Closing the strategy execution gap in the public sector

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6

Abstract

Purpose – In response to the significant gap between strategy planning and execution, a conceptual model was developed in an attempt to close this gap, particularly in the public sector. The paper aims to discuss this issue.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a literature review and participatory action research, stretching over ten case studies and eight years.
Findings – The MERIL-DE model integrates the identified "nine vital stratex components" of leadership, strategic planning, project management, alignment, MERIL (Measure, Evaluate, Report, Improve and Learn), drive, engagement, risk, and stakeholder management. The car analogy demonstrates this integration in a practical way.
Research limitations/implications – The conceptual model should be used as guide in the tailoring of a unique MERIL-DE model or Stratex Car for each public sector organization (PSO), according to its unique context.
Practical implications – In designing a tailored "Stratex Car" based on the MERIL-DE model, it is believed to close this gap significantly. The strategy execution framework is presented as a tool to assess the total strategy execution capacity (TSEC) of PSOs.
Originality/value – This is a new conceptual model for the unique public sector context, focusing on successful strategy execution in the public sector.

Keywords Strategy execution, Public sector, Conceptual model, Closing the gap, MERIL-DE model,
Stratex Car, Nine vital stratex components

Paper type Research paper

This paper considers the research problem of consistent and general poor execution of strategic plans in the public sector, which leads to poor service delivery and the non-realization of the specified objectives and intended benefits to the public.

The nature of strategy execution

According to Childress (2013), there is no strategy without execution. Through execution, the strategic plan, as hypothesis, is tested and reviewed where needed to achieve the specified aims in the most efficient way. Thompson and Strickland (1987) regard strategy execution, evaluation, and adjustment as part of strategic management and define strategic management as the process whereby managers establish an organization's long-term direction, set specific performance objectives, develop strategies to achieve these objectives in the light of relevant internal and external conditions, and then undertake the chosen action plans. Strategy execution, as part of strategic management, is the action of doing what the strategy (or the strategic plan) says and includes a review process. De Flander (2010) defines strategy execution as "all the actions necessary to turn your strategy into success." Execution, according to Bossidy and Charan (2002), is the major job of business leaders. Hrebiniak (2005), in turn, describes execution as a disciplined process or logical set of connected activities that enables an organization to make its strategy work. Childress (2013) views strategy and execution as inseparable, distinct, but intimately connected, much like two sides of a coin. When separated, they do not work. He sees strategy as a living organism that only expresses itself though the process of being delivered. It is a unique, disciplined journey involving the

whole organization. Strategy without execution is consequently non-existent, and execution is therefore the only competitive advantage. Childress (2013) continues by describing strategy as a dynamic contact sport where the leadership team will grow in capability, alignment, and confidence through agility to respond to the uncertain and dynamic environment through frequent updates and adjustments. Childress (2013) also sees strategy as a journey of breakthroughs to a different tomorrow, a journey requiring bold leaps in performance and requiring changing the way things are done. Strategy therefore always requires doing things in new ways. This distinctiveness is also captured in the definition of a strategic initiative or project according to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), namely, that it is being temporary, unique and creating a specific benefit (Project Management Institute (PMI), 2013). Because of this distinctiveness, there cannot be a perfect project plan and perfect strategic plan, "but the sooner you begin to work your plan, the sooner you learn how to improve your plan" (Childress, 2013). In the strategic plan, a portfolio of projects is implemented, which consists of the various selected programs, projects, and activities (PMI, 2013). Hamm (2011) describes execution as a game marked by continually keeping score, measurement, feedback, learning, and making improvements or corrections. Leaders are paid and held accountable to produce results from this "game."

Significance of strategy execution
Collins (2001) in his book *Good to Great* states that what separates the good from the great organizations is not strategy, but rather execution. Bossidy and Charan (2002) state that "execution is the great unaddressed issue in the business world today." Niven (2003, pp. 10-11) agrees with this view when he states that "the execution of a strategy is more important and more valuable than the formulation of a strategy […] [U]nfortunately, the vast majority of organizations fail miserably when attempting to execute their strategies." In a similar fashion, Hrebiniak (2005) states that "formulating strategy is difficult, but executing it throughout the organization is even harder." Hrebiniak (2005) continues by stating that "[w]ithout effective execution, no business strategy can succeed." Hrebiniak (2005) argues that managers today know far more about developing strategy than executing strategy, including overcoming political and organizational obstacles. Welch (2005) believes that without a disciplined process or logical set of connected activities, strategic goals cannot be attained, as "[t]he important thing is not having a strategy, it's getting it implemented." In turn, De Flander (2010, p. 29) asserts: "Strategy execution is a new, emerging competitive battlefield that starts to get more and more attention."

Lepsinger (2010) and *OnPoint Consulting* (2011) agree that if an organization cannot execute its strategy, nothing else matters, i.e. neither the most solid, well-thought-out strategy, not the most innovative business model, nor even technology that could transform an industry. Lepsinger (2010) and *OnPoint Consulting* (2011) agree that the real differentiator is the ability to get things done and deliver consistent results. Therefore, in strategic management, it is strategy execution that matters most. Strategy execution seems to be where the action is, as it is very dynamic and difficult, but also where the benefit is created, where performance is improved and where competitive advantage is realized. It seems as if strategy execution is the job of all, including top management. It could be regarded as a game or a journey, i.e. a long game or journey that has a start and a finish. The journey or game takes the whole organization to unfamiliar territory as it gains more territory, moving to higher levels of performance and service delivery.

The size of the strategy execution gap
Research suggests that strategy execution is not given sufficient attention by organizational role players. Childress (2013) states that 70 percent of CEOs who are fired are not dismissed because of bad strategies, but rather because of poor execution. Research by

Mankins and Steele (2005), De Flander (2010), *OnPoint Consulting* (2011), Cruz (2013), and Childress (2013) suggests that organizations on average realize only 40 percent of their strategic ambition leaving an average gap of 60 percent between strategic planning and execution. This average percentage was determined through surveys between 2002 and 2008, mostly in large private sector companies in first-world countries.

Organizations in general therefore face an average performance loss of 60 percent when implementing strategy. At the high end, Zook and Allen (2001), Kaplan and Norton (2001, 2008), Franken *et al.* (2009), and Dinsmore and Cabanis-Brewin (2011) reported a 60-90 percent failure rate of well-formulated strategies. The finding from Leinwand and Mainardi (2016), also from the private sector, is that 66 percent of executives say their organizations do not have the capabilities to support their strategy.

Reliable statistics based on sound research in the public sector seem not to be available yet. The average gap between strategy planning and execution in the public sector is therefore assumed to be also 60 percent. The nature and extent of this gap in public sector organizations (PSOs) need to be determined in future research. This gap could be expressed in terms of lost business income/benefit, lost public value, and/or objectives not achieved. When measuring the extent of objective achievement, all leading and lagging objectives (input, process, output and outcome objectives) could be assessed or just the lagging objectives (outputs and outcomes) which may not tell the whole strategy execution story as advocated by the balanced scorecard.

Research purpose and significance

As strategy execution is being considered the number one challenge in business today, it is therefore clear that any research contributing to the closure of the gap between strategy planning and execution in the public sector, in particular, will be valuable. The research is justified by the significant practical problems that are experienced, as well as the gaps in the body of knowledge, especially strategy execution in the public sector. The research intends to present a new simplified and integrated model for strategy execution for today's PSOs. It intends to combine different theories and disciplines and to identify and integrate key components into a usable model for improved strategy execution in the public sector, operating in a complex, dynamic, and open system. By developing this model, this study attempts to improve the chances for PSOs to successfully complete their strategic journeys.

