

# THE SECRET INGREDIENTS OF STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

Knowing what to do and actually doing it are two very different things.

There are seven key principles that can guide an organisation to succeed in strategy implementation.

Implementation is about taking the right actions, so leaders need to support and guide employees to work differently.

Leaders need to develop the same discipline, passion, and tenacity for implementing strategy that they had when crafting it.

Organisations understand the need for sound strategies, but few successfully implement those strategies and deliver long-term sustained value.

Hence there exists an imbalance between strategy and implementation. Leaders spend more time, effort, and energy on crafting the strategy than guiding its implementation. The imbalance is partly attributed to the availability of a plethora of tools and frameworks (and consultants) to support the devising of the strategy, but much fewer resources (and consultants) to guide its implementation.

To correct this issue and deliver world-class implementation, organisations need to develop a disciplined implementation mindset. This involves both leaders and their teams taking consistent, deliberate right actions to move the strategy forward. It is about building the “discipline of doing it right”. This article delves into how leaders need to adopt a different way of thinking and approach to deliver world-class implementation in today’s rapidly evolving digital world, where organisations may be excellent at crafting innovative strategies but not good at implementing them.

## DO THE RIGHT THING AND DO IT RIGHT

Strategy is about making the right choices. Crafting a new strategy involves making multiple choices about things such as the markets to compete in, growth strategies to pursue, customer segments to target, what sustainability and social responsibility initiatives to incorporate, which technology to invest in, and the ecosystems to participate in.

Implementation is about taking the right actions. Implementation moves the organisation from planning to doing, from thinking to achieving, and from making choices to taking the right actions. It requires employees

to work differently since a new strategy means doing things differently. Employees, however, are already busy every day. The challenge for leaders is to ensure they are busy doing the right things—that is, taking the right actions. INSEAD Professor Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries commented, “There is often a gap between our good intentions and our actual behaviour. Alarming, we’re sometimes not even aware of the difference between what we think we’re doing and what we’re really doing.” In his opinion, while we may believe that our actions are a result of conscious and rational thought, “only a small part of our brain is actively engaged in conscious reasoning.”<sup>1</sup>

Hence, despite our good intentions, somewhere between thought and action, we lose focus. Consider these examples. After having potentially life-threatening heart surgery, people know they need to change their daily actions, but most do not. Dr Edward D. Miller, dean of the medical school and CEO of the hospital at Johns Hopkins University, said, “If you look at people after undergoing coronary-artery bypass grafting two years later, 90 percent of them have not changed their lifestyle.”<sup>2</sup> In yet another example, the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* indicated that as many as one in five doctors smoke. Despite knowing the risks of smoking—and the supposed need to set a good example for their patients—they still smoke.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, even though people know it is good to exercise and eat

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right, it is estimated that half of the American population will be obese by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

Having a disciplined implementation mindset means that the organisation applies an equal balance of tenacity, passion, and commitment to both the strategy and its implementation.

Deloitte’s 2023 analysis of organisations’ success at digital transformation found that “organisations often struggle to determine which actions drive the most impact and which investments yield the most enterprise value... the link between strategy and action is the determining factor in an organisation’s ability to derive the most value from its digital transformation.”<sup>5</sup>

How can a leader bridge this gap between strategy creation and its implementation? Amazon founder Jeff Bezos once said, “As a senior executive, what do you really get paid to do? You get paid to make a small number of high-quality decisions.” This sentiment reflects the kind of disciplined focus required from leaders—they need to identify the small, impactful actions that will drive their

strategy implementation forward while resisting the temptation to become bogged down in day-to-day operational tasks. But this is not easily accomplished and demands a disciplined implementation mindset focused on consistent, deliberate actions.

