



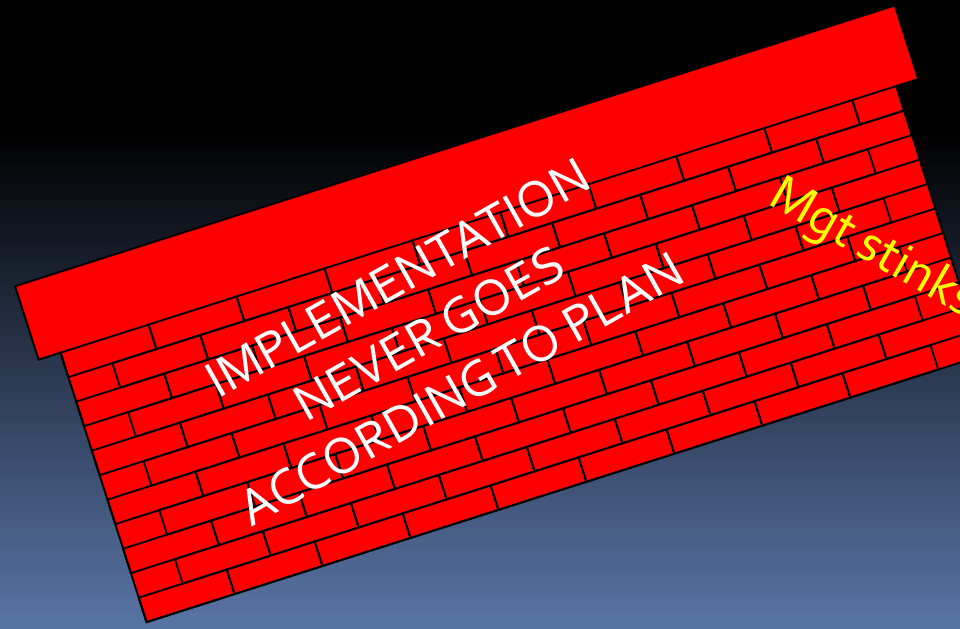
Execution Leadership

7 global best practices for
leaders to implement
strategy

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Bricks to Bridges, 2004

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Leaders get it.

Leaders now know that a titanic mistake has been to focus more on crafting strategy than on implementing it. It is no longer a hard sell to them and the arguments over the last 10 years – combined with the staggering failure of leaders to deliver on their strategy promises – has led to strategy implementation today becoming an integral part of strategy discussions.

The question leaders are now asking is “What do we need to do differently?” Too many leaders on too many occasions have been involved in too many failures. We have piqued their curiosity. Leaders now want to know what they *specifically* need to do to successfully drive the strategy implementation through the organization.

Around the world, leaders understand the arguments, have recognized the opportunity and understand that something different is needed. Attitude, approach and actions must change. Many of the actions leaders now need to take to successfully implement strategy are contrary to current beliefs, such as, most people do not resist implementation when it is communicated correctly and strategy implementation must be reviewed not twice a year but every two weeks. Implementation simply can't be delegated. Leaders must spend the majority of their time overseeing the implementation activities and not on operations.

Every strategy implementation must be unique because every organization is different. Leaders are responsible for guiding staff members to the strategy destination. Along the way, there are seven global best practices leaders can adopt.

Something needs to change and it starts with the leaders.

Milestones in the Field of Strategy Implementation

1993	Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton publish <i>Putting the Balanced Scorecard to Work</i> , introducing a new management style
1999	Fortune magazine published the oft-quoted cover story, “Why CEOs Fail,” that explained, “Organizations fail to successfully implement strategy not because of bad strategy but because of bad execution.”
2002	Ram Charan followed up the article by teaming up with Larry Bossidy to write <i>Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done</i> . The book introduced the field of implementation to business leaders and explained why execution was important.
2004	Bridges published <i>Bricks to Bridges: Make Your Strategy Come Alive</i> and introduced a framework for implementation
2009	Bridges published <i>Beyond Strategy: The Leader's Role in Implementation to focus on the actions leaders must take</i>

1. *Implementation never goes according to plan.*

Whatever you planned in the board room to implement the strategy always changes.

No one sets out to fail when implementing strategy but they do fail nine out of ten times. Similarly, no one sets out to craft a bad strategy! The only way we know a strategy is bad is by implementing it. The only way we know if an implementation is working is by reviewing it.

A main contributor to strategy failing is that after crafting the new strategy, leaders believe they have completed most of their responsibilities and delegate what they consider the easier part, the implementation. Unfortunately, they take their eye off the ball. This creates a recipe for failure. The implementation changes and leaders do not know.

There is no one reason for the failure, just as there is no one solution for implementation. Every organization is different and each implementation journey is unique. Even though organizations may have a similar strategy, their implementation is different. Their leaders must spend time identifying the actions and behaviors they need staff members to take every day to deliver the strategy. They must be fully involved in the implementation journey.

Leaders now recognize the importance of implementation, but their actions are still out of date. Because leaders are responsible for crafting and implementing strategy, they require both skill sets.