Research methodology

While the objective of this study was to develop, test, and further improve a management model or conceptual model that can be applied in PSOs to help close their strategy execution gap, the main research question was:

RQ1. What does the ideal strategy execution model for the public sector look like?

The sub-questions were:

- What is the current practice? What are the main problems experienced with strategy execution in the public service? Where are the main gaps or deficiencies?
- What are the main components of such a model?
- How can these key components be integrated best?
- How can this model be applied best in the public sector?

The qualitative research method was adopted as the most appropriate, using case studies with the support of questionnaires and focus group discussions. The overall methodological approach followed was that of Participatory Action Research (PAR).

Robinson (2011, p. 1,436) suggests, "[c]onceptual modelling is not a science but an art." This study holds that conceptual modeling involves analysis and synthesis – the analytical part to identify the key components and the synthesizing part to put these together in a balanced and integrative manner. Robinson (2011) describes the process of conceptual modeling as starting with the observation and description (with assumptions) of the real system in the "problem domain." From there, the process moves to the abstract level where simplifications are made to develop the conceptual model. In this "model domain," the conceptual model is tested and validated in the real world or "problem domain." This process is described as an iterative process and compares with the PAR methodology. The conceptual model for closing the strategy execution gap in the public sector was developed through five phases over this eight-year period. The initial model mostly originated from theory (literature studies, ideas, and constructs). It was then applied, tested in practice, tested with theory from literature, and improved further. The PAR cycles in phases 2-4 included model development, application, verification, and improvement.

The participative action from the beneficiaries (PSO) during the ten case studies was through individual interviews, focus group discussions, and workshops. The various conceptual models were presented, tested for applicability, and improved from case study to case study. A questionnaire was developed and used during initial case studies to help with model assessment and improvement and to assess strengths and weaknesses of the model components at organizations. Questions were also asked to determine whether any component could be removed as critical or vital component or whether any additional component was required in the conceptual model.

Case studies in empirical research
PAR was conducted in ten PSOs in Namibia over an eight-year period, ranging from 2006 to 2014. The unit of analysis was the organizational and unit level and not the individual level. PSOs were analyzed with the focus on corporate and unit performance with regard to the execution of corporate and cascaded unit strategies. The ten case studies used in empirical research of developing the conceptual model were: one ministry (Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry); six local authorities (Eenhana Town Council, Ongwediva Town Council, Bethanie Village Council, Omuthiya Town Council, Helao Nafidi Town Council, and Walvis Bay Municipality); and three state-owned enterprises (National Road Safety Council, Fisheries Observer Agency, and Namibia Statistics Agency).

The approach followed with the case studies was to rather select a large number of diverse PSOs as case studies to get trends in different public sector environments than doing in-depth studies of one or two PSOs. It is believed that this approach better lends itself to the development of a conceptual PSO to be applied in all PSOs. The PAR methodology applied in the ten case studies was therefore not applied in depth due to the large number of case studies used in the current research. The conceptual model was developed, tested, and improved under these different conditions found in the ten case studies.

These case studies followed consultancy appointments of the author, trading as Stratex Consulting since 2004. These consultancies included mostly strategic planning with preparations for strategy execution. The duration per consultancy appointment varied between 4 and 18 months.

Strategy execution: a literature-based analysis
The focus of the study was on strategy execution in the public sector, while most literature on strategy execution is based on the private sector. This section presents the main perspectives from the literature review with regard to strategy execution. A significant increase in research on strategy execution is observed after 2000. It started slowly with Kaplan and Norton (2001) and then Bossidy and Charan (2002). From 2005 onwards, there

was a constant flow of research from Hrebiniak (2005), Morgan *et al.* (2007), Paladino (2007), Spitzer (2007), Kaplan and Norton (2008), Harpst (2008), Marr (2009), and Mukherjee (2009). Sources since 2010 include De Flander (2010), McKnight *et al.* (2010), Lepsinger (2010), Cohen (2011), McChesney *et al.* (2012), Childress (2013), and Leinwand and Mainardi (2016). These last two sources highlight leadership as the single most important component for successful strategy execution.

Since 2013, the search for further strategy execution solutions continued, but with no observed significant scientific research. Calhoun (2013) stresses the importance for executives to be able to run and transform their existing business models concurrently for which a well-defined formal strategy execution process is required, together with a significant paradigm shift, including a move from functional optimization to synchronized cross-functional optimization. Barrows (2014) confirms that strategy execution remains a popular topic in management and most challenging business issue. Barrows (2014) makes a distinction between two mainstream approaches to strategy execution to date, namely, strategy execution described as a process, for example, by Bossidy and Charan (2002), and strategy execution described as a system, for example, by Kaplan and Norton (2008). Barrows (2014) sets the challenge to describe strategy execution, as a system of many systems and processes, not in too simplistic terms, but also not in too much detail to find a solution that is just right, capturing the lion's share of strategy execution success. This challenge does not mention the even more moving parts and more complicated systems found in the public sector.

Barriers to successful strategy execution

What are the factors or components contributing to the aforementioned 60 percent gap? The literature suggests various barriers to successful strategy execution. These barriers could be grouped into seven categories:

(1) poor leadership (especially the CEO, but also top management and sponsors/champions at all levels);

(2) poor strategic planning (wrong, incomplete, unclear, not SMART, not cascaded);

(3) poor project management (includes portfolio, program, and project management);

(4) poor alignment of the strategy with the rest of the organizational elements (staff, skills, culture, structure, processes, technology, and budget);

(5) lack of a performance management system (PMS) (an institutionalized repetitive cycle of measurement, evaluation, reporting, improving, and learning);

(6) poor drive (internal motivation from individual people); and

(7) poor engagement (of management and staff in strategic management – both in the planning process and during the strategy execution journey).

Strategy execution solutions

Solutions offered in literature either take the form of certain critical elements or factors that are required or an integrated system or model. Many of the sources stress the importance of combining or integrating these factors or elements, but only a few propose how this integration should take place in the form of an integrated system or model.

An example of the factor solution is provided by Bossidy and Charan (2002) who present various critical factors, components, or processes for successful execution. They explain that "the heart of execution lies in three core processes" (Bossidy and Charan, 2002), namely, people, strategy, and operations. The authors do not fully explain how an organization can successfully

implement these three core processes. It is the view of the author that this "factor view" does not contain enough detail to help managers implement it in their organizations.

Furthermore, the first significant model solution or management system for strategy execution was presented by Kaplan and Norton (2008). It consists of six sequential stages intended to help organizations capture what they call an "execution premium" – a measurable increase in value derived from successful strategy execution. These stages consist of 26 detailed sub-activities where they explain how organizations can execute their strategies. However, this system's view contains so many sub-steps that it can be overwhelming for managers to implement in their organizations. The author is therefore of the opinion that a system view is better to address the complexity of strategy execution, but that the components should be limited to the critical few with a clear application of the components and the system as a whole, i.e. a non-linear system.

Cruz (2013, pp. 2-4) summarizes the solution to successful strategy execution:

> Successful strategy execution depends on doing a good job of working with and through others; allocating resources; building and strengthening competitive capabilities; creating an appropriate organizational structure; instituting strategy-supportive policies, processes, and systems; motivating and rewarding people; and instilling a discipline of getting things done. Executing strategy is an action-oriented, make-things-happen task that tests a manager's ability to direct organizational change; achieve continuous improvement in operations and business processes, create and nurture a strategy-supportive culture, and consistently meet or beat performance targets. Although there is no single managerial "recipe" for successful strategy execution, a few frameworks may be used. There is unfortunately very limited literature on strategy execution. This seems to be a topic that has failed to attract the most prominent management gurus like Peter Drucker, Michael Porter, Henry Mintzberg, Gary Hamel or Collins and Porras.