### FRAMEWORKS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

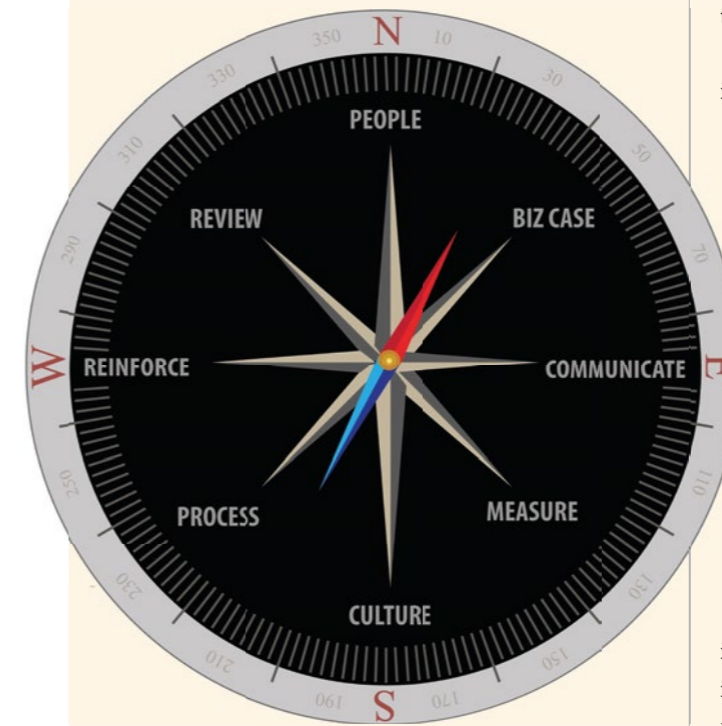
To correct the imbalance articulated above and guide the leaders and employees through the implementation journey, I have developed two frameworks. These frameworks have been adopted by both governments and businesses.

The Implementation Compass™ highlights the eight areas of excellence in implementation and is a proven framework that has been used by the public sector and businesses since 2004.

Meanwhile, the Implementation Canvas® assists leaders in identifying the right actions that the organisation requires employees need to take, especially at the launch of a new strategy so as to build momentum and traction. The Canvas builds on expanding the Compass.

### THE IMPLEMENTATION COMPASS™

The Implementation Compass™ is a proprietary framework that highlights the eight critical areas of successful implementation. It serves as a guide for leaders, ensuring that they are addressing all the key components needed for effective implementation. Each direction of the compass represents an area that leaders must focus on—from engaging people effectively to ensuring that measurement systems are in place to track implementation progress.



The Compass is made up of the following eight areas.

**North: People** – The calibre of the people dictates the quality of the implementation. Employees need to be trained in new skills to deliver the strategy.

**Northeast: Biz Case** – This explains why the organisation must change strategies, creating a sense of urgency to get started.

**East: Communicate** – Communication should be nurtured throughout the whole implementation, and not just for the first few months. This involves, for example, sharing customer feedback and informing employees of what is going on, what is working or not working, what lessons are being learnt, and any changes to the objectives.

**Southeast: Measure** – A change in strategy requires an adjustment in measurement. Leaders need to create new measures that track the implementation advancement and identify where to take corrective action.

**South: Culture** – This drives the way the strategy is being implemented. Two companies can have the same strategy, but how they implement it is driven by their culture. Leaders must ensure the culture supports the implementation and drives employees to take the right actions.

**Southwest: Process** – Changing the strategy means modifying how to operate things. Processes need to be continually improved and reinvented by employees who are empowered to change how they work.

**West: Reinforce** – When employees step up and take the right actions, they have to be encouraged to keep taking the right actions with the appropriate recognition.

**Northwest: Review** – Regular monitoring is critical, as it reinforces the importance of the implementation and ensures small problems can be resolved before they snowball into large problems. It also emphasises the importance of the implementation and keeps everyone on track.

