

Strategic Implementation as a Core Competency

The 5P's Model

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Abstract

Whereas strategy formation has received robust examination in the literature, explicit guidance toward strategy implementation has been meager. Unfortunately, most strategic planning efforts fail during this crucial phase wasting significant resources already invested. Because of the abysmal success rates in plan realization, we suggest that the systematic strategy implementation requires a more integrative methodology. While it is feasible to theoretically separate the academic domains of strategic management, operations management, organizational behavior, etc., such an approach is not pragmatic for organizational leaders charged with conceptual execution. These leaders would benefit from a more inclusive framework so that strategic implementation, as opposed to the myopic focus on strategy formulation, might emerge as a core competency. Based upon this premise, we integrate theory and research from supposed disparate business disciplines to offer the 5P's model, a universal, comprehensive representation of effective strategy implementation.

Keywords: Strategy implementation, core competency, 5 P's model

While conceptual and analytical models of strategy formulation have continued to develop, such offerings within the realm of strategy execution have been meager at best. Without coherent, aligned implementation, however, “even the most superior strategy is useless” (Aaltonen and Ikavalko, 2002, p. 415). Accordingly, many scholars have bemoaned the lack of attention given to strategic implementation (Aaltonen and Ikavalko, 2002; Al Ghamdi, 1998; Alexander, 1985; Noble,

1999). Rightly so, as in the dynamic, hypercompetitive environment of today, savvy executives realize implementation is just as critical, if not more so, than the development of effective strategies (Atkinson, 2006; Higgins, 2005; Kaplan and Norton, 2001) and “that strategy execution will emerge as one of the critical sources of sustainable advantage in the twenty-first century” (Biglar, 2001, p. 3).

Although we agree with this assessment, regrettably, recent data suggests the majority of implementation efforts are unsuccessful (Allio, 2005; Sterling, 2003). One reason for the dreadful success rate is the lack of an integrated viewpoint (Beer and Eisenstat, 2000; Raps, 2004). Reed and Buckley (1988) held the literature available tended to focus on specific subsidiary components within strategic implementation (e.g., strategic control, the role of human resources, organizational culture, middle-management commitment, etc.). To further obscure matters, this literature is explicated in a

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multitude of academic and organizational disciplines (Neely, Mills, Platts, Gregory, and Richards, 1994; Noble, 1999). Atkinson (2006, p. 1444) summed up this predicament by saying what we have is “a lack of theoretical frameworks” and a “somewhat incoherent knowledge base” with “many important gaps remaining to be filled in.” Clearly, a comprehensive representation derived from these various implementation elements and perspectives is needed (Atkinson, 2006; Raps, 2004). Although such an integrated, conceptual model of strategy implementation has proven elusive, we propose a model toward advancing such a framework.

We begin with a very brief discussion of the relationship and differentiation between strategy formulation and implementation in real-world organizations. Further, we demonstrate the critical role of strategic execution as a potential core competency of the firm and support our contention of the need for a more integrated conceptual model of strategy application. Next, taking perspectives from various specific implementation topics and functional disciplines, we offer and elucidate our comprehensive representation of strategic implementation. Finally, we conclude with our thoughts of implications and future efforts for those researching and applying strategy in organizational settings.

Strategic Implementation

Although we do not intend to minimize the importance of formulating effective strategies, the truth of the matter is that many organizations have developed “the know-how and insight to create the right strategy. Executing it, however, is another matter” (Zagotta and Robinson, 2002, p. 30). Unfortunately, implementation has too often been considered a “strategic afterthought” (Raps, 2004, p. 53), as most strategy textbooks describe implementation as an entity distinct from formulation, primarily focused on structure (Aaltonen and Ikavalko, 2002), even though the two must be interconnected (Pettigrew, 1987). Undoubtedly, many consider execution less “glamorous” than formulating vision (Humphreys,

2004) and strategic content (Atkinson, 2006, p. 1441, based on Alexander, 1985). In addition, too many in positions of organizational leadership seem to “get lulled into believing that a well-conceived strategy communicated to the organization equals implementation” (Beer and Eisenstat, 2000, p. 29). Experience, though, dictates otherwise as many carefully crafted strategies are simply never successfully implemented (Fauli and Fleming, 2005; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Mintzberg, 1994; Sterling, 2003), because many firms find it difficult to bridge the knowing-doing gap (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000). Of course, ineffective implementation can cripple the firm, as the needed strategy goes wanting even as the considerable energy and resources expended to develop the strategic planning skills and processes are wasted (Allio, 2005; Humphreys, 2007; Raps, 2004). “Execution is at the core of business success and forms a foundation for applying the firm’s competence” (Joyce, 2005, p. 69). Thus, many have called for a more robust focus on implementation as an organizational core competency (Biglar, 2001; Fauli and Fleming, 2005; Joyce, Nohria, and Roberson, 2003).

Implementation as a Core Competency

Most executives have heard the anecdotal refrain – “effective implementation of an average strategy beats mediocre implementation of a great strategy every time” (Sterling, 2003, p. 27). More than a decade ago, Egelhoff (1993, p. 49) demonstrated an understanding of this premise by declaring, “More firms need to shift from relying on superior strategy to developing superior strategy implementation capabilities.” This advice was offered upon contrasting American firms, which typically pursued unique business strategies, with Japanese firms, many of which applied ubiquitous strategies but with world-class implementation. The author (Egelhoff, 1993) asserted the development of such capabilities could lead to a sustainable competitive advantage (Sashittal and Jassawalla, 1998) that could be applied across numerous business functions, the basic definition of core competency (Hamel and Prahalad, 1990).