It is evident that various attempts have been made over the last 13 years to find the solution for the strategy execution gap. From all the proposed solutions, there is consensus that the problem is big, complex, and dynamic. To make sense of all these proposed remedies and to be able to apply them in a practical way that is simple enough, but effective, the multitude of factors, elements, or keys are grouped into seven categories.

Before building a model by addressing these seven barriers mentioned, the public sector context was analyzed in terms of strategy execution.

Strategy execution in the public sector context
Most literature on strategy execution comes from the developed world and the private sector in which goods and services are produced with the prime purpose of making profit. The questions asked were what are the main differences between the public and private sector contexts? What are the implications of these differences in executing strategy in the public sector? If these implications are significant, how could these context differences be considered for strategy execution?

Significance of context in strategic management
In the same way that context determines the meaning of a sentence, it determines the meaning of a strategy. A good strategy is responsive to context. Strategy separated from context could be regarded as unrealistic or meaningless, as the purpose of strategy is to find the best way of responding to opportunities and threats appearing in its external environment or context, when considering and addressing internal strengths and weaknesses. Context could be defined as the environment, atmosphere, or conditions within which an organization operates and performs. The organization operates in relation to its context, i.e. the context influences the organization, and the organization, at the same time, influences its context.

The nature of the public sector

The public sector purpose or mandate is usually defined in legislation, setting out its role, responsibilities, and authority. In its most basic form, the purpose of the public sector is to serve the public. Their value proposition is to promote the social and economic well-being of all its citizens. A PSO, like any other organization, is seen as an open system, relating to its environment through numerous influences and stakeholders, including individuals, groups, and other organizations. Starling (2011) regards the PSO as generally operating within a system that is more open than that of the private sector. Niven (2003) reveals a 90 percent failure rate in strategy execution for PSOs, due to the unique internal and external challenges faced by governments. It therefore seems as if strategy execution in the public sector is more difficult than in the private sector.

Differences between public and private sectors

In total, 16 key differences were identified that apply to strategy execution. It should be noted that these 16 differences are not independent, but rather related to the others. Many sources argue that strategy formulation or planning is more prone to these different influences and that strategy execution is more technical in nature and less prone to be these influences. It is the view of the author that a 20-80 rule (based on the Pareto principle) could apply to strategy execution. There may only be 20 percent significant differences in context between the private and public sectors, but if these differences are not fully addressed, it could hold back (brake or break) 80 percent of strategy execution. Even if strategy execution is, say, 80 percent the same in public and private sectors, the 20 percent differences are regarded as significant. Differences in the 16 elements could be regarded as the critical few to be considered in strategy execution in the public sector. These differences are found in:

(1) purpose;

(2) governance;

(3) leadership;

(4) culture, values, and guiding principles;

(5) decision making;

(6) economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental influences;

(7) political influences;

(8) planning and execution cycle;

(9) funding and budgeting;

(10) stakeholders, complexity, and transparency;

(11) strategic objectives;

(12) structure and human resources;

(13) flexibility and change;

(14) project management;

(15) costs and productivity; and

(16) performance management.

It can therefore be concluded that context matters for strategy execution and that these differences should be considered to improve the chances for success in strategy execution in the public sector. These 16 differences could be regarded as the 20 percent portion

mentioned above. Considering the unique context of the public sector, it would be unwise to approach the strategy execution journey in the public sector in the same way as in the private sector. In addition, when understanding that the nature of the PSO differs between countries and between national, regional, and local governments, it is still deemed wise to consider the 16 possible differences for strategy execution. More than strategic planning, situational/contextual analysis should be applied for strategy execution, due to its much longer duration and complexity.

In general, the public sector demands a more cautious approach in the execution of its strategy, requiring more time for consultation, buy-in, and decision making. A simple, focused, and clearly defined strategy is of utmost importance. The larger number of stakeholders, the increased transparency, and increased complexity should all be noted. An understanding of the greater openness to environmental and stakeholder influences and the need to respond to these during strategy execution are important. The unique leadership characteristics in the public sector, including its shorter term, its power base, and its criteria for selection and success should be considered.

The increased number of oversight bodies complicate public sector management and often lead to a more cautious, slow, and incremental approach to making changes. An awareness of the level of corruption entrenched in the PSO is necessary. Strategy execution should be aligned with the fixed and complex government planning and the execution cycle. The political cycle should also be considered, and the knowledge that funding for strategic initiatives is mostly uncertain and often reduced.

An awareness of the "vertical" hierarchical gap between political policy planners and the administration responsible for execution is crucial. In addition, the "horizontal" chronological gaps between the terms of elected politicians that may cause the stop-and-go of strategy and projects should be expected. It may also lead to changing objectives. Care should be taken with the often overambitious and unrealistic objectives determined more on political than rational grounds and interpreted in different ways. Decision making is typically more complex within these governing structures and restrictive processes. Therefore, a more cautious and slow process involving the many stakeholders should be expected, considering different political and rational views.

The level of motivation that is critical for executing strategy should be determined. Low motivation in the public sector is often attributed to a lack of purpose, action plans, autonomy, mastery, appreciation, and achievement. As values and guiding principles determine culture that, in turn, determines behavior and eventually performance, the culture should be assessed and managed. A wider variety in cultures and general lower levels of motivation in the public sector should be expected. The level of performance management practised is also of critical importance. A lower level of performance management in government should also be expected. This will imply the absence of a culture and system to measure, evaluate, report, learn, and improve performance regularly, which is a critical component for successful strategy execution.

The PSO typically has a larger and more complex organizational structure spread out over many vertical hierarchical layers and geographic locations that makes communication, engagement, buy-in, and coordination very challenging. Strategy is also often not properly aligned with human, structural, physical, and other resources.

With the absence of or informal approach to project management, efficient and effective strategy execution is highly unlikely. With the large and complex projects, expect more frequent changes in scope, resulting in time and cost increases. Extensive outsourcing makes procurement and contract management more complicated.

The lack of strategic thinking, by the leadership, but also at lower levels where actual execution takes place in general in government, is a major obstacle for the strategy execution journey. If these key differences (or handicaps) are not considered, they will appear during execution in one way or another, as a "break" or "brake," as described earlier.

Although strategy execution may be 80 percent the same, the 20 percent differences in the public sector may cause strategy execution to become "stuck" and stay "stuck" for a long time.

Strategy execution in the public sector is more difficult due to its large number of moving parts that constantly need to be aligned, compared to the private sector. The above 16 differences are regarded as impacting strategy execution significantly. Therefore, it should be imperative to consider these differences formally before and during strategy execution in the public sector.

It is the view of the author that the approach to strategy execution in the public sector needs to be reviewed drastically. The private sector methodologies cannot simply be modified and applied to the public sector. Strategic planning, performance management, and project management systems should better reflect these differences. Rational, comprehensive models are inappropriate in the public sector. Mintzberg (quoted in Ring and Perry, 1985) suggests that "the conventional wisdom of strategy formulation that emphasizes the need to state goals precisely, assess strengths and weaknesses, and make strategy explicit may mislead organizations, such as those in the public sector, that face a confusing reality." This "confusing reality" refers to the complex, changing nature of the public.

Incremental and agile processes could perhaps manage these public sector constraints better, compared to processes that are rigidly planned. An incremental or emergent strategy could enable public organizations to be more responsive to the needs and demands of their constituents (Ring and Perry, 1985). Such an approach could be more effective, but less efficient, according to Ring and Perry (1985). Public sector managers should therefore use different processes and skill sets in strategic management.

Risks, whether originating from the macro environment, pressure groups, politicians, corruption, or self-enrichment from within a system and/or capacity constraints, should be managed in a professional and diligent manner. If risks are not managed (identified, analyzed, and responded to), any one or more of them could easily "break" or "brake" strategy execution.

