

Who murdered strategy?

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In the old “who done it” novels, as you turned the last page with anticipation and fingers trembling to discover who was responsible for the murders you read, it was the “butler” and your response was “I just knew it had to be him.”

In business, the statistic that nine out of 10 strategies fail (which we published in our international bestseller *Bricks to Bridges – Make Your Strategy Come Alive, 2005*) has gone viral over the last couple of years. A prime reason for this is that leaders are under intense pressure in the current economic conditions to deliver on their strategy promises to shareholders. In the past when strategy implementation was failing leaders threw more money at the problems or more people. Both of these options have been curtailed by the pressures of the global financial crises (GFC).

When strategy is murdered in an organization who is blamed, who is the equivalent of the butler? Fortunately you do not have to wait to the last page to find out. Amazingly the strategy itself is blamed. Leaders say “well the strategy must have been wrong” and move on. This is amazing because leaders never look beyond their first (and often) only suspect.

If it was not the strategy then who else can be responsible?

The implementation

As an implementation specialist whose work starts after the strategy has been crafted, I am more than happy with strategy constantly taking the blame. But it is a short sighted view that is damaging and distorting leaders’ implementation abilities.

Leaders must recognize that strategy implementation is extremely difficult and that they habitually underestimate its challenges. They perceive crafting strategy as the harder challenge and therefore by default blame the toughest area when it fails. Executing strategy, however, is just as tough as crafting the right strategy. Therefore typically it is evenly balanced where the blame lies for strategy’s murder.

Just like planning the perfect murder, strategy and implementation have a similar relationship. First you must plan and then you must execute it and it never goes according to plan.

When leaders recognize that crafting and implementing strategy are equal challenges then they will naturally start to pay more attention to implementation. Currently too many leaders delegate their implementation responsibilities and do not follow through on the actions. When leaders stop paying attention to the implementation so do the staff members and it starts to fail. Leaders must take more time to reflect that the suspects for strategy’s murder come from both strategy and its implementation.

A post mortem must be conducted to identify the cause of the murder. Just as forensic science has dramatically improved so has our ability to examine businesses. The use of tools such as the Balanced Scorecard and Six Sigma provide us with factual evidence to support circumstantial evidence. Most leaders are able to guess why the strategy failed but this must

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be corroborated by data. When they start to do this they will often discover that their initial assumption was wrong.

Before you start the implementation of your next strategy, take the time to learn from what has happened before in your organization. Take the time to:

- make sure you know why previous strategies have failed;
- examine what happened in both the planning and the implementation of the strategy;
- identify lessons that can be shared;
- understand what works and what doesn't in your culture;
- identify the critical success factors for moving forward; and
- constantly review your new implementation to ensure you are not repeating mistakes.

Executing strategy is a business differentiator. When you have the ability, you outperform your competition. In conjunction with the statistic that nine out of ten implementations fails going viral there has also been an increase in new books on the subject. The books and the blogs are mostly focused on making leaders aware of the implementation challenges and over the next few years as we conduct more and more post mortems we will learn more about implementation science. In Bridges (the company I founded) we believe that these are 11 trends that will start to appear in the next few years:

1. Leaders will stop underestimating the implementation challenge and realize that it is tougher than they ever anticipate.
2. We will recognize that every implementation is unique and it has to fit the organization's culture.
3. Strategy is about making the right choices and implementation is about the right actions.
4. We will recognize and share that implementation at the end of the day, means more work for staff members.
5. Staff members will be treated as the "Strategy Customers" and implementation will no longer be forced upon them.
6. When starting the rollout implementation will be targeted at the 20 per cent of staff members who will support it and that leader must actively support this 20 per cent in return.
7. Strategy cannot be implemented if it cannot be understood and explained. We will become even better at communicating strategy.
8. Organizations will brand their strategy by giving it an image so as to win over both the hearts and minds of their Strategy Customers.
9. Leaders will conduct more implementation reviews so as to resolve small problems before they become big problems.
10. These reviews will be conducted every two weeks.
11. Made the promise? Now deliver. We will equally focus on strategy and implementation.

About the author

Robin Speculand, the founder and Chief Executive of Bridges Business Consultancy Int., is a global pioneer in the field of strategy implementation. Widely acknowledged as a thought leader in implementation, Robin has written the bestselling books *Bricks to Bridges – Make Your Strategy Come Alive* and the follow up *Beyond Strategy – the Leader's Role in Successful implementation*. He is a masterful event facilitator, an engaging keynote speaker and an avid ironman competitor. His work has been featured in the media, including BBC Global, CNBC and the *Financial Times*. He can be contacted at: bridges@bridgesconsultancy.com