

Strategy Execution

“However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.”

— *Winston Churchill*

When Lou Gerstner orchestrated IBM's turnaround in the 1990s, he famously commented that it doesn't matter what your strategy is, as long as you have one. Having a strategy is certainly a good idea, but making it happen—and engaging the organization in the process—is even better. For more than 25 years CFAR has worked with organizations committed to putting strategy into practice for results that make a difference.

Six approaches to complex strategy execution

Strategy *development* typically occurs at the executive level, but strategy *execution* involves a complex web of relationships and tasks reaching from the C-Suite to those serving customers on the front line. In our work helping thousands of companies and nonprofit organizations, we have found that for a strategy to take root, there must be an active effort to create fertile ground—people must understand the strategy and know how their work actually contributes to it. We have designed our approach to strategy execution around six critical activities:

1. **Define the ‘what and why.’** A task without context is just that—a task. Effective strategy execution is framed by a context and need that rallies staff to take action *in a coordinated way*.
2. **Structure the ‘how.’** Now that you know what you want to do, how will you do it—not in some abstract

way, but in this organization at this time, with its unique ways of working, culture, hierarchy, and social networks that help or hinder getting things done?

3. **Make the case for change.** A new strategy plan often requires widespread behavior change, not something that most people in organizations are longing for. Top-down announcements—“This is what will happen” (without the story behind the strategy)—may work for a while but fail to cause lasting or extraordinary results.
4. **Manage implementation.** Implementation is often a project in itself but its second and third order effects can be lost as project management processes are put in place. Tracking progress with social, as well as organizational and financial, metrics makes a difference.
5. **Generate momentum among leadership.** While the top and those near the top may signal “being on board,” over time differences can develop: differences in pace, differences in priority, differences in the scope of change. Recognizing the coalitions needed to sustain the organization *and* those who are needed to instigate change—and attending to both—is an ongoing leadership activity.
6. **Talk about it.** Implementing your strategy can feel like going in many directions at the same time. This is unsettling. Talking about the

strategy—the intentions and the challenges, the accomplishments and the constraints—enables members of an organization to find the forest among the trees. The strategy story is one that evolves dynamically—and organization members want and need to know what's up.

Strategy without engagement to make things happen is just chatter or wishful thinking.

Strategy execution is difficult, and research shows that up to half of these efforts fail, taking with them a loss of valuable time, money, and—even harder to reclaim—leadership credibility, and forward momentum.

CFAR's tools, processes, and methods are built to help you take your strategy—your really good ideas—and turn them into coordinated action that achieves results. We have successfully worked side-by-side with executives across sectors and across time, designing, putting in place, adapting, and ultimately assessing strategy efforts that have involved both small- and large-scale change and resulted in novel outcomes with major impact.

CFAR's approach focuses on both leaders and employees. Our work fits each organization's culture and re-defines how you think about handling the complex challenges of strategy implementation. We leverage our innovative tools and your insights to streamline the work, applying our skills in the hard analytics of strategy and our understanding of the social and cultural factors that make organizational life so interesting, and are essential to putting strategy into practice.