These 16 differences should be used as a checklist to develop specific actions for the promotion of successful strategy execution in the specific public sector context.

Toward a new model
The challenge for public sector leadership is therefore not only to know the key variables in strategy execution, but to be aware of how each variable or element differs from that in the private sector locally and even the public sector in other countries. The suggestion would be to integrate these dynamically in the local context through an institutionalized strategy execution framework (including portfolio management, project management and performance management processes, and systems).

This is an area in which much more research is needed to close the gap between strategy planning and strategy execution in the public sector. Although this gap is one of the major global concerns and management issues today, the gap in the public sector seems to be even bigger and more complex. For the public sector, tools such as the balanced scorecard and portfolio/project management become even more important as vehicles for managing continuity, inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes over time.

The strategy execution model for the public sector therefore requires modifications when compared to the private sector model. Such a new model is presented in the next section. In the author's view, some previously presented models are overcomplicated and others oversimplified. However, it can be agreed that strategy execution processes and systems should be integrated and institutionalized. There could never be one solution that fits all circumstances, due to the many variables, but a conceptual model integrating the critical strategy execution elements and considering the key public sector differences can make a significant contribution to close the strategy execution gap in the public sector, particularly.

The MERIL-DE conceptual model

Synthesis from literature review reveals seven elements or components holding the key to close the strategy execution gap. These seven identified vital strategy execution components are leadership, strategic planning, project management, alignment, performance management (MERIL), drive, and engagement.

It was concluded that due to various unique characteristics found in the public sector context, a different approach is needed to successfully execute strategy in the public sector. It was found that the public sector generally presents more challenges in the execution of strategy. In addition to the seven components identified in the literature review, additional considerations are required, taking into account the differences in the 16 elements, to tailor strategy execution for the PSO. The identified seven vital strategy execution components (from reviewing mostly private sector sources) therefore had to be strengthened based on realities in the public sector context to make it robust. These two additional vital components for the public sector context are:

(1) risk management (risk identification, evaluation, and response based on regular situational/contextual analysis); and

(2) stakeholder management (of the numerous partners, sponsors, interest groups, etc. from the public and private sectors)

The final conceptual model as developed in 2014 integrates the nine vital strategy execution components to close the strategy execution gap. These nine vital components are integrated into the MERIL-DE model, as presented below in Figure 1 and described in the Table AI. This conceptual model represents the synthesis part of the research and is based on the analysis done on strategy execution in the public sector context.
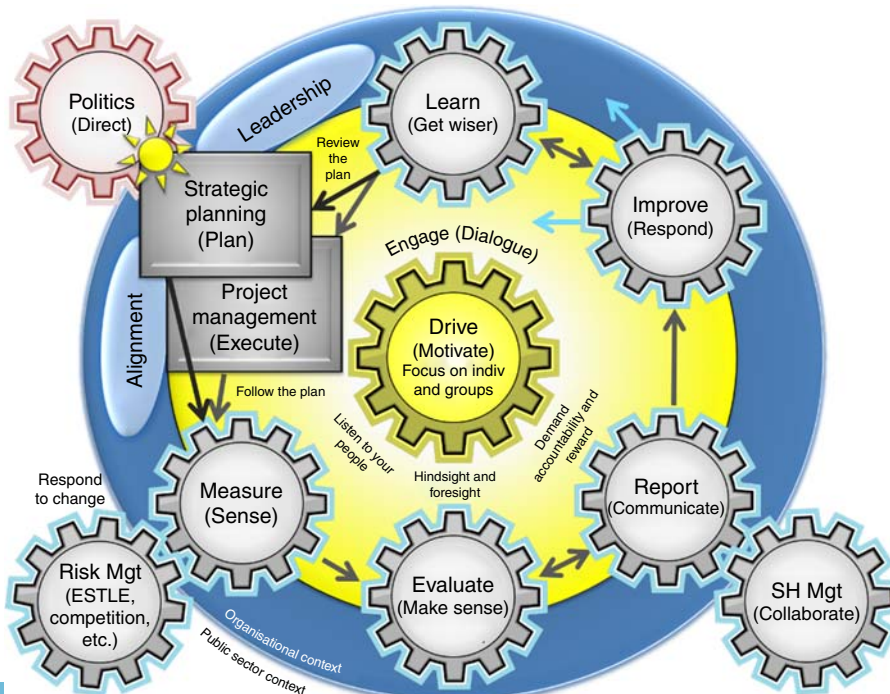

Figure 1.
MERIL-DE model

The model is referred to as the MERIL-DE model. The name of the model is derived from the acronym describing the performance management cycle of measure, evaluate, report, improve and learn – all through drive and engagement.

MERIL-DE is presented as the model to be used to close the strategy execution gap in the public sector. The model is depicted as one engine with connected gears. This whole Stratex Engine needs to be built and made operational for every PSO that wishes to improve the implementation of its strategy. Apart from the connected gears there are the two boxes called "strategic planning" and "project management." These two boxes represent the conventional "plan-and-execute" process, the more stable process repeated every five years and amended annually. In contrast, the gears represent the more dynamic "sense-and-respond" process, also often referred to as the agile process. The blue background represents the organizational context, surrounded by the (external) public sector context. This boundary between internal and external context, however, is fairly porous and blurred. Embedded in this blue organizational context are two relatively stable components, namely, leadership and alignment (of strategy to structure, culture, processes, technology, and other organizational elements). In contrast to the more permanent and stable executive leadership are the more changing or dynamic political leadership and influences, as depicted in the red gear. The reason for this red color is to make a distinction from the vital components that can be managed. The political gear positioned at the top can at any time (moderately or substantially) change the strategic direction. The sun represents the organizational vision, aligned with the national and political vision, directing movement of the Stratex Car (vehicle analogy for moving the organization to its preferred strategic position). The source of energy comes from inside, i.e. from drive. This represents the mostly internal motivation of individuals and groups. Around drive, linked to the other components, is the yellow area of engagement. This area of lubrication allows the gears to move smoothly in an integrative way. Chronologically, the MERIL-DE model story could be told as follows:

A good strategic plan is developed based on thorough situational analysis (external and internal analysis), including the political direction and priorities at that time. SMART objectives are identified with related initiatives by using tools such as strategy maps and scorecards. The corporate strategy is cascaded to units with clear accountabilities and responsibilities for groups and individuals. The strategic initiatives are then converted to detailed project plans that are properly executed, controlled, and closed, managing all ten knowledge areas described in the PMBOK (PMI, 2013), namely, project scope, time, cost, quality, human resources, communication, risk, procurement, stakeholder, and integration management. The gears start turning during execution, when the strategic plan is executed by means of projects. Many of these projects are outsourced and require proper procurement and contract management. Measure represents the sensing mechanism, sensing compliance to the plan – both strategic and project plans, the views of the people, benchmarks, changes, and risks in the environment. Data are captured with technological support. Thereafter, the data are evaluated (through analysis and synthesis) by means of dialog and technology to make sense of and give meaning to the data. This is normally followed by informal and formal reporting for transparency and communication purposes. Reporting, in turn, can precede evaluation. Based on reported information and knowledge, it is shared with both internal and external stakeholders – internal stakeholders to demand accountability and rewarding good performance and external stakeholders – to maintain and improve collaboration. This reporting is done according to the communication and stakeholder management plan and often serves as a trigger for releasing more funds. This is followed by making the improvements and learning from these improvements to get "wiser," the term used by Senge (1990) and others in the learning. Based on these learnings – from both successes and failures – the strategic plan and related project plans are adjusted or improved. Improvements could include any or more of the organizational development

elements with focus on organizational, unit, and/or individual levels. Learning and knowledge are institutionalized to make the organization all the wiser. All this is fueled by "drive" and lubricated by "engage." Drive provides the energy setting and keeps the Stratex Engine in motion through engagement (continually engaging the minds and hearts of employees) providing the connection and ensuring that the engine runs smoothly as a whole. While this motivational energy driving the engine comes from the inside (individual and group motivation), it has to be sustained by means of engagement, feedback, rewards, learning, and development.

