



# Implementing strategic initiatives: a framework of leading practices

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Recent operations management research suggests that adopting and implementing the right practices are essential to attaining “world-class” performance. The purpose of this paper is to report the leading operations management practices and the strategy deployment framework that emerged from a qualitative study that addressed the question of how managers implement strategy in an organisational excellence environment.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Group work with managers responsible for implementing strategic initiatives was followed by case studies of seven organisations via in-depth semi-structured interviews. A survey questionnaire strengthened the validity of the constructs of strategy deployment that were identified in the case analyses.

**Findings** – In total, seven strategy deployment constructs were identified and linkages between them are described. The 50 leading deployment practices indicate a mix of hard and soft management skills applied across the seven constructs.

**Practical implications** – The leading deployment practices have the potential to raise the performance of organisations by improving the implementation of strategic initiatives. The framework is relevant to the deployment of both corporate and business unit strategy such as manufacturing or operations, and should be of interest to managers in these areas.

**Originality/value** – Researchers have noted for more than a decade that no generally accepted framework of operations management practices has emerged for strategy implementation. Most strategy studies have focused on strategy formulation, content, or on project/programme management. There have been few multiple case studies of leading strategy deployment practices in diverse organisations from both private and public sectors.

**Keywords** Operations management, Corporate strategy, Quality management, Performance management, Business excellence

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

All organisations face a common challenge when implementing a new strategic initiative: how to successfully manage the changes that will occur as the new initiative is deployed. Some researchers note that organisations fail to implement up to 70 per cent of their strategic initiatives (Beer and Nohria, 2000; Miller, 2002). Pilkington and Fitzgerald (2006) note that two central themes of operations management concern the



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case study method and best practices in relation to strategy and context. A key operations and production management question here is: how do managers implement strategic initiatives in an organisational excellence environment? We address this question using data from seven case studies and a survey that investigated the processes and practices used by organisations when implementing a strategic initiative. Management practices that were most effective at assisting implementation are identified.

From a strategic management and an operations management perspective, research suggests that adopting and implementing the right practices is essential to attaining “world-class” performance (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Laugen *et al.*, 2005). The organisations studied were all committed to “organisational excellence”. For the purpose of the research this meant that these organisations used a recognised business excellence model with which they assessed and improved their performance. The authors considered that studying these organisations gave a greater likelihood of identifying leading practices in strategy deployment and, in addition, the research would be of particular relevance to organisations that follow a business excellence approach.

While research into operations strategy and strategic manufacturing initiatives has investigated leading practices in determining strategic content, it is only recently that processes for implementing strategy have begun to be examined (Brown and Blackmon, 2005; Ketokivi and Schroeder, 2004; Minarro-Viseras *et al.*, 2005). Strategy implementation has been studied from a single management perspective such as project management (Bryson and Bromiley, 1993; Minarro-Viseras *et al.*, 2005), or as a component of performance management or strategic control (Chenhall, 2003; Langfield-Smith, 1997). Such studies have focussed on single projects or initiatives, but practitioners typically work in a dynamic and complex environment where there are multiple initiatives being implemented (Dawson, 2003; Pettigrew *et al.*, 2003).

This study focussed on the implementation of strategic initiatives, not projects. The distinction was made as follows. Strategic initiatives are strategy focussed and often emerge and evolve over time, while projects have a task-oriented view and are time-bound (Bryde, 2003). A strategic initiative signals important changes in an organisation, affecting its long-term direction and the scope of its activities. Operations are affected as the strategic initiative is deployed, changing day-to-day routines. In contrast, a project is a unique one-off activity with a specific, clearly stated outcome, and has well defined boundaries including a specific start and finish date (Grundy, 1998; Herroelen, 2005). Projects are usually short duration, and implementation tends to be routine, using existing structures (Moncrieff, 1999).

Strategy deployment was therefore distinguished from project management in the study, with the identification of potential projects and their selection found to flow from decisions made during strategy deployment, while the execution of the projects was the province of project or programme management, where projects with shared strategic intent are managed together. Unlike strategy deployment, studies and frameworks of project and programme management are well documented in the operations and quality management literature (Bryde, 2003; Koners and Goffin, 2007; Lycett *et al.*, 2004; Minarro-Viseras *et al.*, 2005; Zwikael and Globerson, 2004).

Our study examined how strategic initiatives were deployed in organisations that were using the Baldrige criteria for performance excellence (CPE) model to improve their performance. The CPE was developed from TQM in the late 1980s, and the items

that make up the CPE are regularly updated in response to feedback from performance improvement practitioners and organisations that have applied for quality awards (NIST, 2005). Researchers who have investigated the CPE framework have found that it has considerable validity (Evans and Jack, 2003; Flynn and Saladin, 2001; Pannirselvam and Ferguson, 2000).

Leading practices in strategy deployment were identified from organisations in the New Zealand Benchmarking Club (NZBC), and from secondary sources. Organisations in the NZBC network were diverse, shared a commitment to continuous improvement and undertook annual self-assessment against the CPE (Saunders and Mann, 2005). Group work with managers who had responsibility for implementing strategic initiatives was followed by case studies of seven organisations via in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations and documentation analysis. A survey questionnaire was administered to members of the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF), the custodians of the CPE in New Zealand.

This paper contributes to knowledge of strategy implementation in three ways. First, in building constructs of strategy deployment by examining organisations that were using the CPE model to improve their performance. The seven deployment constructs and the linkages that were found between them are described. Second, by describing and evaluating the strategy deployment practices of selected New Zealand organisations and international quality award winners. The results give answers to the question of what practices are used by the best performing organisations (Davies and Kochhar, 2002; Laugen *et al.*, 2005). A mix of hard (systems or analytical) and soft (people/social or behavioural/cognitive) management practices was indicated for effective implementation. Third, in building a framework of strategy deployment that incorporates the constructs. A number of strategy implementation frameworks have previously been proposed, but not how they can be populated with effective management practices, and what the leading deployment practices are.

The next section reviews the strategy implementation, performance improvement and operations management literature for recent approaches to, and models of, strategy deployment. The research methods and findings are then summarised, the strategy deployment framework is presented and the implications are discussed.

### **Background: approaches to strategy deployment**

Management approaches to strategy implementation can be placed on a continuum with prescriptive planning at one end and process approaches at the other. Prescriptive planning involves moving from strategies to action planning, through the process of setting objectives and performance controls, allocating resources, and motivating employees (Ansoff, 1990; Mintzberg, 1994).

In contrast, the process approach emphasises that successful implementation depends on people changing their behaviour. This involves changing the assumptions and routines of people in the organisation, including managers (Dawson and Palmer, 1995; Lorange, 1998; Miller *et al.*, 2004). Many organisational behaviour studies support the process view, which focuses on managing the interpersonal and intragroup conflicts that can derive from defensive behaviours, personality differences and poor communication (Argyris, 1999; Balogun, 2006; Kanter *et al.*, 1993).

Beer and Nohria (2000) and Johnson and Scholes (2002) argue that the successful implementation of strategy requires a mix of three critical elements taken from the

prescriptive planning (hard) and process (soft) approaches. Two elements are from the planning approach: having an appropriate organisational design and structure to implement strategy (Mintzberg, 1979); and having appropriate resource allocation and control – the way this is done shapes the context for deploying strategy (Langfield-Smith, 1997). The third critical element is managing change, from the process approach. It focuses on diagnosing barriers to change; managing political issues, communication, and changes to organisational routines (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991).

