Involvement of implementers:
missing element in strategy formulation

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T here is a syndrome in top management that strategic planning is supposed to be formulated by them alone, and for them it is a sign of power and an expression of the magnitude of the difference between them and their subordinates. Going for a retreat without their subordinates is a sign of power; year after year my MBA classes of managers I have taught from different organisations have confirmed this. They say that they will monopolise strategy formulation but they want employees to implement it. Strategic planning is done by top management far away from the organisation's premises, usually with the help of a consultant. Thus while they formulate the strategies, visions and missions of the organisation, in sum they will create the strategic plan for the organisation, which will be operationalised in the organisation. This strategic plan will be expected to guide the organisation moving forward and its components are expected to be implemented by every member of the organisation.

Previously, strategy was defined as being adopted from the military, designed to achieve goals. Hubbard (2000) highlights the importance of quick responses to changing environments and asserts that planning works in controlled areas but not in changing battlefields. On the other hand, strategic management is defined as the ''art and science of formulating, implementing, and evaluating cross-functional decisions that enable an organisation to achieve its objectives'' (David, 2003, p. 5). He went on further to say that the strategic management process refers to strategy formulation, strategy implementation and strategy evaluation. According to Thompson and Strickland (2003), strategic management is an ongoing process, nothing is final and all prior actions and decisions are subject to modification in the future. This process consists of five major, ever-present tasks:

- developing a concept of the business and forming a vision of where the organisation needs to be headed;
- converting the mission into specific performance objectives;
- crafting a strategy to achieve the targeted performance; and
- implementing and executing the chosen strategy efficiently and effectively.

Strategic planning has been defined as a process by which the leaders of an organisation determine what it intends to be in future and how it will get there. This process leads to the development of a vision for the organisation that is a statement of the hopes, aspirations and wishes of the organisation. The organisation's future is determined, and necessary priorities, procedures and operations (strategies) to achieve that vision are established. Included are measurable goals that are realistic and attainable, but also challenging. There is an emphasis on long-term goals and strategies rather than short-term (such as annual) objectives. Strategic planning assumes that the future of the organisation can be created by the members of the organisation; in other words, they can create the organisation they want to see in the future (Thompson and Martin, 2005).

Studies on strategy implementation

Several studies have indicated that implementation of a strategy is a difficult task, but nobody really seems to know the true rate of implementation. Candido and Santos (2008), in their article ''Strategy implementation: what is failure rate?'', noted that the difficulty of successfully implementing new business strategies has long been recognised in the literature; for example, Alexander (1985), Wernham (1985), Ansoff and McDonnell (1990) and a 1989 Booz Allen study cited by Zairi (1995), concluded that most managers believe that the difficulty in implementing strategy surpasses that of formulating it. The study found that 73 per cent of managers believe that implementation is more difficult than formulation, and 82 per cent believe that is the part of the strategic planning process over which managers have least control.

Though remarkable progress has been made in the field of strategic management, the problem of strategy implementation failure still persists. It is still important for researchers and an ongoing concern for researchers and practitioners (Mockler, 1995; Barney, 2001; Hickson *et al.*, 2003). A number of authors have studied the obstacles to strategy implementation, and deployment has often been cited as one of the main reasons for failure to achieve expected or projected performance in many companies (Dean and Sharfman, 1996; Mintzberg, 1994; Noble, 1999). A report by Deloitte and Touche (1992) shows that eight out ten companies fail to deploy their strategies effectively. Wessel (1993) argues that most of the obstacles or barriers to strategy implementation fit into one of the following inter-related categories:

- too many and conflicting priorities;
- the top team does not function well;
- top down management style;
- inter-functional conflicts;
- poor vertical communication; and
- inadequate management development.

Eisenstat (1993) argues that most companies attempting to develop new capabilities stumble over common organisational hurdles such as competence, coordination and commitment. McGrath *et al.* (1994) indicate that political turbulence may well be the single most important issue facing implementation process.

The above are among a host of reasons why strategies fail in organisations, but I have observed that failure to involve implementers at the formulation stage is a major problem that cannot be ignored. In most cases where strategies fail, implementers did not have an input at the formulation stage. They drag their feet at the implementation stage because they think the strategic plan belongs to the architects of the document – in this case the formulators, i.e. management. The implementers do not own the strategic plan, and therefore they shun it.

Having worked in different organisations where strategic planning was practised, I would like to share my experience and suggest why strategy implementation fails. The most common process of strategic planning is where the Board and key staff representatives go for a retreat. For example, at the universities I was teaching and other organisations I worked for and through observation in many organisations, especially in Southern Africa where I had consulted on strategic planning, the process was that top management would go for a retreat for a week or so to come up with a strategic plan, with a consultant facilitating the process.