The "plan-and-execute" mechanism is complemented by a "sense-and-respond" mechanism. The performance management cycle is the continual alignment of organizational, unit, and individual performance toward achieving agreed-upon objectives. It facilitates continuous improvement of organizational, unit, and individual performance and ensures high levels of drive (in terms of motivation, the engine, or energy) through engagement, dialog, or interaction. MERIL-DE provides the sense-and-response capability during execution of strategy and projects. Performance indicators for both objectives and initiatives are measured against targets and compared to benchmarks. Risks are identified, analyzed, and responded to on an ongoing basis. By understanding progress (or the lack of progress) through proper evaluation, the organization is able to respond appropriately and learn from its successes and failures through ongoing dialog. During dialog, there is the need to sense, measure, take note, or listen to the actual performance compared to planned performance, to listen to the risks, to listen to the people, and through evaluation to develop a solid hindsight as well as foresight (Garbers-Strauss and Roodt, 2001). Performance reporting (or feedback) is done regularly to inform both internal and external stakeholders. Appropriate rewards and corrective measures can be implemented based on verifiable performance reports. This performance management process should be standardized and institutionalized as a regular and closed-loop system. Technology can support this process.

Further details of these nine vital stratex components are presented in the Appendix.

The Stratex Car
The application of the MERIL-DE conceptual model is demonstrated in this section by using the car analogy. For successful strategy execution, a complete, roadworthy, (fuel-) efficient, and reliable "vehicle" is required. The "Stratex Car" should be designed and built to take the PSO on the strategy execution journey.

The lights are showing the direction and the road ahead (the vision). The driver controlling the car is normally the owner, sponsor, or champion of the trip (leadership). The road map is offering guidance of where to go and the best route to take (the strategic plan). The engine and fuel provide the energy and power to drive the vehicle forward (drive – mostly internal motivation of individuals collaborating in teams through dialog, making the journey a sustainable one, without regular motivation through external rewards). Gears with oil/lubrication allow all moving parts to be engaged and to run smoothly (engagement through dialog that is more than just loose/informal communication, but communication engaging the hearts and minds of everyone in the organization). The chassis and body are the frame or structure of the car, proving supporting strength (the aligned organizational design, including people, processes, and technology, supporting the strategy and project management). The wheels are where the vehicle touches the ground, where the action is, where strategy occurs through clear actions, projects, and programs (project management). The dashboard enables everyone to sense/know what is happening and to make sense of it, as it enables measurement and evaluation through dialog with everyone in the car and reporting/sharing facilitating good decision making and agreed-upon improvements to be implemented with learning taking place – from successes and failures, informing adjustments to the journey, the car, and the passengers, as required (the PMS).

The maintenance plan allows for regular inspections – both reactive repairs and proactive maintenance. This, however, requires regular stops. The bumpers and airbags provide the safety features to make the journey safer, enhancing the chances to reach the desired destination in one piece and on time (risk management). Modifications to the vehicle are made to travel on the more rugged terrain of the public sector road (gravel and sand with steep slopes) under more severe and changing weather conditions, making the vehicle stronger, more robust, and better equipped with the best outdoor gear, including 4×4 and differential lock capability and high-lift jacks (also risk management). Finally, regular communication by means of cell phone or radio is needed to inform family and friends of progress on the journey and expected time of arrival (stakeholder management).

This car must be robust, durable, sustainable, economical, user-friendly, green, fast, powerful, and intimidating to others. Is this the car as depicted in Figure 2.

A more detailed description of the nine vital stratex components is presented in Table AI. Each of these nine components is described in terms of its role in the car analogy, its position and function in the MERIL-DE model, and a brief description and elements contributing to the establishment of each component.

Quantitative analysis

Quantitative research had a limited complementary role in the PAR qualitative research. Quantitative analysis was only used in questionnaires where responses to statements were expressed in terms of numbers. A questionnaire was developed and used during initial case studies to help with model assessment and improvement and to assess strengths and weaknesses of the model components at organizations. Responses to
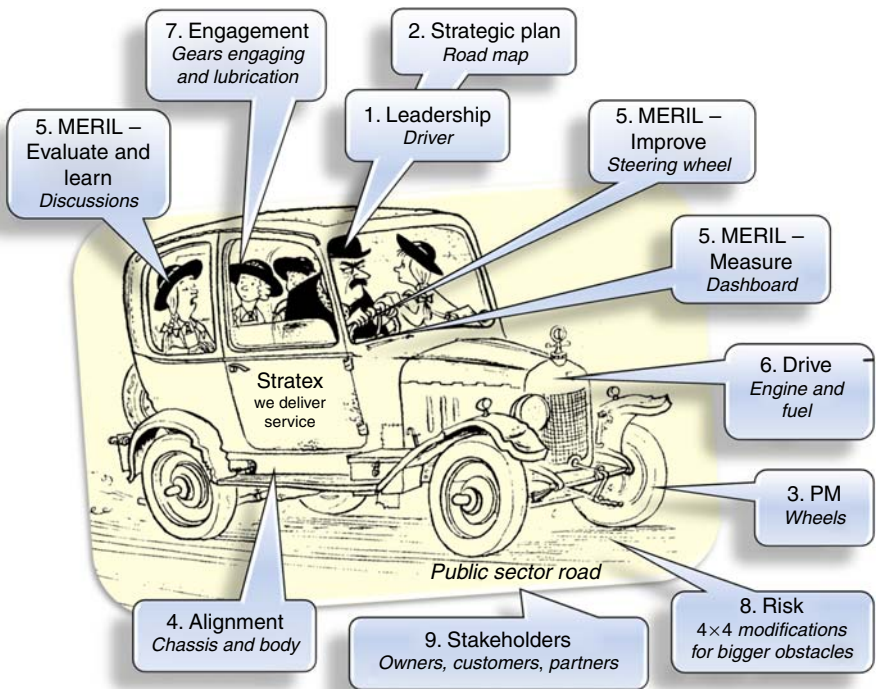
Figure 2.
The "Stratex Car" driving on the public sector road

statements in the questionnaire were converted into numbers to allow for quantitative analysis. After the development of the final MERIL-DE model, the questionnaire was adapted to the Stratex Assessment Framework (SAF). The SAF is therefore aligned to the final MERIL-DE model with its nine vital components. Each of the nine components with subcomponents/elements contains a number of statements serving as assessment criteria. The average number of criteria per component is ten. Each statement is rated between 0 and 10. A higher rating indicates better capacity.

Note: this SAF instrument to calculate total strategy execution capacity (TSEC) for a PSO is a topic for future research.

