

# What can doom a great strategy?

## FAILURE TO EXECUTE

### *The Pinnacle Perspective*

Our world is changing at the fastest rate in human history. As a result, updating our operating systems, our smartphones, and even the cut of our favorite denim to the latest renditions can feel like a never-ending process. Likewise, in this rapidly evolving environment, new business strategies are being developed more quickly—and more frequently—than ever before.

While these strategies are often compelling, they rarely include a comprehensive blueprint for **strategic execution—that is, the comprehensive implementation of the strategy or change**. This can make it challenging for business unit leaders, particularly those who lack experience with transformations or the bandwidth one requires, to bring these strategies to life.

Transitioning from your current state to your desired future state is easier said than done. If you're tasked with executing against a new strategy, it's important to approach the process pragmatically and with empathy, thinking through the impact the change will have on your employees and the way they work. What follows are critical components for doing so—learned from our experiences with a broad client set—that can make or break your execution success.

“

*“Ideas are a commodity.  
Execution of them is not.”*  
– Michael Dell

### **A strategy is only as good as its execution**

For the purposes of this paper, we're defining “strategy” as a solution to a problem or opportunity. In other words, a new strategy is a disruptive idea or the answer to the question: “What is the desired future state?”

**Strategic Execution** translates disruptive ideas into new ways of working that last, through comprehensive change/strategy implementation.



A new strategy could involve significant change within an organization or be limited to certain teams, business units, or functions. For example, a new strategy could call for changing the way a business serves its customers or upgrading the technology used by a single team or department. As a result, affected individuals will be required to transition to an unfamiliar way of working.

Needless to say, executing a new strategy can be a daunting challenge. Leaders who are tasked with bringing a new strategy to life are often already overwhelmed by their to-do list. This is especially true in our current recovery environment. What's more, transformations, particularly those that require wholesale change, are not common events.

Yet leaders must not shy away from the execution task at hand. Instead, they must dig into all of the details of how the change from current state to future state will take place, and stay involved throughout the process. They must understand the nuances of how the transformation will impact people, process, and technology at every step.

For example, when the C-suite of a Fortune 500 company sought to increase the efficiency of its production planning, its business unit leaders first assessed what this would entail and then designed a technology-centered solution. Because the business unit leaders understood how difficult such a large transformation would be, they made the effort to account for numerous downstream impacts. The result was a successful transformation to a new way of working.

Implementation is less about driving change and more about **preparing people to receive change.**

## The importance of empathy to implementation

Although organizational leaders may spend a great deal of time developing a new strategy, they may not think through how it will impact day-to-day operations. After all, we humans have a tendency to solve problems at a high level while glossing over details. Breaking through this mindset requires us to reflect deeply on current business processes and then practice empathy by thinking about all the individuals who would be affected and how they will be affected if the processes were to change.

Within nearly every organization, the impacts of a transformation are felt throughout, from leaders to front line employees. As a result, it's critical to consider multiple points of view when designing the future state. Looking at a strategy in the context of how it will change employees' day-to-day activities—i.e., through an operational lens—lays the groundwork for a successful execution.

In other words, implementation is less about driving change and more about preparing people to receive change. Will front-line workers need to ring up customers using new software? Will employees on the plant floor no longer engage in certain processes? Will leaders need to use different terminology when speaking with their teams?

Looking at change through an operational lens also involves assessing a new strategy's impact on an organization's culture. For instance, a global manufacturer recently transformed the way it forecasts product production. This required one of the organization's teams to



curtail the use of spreadsheets in favor of advanced algorithms and modeling. But the spreadsheets were fundamental to the team's leadership and business conversations.

To minimize cultural impacts, a plan was developed to carry forward the benefits of the spreadsheet (i.e., the discussions and questions it sparked) into the new automated process. As a result, the new way of working was better received by team members, allowing the team to achieve sustained change.

### Bridging the gap between the current state and future state

Implementing a new strategy generally involves managing and communicating with stakeholders; defining new processes and assessing the impact of the change; providing communications and training to employees; and measuring progress.

Each of these initiatives requires extreme attention to detail. This means clearly articulating the new way of working, partnering with leaders, and digging into the nuances of what the new strategy will mean for impacted roles. More than anything, implementation calls for thinking through and validating the solution—and not for relying on templates or an academic approach to change management.