“Yet companies nonetheless often fail to operationalize their strategies in ways that improve the likelihood that they will be implemented effectively” (Sterling, 2003, p. 27). Alexander (1991) suggested many organizational leaders struggled with implementation due to conceptual confusion concerning the various elements and processes. Although numerous problems have been associated with failed execution (Space constraints and our specific focus limit our review of this literature. Interested readers should see Aaltonen and Ikavalko, 2002; Alexander, 1991; Atkinson, 2006; Beer and Eisenstat, 2000), we agree with others (Aaltonen and Ikavalko, 2002; Alexander, 1985; Goold, 1991) that one of the primary issues is the lack of a broad conceptual model. In reality, whereas there are many systems (i.e., models, processes, techniques) available to organizations for strategy formulation, there are relatively few such guides to effectively implement strategy (Aaltonen and Ikavalko, 2002; Braganza and Korac-Kakabadse, 2000). Therefore, the attempt to represent a comprehensive framework of strategy implementation appears warranted.

A Conceptual Model of Strategy Implementation

Braganza and Korac-Kakabadse (2000, p. 52) ... “suggest that to prosper in the future organizations have to develop capabilities that enable them to manage atomistically, that is, within each function, and holistically, i.e., in a process manner. Developing this capability will require business leaders to think and act in functional *and* cross-functional dimensions at the same time.” Consistent with this reasoning, the authors (Braganza and Korac-Kakabadse, 2000) asserted strategic implementation as a primary element in successful organizational performance. Cravens (1998, p. 238) had previously offered this line of thought and declared the major challenge in strategy implementation was “coordinating and integrating the activities of the participating individuals and functions.” — We concur. Unfortunately, conceptual models representing such comprehensive and integrative views are

extremely limited (Aaltonen and Ikavalko, 2002; Goold, 1991).

Moreover, those who have valiantly attempted to develop and/or extend implementation paradigms have tended to focus more narrowly on various specific perspectives such as senior leadership (Allio, 2005), cultural artifacts (Higgins and McAllister, 2004), organizational development (Heracleus, 2000), human factors (Martell, Gupta, and Carroll, 1996), middle-management commitment (Guth and Macmillan, 1986), quality initiatives (Pryor, White, and Toombs, 1998), employee buy-in (Michlitsch, 2000), and performance measures (Atkinson, 2006). While such efforts are valid and helpful, they do not provide an integrated representation to assist in the effective realignment of “structure, systems, leadership behavior, human resource policies, culture, values, and management processes” (Beer and Eisenstat, 2000, p. 29).

To illustrate such an inclusive view requires one to move beyond specific functional disciplines. While it is possible to theoretically separate the academic domains of strategic management, operations management, organizational behavior, etc., such an approach is not realistic for organizational leaders charged with conceptual execution. In recognition, some organizations have even created specific corporate-level units dedicated to coordinating the implementation process (Kaplan and Norton, 2005). We trust these leaders would benefit from a more complete framework so that strategic implementation, as opposed to the myopic focus on strategy formulation, might emerge as a core competency.

Furthermore, research within these supposed disparate disciplines have evolved to the current state (Sprague, 1977), with seeming oblivion to the fact that the “hard” and “soft” sides of management originated from many of the same foundational works (e.g., Gilbreth, 1914; Mayo, 1933; Rothlisberger and Dickson, 1939) and are certainly linked. Zahra and Dess (2001, p. 8) have proclaimed, “Despite some claims to the contrary (Meyer, 1991), the field of strategic management

draws on many social science disciplines (Barney, 1990; Jemison, 1981) and continues to derive its strength from its eclectic nature.” — We agree. While the academic disciplines and research may be distinct, the theories within them overlap greatly. For example, authors of strategic management books and models (e.g., Hitt, Ireland, and Hoskisson, 2005; Pearce and Robinson, 2007; Porter, 1998) include concepts relating to values, culture, leadership, measurement, and feedback as well as other strategic elements. Authors of organizational development (OD) books and models (e.g., Cummings and Worley, 2005; Daft, 2006) include strategic, performance management and behavioral concepts, as successful organizational interventions obviously require their use (Heracleous, 2000). In addition to process redesign theories, reengineering books include organizational development concepts because that is what reengineering is about (See Champy, 1995; Hammer, 1996). Further, effective reengineering requires an understanding of the potential impact on the people who are employees, customers, and suppliers. Therefore, reengineering books generally include organizational behavior concepts as well. Indeed, since people are the active ingredient in the implementation equation (Becker, Huselid, and Ulrich, 2001; Michlitsch, 2000), they must be considered regardless of the field of study or the theories and models being used. All the same, having acknowledged this truth, behavioral theories do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, organizational behavior (OB) offerings include organizational development and strategic management topics relating to directorial structure and design and strategic visioning and approaches to organizational change (Martell *et al.*, 1996; McShane and Von Glinow, 2005). Along this same line, leadership books include information on OD, OB, operations (process), and strategic theories because leaders manage from multiple perspectives.