Figure 3 presents an example of how the TSEC for a specific PSO could be calculated. In this example, each of the components (column 1) are weighted equally $(1/13 = 0.077)$. These weightings are shown in the second column. In the third column, the average ratings from the SAF are inserted. Tentative ratings between 0 and 10 are given for demonstration purposes. In the last column, these weightings and ratings are multiplied to

| Component	Weight (W)	Rating (R)		Score ($S = W \times R$)
1. Leadership	0.077		6.0	4.62
2. Strategic planning	0.077		7.5	5.77
3. Project management	0.077		3.0	2.31
4. Alignment	0.077		5.5	4.23
5.1 Measure	0.077		7.5	5.77
5.2 Evaluate	0.077		3.5	2.69
5.3 Report	0.077		6.0	4.62
5.4 Improve	0.077		4.5	3.46
5.5 Learn	0.077		3.5	2.69
6. Drive	0.077		3.0	2.31
7. Engage	0.077		5.0	3.85
8. Risk management	0.077		4.5	3.46
9. Stakeholder management	0.077		6.0	4.62
	1.000			
Total score (TSEC)				50.4
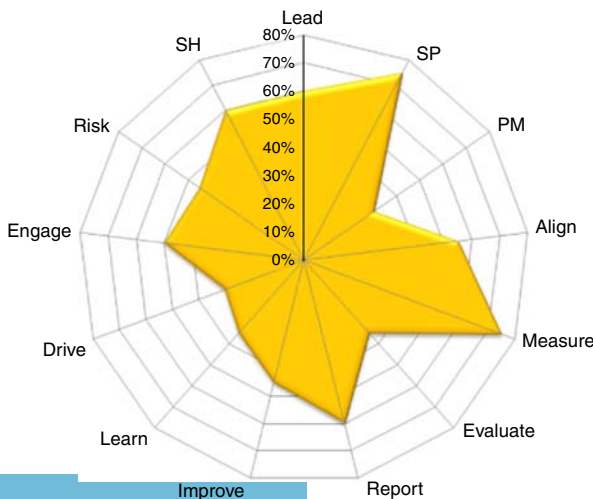
Figure 3.
TSEC example with component scores presented in table and radar diagram format

calculate a score for each of the 13 components and subcomponents. These component scores are illustrated in the graph in terms of percentages. A higher score indicated a better or stronger capacity. A color code was used to highlight strengths and weaknesses. In this example, the indicators were set as follows: green for ratings of 66 percent and higher; orange for ratings between 50 and 66 percent; red for ratings between 33 and 50 percent; and black for ratings below 33 percent. The target would be to achieve, for example, a rating of 66 percent (green) on each component. The total score in the last column gives the TSEC. In this example, the TSEC is 50.4 percent, which is indicated as orange according to the above key.

Figure 3 could be interpreted as follows: This TSEC score indicates the organization has a 50.4 percent chance of successfully executing its strategy. The strategy execution gap is therefore 49.6 percent (100−50.4 percent). The reason for this low capacity could be seen in the graph. While certain vital components are strong in the organization (e.g. the strategic plan and measure), project management and drive, in particular, are extremely weak (below 33 percent strength). The red bars, namely, evaluate, improve, learn, and risk, are the other weak components with capacity strengths below 50 percent. As the weak links in the chain could easily cause a total collapse, it would therefore be advised to focus effort on the strengthening of project management and drive in the organization. Regular assessments (at least annually) could be done for TSEC calculations to determine trends.

In future research, the SAF could be used in surveys to determine the strategy execution gap of individual PSOs as well as the public sector in general. Through research, the criteria and weights can be refined and adapted for different contexts.

Model applications, limitations, and benefits
In the use of the MERIL-DE model, key applications, limitations, and expected benefits are presented. First, the nature and the verification of MERIL-DE as conceptual model are addressed.

Conceptual model development and verification
Conceptual modeling helps humans to think and solve problems. The MERIL-DE conceptual model was formed after a conceptualization process in the mind that was based on observations and experience. The model is a representation and simplification of the real world, consists of the composition of concepts, and is used to help understand the subject matter of strategy execution. It therefore serves as guide or stimulus for thinking and applying knowledge in the PSO. The MERIL-DE model can be regarded as a theory supported by a conceptual model. It consists of propositions such as strategic management, project management, and performance management, each with its various interlinked concepts. These MERIL-DE components could also be regarded as models on their own, for example, strategic management with its balanced scorecard model (Kaplan and Norton, 2001) and project management with its project management model (of five process groups and ten knowledge areas) (PMI, 2013).

The MERIL-DE model is not a presentation of a step-by-step process. Although it depicts a general sequence of events in a cyclical fashion, it rather presents the pieces of a puzzle or essential building blocks for executing strategy in a specific context, namely, the public sector. It is an integrated system representing a part of the real world. This integrated system includes nine key components or independent variables for improving strategy execution in the public sector, i.e. in the real world. The dependent variable is successful strategy execution or closing the strategy execution gap. Arrows are inserted between the variables to represent the hypothesized relationships between variables. MERIL-DE contains both one-way arrows and two-headed arrows. The one-way arrows depict a general

sequence from one independent variable to the next independent variable. The two-headed arrows show unanalyzed correlations between variables (Creswell, 1994).

The need for the MERIL-DE model was born at the empirical level where the reality of poor strategy execution in the public sector was observed or experienced. At the same time, the process of literature review was started on the abstract level to identify key concepts, propositions, and theories related to strategy execution. Initial models were developed, tested/verified, and improved by means of empirical studies (PAR).

The MERIL-DE model as conceptual model can be applied as a visual presentation of an organizational system to improve business performance. According to Ostenwalder, Pigneur and Tucci (2005), a conceptual business model cannot be successful *per se*. Its success or value is found during implementation. This conceptual model, based on the sound theory, has been verified and improved during empirical tests in PAR cycles. It should be noted that the purpose of these empirical tests were to verify and improve the MERIL-DE conceptual model and not to practically implement the model as a whole.

Further research is therefore required in the application of the MERIL-DE model, in the practical design and putting the vital components in place in an integrative manner and then measuring success in terms of improved strategy execution, closing the strategy execution gap. This will involve putting in place and integrating structures, systems, methodologies, staff, and skills described in this model and monitoring both their individual performances and combined performance. The value of the MERIL-DE model will be in its implementation. Although it remains a conceptual model, its origin was in reality (a broken reality) and its application should go back to reality (for a less broken reality – where strategies are more successfully executed where the gap between strategic planning and execution is increasingly being reduced). In this translation from conceptual into concrete things, it should be remembered that organizations are complex and dynamic, always subjects to internal and external pressures, always subject to change. The MERIL-DE manifestation in the real world (e.g. staff, structure, and systems) should therefore also be subject to regular change.

Different public sector contexts
Although the model can be applied in all public sector contexts, a unique MERIL-DE model (or Stratex Car) has to be designed for each situation or each PSO by considering the differences in the public sector context. As the context determines strategy, context similarly determines strategy execution.

Preparations before execution and improvements during execution
The MERIL-DE model should be well understood to enable each PSO to design and build its own tailored MERIL-DE model or Stratex Car. This will require dedicated effort and time. The time required will vary from PSO to PSO. The earlier the process starts during strategic planning, the better. As with any journey about to be undertaken, preparations have to be made. The preparations include getting the vehicle and all its passengers prepared. It should also be noted that further building and improvements will have to be made during the strategy execution journey. This car-and-journey analogy is herewith further explained.

Getting the people prepared means leadership informs employees of the journey and its importance in getting them together, equipping them, and getting them excited. Time is required to prepare for the trip. This may include training, attaining the equipment, and acquiring the funds. These actions represent the "drive," "engagement," and "alignment" components of MERIL-DE, the people side of the model or vehicle.

Getting the vehicle prepared means building an aligned and supporting vehicle structure (system, processes, and technology), aligned to the engine (people processes). The vehicle

needs to be tailor-made for the unique road conditions (public sector context). Appropriate project management, performance management, and risk management systems should be built into the vehicle. Time is also required for these preparations.