These three elements can be combined by organisations using the CPE framework to improve their performance. The CPE does not specify a particular approach to deployment and is not prescriptive as to how a strategy or action plan is deployed (NIST, 2005). The framework encourages organisations to broaden their view of quality management from a product quality focus to an organisational focus, by emphasising the inter-relationships between the seven categories that make up the framework. The framework of the six enabler categories and the business results category is shown in Figure 1.

### Strategy deployment frameworks

Although there are a number of frameworks used for strategic analysis and strategy development, such as SWOT, five forces and value chain analysis, and at least three paradigms for manufacturing strategy (Voss, 2005), relatively few models have been developed for strategy deployment and been widely accepted by practitioners. Researchers have noted for more than a decade that no generally accepted or dominant framework has emerged for implementing strategy at either corporate or

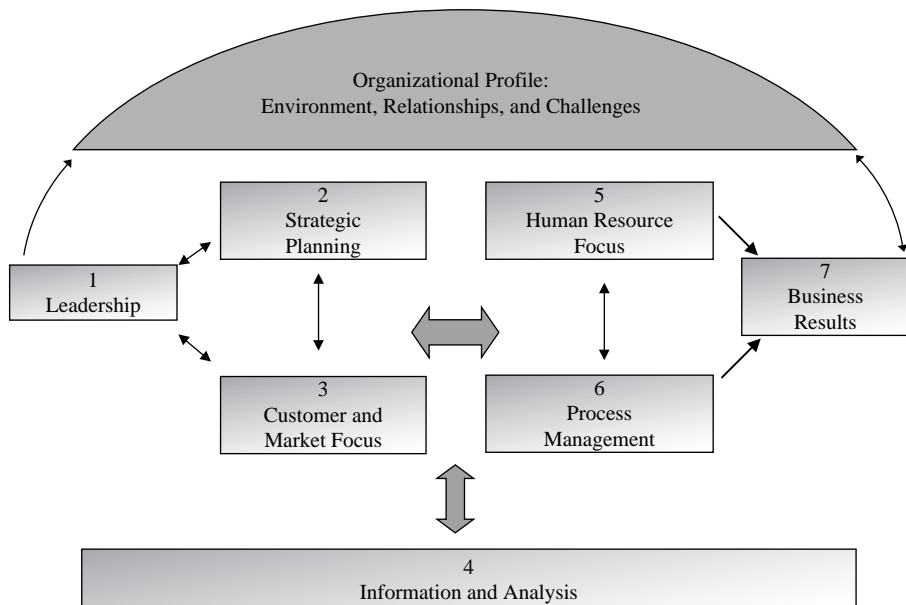


Figure 1.  
Criteria for performance  
excellence

Source: NIST (2005)

business/operations levels (Minarro-Viseras *et al.*, 2005; Noble, 1999a; Okumus, 2003; Wilson, 1994).

Despite this, researchers have identified many contingency factors or variables that influence the outcome of strategy implementations. Typical factors in models and frameworks of strategy implementation proposed in the 1980s were organisational structure, culture, people, communication, control and outcome (Okumus, 2003). The early frameworks, for example, Reed and Buckley (1988), simply listed and described implementation factors. None of the early frameworks have been tested empirically.

While there were no studies found that benchmarked deployment practices, studies of implementing leading practices in other functional areas of organisations have identified important cultural and organisational elements. These include: leadership championing the implementation effort, market constraints, and recognising that deploying leading practices is dependent on resolving people, process and technology issues (DDetert *et al.*, 2000; Jarrar and Zairi, 2000; Prajogo and McDermott, 2005). Kim and Arnold (1996) produced a process model for operationalizing manufacturing strategy, consisting of three constructs, competitive priorities, manufacturing objectives and action programmes for investment. Recent research suggests that linking manufacturing/operations strategy content and process aids strategy implementation and improves performance (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Kotha and Swamidass, 2000; Papke-Shields and Malhotra, 2001).

Frameworks of strategy deployment based on empirical work incorporate many of the above elements, and have been produced by a number of researchers (Table I). A limitation of many of these models is their step-by-step approach in which deployment is depicted as a sequential process. Logical sequential models of change have recently been questioned by researchers for not reflecting the complex and dynamic nature of change initiatives (Collins, 1998; Dawson, 2003; MMcAdam and Bailie, 2002).

Other deployment frameworks based on empirical research have been influenced by Pettigrew and Whipp's (1991) processual framework for strategic change (Aaltonen and Ikavalko, 2002; Bryson and Bromiley, 1993; Dawson and Palmer, 1995; Okumus, 2001). While these frameworks emphasize the importance of context and process they do not give details of which operational factors are important, and their role and impact during implementation. Table I summarises the key findings from empirical research into strategy deployment frameworks.

Identifying commonalities among the findings in Table I is difficult, as the frameworks contain many different factors. The use of the term "factor" is problematic as many researchers consider it a statistical term that should only be used for factors determined using factor analysis. For this reason the terms determinant, element or dimension may be used instead. However, in most cases it is clear that the factors are proposed as contingency variables (moderating variables) that influence the progression from strategy to a successful outcome for the implementation of the strategy.

The different titles given to similar concepts can be confusing. Outcome, for example, may also be called results, performance or success. Communication is not a single concept but a construct of related concepts (Cooper and Emory, 1995). The method used to measure outcomes, and what exactly is measured as an outcome also varies with the different studies. A systematic review (after Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) of the evidence for the effectiveness of implementation factors may resolve these issues, but

| Researcher                   | Organisation(s)                        | Key findings and determinants of deployment success  |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| Roth <i>et al.</i> (1991)    | 82 business units in global industries | Six organisational design factors for implementing global or multi-domestic strategies: coordination; managerial philosophy; configuration; formalisation; centralisation; and integrating mechanisms  |
| Hrebiniak (1992)             | Global companies                       | Leadership; facilitating global learning; developing global managers; matrix structure; and strategic alliances with external companies  |
| Schmelzer and Olsen (1994)   | 3 restaurant companies                 | Company size and geographic location; life cycle stage of the company; and the demographic background of the managers  |
| Feurer <i>et al.</i> (1995)  | Global IT company                      | Cross-functional teams, learning; organisational structure and culture   |
| Miller (1997)                | 6 private and public companies         | Realising factors: backing; accessibility; specificity; cultural receptivity. These factors were more powerful than the enabling factors: familiarity; priority; resource availability; structural facilitation and flexibility  |
| Okumus (2001)                | 2 international companies              | Multiple project implementation; organisational learning and working with external companies   |
| Hacker <i>et al.</i> (2001)  | 3 US Government agencies               | Communication; improvement infrastructure; identify drivers; develop action plans  |
| Kaplan and Norton (2001)     | Company case studies, survey           | Clarifying and translating the vision and strategy; communication and linking; planning and target setting; and strategic feedback and learning  |
| Aaltonen and Ikavalko (2002) | 12 service organisations               | Communication; the backing of senior management; developing management systems and skills for change; organisational structure and culture that is receptive to change, commitment of employees to the company vision; incentives; marketing orientation; alignment between implementation factors |

Freedman (2003), Linton (2002) and Noble (1999b)

**Table I.**  
Key findings from empirical research into strategy deployment frameworks



is problematic. This is because of the different underlying research paradigms used (positivist, realist or interpretive) and the need to evaluate and compare findings from quantitative and qualitative studies, where the data analysis techniques may be as divergent as content analysis, structural equation modeling or “factorial models” used in statistics for the analysis of variance.

