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Executing Strategic Plans

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Well-implemented strategic planning provides vision, direction and goals for an association, practice or individual attorney; but it is operational planning which translates that strategy into everyday execution tactics, ultimately producing the outcomes defined by the strategic plan.

The key to execution or implementation planning is the conversion of strategic goals into executable steps. No lawyer likes to admit that she might lack the skills, knowledge, experience and discipline to carry off precise execution of strategic plans. As a result, execution of a strategic plan may be poorly handled, mired in complexity, leading to, at best, mediocre results or, at worst, an assumption that strategic plans just don't work. The fact of the matter is that the execution component is equal in importance to strategic visioning. I have a formula with my clients: Strategy + Implementation = Results. (For a detailed discussion of the road blocks that get in the way of implementation, read [Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done](#), by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan.)

Below are some common reasons for the success or failure of strategic plans:

- The planners and "doers" are not part of the same planning process. Sometimes, the planners, often senior partners, in the case of law firms, or an executive committee, in the case of a bar association, see themselves, consciously or not, as elite and above the "doers" or worker bees. If things don't go well, the "doers" get blamed. The greater the interaction, involvement and communication between these groups, the more that is executed efficiently.
- The right skill sets are needed for the execution process. Execution requires considerably more time and effort than the planning process. It is not the result of a single decision or action but more of a series of integrated actions over a period of time.
- Most of us don't like change and try to minimize it as much as possible, oftentimes to our own detriment. Strategy and execution demand change.
- Clear responsibility and accountability are critical aspects of successful implementation. Leaders must know who is doing what, when and why at each step in the execution process.
- Leaders must motivate all involved to ownership of and commitment to the implementation process. They must provide the answer to the infamous question "What's in it for me?" Linking strategy to clearly outlined systematic steps will help stakeholders visualize the change.
- Consistent communication is needed to ensure that everyone is on the same page. All the relevant teams must communicate outcomes, progress and changes.
- Goals should be constructed in terms of tangible, measurable outcomes.
- The more complicated things become, the more difficult execution is. Complexity must be consistently weeded out.

While this is certainly not a complete list, the above reflect some of the recurring themes I've seen when clients come to me trying to understand what went wrong in the implementation of their strategic plans.

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