The question is whether the Stratex Car should be completely built before undertaking the journey or whether it is possible to start the journey immediately, but to move slowly while at the same time getting the right people on board and assembling the vehicle. Can or should the car depart without all the right people on board and if the bus not yet roadworthy or properly modified, or equipped for the specific journey? Can many gears, hanging loosely in or around the car, each functioning or not, but not linked, move a car? This is also a common question in strategic planning. All of these concerns can be summarized in the following example question: "Should we wait for developing the perfect strategic plan or get the 70 percent perfect plan approved to start implementation and at the same time see where we can improve it?" The general answer is that the Stratex Car or MERIL-DE model should be in place and put together before attempting the strategy journey. Minor modifications and additions can be made during the journey. Important is to move at a pace in accordance with institutional capacity. If the car is not yet fully functional, go slowly. This has the implication that strategy execution in general will start slowly and accelerate over time.

Model limitations
MERIL-DE is a conceptual model and, by nature, makes use of simplifications and generalizations in the management discipline of strategy execution and within the public sector context. Although the nine vital components are presented in an integrated fashion, using the car or engine analogy, it remains a conceptual model to be used as guide in the tailoring of a unique MERIL-DE model or Stratex Car for each PSO. Although all nine components should be built into any PSO Stratex Car, no tailored model could be copied and used for another PSO. Due to the various differences in the organizational and environmental contexts, a unique Stratex Car has to be designed, built, tested, and improved for each PSO.

Benefits for using the MERIL-DE model
The MERIL-DE model identifies and explains the vital components for strategy execution as well as their integration in the public sector. With the addition of the SAF and TSEC, the MERIL-DE model can be used as checklist and tool to assess strategy execution capacity or strength. Specific expected benefits with the implementation of the MERIL-DE model include:

- making the PSO a strategy-driven and high performance institution;
- providing a framework for systematic integrated strategy planning and execution;
- dynamically aligning projects with strategic objectives;
- helping to align the organization to its strategy and develop and institutionalize the discipline of regular performance management;
- promoting learning from performance;
- promoting employee motivation through dialog and participation in performance management; and
- calculating the capacity or strength of each of the nine vital strategy execution components as well as the overall strength or capacity, determining the readiness or capacity of a PSO for strategy execution, indicating strengths and weaknesses in its ability to successfully execute strategy.

The MERIL-DE model can never guarantee success, but at least it will maximize the chances of success (achieving the PSO objectives and arriving at the desired destination) within the strategy limitations and resource restrictions.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented here are targeted on a practical solution to closing the strategy execution gap by using the MERIL-DE model. These recommendations are presented by using the car-and-journey analogy. The car represents the tailored vehicle built for the PSO from the nine vital strategy execution components in MERIL-DE and the journey representing the progress being made by moving from the current position to the preferred position as detailed in the strategic plan. In turn, the road and environmental conditions represent the public sector. The recommendations are addressed to the PSOs as well as academics and consultants involved in promoting the successful execution of strategy.

(1) Develop a policy and procedures: to institutionalize strategy execution in the public sector, each PSO needs to develop and adopt a policy and procedures based on the MERIL-DE model. This will involve the development and integration of related policies and procedures, such as strategic management, performance management, stakeholder management, risk management, and project management.

(2) Improve strategic planning: to integrate strategy planning and execution, consider the MERIL-DE model during strategic planning. Change the thinking of leaders not to see the strategic plan as an achievement, but only as a means for achievement. Ensure the strategic plan is focused, balanced, integrated, detailed, and realistic with clear accountabilities and responsibilities. This is the road map for the journey, explaining where to go and which route to take.

(3) Prepare for the journey – build the Stratex Car: on the one hand, do not wait for a perfect strategic plan before executing a strategy because there is no perfect plan. On the other hand, do not think that the PSO can simply start executing the strategic plan the day after its approval. There are preparations to be made, as with any journey, especially a five-year journey, i.e. one on which the whole organization is embarking. A balance should be reached between taking time to build the perfect Stratex Car and to get going with the initial design and then improving it on the way. The car design should perhaps already start during strategic planning.

(4) Go, but service the Stratex Car regularly: the journey has to start, even with the initial design, without delaying for too long, but with consideration of all nine vital components. The PSO should take a formal decision when to start executing the strategy (to start the journey). Assess the strengths of each component by making use of the SAF and calculating the TSEC. Identify strengths and weaknesses in TSEC and take corrective actions. Assess the trend in capacity improvement over time. Test the Stratex Car through regular servicing. Make upgrades and do repairs and maintenance during the journey.

(5) Conduct formal research on the Stratex Car: it is recommended that research be conducted in the application of the MERIL-DE model on the public sector, specifically: to determine how the Stratex Car design could be improved for the unique public sector road and environmental conditions; to determine the relative importance or weightings to apply to the MERIL-DE components and subcomponents in the SAF and TSEC calculations for different organizations, different situations, and different countries; to determine how the SAF criteria

per component could be improved for the measuring or quantification of component strength; and to investigate the relations or dependencies between the MERIL-DE components or variables. Explore, for example, the following:

- Can a PSO claim its leadership is strong if other components are weak, for example, project management, alignment, drive, and engagement, by using the SAF?
- To what extent do the weaker organizational units influence strategy execution?
- Is the organizational strategy execution as strong as the weakest component/link or as strong as the average as calculated in TSEC?
- Can the gap widen again after it had been closed? How?
- What are the costs and benefits in monetary value to close the gap? How could TSEC be related to monetary value?

Closing remarks

In conclusion, strategy execution is extremely critical, but there is a big gap. The MERIL-DE model is presented as a benchmark for applying strategy execution successfully in the public sector. However, in order to succeed, the model and its underlying management disciplines have to be understood to apply it properly in a PSO. As conceptual model, it serves as a guide to design and build the tailored Stratex Car for each PSO by considering the unique conditions of the public sector. Through the wide implementation of the recommendations presented, the author would like to see a significant improvement in the delivery of strategic promises in the public sector, and not only in Southern Africa, but also worldwide.

Glossary

MERIL-DE	Measure, evaluate, report, improve and learn – all through drive and engagement
PAR	Participatory action research
PM	Project management
PMS	Performance management system
PSO	Public sector organization
SAF	Stratex assessment framework
SMART	Specific, Measureable, Agreed to, Realistic & Time-bound
Stratex	Strategy execution
TSEC	Total strategy execution capacity

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Appendix

Vital component	Role in car analogy	Position in MERIL-DE model	Description	Elements
1. Leadership	Driver	At the top left – with vision and strategic planning, due to its important role	The most important component; fully committed leaders are required for strategy execution, daily leading from the front and top-down. Leaders who can take their organizations on a successful journey characterized by purpose, direction, resources, progress, and cohesion	Eight leadership levers for strategy execution (author): envision – for direction; educate – for clarity (head); energize – for commitment (heart); employ energy – through planning; empower – through people, processes and technology (PPT) capacity; engage – through participation; execute – with integrity; and ensure – through controls
2. Strategic planning	Road map	At the top, crafted by leadership, considering political direction	A good strategic plan obviously lays the foundation for good strategy execution, including cascading to unit scorecards and performance agreements. A poor strategic plan will lead to poor execution	Characteristics of good strategic plans include: focus; balance; integration; understood and accepted; SMART; clear and single accountability for objectives; and detailed initiatives with clear initiative descriptions, responsibilities, timelines, and cost estimates
3. Project management	Wheels	The "execute" in the "plan-and-execute" mechanism linked to strategic planning	Strategy is executed through projects. Project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements and strategic objectives; together with strategic planning, project management forms the "plan-and-execute" mechanism	Five Process groups and ten knowledge areas (PMI, 2013); projects are initiated, planned, executed, monitored and controlled, and finally closed out; include the ten knowledge areas which are scope, time, cost and quality, human resources, communications, risk, procurement, and stakeholder management; everything is combined through integration management through which the project plan is being developed, executed, and controlled
4. Alignment	Chassis and body	Alignment is positioned in the blue part, representing the organizational context	Strategy can only succeed if the organization is aligned around the strategy and the resources are appropriately allocated; supporting and aligned organizational resources have to be put in place, including the organizational structure, people, culture, processes, technology, and funding	Structure: in terms of coordination, communication, and decision making; people: staff and skills (internally or outsourced) must be available and allocated for executing strategy; culture: describing relations amongst the identity/heart, thinking, attitude, behavior and outcomes – linking culture to strategic outcomes; processes: aligned to the strategy, for example,