Recurring elements or constructs of strategy deployment in the literature include: communication; people, alignment, the influence of organisational values, and learning. While most frameworks propose that multiple elements be considered simultaneously when implementing a strategic initiative, the frameworks vary in whether they keep elements separate or aggregate them into constructs. Many of the models do not reflect the dynamic nature or complexity of implementing strategic initiatives, or the interactions of implementation with ongoing strategy development (emergent strategy) and strategic thinking. While a holistic understanding of strategy implementation, emphasising a coherence among individual deployment practices and the wider strategic context has been advocated by researchers (Barney, 2002; Pettigrew *et al.*, 2003), no frameworks were found that combine a dynamic framework of constructs for implementing strategic initiatives with leading deployment practices.

## Method

Data were collected through case studies, interviews, site visits, benchmarking, and a survey. All the participating organisations were undertaking performance improvement using the CPE model. For the case studies, this limited data collection to organisations that had deployed the improvement initiative for at least two years.

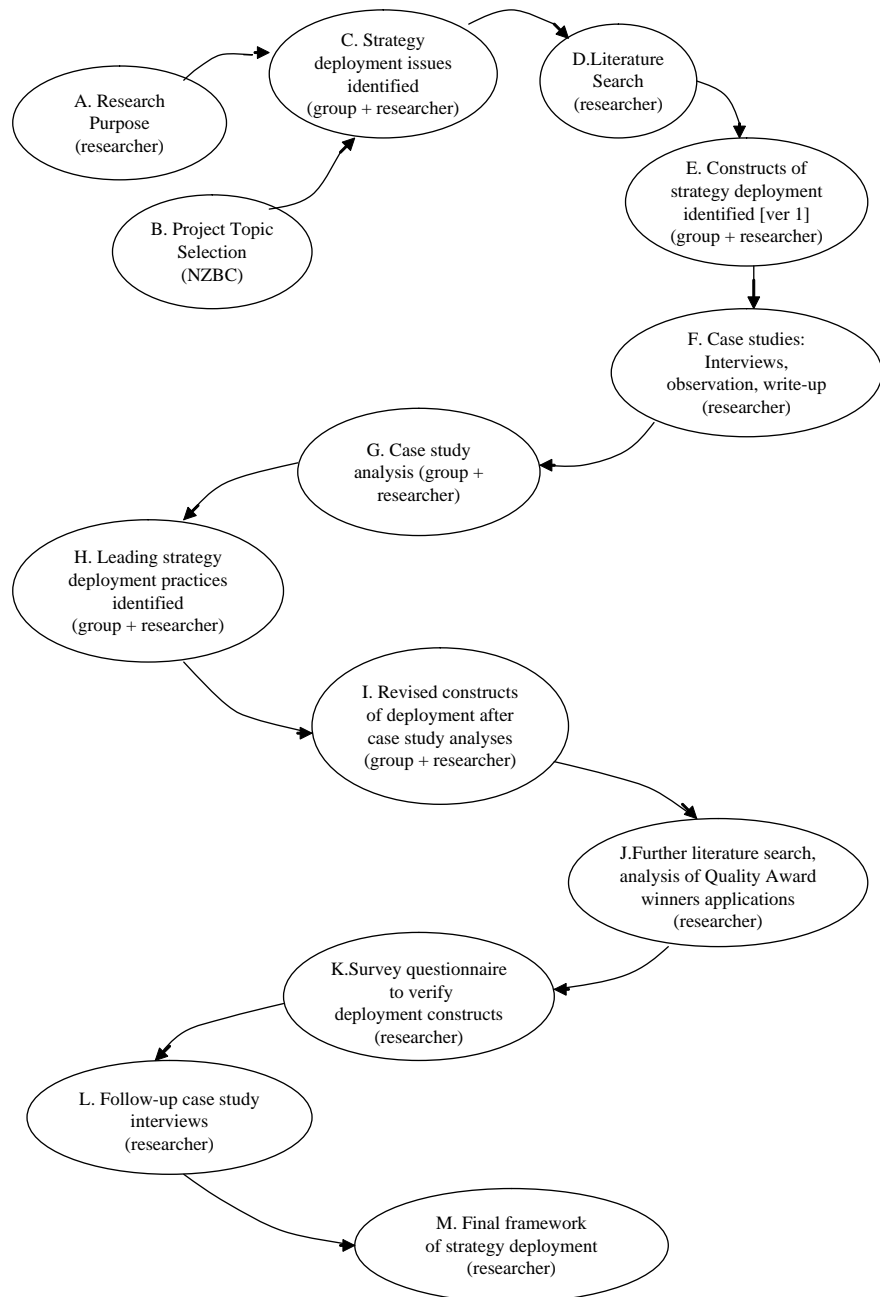
Figure 2 shows the research process and the role of the participants. The exploratory phase is marked “B” and “C” in Figure 2, and consisted of group work at a NZBC meeting and a focus group session. The 14 participants had senior roles such as: manager operations; quality manager; CEO; business excellence manager; programme director; manager business strategy. Content analysis (after Silverman, 2001) of the group sessions in the exploratory phase identified a benchmarking topic, and the participants’ perceptions of the leading practices and opportunities for improvement in strategy deployment for their organisations.

### *Best practice benchmarking*

Best practice benchmarking involves studying the practices of high-performing organisations and adapting their leading practices to another organisation. A group of senior managers responsible for strategy deployment in eight NZBC organisations was formed to identify and benchmark leading practices for implementing strategic initiatives from the data. The lead researcher acted as the group facilitator. The benchmarking method is detailed in Saunders *et al.* (2007) and the process steps are shown as “E”, “G” and “H” in Figure 2.

### *Case study methodology*

A multiple case study methodology (Eisenhardt, 1989; Voss *et al.*, 2002) was used to gather data on the strategy deployment practices of seven NZBC organisations. Four were registered limited liability companies and three were public sector organisations. Three organisational categories were represented by polar types: size (small(2)/medium(3)/large(2)); ownership (public(4)/private(3)); and industry type



**Figure 2.**  
The research process and  
the roles of the  
participants



(service(3)/manufacturing(2)/R&D(2)). Having polar types meant the findings would be applicable to a broad range of organisations (Pettigrew, 1990; Voss *et al.*, 2002). Multiple cases within each category allowed for the findings to be replicated within and across categories, to strengthen the external validity of the findings (Yin, 2003). The two smallest organisations had between 49 and 99 employees, the largest over 20,000. The industry sectors were: dairy manufacturing, data management, food manufacturing; insurance, medical laboratory, scientific research; and software development. No cases involved structural change.

Site visits and semi-structured interviews (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Meredith, 1998) were conducted with managers responsible for implementing strategic initiatives (“F” in Figure 2). A case study protocol was piloted with NZBC workgroup members before the case study interviews were conducted. The unit of analysis for the case studies was a strategic initiative that the organisation had recently deployed, or was in the process of deploying. The data were tabulated for within- and cross-case analysis.

Secondary sources were also used to identify leading practices in deploying strategic initiatives, including the application documents of CPE Quality Award winners and literature searches (“J” in Figure 2). Key constructs of deployment were initially determined through group discussion of the findings. A search was then made of the literature in the functional management areas that had been identified as important to the constructs.