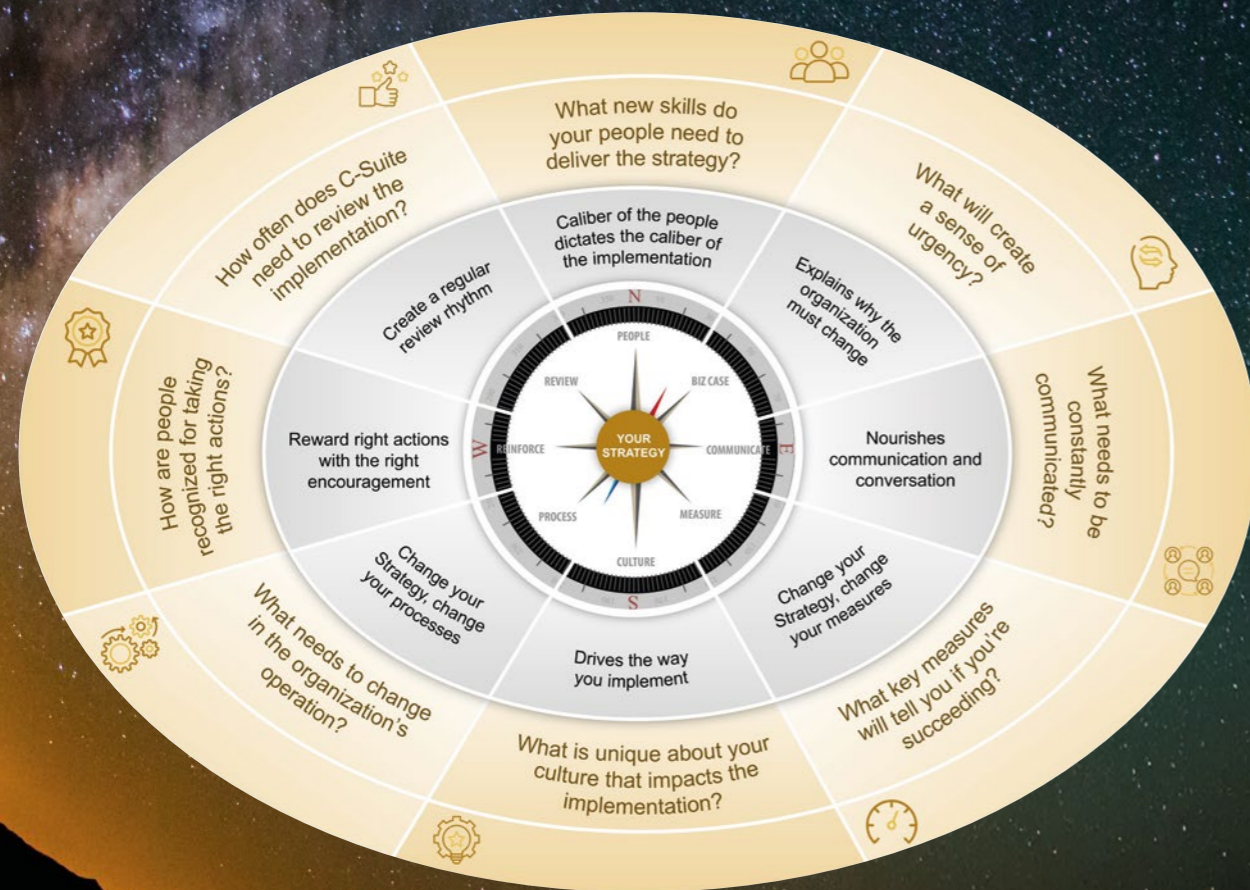
Not all the directions on the Implementation Compass are of equal importance to an organisation at the same time, but all are ultimately important. At different stages of an organisation’s implementation journey, the relevance of each area can increase or decrease. The challenge for leaders is to identify and prioritise what needs to be done, and guide employees through the implementation journey.

### The Implementation Canvas®

The Implementation Canvas® builds on the Compass, and further facilitates discussions about identifying the right actions to take and prioritising those actions. This Canvas enables organisations to map out the steps involved in translating strategy into action, providing a clear, visual representation of what needs to be done and by whom. It serves as a practical blueprint, ensuring that everyone in the organisation understands their role in the implementation journey.

- At the centre of the Canvas discussion is the organisation's strategy
- The second circle from the centre is the Implementation Compass, which draws out the eight areas discussed earlier
- The third circle features brief descriptions of each area of the Compass
- The fourth circle highlights the critical discussion questions for each of the eight areas
- The outermost circle is where leaders record the right actions for their organisation.

To start using the Canvas, leaders must first brainstorm the critical discussion questions for each of the eight areas, and then prioritise the 'correct' actions that have been identified against their impact and urgency.



