



Leaving a lasting mark on higher education

## 10 Critical Lessons I've Learned About Implementing a Strategic Plan

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by Pat Sanaghan (President, The Sanaghan Group)

I have been involved with over one hundred planning efforts on a variety of campuses (including DePaul University, Central Community College, Tarleton State University, [Stephen F. Austin State University](#), The University of the West Indies, Saint Joseph's University, The University of California, Santa Cruz, Cornell University, Anoka Ramsey Community College). I have had my share of successes and failures with implementation efforts. **Both the failures and the successes leave important clues.**

The success rate for the implementation of strategic plans is dismal, with the percentage of failed implementations ranging anywhere from 63% to 90%. In fact, Robert Kaplan of the *Balanced Scorecard* fame (1996, 2000, 2008) estimates that **90% of strategies fail due to poor execution.**

Actually *creating* strategies and inspiring strategic plans is not hard work. We have many intelligent, dedicated people throughout our campuses who have powerful hopes and aspirations. But having beautiful pictures of the future is not enough; we must be able to produce them. That's the hard, difficult part of strategic planning. We must become world-class at actually *executing* our strategic plans. This will not be easy.

I want to talk about some practices I've learned that *work*. Here are 10 of the most critical.

### 1. Always Have a Designated Responsible Party

One person (leader) must be designated as the visible, responsible party for each strategic goal. The "senior team" is not a responsible party; the "finance office" is not a responsible party. One person (e.g., Provost, Chief Business Officer) *is* a responsible party.

Strive mightily to identify one person and communicate this widely across campus on a regular basis. This is also true for divisional and departmental goals and objectives. Names attached to specific actions communicate an implementation mentality. Get rid of all the fancy pictures that usually exist on most plans and replace them with actual names.

#### EXAMPLE

I have a former client, Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas, that has four (4) powerful strategic goals with 21 supporting strategies. Each strategy has an "Owner," a specific person named as the accountable party for the accomplishment of that particular strategy. This is a best practice and creates an implementation mentality throughout the campus. To see more of their approach, please read their plan, which you can find on their web portal.

### 2. Reward the "Doers"

Reward the "doers" whenever possible. The "dreamers" already get way too much credit. Those individuals who actually accomplish something meaningful are invaluable. Find ways to reward and recognize them. When people see that the "doers" are appreciated and recognized by leadership, this starts to create a culture of implementation.

Implementation is hard, difficult, noble work, and essential to a campus's success. We need to support those individuals and leaders who actually get stuff done. They are the ones that will help make our campuses successful. Maybe if we had an "Implementation Champion" award to highlight the good work of the doers, on every campus, we would see amazing results.

### 3. Rethink "Accountability"

"Accountability" is a word that is thrown around carelessly on many campuses. We bandy the word about because it sounds like the leadership thing to do, when in truth, it isn't. The term can strike fear in the heart of brave and hardworking people, *especially* in low-trust environments. When most people hear the term "accountability," they interpret it as assigning blame. Who wants that?

Instead, consider the following:

A person or team who is responsible for a *specific* task needs to have *sufficient resources* (e.g., money, time, information, people, space, technology) to be successful. This needs to be discussed openly and negotiated carefully *before* the assignment is undertaken. No one wants to be held "accountable" when they know they have insufficient resources. Most people in higher education have learned how to do more with less, but sufficient resources are essential to success.

People who are engaged in real implementation efforts need *organizational support*. This is very different than resources. This could be political support, supervisory time and attention, access to senior leadership, an effective champion or sponsor for their strategic task and the permission to engage in cross boundary sharing and collaboration with others across the campus. When implementers know they have this kind of support, they will work hard to achieve meaningful results and be very comfortable being held accountable.

#### WHAT DOES "ACCOUNTABILITY" MEAN?

The most elegant and constructive definition I have encountered about "accountability" comes from the book, *"How Did That Happen?"* by Roger Connors and Tom Smith (New York: Portfolio Trade, 2011). For these authors, to hold someone accountable means: **"Effectively form, communicate, align and inspect the fulfillment of an expectation in the positive and principled way that enables people to achieve results now and in the future."**

Most people I have worked with in higher education would grab at the chance to have this kind of accountability in their lives.

## 4. "Tolerance for Failure" is Essential

A tolerance for failure is necessary because when it comes to implementation, mistakes will be made- guaranteed. Implementation is a *doing* and *learning* process, and mistakes are everywhere. If people are encouraged to learn from their mistakes and willing to share what they are learning with others, implementation efforts will be improved.