#### *Questionnaire design*

A questionnaire surveyed a wider number of organisations after the completion of the case study analysis (“K” in Figure 2). Prior to the survey, the practices, behaviours and perceptions of managers in the cases had been recorded, and “working” constructs had been developed. The survey provided an additional way to collect data to explore aspects of the constructs and practices that had been identified.

The survey was based on replication logic, not statistical sampling logic (Eisenhardt, 1989; Voss *et al.*, 2002). The sample was selected to fill the conceptual category, which was the use of the CPE model. The underlying proposition was that organisations that were undertaking CPE-based improvement initiatives would either be using and/or recognise the importance and effectiveness of the deployment practices identified in the seven case studies, and so supply supporting evidence for the constructs.

The questionnaire was pilot tested on NZBC workgroup members. The survey population ( $N = 288$ ) was all the member organisations of the NZBEF. The questionnaire contained 35 unbiased non-leading questions aimed at studying the perceived importance and effectiveness of the strategy deployment practices found from the group work and cases. The respondents were managers with responsibility for deploying strategic initiatives and used a five-point Likert-type scale to score each question. The questionnaire is shown in Appendix 1.

#### **Findings**

Seven strategy deployment themes were identified from the leading practices data collected in the exploratory phase. The themes were proposed as seven constructs of strategy deployment. Analysis of the cases identified over 50 leading deployment practices, which were tabulated with the reasons for their use. The individual practices were categorised in management skill terms as hard or soft by the researcher, using

Hussey's (1998) hard and soft dimensions for strategy implementation practices. Hussey (1998), building on studies by Alexander (1991), defined hard as comprising of information, analysis, evaluation, action and project plans, monitoring and controlling, all based on data. The soft or behavioural dimension comprised perception of information, structure and culture fit, power and influence fit, communication, commitment, encouragement and support, all judgement based (Hussey, 1998).

In the cross-case analysis, practices from each case were tabulated in an assessment worksheet. The practices, their perceived strengths and supporting evidence were reviewed and evaluated using this tool at workgroup meetings (see Saunders *et al.* (2007) for an example worksheet). Each practice was scored by the group on a five-point scale where 1 = unsatisfactory; 2 = satisfactory practice/nothing special; 3 = good standard practice; 4 = moving toward best practice/some innovation; 5 = best practice/innovative. The leading practices from the case data and Quality Award winners application documents were assigned to the seven deployment constructs. The within-case and cross-case analyses of the deployment practices helped sharpen the definitions of the constructs. The seven constructs and their descriptions are shown in Table II, and the leading practices associated with each construct are summarised in Appendix 2.

#### *The framework for implementing strategic initiatives*

Linkages between constructs were evident from the case analyses, and are detailed in the discussion section. To compare the research findings with evidence from the literature, an additional literature review was conducted for each construct, and the results strengthened the validity of the constructs and the links between them. Figure 3 shows the final framework. Organisational strategy is depicted interacting with the framework, representing the on-going evaluation and adaptation of the strategy as events unfold during implementation.

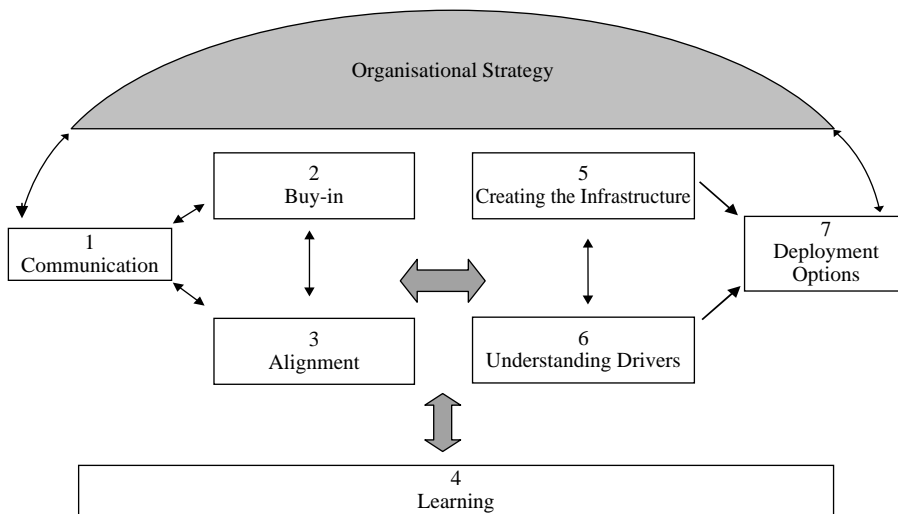
Projects were the vehicle used to implement discrete components of the strategic initiative in all the cases. Project and programme management were outside the scope of the study, however all seven case organisations had project management structures and policies in place. In all cases the project/programme management function was distinct from (and in the case of the government owned organisations, often pre-dated) their infrastructure for strategy deployment.

#### *Survey findings*

The survey purpose was to further investigate the findings from the cases using theoretical sampling, and that was achieved with the 19 returns received, which was adequate to show replication of the findings.

| Strategy deployment construct                 | Description of each construct  |
|---|--|
| 1. Communicating the initiative               | Ensuring understanding of the strategic initiative                                 |
| 2. Achieving buy-in                           | Acceptance and adoption by stakeholders  |
| 3. Aligning implementation                    | Actions are aligned to the strategic direction                                     |
| 4. Learning                                   | Continuous evaluation and adaptation   |
| 5. Creating the infrastructure for deployment | Organising teams, roles and responsibilities                                       |
| 6. Understanding the business drivers         | Awareness of the business reasons for the initiative                               |
| 7. Identifying deployment options             | Identifying and scheduling projects, assessing risk, choosing performance measures |

**Table II.**  
Seven constructs of  
strategy deployment



**Notes:** Constructs 1-3 are associated with soft management practices and constructs 5-7 with hard practices. The learning construct interacts with all the others

**Figure 3.**  
Framework for strategy  
deployment

Respondents were asked to rate how they personally viewed the importance of 30 practice statements (derived from the seven constructs) to their organisation's ability to deploy strategic initiatives. The Likert-type scale used was: 5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = neutral; 2 = low; 1 = very low; DK = do not know. The results were:

- 22/30 activities rated 4.0 or greater (high to very high importance);
- 6/30 activities rated 3.4-3.9 (high importance);
- 1/30 activities rated 3.0-3.3 (neutral to high importance); and
- 1/30 rated 2.9 (neutral).

Although the questionnaire included an "Other (please specify)" option, only one response was recorded. Table III shows the ranking of the 22 practices that were perceived to be of high-to-very-high importance. The construct associated with each practice item appears in the Construct column (Table II). All seven constructs are represented.