### ADOPTING IMPLEMENTATION PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

In using the Compass and Canvas to implement strategy, there are seven practical and easy-to-adopt implementation principles to adhere to, which I have elaborated on below.

#### 1. Right actions

The right discipline drives the right actions to deliver the right performance. By adopting the Compass and then the Canvas, leaders have the frameworks to identify the correct actions they need employees to take. Research by Bridges Business Consultancy Int. since 2002 revealed that only five percent of employees in an organisation knew their organisation's strategy.<sup>6</sup> Articulating the right actions and then breaking them up into small steps is critical because it translates the big-picture strategy into meaningful insights and viable actions for employees. It explains to employees how they can participate in the strategy and encourages greater participation across the organisation. Moreover, it acknowledges that behaviours are contagious while ensuring the right actions are being adopted. It exerts more control over the actions employees are taking, rather than waiting to see the eventual outcomes. And also by doing so, it ensures the organisation is spending its energy, time, and focus on the correct areas, rather than on actions that do not create the right outcomes.

#### 2. Measure everything

When you change your strategy, you must change your measures. Otherwise, you are tracking the old strategy. However, identifying a new strategy is already challenging, and putting in new measures to track it makes implementation even tougher. From the eight areas on the Compass, *Measure* encounters the most resistance from employees. This is because employees are traditionally used to being measured once or twice a year. But many organisations are now able to track employee performance daily, and employees begin to feel threatened and greatly resist the new measures. This is why, for both the Compass and Canvas, it is critical for leaders to identify the right measures and ensure they are driving the appropriate actions. It is alarming to discover that, from Bridges' research conducted since 2020, 72 percent of leaders do not

believe their organisation has an effective measurement system to track their strategy implementation.<sup>7</sup>

When the right measures are in place to track the implementation, they enable the organisation to identify the right actions to take, see where to make corrections along the implementation journey, and enable leadership and employee accountability. Over the last 25 years, the ability to identify and track strategy has improved with the introduction of management tools such as the Balanced Scorecard, and Objectives and Key Results (OKRs). These provide a framework to guide leadership teams in identifying the right measures for their strategy. Once identified, they then have to be integrated into the business.

Sometimes the resistance to implementing a strategy comes from high up in the organisation. For example, a global hearing aid organisation had a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in New Zealand who came up with an innovative idea for growing revenue and reaching new customer segments. The idea was to develop a subscription payment model since hearing aids are expensive and unaffordable for many people. The new scheme never got off the ground because the finance leaders at the head office were focused on immediate revenue and could only see the loss of upfront revenue. They could not see the long-term customer value or the potential of opening up sales to a new segment of customers who could not afford to pay the full amount in one instalment.

#### 3. Less is more

When a new strategy is being rolled out, every activity seems important and urgent, especially at the start. Implementation discipline is required for leaders to prioritise and recognise what can be achieved when they focus on 'less' rather than 'more' actions. When the focus is on 'more', and the organisation puts out too many objectives and actions, employees become confused about what is important. They compete for limited resources, attend an endless number of meetings, cannot get ahead of their work, and fight a slow and often bureaucratic culture as they try to please everyone (but often end up pleasing no one). On the other hand, the 'less is more' technique enables the organisation to be resource-rich as it is able to provide the required resources for the limited

initiatives, rather than spreading resources too thin over too many initiatives. It also creates an implementation-focused culture, where employees have the time, space, and support to do their daily work, as well as take the right implementation actions.

This technique also reduces the number of strategic objectives an organisation focuses on every 12 months. From my consulting experience, focusing on three strategic objectives within 12 months optimises the implementation. When focusing on four to 10 objectives, typically only one or two are completed, and when focusing on over 11, none is completed.

Successful implementation requires leaders to prioritise the necessary actions. For example, when Roz Brewer became Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Starbucks in 2017, she restructured the business by eliminating two-thirds of the projects underway in the corporate office.

Instead, Brewer focused on three priorities: beverage innovation, store experience, and the digital business. Before long, she gained a reputation for making tough decisions and sticking to them: “We just lined everybody up and said if it doesn’t fit in these three lanes, we’re stopping the work.”<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. 90-day chunks

Successful implementation requires early and quick wins to build traction and momentum. When an action is set with a deliverable date that is say, 12 months into the future, it sends a message that action is not necessarily urgent and that can delay its initiation.

