICES

While there are very few absolutes in business, says Speculand, it is safe to say that whatever is planned in the boardroom, will not be what happens in the execution. "This is because markets may change, day-to-day issues arise and there are always new things happening," he explains.

To counter this, leaders need to ensure they are constantly on top of the implementation.

Yet although one of the best practices of top performing CEOs, implementation is one of the *least* practised among leaders around the world, he notes. "Follow through is not rocket science; it's common sense. But just because it's common sense, doesn't mean it's common practice."

Yet to get leaders to do it is one of the hardest things he and his team face.

Follow through also keeps leaders up to date on any implementation changes, allowing them solve the small problems and head off the big ones.

Even so, Speculand says he's still shocked that most implementations are reviewed only once or twice a year.

"Unbelievable," he laments. "They'll wait six months to review the implementation of a strategy. If they're going in the wrong direction, and things aren't working, it's too late."

It's far short of his recommended two-weekly review for components of the implementation, and three months for a full review. "The advantage of reviewing it frequently is that you know what's going on and you're staying on top of it."

Reviews are a best practice, he adds. "Once again, it's a very straightforward aspect of the process, yet people just don't do it."

THE HUB

After a leadership team identifies its strategy and recognises that implementation is a tough challenge—which most don't, says Speculand—they assume the rest will get done. However, it isn't that easy, he adds. "It takes hard work and can't simply be shrugged off with delegation."

Finding useful implementation resources has also proved challenging. In fact, prior to the launch of the Implementation Hub (www.implementation-hub.com) there was no central depository for information about strategy implementation. Searching for information was time consuming and spread out over several sites.

The Hub provides the tools and resources needed for successful implementation. More a supporting tool than a stand-alone, it supports the skills gap that many leaders have as a consequence of being taught how to plan, but not how to execute. Resources include a range of templates, techniques, tips, tools, framework, audits, case studies, best practices and one-minute videos, all of which use a variety of media.

Robin Speculand is the founder and Chief Executive of Bridges Business Consultancy Int., and adjunct professor at SMU's Lee Kong Chian School of Business