The 19 returns represented 6.6 per cent of the NZBEF population. While the response rate was too low to allow reliable statistical analysis of the strategy deployment practices of the entire NZBEF population, the survey expanded the number of organisations from which data were collected from seven (the case studies) to 26, strengthening the external validity of the study. The practice statements in the questionnaire were drawn from the leading practices for each of the constructs found in the cases. The high to very high level of importance attributed to 22 of the 30 deployment practices indicates that the participating managers perceived these practices to be highly relevant to strategy deployment (Table III).

| Practice/activity   | Construct | H/S <sup>a</sup> | Rank |
|---|-----------|------------------|------|
| Identifying and allocating roles, responsibilities, teams                   | 5         | H and S          | 1    |
| Ensuring the necessary resources are available                              | 5         | H                | 2    |
| Developing action plans to address the key strategic objectives             | 3, 7      | H and S          | 3    |
| Communicating strategies to employees                                       | 1         | S                | 3    |
| Appointing a leader for the initiative                                      | 5         | S                | 3    |
| Creating a shared vision for the initiative at all levels of management     | 2         | S                | 3    |
| Seeking buy-in from employees   | 2         | S                | 7    |
| Goals/targets and strategies are cascaded to all levels in the organisation | 3, 6      | H and S          | 8    |
| Resource allocation is linked to strategy                                   | 3         | H                | 9    |
| Understanding the business drivers behind the initiative                    | 6         | H                | 10   |
| Promoting a set of company values   | 3         | S                | 10   |
| Assessing implementation risks  | 7         | H                | 10   |
| Measuring and evaluating progress as the initiative is deployed             | 4, 7      | H and S          | 10   |
| Making changes during deployment in response to feedback                    | 4, 7      | H and S          | 10   |
| Appointing a champion/sponsor for the initiative                            | 5         | S                | 15   |
| Identifying key performance indicators                                      | 7         | H                | 15   |
| Aligning short and long term action plans                                   | 3, 6      | H                | 15   |
| Preparing a communication plan for the initiative                           | 1         | H                | 18   |
| Ensuring that non-managerial employees have the skills to implement         | 5         | H and S          | 19   |
| Aligning performance indicators with long-term objectives                   | 3, 7      | H                | 20   |
| Ensuring that managers possess the knowledge and skills to implement        | 4, 5      | H and S          | 20   |
| Dealing with the fear that change can provoke                               | 1, 2      | S                | 20   |

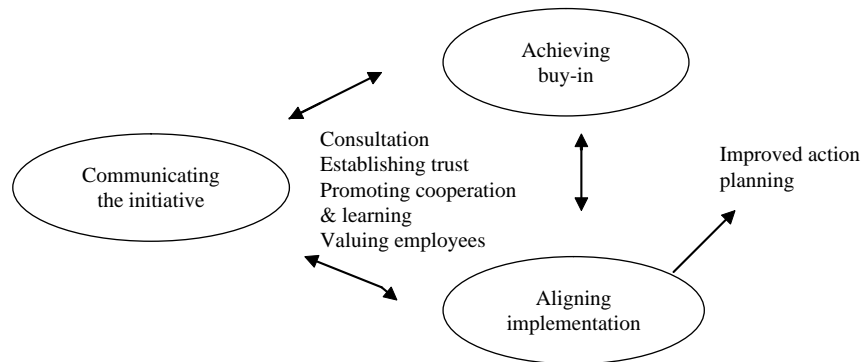
**Notes:** "H" – "hard" issues (system or analytical in nature); S – "soft" (people/cognitive/behavioural in nature)

**Table III.**  
Deployment practices perceived as high-to-very-high importance

### Discussion

#### *Communicating the initiative, achieving buy-in and aligning implementation*

From case analysis we found these three constructs to be closely linked during implementation. They are associated with soft people skills such as influencing attitudes and promoting cooperation (Figure 4). For example, participants in the cases



**Figure 4.**  
The constructs associated with soft management skills

and group work perceived that consultative communication of the strategic initiative improved buy-in and helped align interpretations of the initiative: “What we’ve done is set up groups with people from the coalface, to get together and talk things through and agree on the best way. So that’s how we’ve overcome the buy-in problems” (Case study senior manager). In turn this positively affected the action planning process and implementation.

The linkage between the three constructs was apparent in a strategic alliance case, where success depended on achieving communication, buy-in and alignment at three levels in both organisations:

We’ve discovered that if we’re going to have a strategic collaboration like this, to be successful we have to work at the relationship at all levels, it’s no good if just the management get on, or just the top and the middle (Case study senior manager).

Managers in all the case studies considered feedback about the initiative from employees and other stakeholders vital to successful implementation. Feedback was obtained formally through employee focus groups, questionnaires and meetings, and informally. Two-way communication, alignment and learning were closely linked:

The more formal content feedback will come through the planning cycle because as those things get permeated through the second third fourth level to the businesses that are in the markets executing – [they] will come up with improvements, changes, variations, some of the assumptions and hypotheses might be revisited in that process. And that’s a two way feedback – it’s what I call the demanding partnership dialogue (Case study senior manager).

Individual and organisational values influenced the aligning implementation construct. The case study organisations were at least two years into a performance excellence initiative, after adopting the CPE model. Managers were aware of the CPE core values of, for example, valuing staff and partners, and of organisational and personal learning (NIST, 2005), and upholding these values in word and action assisted in aligning people with the initiative. These two values were expressed, for example, by including staff and alliance partners in action planning meetings and training programmes.

The interaction between the constructs has practical importance, as illustrated by a case where senior management used two-way communication of the initiative with middle managers, including them in action planning workshops. This gave a sense of ownership and buy-in, and aligned interpretations of the strategy. Feedback on the shared interpretation of the initiative at the production level was both informal and through questionnaires, with the questionnaire results linked to the incentive and performance pay of senior managers. When feedback from plant managers implementing the initiative indicated production difficulties, senior managers willingly reviewed the initiative and sought solutions in constructive dialogue with the plant managers.

Other examples of soft management practices that linked these three constructs included: informal communication; establishing trust; and the promotion of values and concepts such as cooperation, organisational and personal learning, and valuing staff and partners. Establishing trust to promote buy-in was important: “A good relationship is so important . . . the old adage, people remember how you made them feel. If they felt you were not being bone fide and genuine they’ll always be second guessing you” (Case study senior manager). Other links existed between achieving

buy-in, creating the infrastructure for deployment, and identifying deployment options, where buy-in was increased when teams have responsibility for developing action plans.

*Understanding the business drivers, creating the infrastructure for deployment and identifying deployment options*

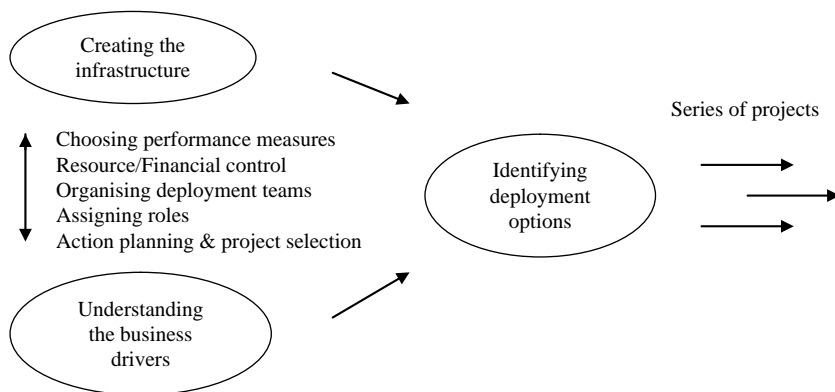
These are traditional management roles and implementation tasks. The case analyses showed these three constructs to be linked during implementation. They are mainly associated with hard management skills such as choosing performance measures, resource/financial control and action planning (Figure 5). For example, a senior management team's understanding of a main business driver (growth offshore) influenced the make-up of the implementation team that was assembled for the initiative (infrastructure). In turn these two constructs influenced the deployment options that were considered.