### Managing and communicating with stakeholders

We all know key stakeholders can make or break a strategic transformation. Neglecting to consider their views can subject you to their critique along the journey from current to future state. Taking time to explore what execution looks like to key stakeholders will help you be more successful. To increase the likelihood of broader adoption, think about the skin stakeholders have in the game and build in checkpoints throughout execution to gain their buy-in.

### Defining new processes and assessing the impact of change

While many business leaders inherit a transformation strategy from their leadership team, further definition is often needed to bring the future state to life. One of the most common pitfalls in executing against a new strategy is the failure to document the details of the future state. Many leaders can envision the future in their heads, which may feel concrete enough, but their visions lack the detail needed to develop plans that people can act against.

For instance, when a global solutions company reorganized their business structure to better serve their end customers, the need for clarity around specific roles and collaboration between teams became apparent. After defining the desired future state, the next critical step in

execution was to detail the change's impacts to each role and team.

In doing so, leaders realized the impacts of the restructure stretched far greater than they had anticipated, leading to a need for additional detailed impacts, documented by region, business, and role. By assessing the impacts on all parties in the execution of this strategy, leaders were able to better enable behavior changes and achieve measurable results.

### *Creating a detailed implementation plan*

Your implementation plan will be a critical component to your ability to successfully implement a new strategy. Above all else, this plan should make sense for your team's transition. This means you may need to challenge or tweak certain components of the new strategy to reach your desired future state. Your implementation plan should be thorough and detailed—perhaps as thorough and detailed as the current way your team is doing business.

Once you create an implementation plan for your team, it is critical to execute against it and, whenever possible, seek to troubleshoot future state processes.

### *Communicating and training*

A key component of your implementation plan includes helping people understand how to behave in this new future state. Communication and training are critical tools in achieving this objective; however, both must be used in a way that resonates with each impacted party. At a minimum, communication and training should give impacted parties the information they need to do their jobs well and be delivered at the time when they need to know it.

Communicating a clear and consistent purpose for your change is the first step. Ensuring all impacted audiences within an organization understand why you are making this change not only enables effective work activity; it inspires these individuals to follow you into this new, unknown territory.

A key component of your implementation plan includes helping people **understand how to behave** in this new future state.

Communication during implementation should also be strategic. Determine the right channels, timing, and sequencing for communicating the new strategy—as well as each phase of change—to key stakeholders. Various roles should be privy to varying levels of detail, based on the degree of impact. When communicating the benefits of the change, reference success metrics or the business case or purpose of this change.

While communication goes a long way in helping impacted parties understand a change, front line workers may require a significant amount of training. This could include upskilling, reskilling, or even introducing a new skillset to certain workers—whatever is needed to ensure workers understand how to behave to drive success in the future state. Training itself could involve on-the-job aides and trainers, online assessments, and live training sessions.

### *Measuring progress*

Throughout the change journey and certainly after it, it is important to measure progress by tracking stakeholders along the change curve. You can do this through pulse surveys or by holding one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders who reach a certain point along the change curve as defined by your plan.

Another way to measure progress is to assess the actual behavior changes or outcomes you set out to change in the beginning. This could involve comparing behaviors or outcomes to pre-change metrics or industry benchmarks. If the new strategy was designed to achieve faster production, were its objectives met?

### **Feeling “execution exhaustion?” You’re probably doing it right.**

There is no magic wand for successfully executing against a new strategy. Unfortunately, seamlessly changing processes, behaviors, and habits across an entire business unit or organization requires a great deal of effort. Getting into the details of what a new strategy entails—and more importantly, who it affects—is critical to bringing it to life.. Furthermore, taking an empathetic approach to implementation can help to achieve change that lasts.

We understand preparing for implementation can be daunting, regardless of your experience with it. In our next paper, we’ll focus on how to effectively begin a change journey, so you’ll know the next steps to take.

The good news is, you don’t have to go through change alone. As a strategic execution consulting practice, we can partner with you to plan the comprehensive implementation of your new strategy. Working closely with you and your team, we’ll help you translate disruptive ideas into new ways of working that last.

**We’re here to help  
you through the  
change process.**

Contact us today to  
learn more.