These related theories and ideas, however, are not presented as a holistic, integrative pattern, the elements of which when aligned and deployed consistently can be used to manage strategic implementation throughout the organization and

its various levels and units. To illustrate this interconnected nature requires a model representing the inclusion of many such overlapping constructs. Lamentably, no such detailed framework currently appears in the implementation literature.

In what we found to be the most assimilated position to date, building upon the ideas of Galbraith and Nathanson (1978), Raps (2004, p. 50) contended:

Traditional strategy implementation concepts overemphasize structural aspects, reducing the whole effort to an organizational exercise. Ideally, an implementation effort ... doesn't concentrate on implications of only one component, such as the organizational structure. When implementing a new strategy, it's dangerous to ignore the other components because strategy implementation requires an integrative point of view. You need to consider not only the organizational structure but the soft facts as well — the cultural aspects and human resources perspective. Altogether, this integrative interpretation allows you to develop implementation activities that are realistic.

Even as we are in total accord with this stance, that strategy implementation must account for the inexorably intertwined elements of culture, organization, people, and systems, we also agree the need is great to move beyond verbiage to a more comprehensive and detailed outline to assist those responsible for strategic execution (Zagotta and Robinson, 2002). As a result, we propose a broad, process-oriented interpretation — the 5P's model of strategy implementation.

The 5P's Model of Strategy Implementation

We are advocating an implementation model that incorporates the various functional areas involved from a strategic and tactical perspective. When correctly applied, such a framework would require decisions and actions that are strategic in nature but also behavioral and tactical, requiring specific elements to be in place and aligned throughout the

organization to create efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, the model should be of a universal depiction, applicable to the management of an entire organization across industries. Consistent with this perspective, Pryor *et al.* (1998) initially offered the 5P's Model as a process for strategic quality management.

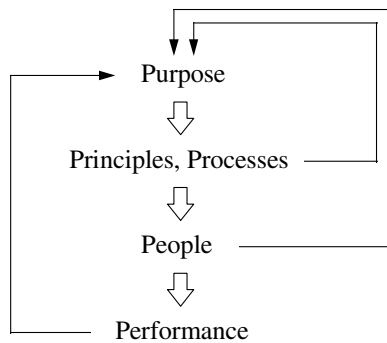


Figure 1: The 5 P's Paradigm

Source: Pryor, M. G., White, J. C. and Toombs, L. A. (1998), *Strategic quality management: A strategic, systems approach to continuous improvement*, Thomson Learning: Mason, OH.

The arrows in Figure 1 depicts the connection between strategy (Purpose) and structure (Principles as internal structures and Processes as external structures) and the influence of structure on employee behavior (People) and corresponding results (Performance). As reflected in this graphic, strategy drives structure; structure drives behavior; and behavior drives results. The arrow from Performance to Purpose represents the feedback mechanism for guiding an organization toward its objectives. This consistent and continual feedback connection is essential to successful implementation and management of organizational strategies (Humphreys, 2004). The primary motivation of this framework was to guide an organization toward performance excellence, world-class status, and long-term survival. As such, metrics and measurements were vital to strategic control and shown.

Although the authors referenced their pattern as a model, the represented diction (see Figure 1), while

sound, required much additional enlargement and expansion. Further development and clarification of this perspective leads us to more appropriately portray this interpretation as our demonstration of a broad model of strategy implementation. As shown in Figure 2, the revised 5P's Model begins to illustrate the integration and alignment of various strategic theories, value and culture theories, systems theories, behavioral theories, and measurement and feedback theories. Of greater importance, subsequent elucidation is provided as to how the individual elements, the underpinning of the integrative model, are applied in strategic implementation efforts.

Elucidating the 5P's Paradigm as a Model of Strategy Implementation

Though the individual elements, and sub-elements, of the 5P's Model are significant as specific components and have been the subject of various management constituent archetypes, their integration and alignment are even more essential for successful strategy implementation (Beer and Eisenstat, 2000; Raps, 2004). This necessitates expanding each of the essential modules with the appropriate internal facets (Due to space constraints, our focus on alignment and integration, and the target audience of this work, specific definitions of the facets are those prevailing in the literature and assumed. Supplementary clarification may be provided by the authors upon request).

Purpose. The elements that constitute the strategic intention of the organization comprise what Pryor *et al.* (1998) mnemonically refer to as the Purpose of the firm (Figure 3). This includes the organization's mission, vision, goals and objectives, strategies, measurement, and feedback. Leaders must establish the strategic direction and negotiate broad goals of their organizations (Humphreys, 2003), as well as the strategies and tactics for achieving them.

Many authors (e.g., Hitt *et al.*, 2005; Porter, 1998, 1980) have offered strategic management models that are used to manage from a corporate level

