

# Strategy implementation: we got the people factor wrong!

*How to lead your saboteurs, groupies, double agents and mavericks*

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**M**ost of us are familiar with the expression, “people resist change”. No they do not! This was just one of the startling results from five years of research we conducted in south-east Asia. We then considered that Asian values may be a contributing factor, so we compared our findings to other regions and discovered similar results.

For years we have happily gone along with the notion that when organisations are making large changes, most people resist. They could have a fear of losing responsibility or stepping into the unknown or trying new things and, as such, we have carved out strategy implementation based on these wrong assumptions.

An even more startling outcome from the survey is that nine out of ten strategies fail to be implemented successfully. Could part of the reason be that our assumptions are wrong about how people react? Once again, we then discovered that similar research in other parts of the world came to the same conclusions.

The results of the survey and our own client work with governments, multinationals and local companies across four continents started us on a journey to find out why so many strategy implementations fail (see Table I) and how staff members respond to changes. We were again surprised by just how many people support or go along with organisational changes.

Bridges Business Consultancy Int. (henceforth “Bridges”) surveyed businesses from various industries across south-east Asia over a five-year period about the challenges they face when implementing strategy, as part of research carried out for the book *Brick to Bridges – Make Your Strategy Come Alive*.

## **Dynamics of change: saboteurs, groupies and mavericks**

The term “implementing strategy” translates to staff members as their having to change the way they work and/or do more work. They generally respond in one of three ways – indifference, resistance or support. Across the organisation, the distribution of these responses falls into a bell curve.

On the left side of the curve is the 20 per cent of staff members who resist change. These people tend to complain about anything and everything. They badmouth the implementation behind the leader’s back and complain that the money should be spent on bonuses instead of on lost causes like yet another management fad. Based on their characteristics, we call them “saboteurs”. If they win, the whole implementation fails.

The middle group of the bell curve, comprising 60 per cent of the staff, sits on the fence. These people neither support the implementation nor oppose it. They come in at 9 a.m. and

**Table I** Top challenges faced in implementing strategy

<i>Ranking</i>	<i>Challenge</i>
1	Gaining support and action
2	Communicating the change
3	Overcoming resistance from staff
4	Support of senior management
5	Aligning processes
6	Tracking success of implementation
7	Changing rewards and recognition
8	Acquiring customer feedback
9	Implementing new technology
10	Acquiring budget

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leave at 6 p.m. In between, they just do their work. They do not volunteer for additional work, but they do not actively resist change. Based on their characteristics, we call them “groupies”. They like the safety in numbers.

The final 20 per cent are those who welcome the change, embrace it and willingly support it. They are the early adopters, and are drivers of the change. Based on their characteristics, we call them “mavericks”.

### What we need to do differently

Previously, leaders led people through strategy implementation as if most were resisting. The successful strategy implementations that we studied recognised the three different groups, and knew where to focus their energy and how to lead each group.

Which group do we start with – saboteurs, groupies or mavericks? Take a moment to think about which group you have focussed on in the past. The right group to focus on is the 20 per cent who welcome and support the change – the mavericks.

Why?

We know that implementing strategy is difficult. The odds are stacked against us before we even start. We need to make it as easy as possible for the organisation concerned to succeed. The 20 per cent who support the implementation will come on board more readily than the others. Many of them recognise the need for change without being told the reasons. They see the benefits and immediately start to take action.

By starting here, you will attain early wins that can be shared and celebrated with the rest of the organisation. In addition, this group provides you with the feedback necessary for tweaking and improving the implementation.

While this positive group is adopting the implementation, it influences the middle group. Remember, those in the middle group sit on the fence and could fall either way. If they are influenced by the positive 20 per cent, they will start to respond positively to the implementation. They are the followers. Although that middle 60 per cent do not have the enthusiasm and drive to charge out of the starting gate, you can move them along at a steady pace in the right direction.

Once you have 80 per cent of the organisation moving in the right direction, you have created a critical mass and built up enough impetus for the strategy to start. But what happens to the remaining 20 per cent, who resist the change?