This can only happen under two important conditions: 1) the campus culture has to be supportive and have a fair amount of trust present, and 2) people have to actually get together to discuss what's working and what's not.

This is where senior leadership has an important role. They can convene *cross-boundary* stakeholders on a periodic basis to share implementation successes and failures. Convening cross-boundary stakeholders creates the opportunity for real learning to take place; it is also a courageous act. Initially, these meetings might be difficult, even ugly, because people see how their usual isolation in silos prevents collaboration, reveals redundancy and overlap, which translates into lost opportunities. But these meetings also provide a space for people to see the possible synergies, ways to share across silos and *learn together*. When that happens, implementation improves dramatically. This takes a tolerance for some initial messiness, but it is worth the effort.

### A GREAT RESOURCE

There is an excellent article, "The Failure Tolerant Leader" (2002) in *Harvard Business Review*, by Richard Farson & Ralph Keyes, that discusses this tolerance for failure well. It is worth a read for senior leaders.

## 5. Clarify the Decision Rules

Clarify the "decision rules." People need to know what their scope of authority is and what decisions they are empowered to make or when they need to seek permission. When there is "fuzziness" about what people can and cannot do, implementation moves at a glacial pace.

Give people as much authority as possible. Obviously, this depends on their skill level, expertise, past track record for accomplishments and their motivation -- but for decades the notion of pushing decision making down to the lowest levels possible has been more of a platitude than a reality.

### RETHINKING DECISION MAKING

I would suggest leaders read the book *The Decision Maker* by Dennis Bakke (Seattle: Pear Press, 2013). This book shows how a leader can push decision making down to where it belongs and actually accomplish things.

## 6. Small Wins Matter

Small wins matter. I resisted this notion for a long time and always tried to tackle the meanest, toughest implementation challenges. I was successful about half the time (which is actually a great batting average when it comes to implementation).

If you can break down big institutional goals into "chewable chunks" (small, clear steps toward the successful implementation of big goals), you will create a visible road map. The accomplishment of small, meaningful tasks and objectives will do several things:

- It will create a positive momentum that will take on a life of its own. People like to know when they are winning and it will help build their "implementation confidence."
- You will learn about what actually works as you move forward, and not have to wait till the end to find out what worked and what didn't. As we mentioned before, it is essential to share this learning across campus and improve everyone's implementation efforts.
- You will develop "implementation muscles." As people experience success, they will get better at implementation. They will learn how to manage their own expectations, make better decisions, allocate scarce resources appropriately and understand what actually works.

This is where "lead measures" come in to play. They can highlight all the steps and activities needed to create a successful outcome. These "small wins" can pave a clear pathway to success. They also allow people to "keep score" and see real progress.

## 7. Micromanagement Kills Implementation

Micromanaging kills implementation efforts and the human spirit. When people feel second-guessed all the time, they will not take the intelligent and appropriate risks and actions. They will wait to be told what to do and your implementation efforts will falter.

I believe micromanaging is an addiction, which, at its heart, is about control and a pervasive distrust in people. It creates a culture of anxiety and low trust, and with that kind of campus culture, excellence will not be achieved.

Eliminate micromanagers whenever possible, and don't reward them by moving to senior positions. They take away far more than they can ever contribute. This brings me to my next point...

## 8. Get People Involved in Creating their Own Goals

Whenever you can, involve people in setting their implementation goals, instead of dictating them. With implementation you want people's commitment, not just their compliance. Setting mutually agreed-upon goals is a collaborative discussion between the supervisor and the direct report.

Negotiating outcomes, due dates, appropriate support and managing expectations are all part of the goal setting process. When people believe they can influence and shape their goals, they are motivated to achieve them.

People will almost always do the right thing. In fact, I have found most folks try and overachieve and try to do too much. Managing realistic expectations is an essential part of the "doing" part of implementation.

Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* (New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011) presented the idea of B.H.A.G.'s (big, hairy, audacious goals) as one of the important elements of achieving greatness. With this notion, *in theory*, you establish "audacious" goals that broadly stretch people's efforts and aspirations. However, I believe this notion creates more harm than good. When people hear about one of these B.H.A.G.'s (e.g., double the endowment in five years, reduce the six-year graduation rate by 50%, become one of the top ten research universities in the country in ten years when you're currently ranked 48, etc.), they aren't inspired. Instead, they are skeptical about the reality, and they feel

defeated before they begin.