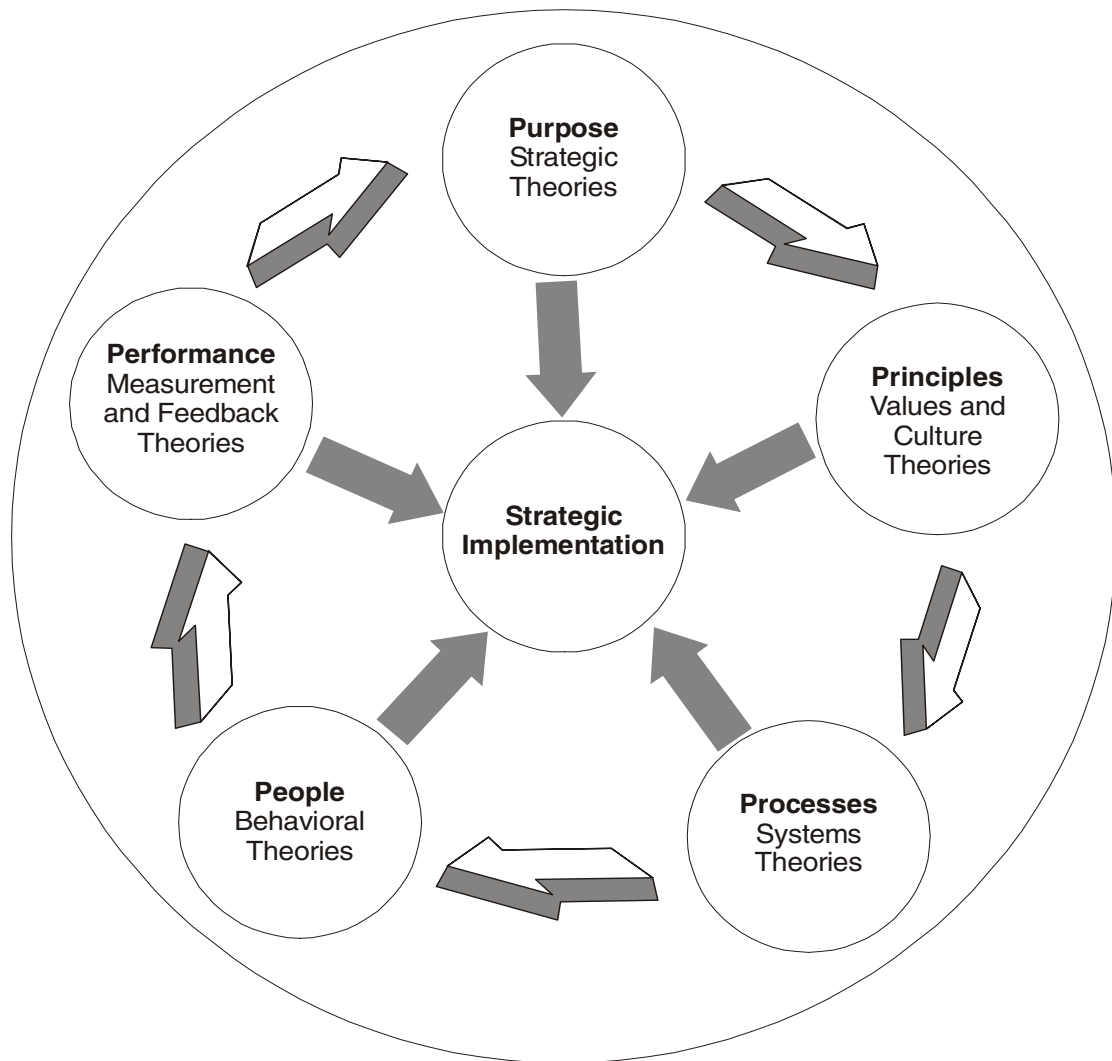


Figure 2: 5 P's Model of Strategy Implementation

perspective. These typically include examinations of a firm's numerous environments, internal strengths and weaknesses and external threats and opportunities (SWOT), as well as the mission, vision, core values, goals and objectives, strategy formulation and deployment, measurement and feedback of critical success factors. These analyses and elements are essential at the organizational level in order to set strategic direction, provided they are used correctly (Humphreys, in press). However, they are also vital at all levels and in all

units of the organization. They must be deployed vertically and horizontally throughout the firm. Therefore, basic strategic management processes must be an initial part of the 5P's Model of strategy implementation.

While this fundamental strategic management progression is a model which leaders should use for long-term survival and success, it does not include or illuminate all of the elements needed to coordinate complete implementation. Since strategies drive structure (Chandler, 1962),