Successful implementation is accomplished by turning strategic plans into action plans that are executed at both the divisional and departmental levels. These action plans must (1) address key strategic goals through practical steps and (2) measure progress over time, assuring that people have the resources they need and keeping everything on track. Along the way, the implementation will change. If leaders delegate the implementation and take their eye off the ball, then it will fail.

Implementation Never Goes According to Plan

Leaders must:

- Take ownership of the implementation journey
- Guide the organization to its strategy destination
- Stay involved throughout the implementation

2. Be the Voice of the Strategy.

It is what staff members do every day that matters.

Knowing the strategy is important, but it should not be the sole goal of a leader's communications. It should be to make sure everyone (1) knows the strategy, (2) knows how to implement it and (3) is motivated to take action.

The leader must become the Voice of the Strategy. Every opportunity is leveraged to explain the strategy and motivate staff members. Similar to an election campaign, leaders must repeat the key messages and stay on message every time. Not an easy task for some!

Once everyone is acting on it, leaders can shift from shouting the message to sharing what is happening and ensuring everyone is engaged. Engagement is a central imperative of implementation and the leaders are responsible to make it happen.

Implementation Never Goes According to Plan

Leaders must:

- Shout the strategy at every opportunity.
- Shout it from the highest roof tops.
- Don't worry who hears; it is the *execution* that make the difference.

Ask your staff members:

- How does the strategy impact your work?
- How does the strategy impact your department ?
- How does the strategy impact you personally?
- What concern do you have about the new strategy?
- What needs to change for you to successfully adopt the strategy?
- What new skills do you need to execute the strategy?
- What can I do to support you while you implement the strategy?

It's ironic that crafting strategy is always at the top of the leaders' "to do" list but within six months of launching, implementation vanishes from the list! Activities for leaders such as the Voice of the Strategy are numerous and at the end of the day, there is no one right combination. A leader's responsibility is to find out what is happening and then do what works .

3. *Strategy cannot be implemented if it cannot be understood and it cannot be understood if it cannot be explained.*

It's not rocket science. It's common sense, but just because it's common sense doesn't mean it's common practice.

Leaders have been living the strategy; staff members are hearing it for the first time. Leaders forget this and do not take the time to fully explain the meaning and impact of their new strategy. They charge forward and expect everyone to be running at the same pace, only to turn round and wonder where everyone is. And what's a leader without followers?

Implementation Never Goes According to Plan

Leaders must:

- Translate the big picture into daily actions
- Not take their eye off the implementation as when they do, so do staff members
- Not underestimate the difficulty of explaining the new strategy to the whole organization

Strategy must be presented so it is easy to understand and encourages staff members to become engaged in executing it. Explaining why a new strategy is important and must be adopted is not as easy as many leaders think. Consider the following example.

Most nations of Europe adopted the Gregorian calendar (the system predominantly in use today) in the 18th century, but Russia only did so after the October revolution in 1917. The official decision to change caused consternation in the minds of the Russian peasants. They believed they were being robbed of several days of life because of adjustments to the date. The ensuing riots saw hundreds of innocent, enraged people killed. Change was simply inconceivable.

Staff members must understand strategy before they can execute it and know what actions they must do differently. Leaders are responsible for translating the strategy into specific actions.

4. Brand your strategy.

Strategy is designed at the top but implemented from the bottom. Branded communication makes it happen.

When strategy is presented to the board, it is typically a numerically centric argument supported by projections, graphs and the strategy paper. When taking the strategy to the whole organization, a more emotional argument is required.

Branding helps explain why the new strategy must be adopted to staff members by using emotional images to convince the unconvinced. No matter how complicated the strategy, leaders must find a way to make it easy to be understood – a challenge that is habitually underestimated.

Implementation Never Goes According to Plan

Leaders must:

- Create the right images, as they are a powerful communication tool. Choose wisely, as the wrong images send the wrong message.
- Always test a new branding campaign.
- Have fun creating the branding!

Branding the essential argument(s) of a strategy into images is a powerful way to achieve success. In some organizations, a slogan is used instead of an image. When Barak Obama ran for president of the United States, he branded his campaign around change. For Bill Clinton it was the phrase, "It's the economy, stupid!"



5. Change your strategy, change your measures.

Implementing new measures receives more resistance from staff members than anything else.

Most organizations today are using the wrong measures to track their strategy. When leaders launch a new strategy, they fail to stop using old measures that are tracking the old strategy. They must create new measures to track the new strategy. Although this sounds logical, it does not happen. Strategy Maps and the Balanced Scorecard provides excellent methodology to align strategy and measures.

A best practice of a CEO we worked with came immediately after adopting he adopted the Balanced Scorecard. He started every leadership meeting by reviewing the measures and actions. This had the desired effect of shifting the conversation among his direct reports from 80% operational and only 20% strategic to vice versa. Leaders are responsible to put the right new measures in place. They can be misunderstood as the following story explains.

In China, the emperor discovered that the most disease-ridden province in his empire was also the one with the most doctors. The solution? He promptly ordered all the doctors shot dead.

