Achieving Excellence in Strategy Execution
Through Uncommon Practices

You may have read the article why leaders fail to execute strategy that lists the various reasons. It has appeared in various formats in various publications over the last few years. The good news is that most leaders have not only read these article but they have taken them to heart. Leaders now appreciate the need to have a balance between strategy and its execution. The question they are asking is "how" to achieve it.

Strategy execution is a relative new subject and only started to gain traction as a unique field in 1999, following the seminal article in Fortune magazine on Why CEOs fail by Colvin and Chandra. The article stated that strategy fails not because of bad execution but because of bad implementation. In 2000, I started Bridges as a pure implementation house and since our first client, Singapore Airlines, we have gone on to work with clients in five continents supporting them to succeed where so many others are failing, In doing this we have identified nine uncommon practices by those who succeed. These practices are practical and focus on making things happen rather than explaining the *why*.

1. **Less is More**

When leaders have too many objectives on their agenda, they typically end up doing less not more. This is because they become overwhelmed with the amount of work and end up being paralyzed. More work ends up with less being done.

Organizations excellent in execution recognize this and limit the number of objectives focused on each year during the execution.

The question is how many strategic objectives should a leader focus on each year?

Sheena S. Iyengar and Mark R. Lepper from Columbia and Stamford University respectively conducted a famous experiment on selling jam for their paper titled, "When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?[1]

The *Jam Experiment* involved an upscale grocery store displaying on one occasion 24 jams for customers to view and purchase and on the other occasion

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[1] https://faculty.washington.edu/jdb/345/345%20Articles/Iyengar%20%26%20Lepper%20(2000).pdf

only six different jams. From the customers who visited the 24 jams selection only 3% purchased and from the six jam selection 30%, 10 times more customers purchased. The experiment was also tested for choices of chocolate and once again the group offered the six choices had a higher level of satisfaction. Research has demonstrated that an excess of choices, called “Option Overload”, often leads us to be less, not more, satisfied once we actually decide. This is because there is often a nagging feeling we could have done better.

The ideal is to have five, plus or minus two strategy objectives focused on each year.

A study[2] from New York University also interestingly found that "restricting the choice of creative inputs actually enhances creativity."

Too many choices in execution leads to lower engagement and satisfaction. Having five, plus or minus two strategic objectives each year allows everyone to know what is important and what to focus on. It also allows for resource allocation and creates a focused organization. The other strategic objectives are still in view and will be addressed in 12-month cycles.

2. **Allow your people to choose the right actions as they work best when self-directed**

People commit to taking the right actions when they perceive they will benefit. This is partly why so many leaders in the initial launch highlight the expected benefits from the new strategy. This may interest the early adopters but to engage the whole organization to taking the right actions, continual sharing of the benefits, encouragement and feedback are required.

People are more committed to outcomes they set themselves by a ratio of almost five to one. This is a claim by Carolyn Aiken and Scott Keller from McKinsey & Company in their paper titled “The irrational side of change management.”[3]

The authors cite a famous behavioral experiment in which, “half the participants are randomly assigned a lottery ticket number while the others are asked to write down any number they would like on a blank ticket. Just before drawing the winning number, the researchers offer to buy back the tickets from their holders. The result: no matter what geography or demographic environment the experiment has taken place in, researchers have always found that they have to pay at least five times more to those who came up with their own number.”[4]

People commit more easily to taking the right actions when they are empowered rather than instructed.

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[2] http://web-docs.stern.nyu.edu/pa/sellier_dahl_creative_success.pdf

[3] http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/organization/the_irrational_side_of_change_management

3. **To Stop List**

Part of achieving excellence in execution is telling people what to "Stop" doing and empowering them to have a license to kill of non-value adding work.

To achieve business execution success, Drucker coined the term 'purposeful abandonment'. If you want to grow your business, before you decide where and how to grow - the first thing you need to do is stop doing what's not working and get rid of the outgrown, the obsolete and the unproductive.

Everyone has a, to do list and you also need a "to stop" list of the actions that don't contribute to the new strategy. Leaders just need to be careful that they don't stop talking about the strategy and the execution.

When you empower your people to stop doing non-value adding work they become more engaged, they are able to accomplish more in less time and you are creating the right conditions for achieving excellence in execution.

A.G. Lafley, in his famous turnaround of Procter & Gamble, established a portfolio of performance initiatives that, for instance, gave priority to four core businesses. At the same time, he created a "not-to-do" list including projects that were driven by technology rather than customer needs. What's more, he ensured every initiative — whatever its specific focus — included building mindsets and capabilities related to focusing on customers and forging external partnerships as part of its execution.

Excellence in execution is a differentiator in business because typically your competition is poor at it and when you achieve excellence in execution the payoff can be tremendous.

The material for this article has been adapted from Robin Speculand's latest book and fourth in the series, *Excellence in Execution – HOW to Implement Your Strategy,* Morgan James NY.
A recognized pioneer and expert in strategy implementation, Robin Speculand is driven to transform strategy implementation globally by inspiring leaders to adopt a different approach. The founder and CEO of Bridges Business Consultancy Int, he created the Implementation Hub, the world's first online portal dedicated to strategy implementation. His work begins as clients are crafting their strategy and starting to think about the implementation. This international bestselling author has sold more than 40,000 books worldwide and been featured on BBC, Channel News Asia and CNBC. Robin is a masterful event facilitator and an engaging keynote speaker. His work has been featured widely in the media, including BBC Global, Gulf Connoisseur, CNBC, Channel News Asia, Oman Observer, Sunday Telegraph and Financial Times.