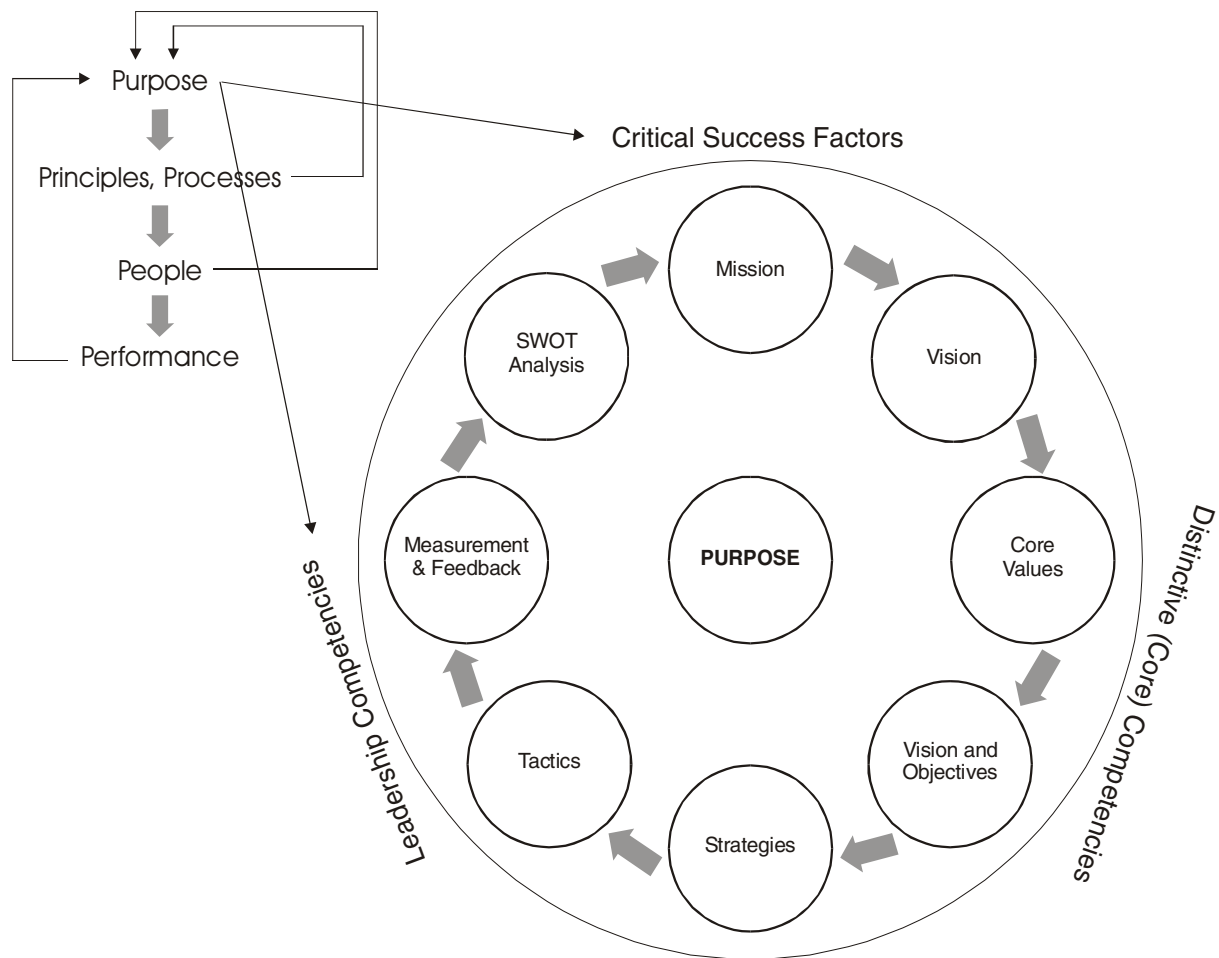


Figure 3: A Conceptual View Defining Purpose as Part of the 5P's Model

Principles and Processes must also be aligned with purpose (Figure 4).

Principles. The guiding philosophies, assumptions, or attitudes about how the organization should operate and conduct business are the organization's Principles. They are the integrity base, ethics, and core values to which employees are expected to make a commitment. Raps (2004, p. 50) asserted that, "Top management's principal challenge in the cultural context is to set the ... tone, pace, and character ..." of the firm so the environment is conducive to the implementation attempt. These core values are the foundation for the way decisions are made and employees behave. Organizational leaders generally understand the principles upon which

their organizations were founded and upon which they currently operate. That said, it is a strategic imperative that all levels of the firm "have the same perceptions of the strategic plan and its implementation, its underlying rationale, and its urgency" (Raps, 2004, p. 51). However, they may or may not understand the need for operating instructions in terms of these values. Also, they may not know how to convey these Principles to their employees or how to align Principles with the other elements of the 5P's Model. These Principles or core values, with complementary operating guidelines for behavior, must be deployed throughout the organization if they are to be meaningful to each organizational unit and to the organization as a whole. Thus, they are absolutely