Many of the measures used in organizations today are obsolete. Despite the growing importance of intangible assets, mostly tangible assets get measured. As an example, consider the expression, "People are our most important asset." This statement is not only wrong but also reveals the need for measures to be updated. People's salaries appear on the P&L Sheet as an expense, not as an asset on the Balance Sheet. It is time to say, "The *right* people are our most important asset."

"That which is measured improves" is the old adage. But if leaders are measuring the wrong thing, making it better will do little or no good.

Implementation Never Goes According to Plan

Leaders must:

- Recognize that measures drive behaviors and it is important you have the right ones in place.
- Create a strategy map as a one-page summary that explains the strategic objectives and their relationships.



6. Create a “to stop” list.

Leaders must identify the actions they don't want staff members to do anymore, just as they must reinforce what they want them to do differently.

When rolling out a new strategy, you are asking staff members to do things differently. We all have “to do” lists. Leaders must also identify what they want staff members to *stop* doing. Quite often, that list is twice as long as their “to do” list.

Take time to closely identify what is no longer important to the business from the old strategy. This critical step allows you to free up staff members' time by eliminating non-value-added work. Then they have time to do the new actions.

Implementation is a destination, not a journey. Strategy and its implementation are constantly reviewed and over time will become obsolete. A new strategy requires new actions and a new way of doing things. Leaders must be able to communicate the differences to their staff members and when they do...

The impact can be amazing. Not only do your staff members appreciate your making their work and life easier, you also further clarify what the implementation means and doesn't mean. Remember, leaders are responsible for identifying what *not* to do just as much as what to do.

“To Stop” List

- × Stop any staff members' activities that add no value to the new strategy.
- × Stop using obsolete measures.
- × Stop holding meetings that take longer than two hours.

7. Review – the poorest performing area of Leaders today.

The odds of successfully executing a strategy that isn't reviewed frequently are slim to none.

Implementation is all about taking the right actions and leaders are responsible for these actions to be taken.

Strategy and its implementation is typically reviewed twice a year. But to succeed, it must be reviewed every two weeks, first in parts and then reviewing the whole strategy and its implementation every quarter. During these reviews, leaders become aware of what is working and what is not and they take corrective action. Yet most leaders lack this discipline.

Implementation Never Goes According to Plan

Leaders must:

- Spend more time reviewing strategy and implementation than dealing with operations.
- Base decisions on intuition combined with facts from the reviews.
- Conduct reviews to ensure you achieve desired outcomes.

Reviews also change the dialogue in the organization. Currently leaders spend 85% of their time discussing operations and only 15% on strategy a month. But a leader is responsible for strategy and its implementation. The ratio should be reversed.

Implementation without proper review is like a man falling from a 30-story building. At each floor, someone asks him how he is doing and he replies, "So far looking good!"

The benefits of conducting a bimonthly review are tremendous:

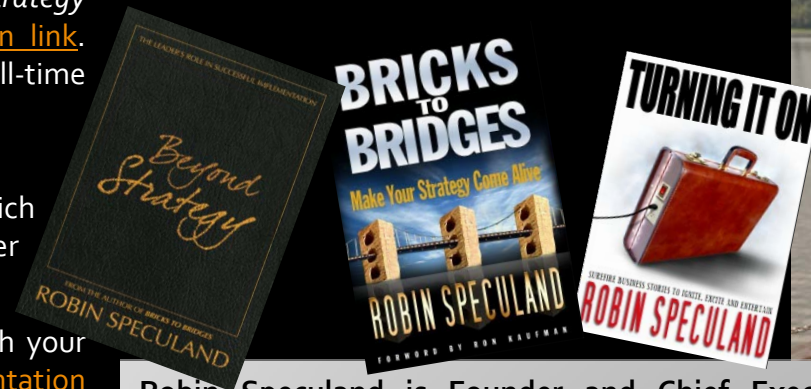
- It demonstrates the importance of the new strategy to the whole organization.
- It changes the dialogue among leaders from talking mostly about operational issues to talking about strategic issues.
- It assists in the cascade of the strategy throughout the organization.
- It keeps the organization's strategy on the leaders' radar.
- It puts the leaders' focus on solving strategic problems, not operational ones.

Author's Message

This free eBook is designed as an introduction to Bridges' latest research and thinking. It is based on my new book *Beyond Strategy – The Leader's Role in Successful Implementation*, [Amazon link](#). Strategy implementation is my passion and has been my full-time focus for the last 10 years.

The field of strategy implementation is now starting to be recognized globally. I feel excited to be part of its growth, which is being fueled partly by the fact that strategy does not deliver revenue – its *implementation* does.

If you have found this material helpful, please share it with your friends and let me know your thoughts at [strategy implementation blog](#) or [twitter](#).



Robin Speculand is Founder and Chief Executive of Bridges Business Consultancy Int, a pioneer and global specialist in strategy implementation. In 2009, John Wiley & Sons published *Beyond Strategy*, the follow-up to his international bestseller *Bricks to Bridges*.

Robin's work begins once clients have crafted their strategy and are beginning their implementation journey by adopting Bridges' Implementation Compass™, a proprietary framework for successful strategy implementation.

Robin is also a masterful event facilitator and an engaging keynote speaker. His work has been featured widely in the media, including BBC Global, CNBC and Financial Times.