

Next Practice

from Imagination Lab

Creating the Context for Commitment

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Ensuring that the strategists themselves commit to the strategy is a first step toward implementing it.

Why Aren't They Implementing the Strategy?

Frustrated, the CEO of a major European services company lamented: "We have a great strategy. I've spent weeks on the road going around the whole organisation talking about it." In a lower tone, he continued: "They all have the strategy document..." He paused, and then with a tired look on his face, he leaned forward and asked: "So why isn't the strategy being implemented?"

Research being carried out by the Imagination Lab Foundation indicates that successful implementation not only depends on having a well-formulated and well-communicated strategy. It equally depends on having a high degree of commitment within the organisation – that is, an emotional attachment and moral obligation to fulfil a purpose that goes beyond individual self-interest. So how can leaders increase organisational members' commitment to strategy?

Creating Commitment

In observing and analysing traditional strategy-making processes, Imagination Lab researchers have noticed that a root problem may be the lack of commitment by the strategists themselves, which suggests that the strategy process itself may inhibit commitment. Our research indicates that the strategists must themselves commit to the strategies they create in order to spur commitment effectively throughout the rest of the organisation. To bring this about, strategy-making processes should allow participants to: 1) embody themselves in the strategy; and 2) engage in open and honest dialogue.

Embodying Strategy Content

Traditional strategy processes that depend on value chains, industry analyses and 2-by-2 matrices tend to generate conversations that are abstract and detached from the daily realities of organisational life.

Using an entirely new strategy-making process (see Next Practice 2002, Vol. 1 no.1-3), we have found that when strategists' own daily realities are brought into these conversations, and when they put their own views and identity "on the table", their connection with organisational intent, aspirations, and goals flows naturally. Contrast these different examples of the strategy-making process and outcomes:

Strategy Team A spends a day reviewing an extensive industry analysis that has been prepared by an external consultant. The conversation is guided by predefined categories (e.g., five forces) and the consultant's summary conclusions. From the outset, the team's view is framed by the categories of the model, which focus on the environment outside the firm and includes many "objective" yet assumption-laden findings and analysis. Facts and numbers dominate the conversation, which eventually yields a strategy document that is presented to the rest of the organisation. The strategy-makers themselves are purposely not represented in nor part of the strategy.

Strategy Team B spends a day discussing daily organisational reality as they use 3-dimensional materials to model the various parts of the organisation and the many connections to other agents on its ever-changing business landscape. During the exercise, events and processes surface, which surprise the participants. As they discuss the internal and external influences on the firm, they tell emotional and personal stories. The model that they eventually construct depicts a complex organisation in a setting that incorporates all of these factors, using a process where the strategy-makers have deliberately made themselves part of the strategy.

Our research suggests that because the strategists in Team B have invested themselves personally in developing the content of the strategy, they will feel more obliged – and therefore more committed – to act on the strategy they have created. "Embodiment" of strategy leads strategists to be more committed than their normal stance as detached, analytic observers usually allows.

Table 1: Are you creating the context for commitment?

KEY QUESTIONS	TRADITIONAL APPROACH	COMMITMENT-FOCUSED APPROACH
What is the relationship of the strategists with content?	Individuals are detached from strategy content	Individuals are embodied into the strategy content
What is the nature of the strategy conversation?	Watchful, guarded, and calculative	Open, frank, and spontaneous
What data is valued?	Objective facts and numbers	Personal views complement objective information
What is the role of emotions?	Emotions do not play a role	Emotions are deliberately incorporated

Strategy-makers must be part of the strategy rather than remain as detached observers

Talking Openly and Honestly

We have witnessed few instances during traditional strategy conversations where people engage in open and honest dialogue. The stakes in such conversations are usually quite high. People tend to express themselves in guarded ways and fall back on using organigrams, spreadsheets, and similar tools – which separate and insulate them from organisational realities. By contrast, engaging strategy-makers in a process that encourages frank and reflective dialogue, will naturally lead to more commitment to the strategies produced.

New strategy content can emerge from a process that allows embodiment and open dialogue

Recently, we facilitated a workshop with the top management of a large manufacturing company using this radically different approach to strategy-making. In discussing the competitive challenge posed by a new product that could substitute their core technology, several individuals were quick to declare the substitute product unworthy of much attention. Questioning the presumed superiority of the company’s core technology appeared to be taboo.

But when some members of the team moved away from the traditional strategy tools they had used to define their position, they described their situation in a completely different manner. In constructing the company and its surrounding landscape and connections, they embodied themselves as characters in a drama, and portrayed the company as a castle “under attack” from more innovative competitors. With this sudden openness, managers were able to make their fears and perplexity a crucial part of their strategy conversation. Far beyond initial expectations, this workshop produced a new strategy that aimed to co-opt competitors, rather

than dismiss their challenge behind a fog of charts and numbers. Thus, new strategy content emerged during a process that encouraged embodiment and open dialogue.

Embodiment and Dialogue Make the difference

A strategy-making process that facilitates embodiment and embraces emotions, is vastly different from most existing ones. In this commitment-creating approach to strategy-making, participants are encouraged to build themselves into the strategy rather than remain detached from it. Emotional honesty is valued as much as dispassionate, objective arguments in the dialogues about strategy. The very nature of strategic conversations is open, frank, and spontaneous rather than watchful, guarded, and calculative. Our research suggests that leaders should have such process characteristics in mind (see Table 1) when they set out to create strategy.

Conclusion

The answer to the CEO’s question, “Why isn’t the strategy being implemented?” does not necessarily lie in the strategy itself. It lies in the nature of processes that create – or suppress – commitment to the strategy.

Imagination Lab Foundation is a non-profit research foundation that conducts research on play, imagination and emergence and provides workshops and training programs for selected management teams. Imagination Lab was created in mid-2000 with the generous support of people who recognize the importance of play and imagination in human life. Today, we are funded by a range of private enterprises.



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