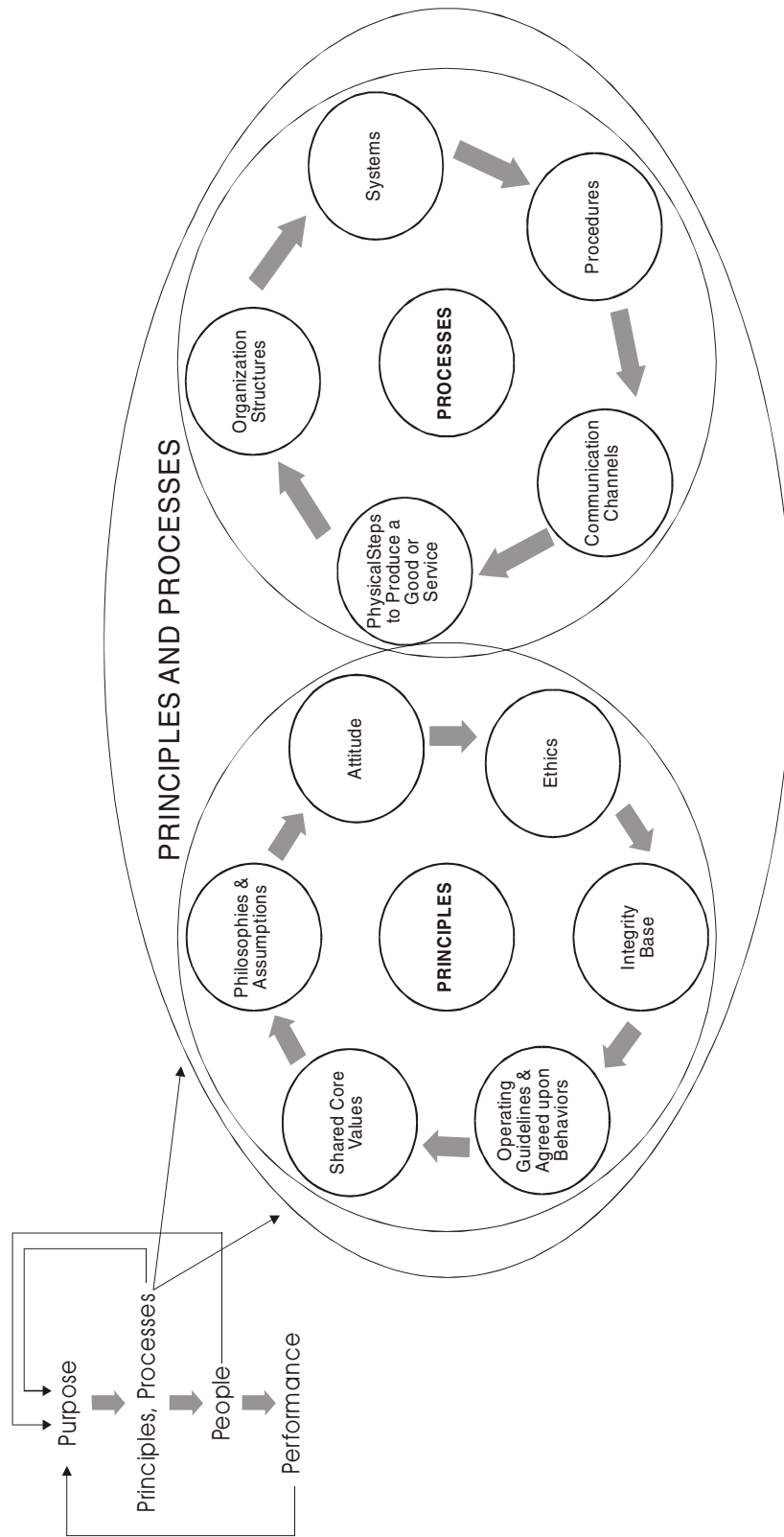


Figure 4: A Conceptual View Defining Principles and Processes as Part of the 5P's Model

crucial to effective execution, consistent with key organizational processes, and included in a more integrated methodology.

Processes. In the traditional process model, a Process involves the physical steps or stages by which inputs — manpower (people), materials, machines, and methods — are transformed into outputs (products and services). The extended process model (Pryor *et al.*, 1998) includes elements omitted by the traditional model — responsibility, controls, accountability, and authority. It is through these additional elements the concept of process ownership is applied.

With respect to processes, Montague (2000) correctly asserted that the process owners (i.e., the employees of an organization) must analyze constraints, hierarchical considerations, and environmental impacts that may affect how the process model is applied and the process flows throughout the organization. Discussions about

organizational structures, systems, and procedures are references to the processes that are used to make the products or perform the services that the organization provides, as well as the infrastructure and rules that support these systems and procedures. Performance appraisal methods, communication patterns, and production systems are examples of processes. If processes are not well documented, it is difficult to manage and improve (or even replicate) them. Therefore, organizational leaders should ensure that all processes are adequately recorded by checklists, process maps, or process flowcharts. Process documentation, management and improvement and process alignment are essential to successful strategy implementation (Kaplan and Norton, 2005). Accordingly, streamlined Processes that are well documented and Principles that are well communicated can drive behavior that is necessary to achieve Performance excellence. Since the organizational process owners are the stakeholders