About half of these (10 per cent of the total staff) will resist but, if handled correctly, will eventually start to move in the right direction. They drag their feet and make a lot of noise, but ultimately fall into line. The remaining 10 per cent, if you are lucky, will leave your organisation and join your favourite competitor! Maybe they had the right competencies when they were hired, but today, they will slow you down and possibly cause trouble. Regard them as not being right for the job. It is time to say, “Thank you, and goodbye!”

General Electric uses a similar approach to this bell curve, calling it the vitality curve. The vitality curve, also in the shape of a bell curve, identifies the top 20 per cent of performers, the middle 70 percent and the bottom 10 percent. Every year, the bottom 10 per cent is asked to leave.

After a few years, we identified a fourth group, who were initially hidden. Based on their characteristics we call them “double agents”. They initially resist, but can become mavericks (see the list below).

Why is there the notion that people resist change? Because of all the groups, saboteurs make the most noise and, as a result, create the largest impression:

- *Groupies*. Groupies believe there is safety in numbers and, as such, are passive even though the change is an opportunity for them. Groupies are the backbone of any organisation. They do the day-to-day work that has to be done.
- *Saboteurs*. Saboteurs are out to sabotage the implementation. To identify saboteurs in your organisation, ask: “Who is likely to respond actively but to see the change as a threat?” If the saboteurs win, the organisation loses.
- *Double agents*. After observing many teams tackle the challenges of implementation, Bridges came to recognise another group who, over time, demonstrated different characteristics. The double agents are hidden among the saboteurs, which is why they were not initially identified. Initially, double agents appear to oppose the implementation. They stand back to see if this strategy is just another management fad or if it will last. When they see that it is succeeding, however, they switch from opposing it to being strong supporters. Only by their own free will can double agents cross over and become supporters. This happens once they see the desired actions taking place. To identify double agents in your organisation, ask: “Who is likely to respond actively and see the change as a threat, but is open to persuasion?” Double agents can be convinced only through actions, not words.
- *Mavericks*. Mavericks willingly and enthusiastically support the implementation. To identify mavericks in your organisation, ask: “Who is likely to respond actively to the force of change and see it as an opportunity?” A secondary question you can ask to identify mavericks is: “If your boss told you to fire 80 percent of your staff, whom would you keep?” In most organisations, leaders do not recognise and reward mavericks enough.

### How do you effectively lead each of the groups?

Mavericks need to be supported and rewarded for their contributions. A leader shows the mavericks what needs to be done and then steps back and lets them get on with it. When the results are achieved, the leaders say “thank you”, and reward the people who made the implementation happen.

Groupies must be driven and encouraged. Groupies, remember, sit on the fence and can fall either way. Therefore it is important that a leader walks among the groupies, driving them forward and encouraging them to get involved.

**“By starting with the mavericks, you will attain early wins that can be shared and celebrated with the rest of the organisation. In addition, this group provides you with the feedback necessary for tweaking and improving the implementation.”**

Saboteurs must be handled carefully and effectively. To reinforce a key message, do not let saboteurs become the focal point of your leadership efforts.

Double agents have to be persuaded and convinced. An individual, no matter how charismatic, cannot lead them. They will only come on board when they see the right actions taking effect and are convinced that the organisation has crossed the point where it will not turn back.

Here is a simple way to remember the effective leadership style for leading each of the groups. It involves the three leadership styles:

1. *Lead from the front.* To lead saboteurs through an implementation, you must be in control and hands-on. Be aware of what they are doing and how they are doing it. This means leading them from the front, in the direction you want them to go rather than the direction they want to go.
2. *Lead from the middle.* With groupies, you must get in among them. They will naturally follow, so you do not need to be at the front. But you must be among them to guide them gently in the right direction, show them what to do and encourage them along the way.
3. *Lead from behind.* With mavericks and double agents, it is best to lead from behind. The mavericks simply need to be shown what and why. Then they will embrace the change. Your role is to support and recognise them for adopting the change and new behaviours. Double agents cannot be pushed or challenged. Rather, they must be left to come around on their own terms, with some gentle direction from behind. By communicating the actions already taken and the results achieved, they will not go amiss.

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Organizational change,  
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### Note

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