

Bridging Strategy and Execution

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Execution Pollution

“We spent a week off-site to formulate our strategic plan, and six months later, nobody’s using it!” Whether you spent a week away with your management team or several sessions at the office to crank out a plan, you’re not alone if you’ve discovered that “working the plan” is more challenging than getting it on paper.

The sources of execution pollution – that grey fog that blurs the results in the horizon – are many. How the plan is generated and how management communication and decision making are structured are often significant parts of the problem.

Most organizations commit to regular weekly or monthly meetings of top managers and assume that this accomplishes the necessary alignment among functions to execute the plan. These meetings do not however ensure that the right information is being communicated across departments to support effective execution.

If managers are not required to share their function’s objectives, strategies and progress on their projects *in a standard written format (that their colleagues are required to review)*, it is likely that they will be communicating what is top of mind for them. Each manager uses his/her own discretion as to who else needs to know “their” critical information. This often leaves important communication to hallway “catch-up” sessions.

The unintended outcome of this type of communication may be that interdependencies, obstacles or conflicts between functions that should have surfaced in a management meeting may not become apparent until it’s too late; inventory won’t support the expectations set by sales and marketing or training can’t provide timely instructions for the new equipment being installed at franchisee and corporate units. These are costly failures in execution that are preventable.

There Is a Fix

Revisit the process of developing and implementing the strategic plan. Start with how the consolidated plan is articulated. The plan you present to your bankers or investment groups is not the same plan that should inform your organization. The wording of your *working* plan should be crisp and to the point so that the guy in the mail room of your company can read it and get it. I am not suggesting a

plan using only 3-letter words, but rather a plan that brings discipline to the word-smithing process: think “less is more”. Go for *one* page (yes it *can* be done) for articulating the company’s vision, mission, measurable objectives, strategies and key projects. Bullet points are fine and in fact, are a must in describing objectives, strategies and projects.

In addition to your approach to writing the plan, think about strategic plan implementation. Once you have upper level management agreement about the consolidated plan, each functional head should then be required to articulate their own one-page plan for his/her unit. These plans are then presented to peers at management meetings specifically scheduled to focus on alignment.

All functional leaders should be present at alignment meetings to engage in dialogue about possible interdependencies, obstacles or conflicts. If inventory can’t be ramped up for the impending marketing campaign, this is the time to develop “Plan B,” - not after the crises has hit. If marketing cannot produce an ad campaign for a new product roll out because of competing projects, several people in the group may have input into what projects take priority and how to integrate schedules. Gaining alignment on the objectives, key strategies and projects across functions is essential for execution.

Once plans have been aligned a major source of execution pollution has been lifted. Managers should share the consolidated plan as well as their unit’s plan with each of their teams. There may be substantive input at the department level that will continue to refine that function’s plan.

Franchisee Input

Once things solidify, certain aspects of the plan may be communicated to the franchisee body. In a mature franchise organization where an elected Franchisee Advisory Board is in place give them a preview of the consolidated plan before presenting it to the franchisee body as a whole. In some organizations where the franchisee advisory board keeps close tabs on marketing activities (since franchisees often contribute to a marketing fund,) consider sharing the plan from the marketing department in greater detail. Remember the capital “A” in Advisory Board. Franchisees can certainly provide advice and input, but the franchisor is ultimately responsible to set strategy and ensure that the entire system moves in the right direction.

Update and Communicate

The key word is “updated”. Avoid the common pitfall of losing discipline in the process by not holding to rigorous updating and continued cross-communication between departments about their plans. Software is available that allows for all managers to view one another’s plans – a fabulous efficiency in the process of sharing information. For the elegant and efficient one-page emphasis; check out

the One Page Planning and Performance System at
www.onepagebusinessplan.com.

Simple documentation in plain language fosters alignment and provides a working tool that keeps the important things on everyone's radar. Returning to the regular weekly or monthly manager update meetings becomes effective because each manager is now bringing their updated one page plan to share with others. It ensures that the projects fueled by employee time and company resources are actually the ones that tie to the company's strategic plan. And it provides a valuable communication tool for everyone from the Board of Directors to the franchisee community by providing a yardstick for measuring the value (or lack of it) of current and potential projects.