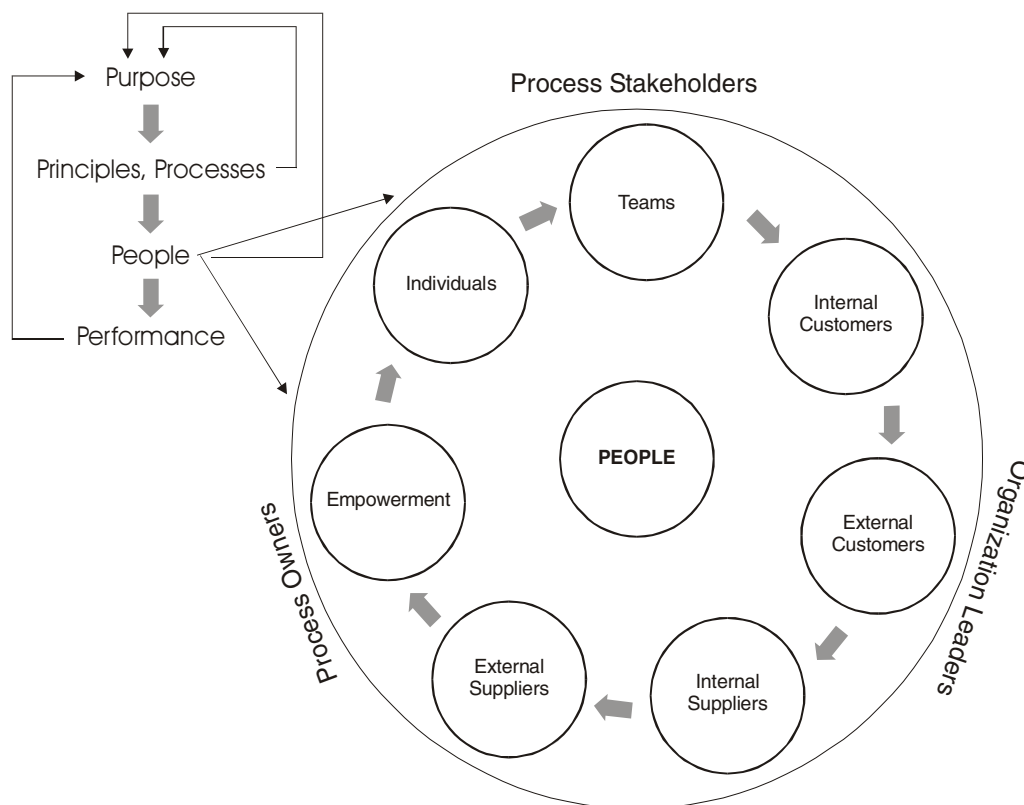


Figure 5: A Conceptual View Defining People as Part of the 5P's Model

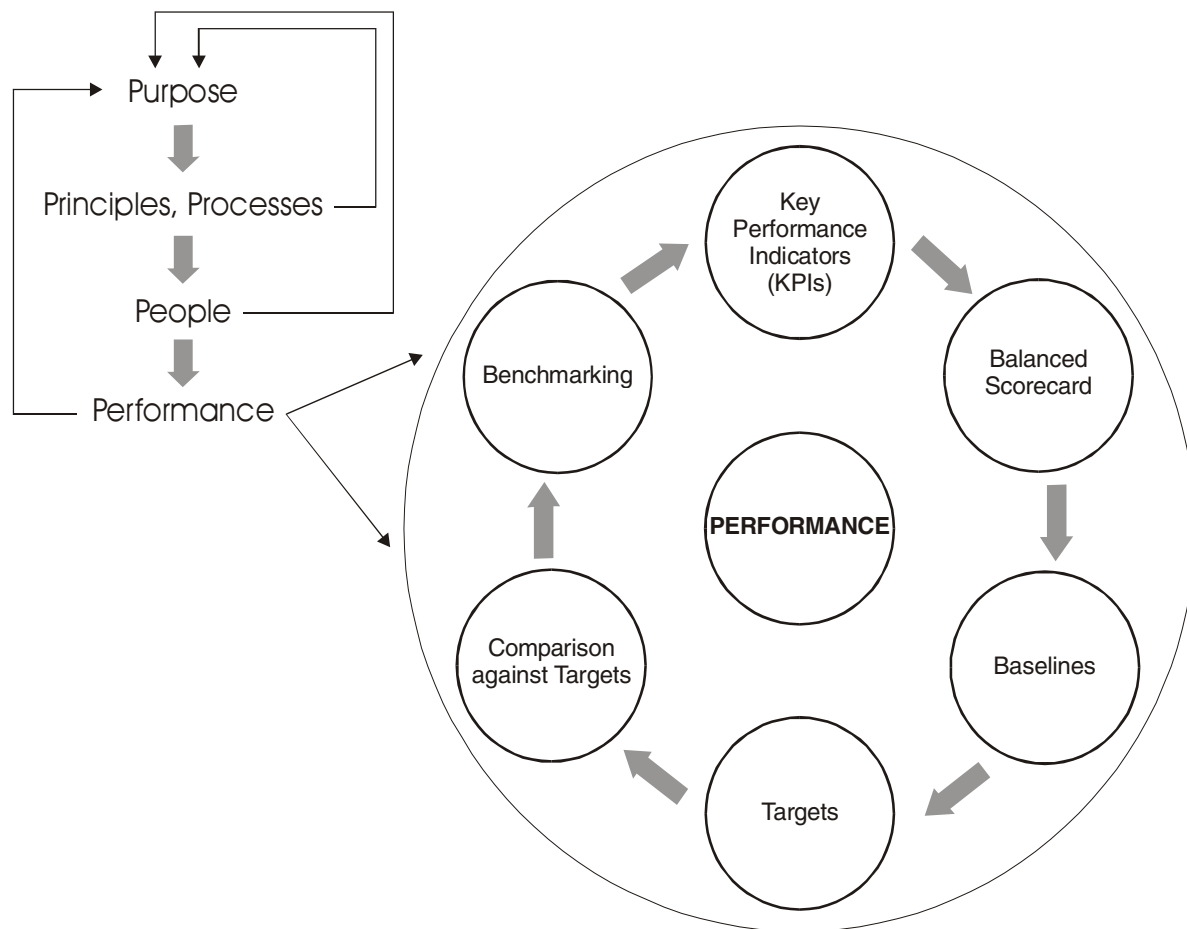


Figure 6: A Conceptual View Defining Performance as Part of the 5P's Model

of the firm, it also follows that People must be a substantial section of any depiction of a comprehensive and integrated implementation process (Figure 5).

People. Michlitsch (2000, p. 28) correctly declared, “Strategy implementation is best accomplished through high-performing people.” In the 5P's Model, People include employees, customers, suppliers, and others. As previously discussed, People are the process owners (individuals and teams) who perform work that is consistent with the Principles and Processes of an organization to achieve its Purpose (Purpose, Principles, and Processes must be in place and aligned before People can be consistently effective. This is because strategy drives the structure in which People operate to establish Performance). They are

the active components through which implementation processes are accomplished (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). Further, while recent research has indicated properly aligned human assets are the key to successful implementation (Raps, 2004), unfortunately, the link to the human resources component is often feeble or missing in many organizational execution endeavors (Martell *et al.*, 1996; Rousseau and Rousseau, 2000).

