

Executing strategy: Why “aha!” isn’t enough

Article by Valerie Carson 01/2016



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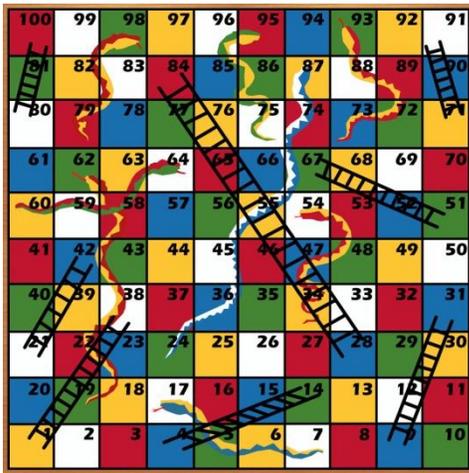
Every company needs a strategy. Most companies have one. A good corporate strategy sets a clear, long term direction that everyone can work towards.

As a consultant, one of the first things I do in a new organization, after checking out the org chart, is find the strategy on the company intranet. I’m looking for how closely the work I’ve been brought in to do – typically some kind of business change initiative – is aligned with the strategy. Earlier in my career, I thought discovering that alignment was enough. I’d find something in the strategy related to improving performance or cutting costs that was directly supported by what I was doing, say “aha!”, and figure that getting management buy in and executive visibility would be pretty easy.

But to my surprise, what actually happened was that I would reference a strategic driver in a team meeting and get blank looks from the people in the room. Even more surprisingly, their management was equally unfamiliar with what I was talking about. I’d end up directing company employees to their own internal website and pointing out information about the strategy – often easily accessible and quite well articulated – sometimes getting a vague “oh yeah, they talked about that at a town hall in the spring”, but more often a cynical “that doesn’t have anything to do with us”.

So what happened? Why is a strategy that the executive team surely spent a fair amount of their valuable time innovating and contemplating not top of mind? Why are the resulting action plans not directly impacting ongoing activities? And what about the corporate functions, like human resources and corporate planning? Did they perform the important follow through to understand the implications of the strategy to the organization, what they needed to do, and what needed to change, to support the direction? If so, why didn’t that make a visible difference?

In reality, many organizations struggle with following through on their strategy once it’s been defined and communicated. They may develop a plan but have a limited understanding of their own capabilities and how well positioned they are to execute it. Or they lack the detailed understanding of how the strategy will impact the status quo and the discipline to make the necessary changes to achieve it.



In the game of Snakes and Ladders, players progress from the bottom to the top of a board based on throwing the dice and landing on squares that either take them up a ladder or slip backwards down a snake. While there's an element of chance – and a roll of the dice – to any endeavour, the inability of many organizations to move their strategies forward is typically due to a lack of forward planning. Instead of building and then climbing ladders that act as enablers to take them step by step from the defined strategy to achieved results, they make limited advances before stalling or sliding backward. And they often

don't even realize they're not moving ahead because they didn't set up clear measures of success, or ways to track their progress, up front.

Executing strategy is hard work and it's even more critical to get it right when times are tough. I think Snakes and Ladders is a great framework to think about how to move a strategy forward, what commonly gets in the way, and how to influence the board so that every roll of the dice is more likely to take you one step closer to success. Stay tuned for another post that explores that further.

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.



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