The 90-day chunks principle encourages employees to take the right actions by simplifying what is expected of them, thus making it easier for them to engage and participate in the implementation. It also ensures the right actions are being taken. By breaking down the right actions into 90-day chunks—and then recognising people

and teams when the actions are complete—leaders send a powerful message while also reinforcing the right behaviours. Furthermore, it also discourages procrastination, breaks down long-term goals into achievable chunks, and drives leaders to review the progress of the implementation more frequently.

#### 5. Nurture communications

Leaders are often guilty of front-loading their communication when launching a new strategy, and then the communication rapidly dissipates. To overcome poor communication—one of the top reasons why implementation fails—leaders require a mindset shift from being focused on launching the strategy to nurturing communications throughout its journey.

When launching a strategy, leaders are like politicians on an election campaign trail who need visibility and therefore have to meet their voters, shake their hands, and listen to what the latter have to say. Similarly, to support the new strategy, leaders need to find space in their schedules to be visible across the organisation. Their visible presence reinforces the importance of the messaging. And along with their “stump speech”, their presence boosts employees’ understanding and creates opportunities for them to discuss the new direction. The leaders must do this with sincerity and authenticity. When they do so, employees pick up on that and react accordingly. For example, when Alan Mulally joined Ford in 2006 as the new CEO, he noticed that

many of his executives were not driving Ford cars! If the leaders do not use their own product, how can they lead by example to execute a strategy? Similarly, when Angela Ahrendts became CEO of Burberry in 2006, she observed at her first strategy meeting on a cold rainy day with her top 60 leaders that not one was wearing a Burberry trench coat. Her leaders clearly were not being authentic about endorsing their own product, even on a rainy day.

#### 6. Culture of accountability

This is one of the least practised principles of leadership and yet one of the easiest to adopt as it requires only implementation discipline and no financial resources. When leaders follow up with employees to hold them accountable, they send a signal about the importance of the implementation and ensure that employees are held accountable for their actions. It also serves to reinforce the priorities across the organisation. Additionally, they are also able to discern if employees require additional resources to succeed, guidance to stay on the right path, coaching and training to enhance their capabilities, and encouragement to stay motivated throughout the whole implementation journey. But although the benefits of following up with employees are clear, many leaders fail to do so.

When conducted regularly, follow-up requires as little as a 10-minute commitment each time. After asking an employee or a team to take the right action, the leader needs to state when

the follow-up will occur. He could say, for example, “In seven days’ time, I will follow up at 10:20 am for 10 minutes to check in on your progress and to see if you need any assistance or support.” To do this, they can set up a nudge using a phone reminder or calendar invite. Stanford University professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton summed it up succinctly: “Closing the loop—following up to make sure something actually happens after it has been decided on—isn’t a very complicated idea. But it is a potent means for preventing talk from being the only thing that occurs.”<sup>9</sup>


#### 7. Review rhythm

The organisation needs to create a structure to review the implementation advancement regularly and ensure it is heading in the right direction. This prevents small problems from snowballing and enables the organisation to take corrective action. Setting up a review rhythm means establishing the discipline to review if staff are making headway on the implementation on a regular and structured frequency. From my experience, the result of lacking such an implementation discipline is that many leaders do not even know how their strategy implementation is coming along. Creating the review rhythm thus sets the structure for leaders and supervisors to follow up frequently with employees.

#### DELIVERING WORLD-CLASS IMPLEMENTATION

For senior leaders, developing an implementation-disciplined mindset

is critical for success. The difference between organisations that succeed in realising their strategic initiatives and those that fail lies in how well they implement their plans. Successful implementation requires more than just a good strategy—it requires leaders who are disciplined, who can navigate the complexities of implementation, and who can motivate their teams to take the right actions.

By using tools like the Implementation Compass™ and Implementation Canvas®, and adopting the seven implementation principles, leaders can significantly increase their chances of success. Implementation is not easy, but with the right mindset and approach, it can become a powerful differentiator that drives lasting value for the organisation. 



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