People usually know what is doable and realistic and realize the work required on their part. Setting up unrealistic goals that can't be achieved, under the misguided notion that "to reach for the stars" is the way to greatness, is simply a bad idea. Don't do it.

## 9. Middle Management is the Key to Implementation

This is a pervasive finding in the research on effective change management and implementation efforts (Chris and Prusak, 2002; Lepsinger, 2010; McKnight, 2010; Gast and Zannini, 2012; Mellon and Carter, 2014). It also resonates deeply with my experience on campuses.

Obviously, senior leadership needs to be committed to the strategic plan implementation, but unless the "vital" middle (e.g., managers, directors, assistant vice presidents) believe in the plan and are committed to achieving it, execution and implementation will be minimal.

This has several implications for senior leaders:

- Middle managers *must* be authentically involved in helping to create the strategic plan. If they can see their "fingerprints" on the plan, they will be motivated to carry it forward.
- Senior leaders need to convene middle managers on a periodic basis to evaluate the success of implementation efforts. I have already talked about the need for cross-boundary, collaborative meetings. It is essential that the middle managers get a chance to meet, talk and think together about their implementation efforts, problem solve and leverage their knowledge. It will also help build the *relational* capital needed for implementation.
- Identify the "adhocracy" on campus. Henry Mintzberg, the great organizational thinker and theorist, introduced this term to leaders over a quarter of a century ago: see *Mintzberg on Management: Inside Our Strange World of Organizations*, (London: Free Press, 1989)

Let's talk about the adhocracy.

Every campus has an official organizational chart that identifies the leadership officers, roles and functions (e.g., vice presidents, provosts). It is a useful artifact that helps campus stakeholders understand who does what.

But then there is the "other" chart, which includes those individuals who are the "doers." Often, they don't appear on the official organizational chart, *but* everyone knows who they are. These doers or "adhocracy" don't seek the limelight, but they work tirelessly toward goals of the institution. They are invaluable.

These highly credible, often *informal* leaders have huge peer influence because:

- They have reputations for hard work and for getting results
- They are deeply trusted by others
- They follow through on their commitments and keep their word
- They show appreciation for others and share credit whenever they can
- They care about the institution and try to live the expressed values of the institution
- They are sought out by others when people experience challenges and problems and don't know what to do

Senior leaders need to identify these people and engage them in thinking about implementation efforts, not just the doing part, but *how* the implementation process should be organized; providing honest feedback about implementation efforts and results and helping to problem solve implementation challenges. They tend to be close to the action and have real experiences (not theories) about what works and what doesn't.

**They are a strategic asset.**

Fortunately, finding these indispensable leaders is not difficult. Just ask your secretaries and administrative assistants. They will know exactly who those people are because of their reputations and the fact that they often refer people to them for help. Also, directors usually know who these "go to" people are because they rely on them for advice and getting things done in their area of responsibility.

Any time I conduct a strategic planning process, I work with senior leaders to identify these special contributors. I always want several of them on the planning task force because they are comfortable telling it like it is. They also have large peer networks and influence and can act as authentic ambassadors for the planning process.

Periodically, these folks should be convened by senior leadership for an open and constructive discussion about implementation progress. Make sure to engage them in an ongoing manner, not just in a one shot deal.

## 10. Keep the Focus on Results, not Activity

Look out for the "buckets of sweat" syndrome. This is where people are running around a lot, rushing everywhere, coming late to meetings, looking overwhelmed and a quiet frenzy permeates the place. Whenever I encounter such a place, I get very wary because the focus seems to be on *activity* and not on *achieving results*.

If you find that your department or division or school has this crippling and ineffective syndrome, I would strongly suggest you read the *Harvard Business Review* article, "Beware the Busy Manager" (2002). The authors, Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal, have conducted extensive research about organizational effectiveness and how people actually spend their time at work.

Their primary finding is this: only 10% of the managers they studied work purposefully to complete important tasks. The other 90% self-sabotage by busily engaging in non-purposeful activities like procrastination, detaching from their work and needlessly spinning their wheels.

It is a humbling article.

Read and discuss its implications and how they might play out on campus. I have used this on several campuses and it always creates a robust conversation and has influenced many to change the way they work.

Implementation is *not* busy work. It is focusing on what really matters, applying great effort, learning from doing, and achieving meaningful results.

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