

Building ladders and snaring snakes for effective strategy execution

Article by Valerie Carson 04/2016



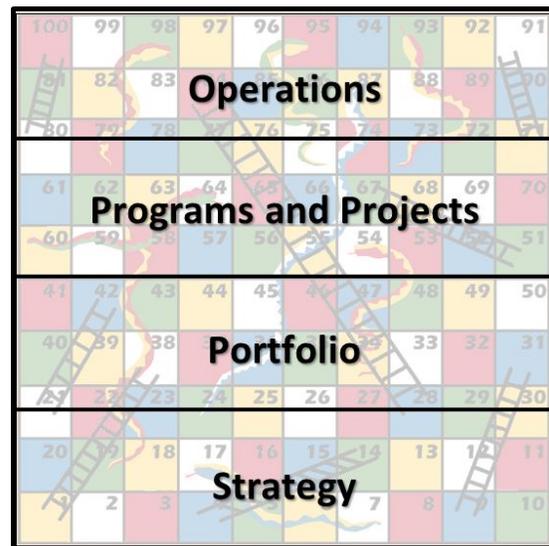
Valerie Carson is the Service Director, Project Delivery and Change Management for Ethier.

Back in January I wrote a post about the way in which many organizations appear to drop the ball on executing a strategy once it has been formulated. Executives develop the direction and the key themes, followed by high level messaging and general communication. And then for some reason the strategy seems to fade into the background, even when new activities and projects have been initiated to achieve it. I likened this to the game of snakes and ladders – where progression through the game is largely a matter of chance, based on the role of the dice – and explored the concept further in a second post comparing common pitfalls of strategy execution to the snakes that take a player plunging down the game board.

In this third and final article about this theme, I'd like to extend the snakes and ladders game analogy a little further while revisiting the Project Management Institute (PMI®) strategy execution framework.

Know Thyself. The first step in playing a game is to understand the game board; that is, the ladders, or enablers, that can facilitate the organizations forward progress and the snakes, or barriers, that will pose the greatest risks to that forward motion. These snakes and ladders can be considered in the context of the key stages of PMI's strategy execution framework: 1) Strategy, 2) Portfolio, 3) Programs / Projects and 4) Operations.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding engage all levels of the organization in identifying its strengths relative to the key stages of strategy execution, then consider how best to leverage them. Where strong capability exists in one part of the organization, think about how to extend it more broadly: are there subject matter experts who can act as advocates? Are these SMEs able to apply their localized knowledge to the broader organization? Do they have the respect and support they need to act as credible advocates?



Similarly consider areas where the organization is ill equipped or under-skilled to face the upcoming challenges. How can professional organizations or designations, or specific training programs, fill the gap? What role can mentoring play, and is the organization structured to facilitate effective mentorship? Are new people needed to bring new skills and fresh perspectives? Be realistic about the time it will take to develop or maximize the required skills, and consider how the approach or the pace of strategy execution may need to be adjusted so as not to stress, or lean too heavily, on developmental roles.

An upfront understanding of the organization's strengths and weaknesses sets the stage for the whole game.

Big snakes need big ladders. As much as every organization is unique, there is likely a lot of consistency in the challenges they face in strategy execution. Right from the beginning, an organization is at a significant disadvantage if the right stakeholders aren't involved and effectively engaged. Knowing who the right stakeholders are is the first step and there are many techniques to identify them. One of the most effective – a big ladder – is to follow the decision trail. What are the key decisions required for the strategy to succeed, and who makes them? It is very difficult, if not impossible, to overcome a lack of support from key decision-makers.

"While 88% of senior executives recognize the importance of strategy implementation, 61% acknowledge that their organizations often struggle to bridge the gap between strategy formulation and its day-to-day implementation."
Why good strategies fail; Lessons for the C Suite –
The Economist, Intelligence Unit

Processes can be constructive enablers to new ways of doing things in an organization, and can also be frustrating and counter-productive time wasters – the way you approach them will determine if they are a snake or a ladder. Generally, it's wise to build on what exists and works in the organization. When introducing new processes, think about touch

"Although formulating a strategy is a difficult task for any management team, making that strategy work - implementing it throughout the organization - is even more difficult."
Making Strategy Work; Lawrence Hrebiniak

points and implications to what is already in place to avoid conflicts, confusion and duplicate effort. And initially, align the level of process rigour and complexity to the culture of the organization, then make adjustments over time where more discipline is required – attempting to introduce too much structure or

formality at one time can have a significant impact on productivity.

It is difficult to know if you're headed in the right direction if you don't gather, review and report on the right information. Not only can a wealth of data be overwhelming for management to understand, but key metrics and important data points can get lost. In addition, it takes effort to generate, collect and provide information and people figure out pretty quickly that it isn't relevant or useful, resulting in frustration and a lack of support. Focus on information that provides useful insights and disseminate it widely.

Keep rolling the dice. When playing a board game, you know that you have to keep playing to stay in the game. Similarly, you need to stay in the strategy execution game, keeping an eye on the long term goals, thoughtfully assessing capabilities and barriers, and adapting as challenges arise to continue to make progress. Consider the capabilities that are most critical and choose the areas of focus wisely – the investment, the amount of change involved – to get the most impact. As you move through the board towards your goals, assess your current position, consider the landscape and where the current big snakes and ladders have appeared, and keep rolling the dice.

Ethier is a premier consulting firm that drives business excellence. For over 30 years, Ethier has helped clients realize their strategic goals by providing expertise to help solve complex business challenges. At Ethier, we understand that once a company creates its business strategy, the real work of executing that strategy begins. This is where Ethier can help.

We work closely with our clients to understand their business objectives, constraints, and culture so we can help them be successful. Using our fit for purpose approach, Ethier can help you unlock your potential to achieve operational excellence, improve project delivery, manage change and access skilled resources.



Valerie Carson is the Service Director, Project Delivery and Change Management for Ethier.

vcarson@ethier.ca

403-234-8963