



Getting the timing right– Four dilemmas of timing strategy execution

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Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation (APA):

Geraldi, J., Stjerne, I., & Oehmen, J. (2018). Getting the timing right– Four dilemmas of timing strategy execution. Poster session presented at MIT System Design & Management Symposium 2018, Cambridge, MA, United States.

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Getting the timing right

Four dilemmas of timing strategy execution



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?

Research method

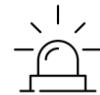
Based on 36 interviews with senior managers and the theoretical foundations of temporal institutional work (e.g. Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016; Gersick, 1994), we suggest four dilemmas managers face to get the timing right: time-horizon, urgency, process and rhythm.



TIME HORIZON DILEMMA

Strategies are about the future. While we accept that we cannot know what can and 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?

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.



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?

Interviewees suggest though that pressing for urgency needs to be balanced with time for reflection. As frustrated as it may feel, change takes time to sink in. Interviewees mentioned the need to switch between periods to increase pressure, and make the strategy seem urgent, and times to suspend the urgency, plant ideas and let them germinate.



PROCESS DILEMMA

The sequence of activities play a major role on how the strategy will unfold 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?

Interviewees shared strategies to sequencing activities in strategy execution. Many followed classic organizational change and strategy deployment models from textbooks and consultancies as a starting point, and adjusted carefully and slowly along the way, balancing the need for responsiveness and stability. Their dilemma was to adjust and iterate the process as much as needed, but not more.



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?

According to our interviewees, the organizational rhythm (e.g. meetings, reports) took a great proportion of their time and was used by and interfering with the strategy execution. Therefore, the senior managers responsible for the strategy implementation balanced the need to create a rhythm of the initiative, and the need to entrain that rhythm in the firm.

Ambitious future
Surrendering to the day to day operations is not a sound strategy
Dare to be ambitious

Constructing urgency
Making the strategy initiative a priority now
Create turbulence

Sequencing activities
Benefiting from the stability of a process to guide the strategic initiative
Keep a stable process

Enacting rhythm
Managing and claiming people's time for the strategy initiative regularly
Create the heartbeat of the initiative

How far can you stretch?
Is it ambitious enough?

When to push?
When to let go?

When to stick to the plan?
When to allow changes and iterations?

How often should we meet?
Is our rhythm in line with expectations and practices of the organization?

Conservative present
Change is not feasible if detached from day-to-day reality
Be realistic

Suspending urgency
Opening space for reflection and maturation of the initiative
Let the ideas sink in

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

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

STRIVING FOR AN AMBITIOUS REALISM A STORY FROM PRACTICE

A large traditional Swedish firm designed an ambitious strategy to become market leaders. The strategy though relied on a sophisticated IT infrastructure. However, the company had limited understanding of IT and the strategy failed to address the need for IT capability development. (Senior consultant)

CREATING AND SUSPENDING URGENCY A STORY FROM PRACTICE

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. (Senior Strategy & Business Development Manager)

SEQUENCING AND ITERATING ACTIVITIES A STORY FROM PRACTICE

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 finance department, iterative activities became the modus operandi. (Head of Projects and Development, responsible for the strategy initiative)

ENACTING AND ENTRAINING RHYTHM A STORY FROM PRACTICE

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 crystalized as their organizational practice. In this example, the execution synced with the rhythm of the firm. (Chairman of the board of directors at a large financial institution)