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When you are looking to deploy a winning business strategy, the secret is that there are no 'secrets'. The real and profound challenge is effective implementation.

The pressures of a hyper-competitive business environment mean strategy development must translate into practical and measurable implementation, delivered at speed. For strategy to achieve its full commercial potential, argues Patrick Gambin of Celerant Consulting, it must therefore be designed with implementation – by everyone concerned within the organisation - front of mind. A clear understanding of current operating realities is the right start point for strategy that can be quickly and effectively implemented.

Introduction – The fallacy of the strategy 'secret'

Some businesses always seem to get it right strategically. Yet their competitors show constant variation in performance – on form one year, they struggle the next. Is it a question of better strategists, sharper consulting input or, even, a 'secret'?

In fact, successful deployment of strategy is attributable to A-Grade implementation.

Strategy is ineffective in isolation – delivery is all

The fundamental thinking behind strategy can take many different directions. The chosen strategy may be moving the business to disrupt the status quo and outpace its competitors; or it could be innovation in products and services or change to the business model; or it might be levels of customer satisfaction higher than those achieved by competitors.

In many cases, the commercial intent is well thought-through. And the strategic direction itself will be accompanied by optimistic and enthusiastic endorsement at senior level. Yet large numbers of businesses continue to report great difficulty when it comes to applying their strategy in practice. The first, and often elusive, goal remains to move from strategic intent at the planning level to achievements in reality. Thereafter, the subsequent goal is sustained delivery with continued improvement. We identify five key factors that can enable and sustain implementation of strategy:

- Making strategy development properly relevant by linking it, systematically, to operational practice
- Using situational analysis of current operating realities to yield actionable information that underpins implementation
- Making the right choice of practical actions to enable implementation to happen as a rapid sequence of smaller steps, rather than a giant leap
- Linking strategic direction to the operational life of the business and the people who work in it
- Embracing positive changes in approach (behaviours) that ensure implementation can deliver, predictably, against the aims of the strategy

The 'Five 'A's' of A-Grade strategy implementation

The problem with the five factors is that they are difficult to act directly on. We believe these factors can be effectively addressed through action around five key areas that will underpin an effective implementation – Ambition, Awareness, Alignment, Action and Achievement. Our experience is that actions taken around these points create the correct environment, or culture, to make strategy execution happen.

A-Grade strategy implementation is a real possibility

Strategy can and should make a directly beneficial operational difference. For that to happen however, everybody from the Boardroom to the Control Room should share two things. First, they should all know **in principle** the strategic direction of their organisation. Second, they should all know **in practice** how they personally contribute to delivering the Big Picture. That's the ideal situation. And achieving it is a real possibility.

How? A-Grade strategy implementation needs organisations to engage fully with the 'Five 'A's'. This engagement will create demands on everyone concerned. But it will also produce measurable and lasting results.

A for ambition

Ambition in this context is your set of commercial objectives. These might include leadership in your sector. Or becoming or remaining a profitable follower. Whatever the specific direction, it is axiomatic that it should very clearly shape the strategy.

A for awareness

Awareness of the real relationship between thinking and doing within the successful implementation of strategy. Put briefly, it is far easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than it is to think your way into a new way of acting. Many great strategic designs fail not for want of sharp analysis – good thinking - but for lack of deep understanding of the practical realities of operations and what they can actually deliver – good doing. Great strategy – and that means effective strategy - must be rooted in acute awareness of the real operational capability of the organisation.

Successful strategy benefits immensely from pin sharp knowledge of what is really going on in the areas of the business that matter. There is nothing to gain from a departure point that is anything other than the organisation's real, accurately understood and current capability. This has to be the foundation of any strategic development. And great strategy must be constructed in such a way that execution (acting) is easy to start. If real, practical doing can begin quickly within the lifecycle of strategic implementation, and if it can yield rapid results, people will become engaged. They will enjoy productive action and the action itself will drive desirable change in thinking and behaviour.

