Getting the timing right– Four dilemmas of timing strategy execution

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Getting the timing right

Four dilemmas of timing strategy execution

**Challenge**

Timing is essential in the strategizing process, but getting it right is hard: if senior managers push a strategy too quickly through the organization, they may lose followers, not involve relevant stakeholders, decrease adoption or even push an unrealistic or irrelevant strategy through the organization. If senior managers are too slow, they lose the momentum, people may be demotivated, the strategic initiative loses priority, and again, execution fails. How could senior managers get the timing right?

**TIME HORIZON DILEMMA**

Strategies are about the future. While we accept that we cannot know what can and will happen in the future, do we actually acknowledge what we do not know about our current situation? Do we look far enough into the future? Are we ambitious enough? How do we balance the need for realism and ambition?

Interviewees suggest that understanding the uncertainties of the current situation of the firm has a strikingly impact on the firm’s ability to implement their long-term ambition. At the same time, if managers are too focused on the current situation, they fail to develop an ambitious leap into a potentially ‘better’ future.

**URGENCY DILEMMA**

We need to make strategy execution relevant now. It is hard to admit, but sometimes, even a crisis can be made useful to implement the desired strategy. But sometimes pushing doesn’t help. When to push the strategy execution and when to allow it to sink in?

Interviewees suggest that pressing for urgency needs to be balanced with time for reflection. As frustrated as it may feel, change takes time to sink in. Interviewees mentioned the need to switch between periods to increase pressure, and make the strategy seem urgent, and times to suspend the urgency, plant ideas and let them germinate.

**PROCESS DILEMMA**

The sequence of activities play a major role on how the strategy will unfold in practice. While planning such sequence is necessary to guide the strategy execution process and sticking to the plan provides the needed stability, any plan will require adjustments. To what extend do we stick to the plan and when do we adjust?

Interviewees shared strategies to sequencing activities in strategy execution. Many followed classic organizational change and strategy deployment models from textbooks and consultancies as a starting point, and adjusted carefully and slowly along the way, balancing the need for responsiveness and stability. Their dilemma was to adjust and iterate the process as much as needed, but not more.

**RHYTHM DILEMMA**

Organizations have a heartbeat and so do strategies. Monday meetings, progress review every third month, strategy planning every three years, etc. When it comes to strategy implementation, senior managers ponder who gets to set the rhythm? How can different rhythms be aligned? What does it take to get everybody on the same beat? Can the strategy implementation dictate its own rhythm?

According to our interviewees, the organizational rhythm (e.g. meetings, reports) took a great proportion of their time and was used by and interfering with the strategy execution. Therefore, the senior managers responsible for the strategy implementation balanced the need to create a rhythm of the initiative, and the need to entrain that rhythm in the firm.

**Research method**

Based on 36 interviews with senior managers and the theoretical foundations of temporal institutional work (e.g. Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016; Gersick, 1994), we suggest four dilemmas managers face to get the timing right: time-horizon, urgency, process and rhythm.

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**TIME HORIZON DILEMMA**

*Ambitious future*

Surrendering to the fact that there is not a sound strategy.

Dare to be ambitious.

*Conservative present*

Change is not feasible if detached from day-to-day reality.

Be realistic.

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**URGENCY DILEMMA**

*Constructing urgency*

Making the strategy relevant now.

Create turbulence.

*Suspending urgency*

Opening space for reflection and maturation of the initiative.

Let the ideas sink in.

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**PROCESS DILEMMA**

*Sequencing activities*

Benefiting from the stability of a process to guide the strategic initiative.

Keep a stable process.

*Iterating activities*

Testing and adjusting the strategy initiative along the way.

Adjust and iterate the process.

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**RHYTHM DILEMMA**

*Enacting rhythm*

Managing and claiming ownership of the strategy initiative regularly.

Create the heartbeat of the initiative.

*Entraining rhythm*

Synchronizing the rhythm of the initiative with expectations across hierarchical levels and departments.

Embed the rhythm across the organization.

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**STRIVING FOR AN AMBITIOUS REALISM**

**A STORY FROM PRACTICE**

A large traditional Swedish firm designed an ambitious strategy to become market leaders. The strategy though relied on a sophisticated IT infrastructure. However, the company had limited understanding of IT and the strategy failed to add the need for IT capability development. (Senior Consultant)

**CREATING AND SUSPENDING URGENCY**

**A STORY FROM PRACTICE**

A large technology firm is emphasizing Artificial Intelligence in their new strategy. The strategy emerged from a sense of urgency from rapidly changing market and technologies. Senior manager leading the strategy though sensed that relevant stakeholders would oppose the strategy, if asked individually. Their tactic was to start planting the AI ideas 2 years ahead of the planned start of the strategy execution, so, people were already on board on the change before launching the new strategy. (Senior Strategy & Business Development Manager)

**SEQUENCING AND ITERATING ACTIVITIES**

**A STORY FROM PRACTICE**

A medical equipment firm planned the expansion of production capacity in three distinct stages, with strong iterative processes within each stage. The sequence helped them communicate the strategy and their progress. Yet, the phases guided but didn’t determine the processes. The leader of the strategy execution navigated from established sequences to iterative activities gracefully. For example, as they faced strong scrutiny of the finance department, iterative activities became the modus operandi. (Head of Projects and Development, responsible for the strategy initiative)

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**Synchronizing the rhythm of the initiative with expectations across hierarchical levels and departments**

*How often should we meet?*

How is our rhythm in line with expectations and practices of the organization?

*Enacting rhythm*

Managing and claiming ownership of the strategy initiative regularly.

Create the heartbeat of the initiative.

*Entraining rhythm*

Synchronizing the rhythm of the initiative with expectations across hierarchical levels and departments.

Embed the rhythm across the organization.

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