

# Don't take your eye off implementation

BY **Aznita Ahmad Pharmacy**

Implementing a strategy is never easy; the number of failed strategies over the years is proof of it. Eight years of research by Bridges Consultancy show that nine out of 10 strategies fail to be implemented successfully. Something needs to change and it starts with the leaders. But before they think about what they can do differently, leaders need to understand their role in strategy implementation.

“The leader has to oversee the implementation. They have to make sure people take action in the right direction. They have to understand their role; most don't. They either do too little or too much,” says Robin Speculand, chief executive of Bridges Consultancy International, in a recent interview.

Speculand is the author of *Beyond Strategy*, which outlines what leaders can do differently to successfully implement strategy.

One reason why implementation remains one of the biggest hurdles leaders face is because they habitually underestimate it, he says.

“They [leaders] think the biggest challenge is to come up with the strategy. When it comes to implementation, many of them take their eyes off the ball. One of the rules of thumb — if it's taking you one year to craft a strategy, it will take you at least two years to implement it,” explains Speculand.

One of the things leaders need to do is focus on communication. A new strategy usually faces resistance and this is where communication can help.

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**Speculand: If it takes one year to craft a strategy, it will take at least two years to implement it**

Before announcing its new customer-centric strategy in 2003, Microsoft Asia-Pacific decided to create awareness among its staff. Speculand's consultancy, which worked together with Microsoft at the time, placed posters that would arouse curiosity in the back office. One poster showed a plane flying with dark clouds on the horizon and a caption that read, “Sunny weather today but there's turbulence just ahead”.

A few more posters showed up over the next few weeks and before long, staff started talking

about them. By the time the new strategy was announced, they were prepared for it.

“Emotionally, they got on board and then we explained numerically why the transformation needed to happen. The change was very well-received,” says Speculand.

Culture also plays an important role in deciding how well a strategy is accepted by employees. “The message here is that when a leader implements a strategy, it has to fit in with the way the organisation works,” says Speculand.

Culture and communication are among the eight areas leaders must focus on in a framework based on the one Speculand explained in his first book, written six years ago. The other areas are: people, business case, measure, process, reinforce and review.

“It's like a compass, so there's no one area more important than the other; some are more important for different organisations. One client may work on communication while another may work on measurement,” says Speculand.

“You've got to look at all of the eight, some are more important than others but you have to address each and every one simultaneously.”

The global financial crisis has only heightened the importance of implementation, and this has helped his consultancy experience a 5% growth over the last 18 months, says Speculand.

“Leaders are under tremendous pressure to deliver for shareholders. In the past, if something went wrong, companies just threw in more money. Today, they don't have the capital to do that. As a result, leaders have to do it right the first time.”

## Speculand's Implementation Compass for leaders

- 1) **People** — leaders need to engage staff members — their 'strategy customers' — and encourage them to take right actions.
- 2) **Biz Case** — the leader must explain both emotionally and numerically why the new strategy is important.
- 3) **Communication** — if you don't communicate well, people won't understand the change.
- 4) **Measure** — put in place the right measure when you come up with a new strategy, such as balance scorecard, financial and process measures.
- 5) **Culture** — a strategy has to fit in with the company's culture.
- 6) **Process** — if you ask people to deliver customer service fast and efficiently but they're using obsolete systems, then there is a disconnect between what you say and what you do.
- 7) **Reinforcements** — when people step up and demonstrate the actions and behaviours aligned with the strategy, reward and recognise them, not just financially but emotionally.
- 8) **Review** — this is the weakest area of leaders around the world. The entire implementation needs to be reviewed quarterly and parts of it every two to three weeks.