Getting the timing right– Four dilemmas of timing strategy execution

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Challenge
Timing is essential in the strategizing process, but getting it right is hard: if senior managers push a strategy too quickly through the organization, they may lose followers, not involve relevant stakeholders, decrease adoption or even push an unrealistic or irrelevant strategy through the organization. If senior managers are too slow, they lose the momentum, people may be demotivated, the strategic initiative loses priority, and again, execution fails. How could senior managers get the timing right?

TIME HORIZON DILEMMA
Strategies are about the future. While we accept that we cannot know what will happen in the future, do we actually acknowledge what we do not know about our current situation? Do we look far enough into the future? Are we ambitious enough? How do we balance the need for realism and ambition?

URGENCY DILEMMA
We need to make strategy execution relevant now. It is hard to admit, but sometimes, even a crisis can be made useful to implement the desired strategy. But sometimes pushing doesn’t help. When to push the strategy execution and when to allow it to sink in?

PROCESS DILEMMA
The sequence of activities plays a major role on how the strategy will unfolded in practice. While planning such sequence is necessary to guide the strategy execution process and sticking to the plan provides the needed stability, any plan will require adjustments. To what extend do we stick to the plan and when do we adjust?

RHYTHM DILEMMA
Organizations have a heartbeat and so do strategies: Monday meetings, progress review every third month, strategy planning every three years, etc. When it comes to strategy implementation, senior managers ponder: who gets to set the rhythm? How can different rhythms be aligned? What does it take to get everybody on the same beat? Can the strategy implementation dictate its own rhythm?

Research method
Based on 36 interviews with senior managers and the theoretical foundations of temporal institutional work (e.g. Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016; Gersick, 1994), we suggest four dilemmas managers face to get the timing right: time horizon, urgency, process rhythm.

URGENCY DILEMMA
Interviewees suggest that understanding the uncertainties of the current situation of the firm has a strikingly impact on the firm’s ability to implement their long-term ambition. At the same time, if managers are too focused on the current situation, they fail to develop an ambitious leap into a potentially ‘better’ future.

Enacting rhythm
Managing and claiming people to strategy initiative regularly
Create the heartbeat of the initiative

Entraining rhythm
Synchronizing the rhythm of the initiative with expectations across hierarchical levels and departments
Embed the rhythm across the organization

Ambitious future
Surrendering to the firm’s call is not a sound strategy. Dare to be ambitious.
How far can you stretch?
Is it ambitious enough?

Constructing urgency
Making the right time to get the priority new
Create turbulence
When to push?
When to let go?

Sequencing activities
Benefiting from the stability of a process to guide the strategic initiative
Keep a stable process
When to stick to the plan?
When to allow changes and iterations?

Iterating activities
Testing and adjusting the strategy initiative along the way
Adjust and iterate the process

Sticking to the plan?

STRIVING FOR AN AMBITIOUS REALISM
A large traditional Swedish firm designed an ambitious strategy to become market leaders. The strategy, though relying on a sophisticated IT infrastructure, had little understanding of IT and the strategy failed to address the need for IT capability development

CREATING AND SUSPENDING URGENCY
A large technology firm is emphasizing Artificial Intelligence in their new strategy. The strategy emerged from a sense of urgency from rapidly changing market and technologies. Senior manager leading the strategy, though sensed that relevant stakeholders would oppose the strategy, if asked individually. Their tactic was to start planting the AI ideas 2 years ahead of the planned start of the strategy execution, so, people were already on board on the change before launching the new strategy

SEQUENCING AND ITERATING ACTIVITIES
A medical equipment firm planned the expansion of production capacity in three distinct stages, with strong iterative processes within each stage. The sequence helped them communicate the strategy and their progress. Yet, the phases guided but didn’t determine the processes. The leader of the strategy execution navigated from established sequences to iterative activities gracefully. For example, as they faced strong scrutiny of the financial department, iterative activities became the modus operandi

ENACTING AND ENTRAINING RHYTHM
The chairman of the board of a large bank kept an eye on their ongoing strategy initiatives at every third board meeting. At these days, the manager responsible for the initiative reported on the progress while the board asked questions based on their extensive experience across different organizations and markets. After experimenting with shorter and longer cycles, three months has been crystallized as their organizational practice. In this example, the execution sync with the rhythm of the firm. (Chairman of the board of directors at a large financial institution)