Creating the infrastructure required a mix of hard management skills, for example, providing adequate resourcing; and soft skills, for example, selecting champions and teams to ensure a good fit, and encouraging and supporting them. Communication and creating the infrastructure were closely linked as evidenced in cases where deployment teams were assembled to implement the initiative:

Weekly videoconferencing was a major factor in developing a comfortable working relationship between [the partner organisations] particularly when a few more difficult issues arose. This did a great deal to forge the teamwork (Case study senior manager).

The team and/or the champion identified deployment options and made decisions such as selecting and scheduling projects (see 6 in Appendix 2 for examples of the roles of teams and champions).

Typically the identification of the external drivers was the result of research and discussion amongst the senior management team, and the team formed to implement the initiative identified the internal business drivers, or interpreted the external business drivers that had been identified. The decision to choose one deployment option over another was influenced by the priorities imposed by the business drivers and the risk-assessment process:



**Figure 5.** Constructs associated with mainly hard management skills

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Now that we have the [strategic initiatives], we have to develop the business cases behind those. Those business cases need to be in the budget for next year – locking it into the budget – that’s the best way to make a strategy implementable (Case study senior manager).

### *Learning*

The learning construct interacted with the other six deployment constructs, and centred on the learning associated with evaluation and adaptation during the implementation of an initiative. Learning included knowledge and skills gained from, and then applied to, the strategy deployment process. A linkage between communication, alignment, buy-in and learning was found in cases where feedback in response to communicating the initiative was used for improving understanding. Qualitative questionnaires or focus groups were used to determine how well people had understood and were aligned with the initiative:

To prove that we have created alignment or not we run a series of questionnaires on how well people have understood [...] it’s the most subjective feedback, it’s the interpretation, the perception of how the process was run, and the perception of how the communication was executed (Case study senior manager).

The knowledge was used to refine communication, buy-in and alignment practices. In an example of the importance attached to soft management skills, one case organisation required senior managers to undertake a training programme that emphasised insight into the cognitive and behavioural aspects of their interaction with their peers and other staff.

The learning construct is also linked to the infrastructure, business drivers and deployment options constructs. The link between learning and identifying deployment options was apparent in a case where scenarios were used to generate action plans. In other cases hard data from, for example, analysing business drivers and financial performance indicators were used when making decisions about potential projects: “We have the ability to quickly predict what happens with those five business drivers – what happens to the profit of the business, and we can project that out a number of years” (Case study senior manager).

Other learning tools used by the case organisations included: 360 degree assessment for senior managers; employee surveys of managers’ performance; customer surveys and suggestion schemes. Few organisations used surveys of suppliers to gain feedback, and this gap represents a learning opportunity. Other constraints to deployment in the cases were poor communication, lack of coordination, and people, finance and technology issues, and are shown in Table IV. For example, in one case the lack of appropriate communication methods for production employees was perceived to have had the most negative impact on deployment.

### *How are strategic initiatives implemented in a performance excellence environment?*

The answer to this question was found to be a range of management practices that influenced many organisational functions (see Appendix 2 and Table III). Seven of the eight practices ranked the most important in Table III were “soft” or “hard and soft” management issues, indicating that the participants considered these cognitive or behavioural management skills to be highly relevant to effective strategy deployment. Cognitive research supports this finding. The importance of soft practices relevant to



| Type of constraint | Case study | Constraint   |
|--------------------|------------|--|
| Financial          | A          | High financial risk associated with deployment         |
|                    | B          | Negative commercial conditions                         |
|                    | G          | Industry downturn affected company viability           |
|                    | D          | Resource constraints limited testing                   |
| People/HR          | C          | Defensive attitudes in other company divisions         |
|                    | C          | Lack of research capability                            |
|                    | C          | Change of leader during deployment                     |
|                    | F          | Existing programs made redundant by the new initiative |
|                    | G          | Recruiting suitable employees                          |
|                    | G          | Increased workload in first year of implementation     |
|                    | G          | Staff adapting work practices to the new system        |
| Communication      | D          | Communication issues with manufacturing employees      |
|                    | E          | Partner's perception of potential loss of control      |
|                    | F          | Understanding the client's needs                       |
| Technical          | A, B       | Product development and production issues              |

**Table IV.**  
Constraints to  
implementation

implementing a strategic initiative can be found in cognitive studies of organisational development and change, employee relations and motivation, teamwork, group decision making, leadership and organisational culture (Durand, 2003; Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002; Hodgkinson, 2003).

The cases indicated senior managers had moved beyond the traditional approach of top-down change initiatives, combining soft practices such as two-way communication alongside established hard practices such as action planning. The approach that managers took to implementing a new strategic initiative was influenced by their experience of having adopted the CPE as their organisations' management model at least two years previously. The organisations therefore were undergoing a change process that included a commitment to the core values and concepts associated with the CPE and quality management.

The cross-case analysis showed that the continuous improvement philosophy and CPE values of the case organisations had positively influenced their organisational climate, and facilitated buy-in and deployment across the whole organisation in six of the seven cases, and in the manufacturing units of the seventh case (a large multinational). Practices that reflected this included: establishing trust, consultation processes, informal communication and visible commitment from senior management.

#### *Implications of the findings*

Ideally managers would consider as a whole the deployment constructs, their interactions and the wider strategic context (environmental changes, emergent strategies, unexpected outcomes) as an initiative is implemented. But as Argyris (1999) noted, few managers can understand and have the time to evaluate all the complexities of managing strategic change. The framework helps by directing managers' attention to the key areas to be addressed and the leading practices in each area that aid successful implementation.

While previous studies have identified hard and soft management practices that influence successful implementations in a specific context such as a strategic

manufacturing initiative (Minarro-Viseras *et al.*, 2005), the leading practices and the framework in the present study are applicable to strategy implementations in a wide range of organisations and contexts. This was achieved by studying polar types and examining underlying similarities in multiple case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Voss *et al.*, 2002).

The framework and the practices are therefore relevant to the deployment of both corporate and business unit strategy such as manufacturing or operations, and to organisations independent of their structure or ownership (public or private sector), their industry sector or the type of technology employed. Public sector organisations have a political dimension to their strategic management that is not present in private sector companies, but although the formulation of strategy was influenced by government, the deployment of strategy was found to be relatively autonomous (free from ministerial involvement) in the public sector cases. Good governance was important for deployment in both private and public sector cases. Leading practices for boards of directors included: regular evaluation of the progress of strategy implementation; ensuring a steady flow of initiatives and projects to achieve the strategic objectives; and using a decision framework for terminating unsuccessful initiatives.

Strategy deployment in the cases occurred in a complex and dynamic social and business environment. The organisations were on a CPE-based performance improvement journey, in itself a long-term strategic initiative requiring management attention. Layered onto that was the strategic initiative that was the focus of the study. Managing the complexities of these two initiatives and other responsibilities was perceived to be difficult, particularly for managers in the two small case study organisations who had many other tasks and responsibilities. In the two large case study organisations one or more managers had a single focus on deploying the initiative with no other major responsibilities diverting their attention. The implication for small organisations of 40-99 people is to build in assistance or a workload reduction for managers implementing a new strategic initiative.

#### *Limitations and future research*

The study examined strategy deployment in organisations with more than 40 employees (the largest organisation had 20,000 employees), and the findings are therefore restricted to organisations in that size range. Further research could determine if the framework is applicable to smaller organisations.