People are the process owners (individuals and teams) who are responsible for ensuring that a process performs as expected; and if it does not, they take action to correct the problems and alter the process. Process owners are accountable to customers and suppliers for the processes they own, and they are empowered to effectively improve these processes as the need arises. Levels

of ownership and empowerment are not static, but dynamic, with levels increasing or decreasing based on the individual, team, and organization (Mushin and Koh, 2001). Merrill (1997) emphasizes the importance of process ownership by discussing what happens in its absence. Without clear ownership, internal and external stakeholders fail to effectively communicate with each other and agree on requirements (Copacino, 2003). Without this strategic consensus, the People who actually implement tactics cannot consistently deliver the level of quality expected by diverse process stakeholders.

Yet the concept of People in terms of process ownership causes a dilemma for many of those charged with strategic execution. While it is critical for creating the management perspective and teamwork that is needed for success (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992), the designation and development of process owners is a somewhat unfamiliar and difficult step for many organizations, as strategy implementation is too often considered a sheltered senior leadership domain and possession (Humphreys, 2005). Approaching strategy with such a top-down mentality, however, squanders the significant contributions of functional level employees (Humphreys, 2003) who are the principal implementation actors (Becker *et al.*, 2001). If organizational leaders understand this comprehensive perspective of their People, however, and can align them with Purpose, Principles, and Processes, they are more likely to achieve Performance superiority (Figure 6).

Performance. Together the metrics, measurements, and expected results that indicate the status of the organization comprise the 5P's element of Performance and are used as criteria for strategic control, and ultimately decision-making. Performance results are fed back into the strategic management process to provide a means of feedback and direction (Humphreys, 2004). It is essential that organizational leaders understand and establish measurement and feedback systems for their organizations' long-term survival and profitability.

These control measures are used to expedite and maintain momentum for improvement initiatives, when the focus is correct. Measurements are not required to be complex but should be relevant, properly aligned with the relevant strategic initiatives, and designed to help process owners understand how the process works and show where improvements need to be made. Measurement is important because it lets the People involved know how they are doing. Measurements also tell employees how well the company is doing at designing and implementing changes and achieving their goals and objectives in terms of key performance indicators. Positive results affirm that the changes being completed are working. Likewise, they can be a source of inspiration for employees. Negative results (as well as positive) can show where weaknesses exist. Managers can then utilize empowered employees and teams to determine the best way to resolve the problems creating the unconstructive results and allow the organization to continually ascertain the proper alignment of Purpose, Principles, Processes, and People — a requisite in successfully implementing the firm's strategies.

Contributions and Limitations

This graphical portrayal of the strategic execution process contributes to our understanding of strategy implementation by providing a more comprehensive and integrated structure than previous descriptions. We have incorporated the various common elements into an overlapping framework and process and further, illustrated an aligned reconceptualization of the composite nature of these components, to offer real-world applicability.

As such, it is not sufficient to simply understand and utilize the components of the 5P's Model separately. The 5P's must be aligned with each other in order to achieve maximum efficiency and effectiveness. For example, if organizational leaders want People to work in teams, they must set up Processes to reward team success, not just individual employee success. If one of the organization's core values (Principles) is

performance excellence, then Performance must be evaluated and enhanced. In other words, metrics systems and key performance indicators must be established to measure the right things—safety, quality, on-time delivery, etc.; baselines and targets must be established; actual results must be compared to targets; and the results must be fed back through the system so that Processes, products, services, and relationships can be improved.

Another contribution of this article is the assimilation of the implementation literature across numerous functional and academic disciplines (e.g., strategic management, organizational behavior, operations management, human resources management, organizational development). According to Braganza and Korac-Kakabadse (2000, p. 45), “the myriad of elements within and without organizational strategy are currently managed on a functional basis, but need to be managed on a function and process orientation.” We agree and offer our representation in that direction.

Of course, as always, it is our hope the implementation framework will also generate future research. We intend to stimulate further inquiry and a broader appreciation of the overall process and the many elements that impact strategy implementation in disparate organizational settings.

Although we have provided an illustration of the process of effective strategic integration and alignment, we have not in any way weighted the building blocks that make up the overall model. We perceive this to be the greatest limitation. Future

research should likely consider the degree of influence exhibited by the various facets within each module. We believe the ability to represent the framework by degree of elemental involvement with relation to implementation success would be exceedingly insightful for researchers and practitioners.

Conclusion

When it comes to guidance for effectively implementing organizational strategies, managers looking to the academic literature are often left wanting and confused, as the bulk of this writing is slanted towards strategy formation. While we often think of the strategic planning process as a core competency, we propose implementation expertise and capability as an equally important entity for creating and maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage. Unfortunately, conceptual models of the execution process are lacking. We surmise this to be one principal explanation why most implementation efforts fail. While the intense concentration on strategy formulation is absolutely necessary, and something we support, we suggest the same focus and tools must be developed for effective implementation of those strategies. It is certainly time for management scholars to attempt to shift from specific areas of verbiage and discipline to depict a more aligned and integrated methodology of strategic execution. To not do so risks creating conceptual clutter for those interested in and involved with this most crucial aspect of strategy. Accordingly, we offer the 5P's Model, a universal, comprehensive framework of strategy implementation.

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