

## Strategy execution is like snakes and ladders

Article by Valerie Carson 02/2016



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

Executing strategy is hard work. Once a strategy has been defined, many organizations struggle with turning that strategy from a stated direction to a tangible result.

In my last post, I described my experience as a consultant who found many times that there seemed to be little to no visible connection between a company's strategy and that company's operational and project activities. Someone, somewhere in the organization, must have known how everything was supposed to fit together but it wasn't clear from my vantage point or – much more importantly – that of the employees and middle managers around me.

So what's the secret to moving a strategy forward? The Project Management Institute (PMI®) has defined a high level strategy execution framework in which the key stages are: 1) Strategy, 2) Portfolio, 3) Programs / Projects and 4) Operations. Whenever we put a diagram of this framework in front of clients, it generates good discussion around these stages as key building blocks of successful strategy execution.

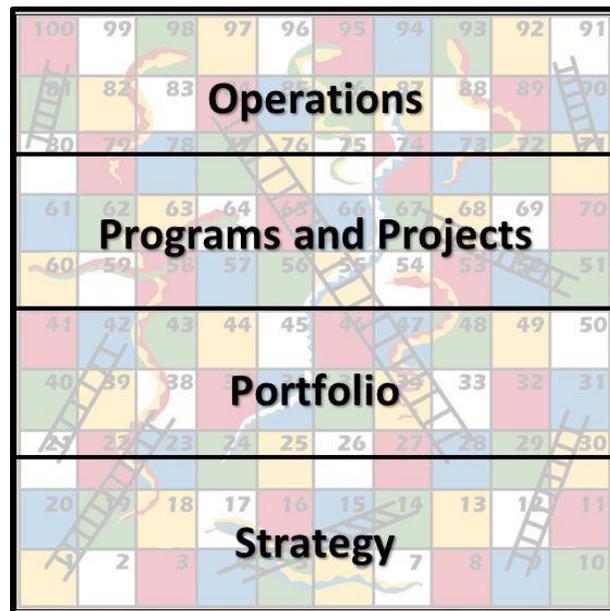
As you may know, or might imagine, the four stages are typically shown in a line from left to right implying an orderly progression from one to the other, with a couple of feedback loops. While this is a convenient way to illustrate the process, let's instead imagine the framework overlaid on a Snakes and Ladders game board. In Snakes and Ladders, progress zigzags upward so we put Strategy at the bottom and Operations at the top. During the game, a roll of the dice moves you from one square to another, where either a snake is waiting to set you back, or a ladder is ready to propel you forward.

I like this representation because on the board, strategy execution is not a straight line.

Also in your organization there will be both enablers – like ladders – that will move you forward and barriers – just like snakes – that will inhibit your progress. An organization that understands the key stages of executing strategy, along with the snakes they are facing and the ladders they can leverage, is much more likely to succeed.



For example, when moving from the Strategy to the Portfolio stage, a well-articulated strategy and clear accountabilities will ensure that senior management understands the direction set by the executives and what is expected of each of them to make it happen.



If the strategy is not well communicated by the executive, or senior management doesn't have a clear mandate to act, the organization will be distracted by the new information but won't necessarily know what it means.



Defining business value, what success looks like and key performance indicators lays the groundwork for the Portfolio – that is, the list of programs and projects – the organization needs to execute. Barriers, or snakes, could include inexperience in setting priorities (because in the absence of infinite capacity everything can't be equally important) and immature project delivery capability. In both cases, it's important for the organization to know its current capabilities and if they are sufficient.



Between setting up the Portfolio and executing specific Programs / Projects, continued management engagement is critical. Unfortunately, this is a time when senior management often drops into the background, leaving middle management ill equipped to provide sufficient sponsorship. It's also important for all levels of management to get relevant information that supports good decisions. Common barriers include not addressing gaps in project delivery capability, and implementing overly rigorous or disconnected portfolio and project processes.



Operations is where business results expected from the strategy are achieved. If projects don't engage functional stakeholders effectively during project execution, the operational departments may not be properly positioned to accept project outcomes and achieve the expected benefits.



In Snakes and Ladders there is a strong element of chance but you can see the board and you know where you'd like to land. In many organizations, the strategy execution process has not been fully defined and the unique barriers and enablers are not clear. In my next post we'll look at ways to influence the strategy execution game board to contain more ladders than snakes, and the key ladders on which to focus to win the game.

*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](mailto:vcarson@ethier.ca)

403-234-8963