A for alignment

Now, there is a clear sense of the organisation's ambition. And there is an awareness of the areas where it is strong or weak at pursuing its ambition – how it really stands operationally right now. Next, there needs to be alignment between what matters strategically and what gets done every day operationally. When this alignment is achieved, something profoundly important and valuable will happen. Through total integration of the work done by staff at all levels, the organisation will be able to configure its processes around the activities that really matter, such as those that exceed customer expectations and build loyalty.

A for action

Effective implementation of clear strategy requires, above all, action. There is a time for talking and researching. And there is a time for doing. But the doing must be highly focused and channelled through clearly identified and practically deliverable projects. Obvious, yes. Yet how often is implementation attempted in a context of “do something, anything”? The ability to make **the right something** happen is paramount. Each project should be chosen for its potential impact on customer satisfaction. It should engage the workforce. And it should make a measurable difference, in as short a timescale as possible.

A is for achievement

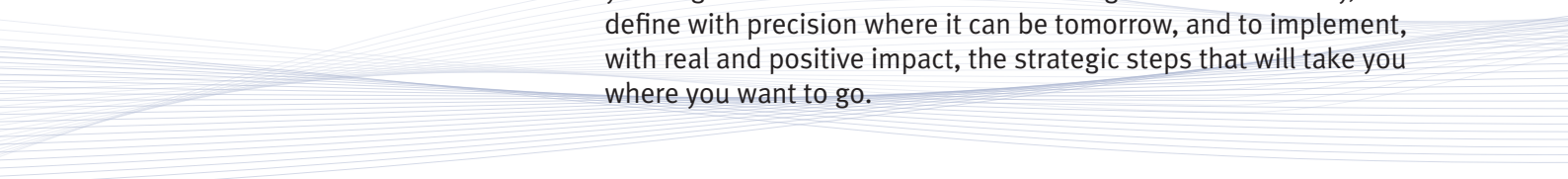
An effectively implemented strategy must deliver measurable achievements that are transparent to the whole organisation. At the macro level, the organisation should be able to see the series of steps, delivered quickly, that make up real strides towards achieving its Big Picture objectives. At the operational level, the people doing the work need to see objectively that they are making a positive difference - and that their personal role in the difference making is clearly apparent. At the most important level of all, that of the customer's perceptions, there are real and sustained improvements in the areas that matter most to the customer; and there is a corresponding upward shift in purchase behaviour and loyalty.

A question of scale and a question of compatibility

In our experience, effective strategy is rarely developed through brilliant analysis alone. And it is scarcely ever implemented successfully through the sort of large scale change programmes that seek to challenge every aspect of the way work is done and people are engaged. Rather, good strategy – effective strategy - works ‘with the grain’ of established operations. It works in synchrony with what an organisation can do, rather than attacking what it cannot. Approached this way, as a constructive change building exercise based on the foundations already in place, implementation happens as a sequence of achievable (and rapid) steps. Each step generates real and sustainable momentum, rather than a long hiatus followed (everyone concerned hopes) by a giant leap forward...

Getting down to business

Successful strategy definition and deployment is about measurement not mystique and sequential actions not ‘secrets’. A roadmap can be developed quickly and effectively to enable your organisation to understand with insight where it is today, to define with precision where it can be tomorrow, and to implement, with real and positive impact, the strategic steps that will take you where you want to go.

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About the Author

Patrick Gambin Vice-President, Operations

Patrick has 15 years professional experience, having held a number of roles in both professional services and in general industry. Having joined Celerant in 2001, Patrick currently has overall responsibility for the delivery of client engagements in the UK. During his time with Celerant, he has led a number of complex engagements across a broad range of industries, including Telecommunications, Utilities, and Financial Services. The majority of the projects Patrick has been involved with have focused on improving levels of Customer Service, while also delivering significant reduction in operating costs.

Patrick holds a BSc in Physics, and has a Diploma in Accounting and Finance.

We have offices in 10 different countries and we will always go where our clients need us to be.

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