The response rate for the survey was only 6.6 per cent. Owing to NZBEF privacy policy there was no access to NZBEF address lists for a postal survey, so a NZBEF administrator emailed the questionnaire (initial response rate 3.8 per cent) and two follow-up reminders on behalf of the researchers. Phone follow-up was not possible because contact details were confidential. The CEO of the NZBEF suggested the low-response rate was because members were requested to complete surveys almost on “a weekly basis” and that “survey fatigue” was responsible.

While the response rate was below the 30 per cent needed to make a reliable statistical analysis of the results for the entire NZBEF membership, the main purpose of the survey was not statistical sampling. It was to further investigate the findings of the case studies and group work using theoretical sampling. That was achieved with

the 19 NZBEF returns received, which was an adequate number to show replication of the findings for the importance of the deployment practices.

Developing a framework for strategy deployment can be viewed as a step toward building a normative theory (Christensen and Raynor, 2003) of strategy deployment in a performance improvement context. Theory development could be progressed by longitudinal studies that evaluated the effectiveness of strategic initiatives, together with the practices used to deploy the initiatives and the overall performance of the organisation, which could be measured, for example, through the assessment score in CPE Category 7 (business results).

### Concluding remarks

The study produced a deployment framework populated with leading practices for implementing strategic initiatives. The participating managers wanted a model that was useable by them, and the leading deployment practices that were found have the potential to raise the performance of organisations by improving the implementation of strategic initiatives. The practices address both the hard operations issues and the soft issues associated with people and their behaviour.

By considering both the systems theory inherent in the CPE model and the contingency research into implementation, elements of systems theory (process) and contingency research (constructs) were incorporated in the framework. The definitions of the constructs are fluid, and the dividing line between elements, for example, between technical (technology) and social (human) or hard and soft management practices can be difficult to define. This mirrors current organisational studies thinking, which is concerned with understanding the complexity and dynamic nature of organisational processes (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2003). The implementation of a strategic initiative is an unpredictable process that occurs in a complex and dynamic environment. The study has produced a framework by which these complexities may be better understood, and identified leading practices that are effective in implementing strategic initiatives.

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#### Further reading

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## Appendix 1. Strategy deployment questionnaire

Activities used in the deployment of a strategic initiative

| 1.   |   | SCALES  |                  |   |
|--|---|---|------------------|---|
| <p><b>Frequency Score</b> – In the last 3 years, how often did this business incorporate the following activities when implementing a strategic initiative. Use the scale in the "Frequency Score" column. For example, "5" means this activity is always used when a strategic initiative is deployed, while "1" means it is never used in deployment.</p>  |   | 5=Always<br>4=Frequently<br>3=About half<br>2=Sometimes<br>1=Never<br>DK=Don't know |                  |   |
| <p><b>Importance Score</b> – please rate how you personally view the relative importance of each statement to your organisation's ability to deploy strategic initiatives. Use the scale in the "Importance Score" column. For example, "5" means this is essential for your organisation's success, while "1" means being good in this area will have no effect on your organisation's success.</p> |   | 5=Very High<br>4=High<br>3=Neutral<br>2=Low<br>1=Very Low<br>DK=Don't Know          |                  |   |
| <p><b>Effectiveness Score</b> – please rate your organisation's performance relative to each statement by using the scale in the "Effectiveness Score" column. For example, "5" means your organisation is highly effective in this area, while "1" means your organisation is not effective in this area.</p>   |   |   |                  | 5=Outstanding<br>4=Very Good<br>3=Average<br>2=Below Average<br>1=Poor<br>DK=Don't Know |
|  | Statement   | Frequency Score   | Importance Score | Effectiveness Score   |
| 1  | Appointing a champion/sponsor for the initiative                |   |                  |   |
| 2  | Appointing a leader for the initiative                          |   |                  |   |
| 3  | Preparing a communication plan for the initiative               |   |                  |   |
| 4  | Communicating strategies to employees                           |   |                  |   |
| 5  | Communicating strategies to customers                           |   |                  |   |
| 6  | Communicating strategies to suppliers                           |   |                  |   |
| 7  | Seeking buy-in from employees                                   |   |                  |   |
| 8  | Seeking buy-in from customers                                   |   |                  |   |
| 9  | Seeking buy-in from suppliers                                   |   |                  |   |
| 10   | Developing action plans to address the key strategic objectives |   |                  |   |
| 11   | Ensuring the necessary resources are available                  |   |                  |   |

(continued)

|    | Statement  | Frequency Score | Importance Score | Effectiveness Score |
|----|--|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 12 | Goals/targets and strategies are cascaded to all levels in the organisation                        |                 |                  |                     |
| 13 | Identifying key performance indicators   |                 |                  |                     |
| 14 | Aligning short and long term action plans  |                 |                  |                     |
| 15 | Ensuring resource allocation (for example, budgeting) is linked to strategy                        |                 |                  |                     |
| 16 | Aligning Performance Indicators with long-term objectives  |                 |                  |                     |
| 17 | Aligning work unit plans and supplier plans  |                 |                  |                     |
| 18 | Aligning work unit plans and partner plans   |                 |                  |                     |
| 19 | Promoting a set of company values  |                 |                  |                     |
| 20 | Identifying and allocating roles, responsibilities, teams  |                 |                  |                     |
| 21 | Understanding the business drivers behind the initiative   |                 |                  |                     |
| 22 | Assessing implementation risks   |                 |                  |                     |
| 23 | Identifying options (alternative actions) during deployment  |                 |                  |                     |
| 24 | Measuring and evaluating progress as the initiative is deployed                                    |                 |                  |                     |
| 25 | Making changes during deployment in response to feedback (acting on evaluation information)        |                 |                  |                     |
| 26 | Creating a shared vision for the initiative at all levels of management                            |                 |                  |                     |
| 27 | Ensuring that managers possess the knowledge and capabilities needed to implement                  |                 |                  |                     |
| 28 | Ensuring that non-managerial employees have the skills and capabilities to implement               |                 |                  |                     |
| 29 | Dealing with the fear that change can provoke  |                 |                  |                     |
| 30 | Dealing with the situation when the new strategy is not compatible with a manager's personal goals |                 |                  |                     |

(continued)

Human Resource planning and support for strategic initiatives

2. Tick one box.

| Does this business have human resource plans for staffing, selection, training, involvement, empowerment and recognition that are aligned to meet strategic objectives? |  |
|---|--|
| - no  |  |
| - plans address some of these areas but are only partly aligned to the strategic objectives   |  |
| - plans address most of these areas and are mostly aligned to the strategic objectives  |  |
| - plans address all of these areas and are fully aligned to the strategic objectives  |  |
| - don't know  |  |

The metrics used to measure future performance

3. Tick one box for each item.

| Which of the following has this business used when projecting its performance into the future. Future performance is compared in a systematic way with: |       |           |            |        |            |
|---|-------|-----------|------------|--------|------------|
|   | never | sometimes | frequently | always | don't know |
| - key benchmarks  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - the goals of this business  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - the past performance of this business   |       |           |            |        |            |
| - the projected performance of competitors  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - the projected performance of organisations in another industry  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - other (please specify)  |       |           |            |        |            |