(*continued*)

Table AI.
Description of the nine
vital components

Vital component	Role in car analogy	Position in MERIL-DE model	Description	Elements
				performance management and project management processes; technology: can be a strong enabler for strategy execution. However, if not well aligned, it could also be an obstacle. It could, for example, support performance management; however, it is important to link technology with processes and people, according to the sequence of PPT; funding; aligned budgeting and funding systems; without sufficient funds at the right times, strategy cannot be implemented; initiatives have to be clearly prioritized and allocated to specific financial years
5. MERIL (performance management)	Dashboard; discussions; steering wheel	Forming the five MERIL gears in the center of the model; these gears are interrelated in a general sequence	An institutionalized regular cycle of performance management is required to offer the complementary "sense-and-response" capability. The author proposes the following five key components of the performance management system or cycle, namely, MERIL (measure, evaluate, report, improve and learn)	MERIL (Author): Measure: the lens through which people "see" or "sense" what is happening with their organization and its environment, creating the basis for effective management; performance measurement done internally (for objectives and initiatives) as well as externally (for determining environmental risks, stakeholder influences and best practices by competition) Evaluate: follows measure and includes analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of performance data to generate information, i.e. to interpret and make sense of the information to enable proper decision making and to decide on the best response; mostly done through dialog and making use of supporting technology Report: the documentation and communication of evidence-based performance as analyzed, synthesized, and

(continued)

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				interpreted as well as the decisions taken and details of actions to be taken; providing an audit trail of performance results, decisions, improvement actions, and results; a valuable source for learning; typically based on the communication management plan; reporting on corporate, unit, or individual levels for internal and external stakeholders Improve: the focus of strategy execution and performance management in response to issues and opportunities identified and evaluated; corrective/improvement measures could be any or more of the various organizational development interventions and could be targeted to enhance corporate, unit, and/or individual performance; change could be gradual, incremental, or transformational Learn: improvement and learning go together, making organizations adaptive rational systems that learn from experience, from understanding performance (successes and failures) and their relations to behavior, attitudes, thinking, and dialog, with the support of a knowledge management system
6. Drive	Engine and fuel	At the center of the model, as motivation lies at the center of a person, representing the driving force behind the model, the energy that keeps all gears moving and the wheels moving forward in the direction set by leadership in the strategic plan	Personal/internal, social, and structural influences (including monetary rewards) that motivate/strengthen/reinforce the right behavior and correct the wrong behavior (with the focus on groups and not individuals); reward system not only appropriately responding to good performance, but also taking action for poor performance	Drive comes from the following six PAAMAA elements or drivers (author): Purpose: I have a clear understanding of the strategy – its priorities, and objectives and I want to achieve these objectives, as they are worthwhile. By achieving these, I will benefit personally Action plan: the action steps and action plans are clear to me. I know what I have to do every day to achieve these strategic

(*continued*)

Table AI.

Vital component	Role in car analogy	Position in MERIL-DE model	Description	Elements
				objectives. We have detailed action plans/ project plans enabling us to do our work properly Autonomy – authority – accountability: I am satisfied with my levels of autonomy and related authority and accountability, and these are in balance. I feel sufficient freedom to do my work the way I believe is the best way, i.e. how to do it, when to do it, and where to do it Mastery: I experience that I regularly master or learn new skills at work and that I am really growing as a person Acknowledgment: I receive regular acknowledgment, recognition, and appreciation for my contributions. I feel I am accepted in my organization Achievement: I feel that we are a winning team. I can see the progress we are making and we regularly celebrate our achievements
7. Engage	Gears engaging, with lubricants	In the center of the MERIL-DE model around "drive," engaging all the surrounding vital components or gears	"Engage" is one of the eight leadership levers and important leadership function; successful strategy execution is impossible without engaging stakeholders, especially employees and project team members; without engaging the "gears," there cannot be any movement. Gears require lubrication (oil) to keep on moving for long periods; the best way to engage stakeholders is through dialog	Dialog: the core of culture and the basic unit of work; how people talk to each other absolutely determines how well the organization will function; a special kind of communication in an organization, based on trust, respect, teamwork, openness, sincerity, a willingness to share and learn, and accountability; requiring, however, time, effort, and commitment
8. Risk management	4 × 4 ability: the nature of the public sector road with more obstacles and uncertainties,	Mostly outside the organization, but also covers internal uncertainties linked to "measure" to integrate risk management with the MERIL cycle	Causes of risks could be political cycles or changes, economic or social changes, stakeholder influences, or even internal to the organization, such as inadequate resources and poor alignment of the strategy to the rest	Risk management plan: risk management includes risk identification, qualitative and quantitative risk analysis, risk response planning, and risk control. Responses to negative risk can be to avoid/prevent,

(continued)

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Vital component	Role in car analogy	Position in MERIL-DE model	Description	Elements
	requiring higher ground clearance, special bumpers and airbags, slower speeds, and more regular stops for inspections		of the organization. Due to the complex, dynamic, and uncertain nature of the public sector context, a formal risk management system is required to identify, analyze, and respond to risks regularly. In risk management, efforts are made to make strategy execution more "bulletproof" to prevent failure and maximize the chances for success. Risk management aims to prevent or minimize any attacks, distractions, derailings, or breakdowns on the strategy execution journey	mitigate, transfer, or accept the risk. Possible responses to positive risk are to exploit, enhance, share, or accept the risk (PMI, 2013)
9. Stakeholder management	People having a stake in the car and the journey include the public/citizens (who actually own the car), sponsors, customers, and partners	External and internal stakeholders; directly linking with "report" to integrate stakeholder management and collaboration with the MERIL cycle, with a two-directional influence between stakeholder management and reporting	The public sector is more open, more visible, and more influenced by stakeholders, such as the public, customers, special interest groups, politicians, oversight or regulatory bodies, partners, and employees. Stakeholder management includes the management of influences to and from stakeholders. A critical aspect is private sector collaboration, often through procurement/contract management. Stakeholder management is done according to the communication management plan in "report," but takes it further in pro-active and reactive management of relations toward successful strategy execution	Stakeholder management plan Communication management plan

Table AI.

About the authors

Anton Jacobus Olivier, the CEO of Stratex Consulting, has 30 years of consulting experience in management and engineering gained in eight countries in Africa and the South Pacific. Specializing in strategy planning, strategy execution, and project management, he has facilitated the development of more than 35 strategic plans and trained more than 1,200 people in Project Management. Focusing on the public sector (on all levels), state-owned enterprises, and NGOs, he has gained experience in various disciplines, such as institutional development, water and sanitation, electricity, road safety, civil registration, and vital statistics. Anton holds the following qualifications and certifications: PhD in Public Leadership & Strategy Execution; Research topic: "Closing the strategy execution gap in the public sector – a conceptual model," School of Public Leadership, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa; Project Management Professional (PMP), Project Management Institute (PMI), USA; Master of Management (MMGT), University of Southern Queensland, Australia; Master in Business Leadership (MBL), University of South Africa; B Eng (Hons: Water Resources Engineering), University of Pretoria, South Africa; B Eng (Civil), University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. His passion is to promote successful strategy execution in the public sector for the creation of real value and service to the public and society at large. Anton Jacobus Olivier is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: anton@stratexconsult.com

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