Strategy formulation is likened to the positioning of forces before a war (David, 2003). War is a means to an end, similar to business strategy. The end might be a desired one (either power or wealth) or it might be survival when under threat. The military strategist, just like a strategic leader, has control over resources and must deploy them accordingly. He or she

must also make sure there is resource development and innovation, and mastermind the supply chain. The issue of positioning of forces is very important in achieving goals in business and in war. The forces should know who they are fighting, the goal of the war, and the strategies to be used. Generally they should be knowledgeable in all that is being done, since the success and failure of the war depends on them because there are the ones who will be in the field and the actual implementers of the strategy. The same should happen in an organisation: workers should be well informed of the whole strategic plan, as it directs the organisation, the path it should follow. If they workers are not well informed they might not have cause to fight competitors.

There is no problem in involving key staff in strategic planning because not everyone can go for the strategic formulation process, but the major challenge I have discovered is that the workers who are supposed to implement the strategy lack vital information about the strategic plan itself. As in the military, where forces are trained to fight because those who craft strategies know that without these people being well trained they will not succeed in their endeavour, in business the implementers need to be trained and well equipped to implement strategy.

Pitfalls that top management need to rectify

- Key staff go for a retreat to come up with a strategic plan for the organisation without the input of implementers.

- The strategic plan is brought in in the organisation and in some cases employees are given the strategic plan or they do not even have access to the document.

- Managers keep the plans on their shelves to gather dust and they ask staff to implement a strategic plan they do not have and do not even know.

- The final implementers will not have the chance to be trained in what strategic planning is all about.

- Company vision, mission statements and values are displayed in reception areas and sometimes in top management's offices, but these may not mean a lot to workers if there has never been an explanation of the issues involved.

- Implementation becomes a mammoth task because the employees were not involved in the formulation process.

Advice to managers

Communication

Managers should keep everyone informed of the issues taking place in the organisation. Even when the strategic plan is being formulated all members of the organisation, through their supervisors, should have input into the strategic planning process. There should also be a mechanism for making sure that organisation members' inputs have been taken on board. After the strategic plan document has been completed it should be communicated to organisation members. Management should hold workshops with employees; issues pertaining to the strategic plan, such as vision, mission statements and values, should be explained in detail. These workshops should be repeated to check the progress of the strategic plan.

Commitment by top management

For strategic management to be successful there is a need for top management to be involved in the process and provide adequate support.

Treat employees as internal customers

A frustrated employee delivers frustrated service, and this has a negative effect on the organisation. There is need for management to realise that the success or failure of a strategy rests on the decisions they make in relation to their subordinates. There is need to

treat employees as internal customers, and their expectations should be met in the way that external customers are treated. Morrison and Lee (1979) pointed out that successful companies seem to be distinguished from their less successful competitors by a common pattern of management practices.

Performance contract

Managers/supervisors must draw performance contracts with subordinates in line with the strategic plan and these should be reviewed regularly.

Management should have an overwhelming commitment to the strategic plan and involve employees in the early stage of formulation so that there is harmony in the organisation.

After the strategic plan has been completed the document should be distributed to all employees in the organisation.

There is need for strategists to have hard and soft skills, to have good interpersonal skills, to be artistic in the strategic management process, and to have the charisma to influence the organisation's members to rally behind their ideas without force. Strategists should have the magnetism to attract all organisational members towards a particular common goal. I recall one organisation where the Chief Executive Officer used to address employees in the organisation telling them that every member of the organisation was very important in their own capacity. He would say ''We are a team, but the only difference is that we are holding different roles, some are managers, captains and players. No one is more important than the other, success is team work''.

Display the important components of the strategic plan

It is the duty of management through the public relations department to make sure that the vision, mission statements and values of the organisation are displayed publicly in all the offices and explained in detail in meetings and workshops, and reiterated often. In most organisations, visions, missions and values are dead – that is, they are displayed but employees do not know anything about them. I was teaching a strategic management module for managers when I asked them to tell me the visions of their respective organisations, but very few could remember, and in one institution the vision and mission statements were only displayed in the administration office. Management knew the vision and mission statements, but employees were not even aware that there was a strategic plan even though there was a claim from management that implementation was taking place.

Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged that managers strive to formulate good strategic plans for their organisations, but the major problem has been in the implementation of such strategic plans. Most managers are struggling to communicate the strategic plan to employees, who did not participate in coming up with the plan. The issue is that most employees are expected to implement a strategic plan they even do not know about. Good strategies are crafted but the implementers are not well informed about what they are supposed to implement. Therefore the issue of a missing link between the formulation stage and the implementation stage can be envisaged: implementers are not involved in the formulation stage and as a result it becomes very difficult for managers to communicate the strategic plan. In many organisations I have visited I struggled to get the strategic plan document from employees; they referred me to their supervisor's offices.

On another note, most organisations lack people who can articulate the contents of a strategic plan and its importance and the vision to include internal stakeholders during the strategy formulation process. Thus, there is a missing link between strategy formulation and strategy implementation to such an extent that other researchers have suggested that since they affect one another they should be done simultaneously, while other researchers have cited the separation of the formulation and implementation phases as the root cause of many strategy failures.

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