The management and governance of strategy deployment

4. Tick the appropriate boxes.

| Which of the following frameworks or systems has this business investigated or used for managing the deployment of strategic initiatives: |              |        |            |
|---|--------------|--------|------------|
|   | Investigated | In Use | Don't Know |
| - balanced scorecard  |              |        |            |
| - business excellence framework   |              |        |            |
| - supply chain management   |              |        |            |
| - strategy map  |              |        |            |
| - software based system (please specify)  |              |        |            |
| - other (please specify)  |              |        |            |

(continued)

5. Tick one box for each item.

| Over the last three years to what extent did this business use the following methods to evaluate and review strategy implementation: |       |           |            |        |            |
|--|-------|-----------|------------|--------|------------|
|  | never | sometimes | frequently | always | don't know |
| - regular review by senior management  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - <i>post project reviews or audits</i>  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - employee satisfaction surveys  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - customer satisfaction surveys  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - supplier satisfaction surveys  |       |           |            |        |            |
| - other (please specify)   |       |           |            |        |            |

6. Tick one or more boxes as appropriate.

*(This question asks only about strategy deployment, not the development of strategy).*

| Over the last three years which of the following were undertaken by the Board of Directors of this business in regard to strategy deployment: |  |
|---|--|
| - no direct involvement in strategy deployment  |  |
| - oversight of strategic initiatives only (not individual projects)   |  |
| - oversight of strategic initiatives and individual projects  |  |
| - actively intervened to keep the initiative 'on track' to meet its goals   |  |
| - other (please specify)  |  |

Any comments?

Is there anything missing from this questionnaire that you think should be addressed?

Please add any other factors that you think should be considered for good strategy implementation.

## Appendix 2. Summary examples of leading practices found for each construct

### 1. *Communicating the initiative (ensuring understanding of the strategic initiative)*

- Good communication avoids misinformation or lack of information impeding deployment.
- Two-way communication with all employees helps understanding of the initiative.
- Small group briefings facilitate feedback and clarification.
- Document and communicate expectations.
- Ensure good communication of the business drivers.
- Middle managers play a key role in communicating strategies and for ensuring a shared understanding of the strategy.
- Informal communication can be more important than formal communication of strategy.

### 2. *Achieving buy-in (acceptance and adoption of the initiative by stakeholders)*

- A consultative approach through participation increases ownership and commitment.
- Consultation with key stakeholders, including employees, at the planning and implementation phases increases buy-in.

- Cultural and organisational elements underpin success in implementation. An initiative that matches the culture and competencies of an organisation can ensure a rapid and successful implementation.
- Senior management demonstrating their commitment to the initiative increases buy-in.
- Using a formal process such as action planning to convert strategic objectives into action plans helps understanding and buy-in.
- Linking strategy to departmental and operational goals helps buy-in and alignment.
- The application of many HR policies, including compensation packages, incentives, employee relations and training, are associated with how employees relate to the strategic direction of an organisation, and so can facilitate buy-in.

### 3. *Aligning implementation (actions are aligned to the strategic direction)*

- A set of organisation values that govern decisions helps ensure alignment. Strategic decisions remain consistent with these values, while retaining scope for autonomous action as initiatives are deployed.
- Action planning workshops across all levels helps align the interpretation of the strategy. The action planning process and the dialogue it promotes helps align the everyday decision making in units or departments with the strategic direction.
- Link project plans to formally documented aims for the initiative (that is, identify how individual projects align with the strategy).
- Implementing new strategy requires making changes in taken-for-granted assumptions and routines that are elements of culture. In top-down cultures changing behavior and routines through task alignment is more effective than using logic and persuasion.
- Linking strategic and operational change is important for developing detailed action plans, key tasks and control processes. It is also important in communicating the initiative in a task-oriented manner throughout the organisation.
- Allocating resources to the new initiative through the budget aligns behaviour with the strategy.
- Developing a suggestion process can assist alignment, especially for those not in the leading group. An anonymous process for suggestions and feedback is effective.
- Aligning compensation and recognition systems with the strategy helps ensure that behaviors support the strategic objectives.

### 4. *Learning (continuous evaluation and adaptation)*

- A robust system of performance measurement is needed to evaluate the progress of the deployment of a strategic initiative and to identify opportunities for improvement.
- Performance measurements can range from a large number of metrics to a single KPI. There should be regular review of progress by monitoring the appropriate measures.
- The choice of KPIs determines the activities management will focus on during deployment, and therefore the learning that will take place.
- Planned strategy and emergent (unplanned) strategy typically evolve hand-in-hand and interact as strategic initiatives are implemented. This should allow the experience gained during deployment to shape ongoing strategy.

- Strategic initiatives should be continually evaluated and adapted as events unfold during the process of deployment. Be sensitive to external environmental signals, and continuously adapt to changes in the environment.
- There should be regular evaluation of the progress of strategy implementation by the board of directors.
- The board should also ensure that a steady flow of initiatives and projects is established in order to achieve the strategic objectives.
- A continuous improvement philosophy and the core CPE values of organisational and personal learning facilitate learning at all levels.

5. *Creating the infrastructure for deployment (organising teams, roles and responsibilities)*

- The form of the deployment infrastructure is context specific, so a single change agent or “champion” may be appropriate in some circumstances, and a team approach in others.
- Clearly identify the roles of those involved, for example, the champion, mentor/sponsor, team member.
- Aim for champions at several levels in the organisation.
- A consultative approach to deployment often entails setting up project teams or task forces. Teams may be cross-functional or within business units.
- Teams are usually responsible for identifying drivers for the objectives and developing action plans.
- An alternative is the intervention approach, where co-ordination and authority remain with the change agent, but aspects of deployment are delegated. Teams may be set up that have responsibility for partial implementation of solutions. The change sponsor monitors progress and may intervene to ensure changes are implemented.
- A participative approach to deployment (such as project teams) is most appropriate for incremental change in organisations.
- Directive approaches are more common when transformational change is required.

6. *Understanding the business drivers (awareness of the reasons for deploying the initiative)*

- The business drivers are the main business reasons for deploying a strategic initiative.
- A systematic process (research phase) should be used to identify drivers for objectives.
- The business drivers form the basis for developing action plans, and action plans should relate back to the business drivers.
- An understanding of the drivers by implementors (typically middle managers) is important during the deployment phase. Ensuring good communication of the drivers can be achieved by, for example, workshops or by having an expert on the team.
- Involving wider teams in the assessment of achievement against the drivers will facilitate understanding. Examples are KPI monitoring or regular reviews against objectives.
- Most businesses have systems to improve customer and market focus, and are focusing on other drivers, for example, innovation, for future success.
- A redirection of training and support will be required for any new business drivers identified.

7. *Identifying deployment options (project selection, assessing risk, choosing performance measures)*

- Identifying options during deployment is an important element of risk management in strategy implementation.
- A decision process using business models and proven decision tools can be used to evaluate alternative courses of action. Formally considering alternatives minimises risk. Identified risks should be prioritised, then plans made to mitigate and manage them.
- A set of organisation values acts as a reference point when considering each option, and guides decision making.
- It is during the action planning phase that many options and alternatives will be considered, including choosing the performance measures to be used to track progress.
- In manufacturing firms, identifying options when implementing business strategies (for example, choice of products and prices) is important to gaining a cost advantage.
- If the strategic initiative is to be deployed through a series of projects, then identifying which potential projects will proceed, and the scheduling of a flow of projects to ensure continuity is important.
- A decision framework for terminating unsuccessful projects is important. The role of the board in these decisions needs to be clear.

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