

FOUR STEPS TO SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENT YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN

By Julie Ryan

Following approval of the proposed strategic plan, there is an audible sigh of relief in the board room. The months of planning and engagement have resulted in clearly defined strategic priorities, and your leadership group is aligned to deliver on a great set of strategies. Now you can take that vacation you put off and bask in the glow of successfully completing this big initiative. But wait! Now the implementation is in front of you. It does not matter that you have a stellar strategic plan if you don't deliver on it. Implementation is the next job ahead.

Rest easy, you can still take that vacation. While many companies struggle with strategy implementation, yours will not because you have a plan to avoid the typical pitfalls. A smooth implementation comes down to four steps: alternative scenarios, project planning, workforce engagement, and reporting.

1. Alternative scenarios

Some organizations fail to consider alternative scenarios, which can expose them when reality is different from the assumptions. When utilities slip into defensive or reactive mode, that can trigger an over-response where the strategy is left by the side of the road. You already know the adage: forecasts are never correct. And your team understands that there will always be some surprises that differ from the base assumptions. But because you did a risk analysis as part of your original strategic plan, your team has considered alternative scenarios and you have discussed how you could adapt the strategy. This is not just an exercise. Even if a different event occurs that you hadn't identified as an alternative scenario, your team is prepared to adapt to a different reality. Proactive analysis of potential risks and associated mitigation has helped prepare your organization to respond to surprises.

2. Project planning

Weak project planning could result in uncoordinated actions or lack of action. However, this will not be an issue for your organization because your team sees the strategic plan as one massive project that requires deft project management techniques. You believe that your implementation will be as carefully planned as the strategy was. The implementation plan will unfold as a multiple-year plan, where activities are staged over time. And the first 12 to 24 months of activities will be the most carefully mapped out, with more detail and more specific action items than in the later years. This will be a large project plan with different tasks and interdependencies that are updated as work unfolds over the coming months. The implementation plan notes sequential activities, parallel activities, and outcomes. In addition to start and complete dates, the implementation plan has mid-project milestones and associated deliverables.

3. Workforce engagement

If leadership fails to embrace the strategic plan, no one else will implement it. Fortunately, your leadership team has demonstrated the will to make this plan come to life. Your leaders are ready to walk the walk and talk the talk. Further, they know to create a line of sight between individual employees' responsibilities and the strategic plan.

You have given a lot of thought to impacts inside the organization. While the strategic priorities should be of no surprise to employees, the strategies may require a different way of working together. For decades, change occurred at a glacial pace inside the utility and work was easily compartmentalized into different areas. But with increasing regulations and swiftly changing technologies, this is less so. For example, your planned future investment in new grid technology could impact field operations, engineering, IT and operational technology, human resources, and more areas. Realize that people may not be used to a rapidly changing environment. Changes to traditional roles or responsibilities can be uncomfortable for some employees, so acknowledge that change management may be needed to help employees acclimate to changes inside the utility.

Looking holistically at what needs to be completed, you realize that limiting decision-making to the executive level will stymie efforts to implement the strategies. Decisions must be pushed further down into the organization, delegating to those with the necessary technical skills and experience. Yet this can be challenging in a traditional, top-down work culture. It will require clear communication about where and how decisions are made in order to push decision-making deeper into the organization.

Having people in the right roles is critical for a strong implementation plan. Your team has already discussed how the work must be distributed across time and across people; everyone acknowledges that there has been a tendency to keep assigning the same good people to important initiatives. You and the leadership team have already begun discussing how strategy projects could be structured to engage more employees and support additional professional growth.

4. Reporting

Your mind now shifts to the board. Their questions throughout the strategic planning process and their interest in the strategic plan's success foreshadow their likely desire to hear about the strategies' progress. Targets must be calibrated appropriately to be consistent with the success measures in the strategic plan and to create the right outcomes. The board reporting package will need to be restructured to provide updates on the strategies' implementation. You want the reporting package to be a helpful management tool as well as a status report for the board. The objective will be to provide valuable and timely information.

And lastly, you have already noted in your work calendar that the strategic plan should be refreshed in the next two to three years. While many of the strategic priorities will continue to be relevant in the future, the strategies will evolve based upon what gets executed in the next few years and what changes in the industry. **NWPPA**

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