Strategic Workshops: Why Genuine Results Are Slow in Coming

by Caroline Cerar

According to a study by the Advanced Institute of Management Research, strategic workshops are part of the standard repertoire of 76% of British companies. This was confirmed by a study in the German-speaking world in 2012. At 45% of the companies interviewed, such workshops were taking place annually. For the most part, the participating executives are satisfied with the immediate results of the workshops. However, if one takes a look afterwards at the workshop's effect on the company's everyday routines, the picture is often quite different.

The implementation of the measures agreed upon moves forward reluctantly. The things that were discussed and decided in the workshop appear to not have been correctly understood or at least not especially enthusiastically promoted in the organization. Actual or supposed contradictions and impediments become the focus of internal discussions. Sometimes the chosen strategic direction is questioned more or less openly. In the end, results don't materialize.

Deeper Understanding of Strategic Workshops for Successful Implementation

For workshops intended to review or redefine strategy, a smaller group of executives get together for an average of one-half to two days. During this time, hierarchical and functional relationships between the participants are suspended, at least in part. The idea is an open strategic exchange during which it does not matter who can issue instructions to whom and who can't. Specific rules of the workshop are intended precisely to steer the thinking and procedures of the managers beyond the customary patterns in order to enable new insights and discussions. Relaxed dress codes, a change in surroundings and a special dramaturgy also contribute to this altered setting.

In other words, such workshops invite the participants to step consciously outside of their normal corporate context. This applies also with regard to established management processes, regular meetings and committee structure. Strategic workshops are, in the terminology of the management research team of Hendry and Seidl, "strategic episodes" in which important strategic decisions are taken outside of the accustomed frame of reference. But these decisions have to flow back into that frame of reference to be implemented. That defines the obstacle that must be overcome throughout the organization in order to get from the strategic episode of the workshop to successful implementation in the organization.

1. **Strategic workshops require targeted re-coupling:** So that strategic workshops do not remain at the end of the day just mere episodes with an anecdotal character, it is important to dock again with the implementation design and integrate the results into the organization in a focused way. By docking, we mean entering into communication with the organization as a whole and the individual units and to use actively the processes and instruments for implementation that have already been established. But re-coupling must also take place on a content-related level. The new insights and decisions must be related to the previous understanding of strategy. The meaning and impact of the newly defined measures for ongoing initiatives should likewise be discussed. The connectivity must be ensured in those areas where continuity is key.

2. **Strategic workshops are more than the sum of strategic decisions:** Workshop results are not just a series of decisions on direction and methods. They also embody a common gain in insight, unified perspectives and commitment. Often, a very "special spirit" has developed in the workshop. In order to guarantee, in the final analysis, an effective implementation in the organization, there needs to be more than information about the measures to be implemented. The executives must also succeed in transferring the process by which insight was attained and the spirit of the workshop so that a true understanding of the chosen strategy can exist and with it, a robust commitment even among those who did not participate in the workshop.

Implement Workshop Results More Effectively - Avoid Typical Cases

This understanding is helpful when it comes to a quick and effective implementation of the strategic decisions made in the workshop. This is how otherwise typical mistakes can be avoided.

1. Principles of Implementation

Often workshops do indeed define measures but there is too little discussion on how to implement them. Examples include responsibilities, questions of project management, guidelines on the philosophy and quality and such measures as important Must-Have's and absolute No-Go's. Similarly, one should concern oneself primarily with the re-coupling. Which established systems or processes can be used in the implementation? What do the decisions mean for ongoing initiatives or the current understanding of the business? How does one handle a strategic change of direction? There needs to be enough time left over at the end of a workshop so that one can agree amongst the executives on the most important principles.

2.   Commitment Workshop and Implementation Workshop

With complex strategic issues, it often makes sense to get together moren often with the Workshop team to deal with decision-making and implementation rather than having a discussion. The time between workshop sessions can be used to review the results of the work done on the topic and to carry out further analyses and critical reviews. In addition, the participating executives also need some time to themselves in order to be able to deal with difficult decisions over a longer period of time.

Taking a break to reflect on prior results and different trains of thought for a follow-up workshop can bring important new impulses to light and make other perspectives open up. Arguments that in the prior workshop did not gain the traction they deserved can now perhaps be examined anew. New insights may come up.

It can also be very useful to write down the details of a chosen strategy in a follow-up workshop. In this way, misunderstandings, different perspectives of the participants and apparent gaps regularly become apparent. Having to write it down forces clarity of thought and balance. The unity and commitment that result will therefore be much more robust and viable because it was possible to grapple in this fashion much more intensively with the questions of strategy.

In addition, one has the opportunity in a follow-up workshop to examine the implications of the chosen strategy in much more detail. This will show which requirements and boundary conditions will be decisive for implementing the strategy. In the implementation program, measures will have to be taken up that will deliver to these requirements and boundary conditions. A somewhat expanded circle of participants can be very helpful in a workshop of this kind in order to be able to think through these questions together from different points of view and functional perspectives.

On this basis, important forward-looking decisions for implementation can easily be derived. Still too often, strategic implementations ignore these approaches and then run into difficulties reaching their goals, even though the strategic measures were well defined *per se* and the employees were willing to implement the new initiatives.

3.   Principles of Communication

The Workshop Team should still agree within the strategic session which value propositions and guidelines are to apply to further communications and how the executives should deal with the questions expected to come from the organization. If a workshop with especially critical content is involved or if it is a workshop taking place during an especially critical time period for the company, this will also have to be recognized in the organization and reinforced during the preliminary stages. In such situations, it is recommended that brief information be sent out on the day following the workshop. As part of this information, it will not yet be possible to envision the strategy but surely one can announce when and in what sequence the organization will be informed about the new strategy. Such clear information about the process and further procedures will reorient the employees and promote trust.

4.   Implementation as a Complete Process

As long as relatively independent measures are involved, implementation will be feasible without a lot of coordination. However, to the extent that it involves a multitude of interconnected implementation subjects, the approach and philosophy of the implementation become more relevant. The implementation must then be understood as a total process and configured in such a way that overall responsibility is established.

Unfortunately, the idea is too prevalent in practice today that it is enough to communicate the defined measures – following the motto: The line and function managers will work out the implementation by themselves. The typical losses from friction in organizations are often a symptom of this approach. The force of implementation on the responsible line in the organization and the prudence and intention of its managers in achieving the necessary coordination will often be overestimated here while the necessary need for overarching planning and control will often be underestimated.

There is also another recurrent phenomenon that takes place when the entire process is handled with overarching responsibility. With implementation, there is a change of responsibility. The respective line and function managers now come under obligation. There is a transfer of the focus from the larger context to the lower functional levels. Partial loss of the overall picture can also accompany this. While the strategic workshop has mostly been very carefully prepared by sponsors and external or internal moderators, this clamping function of overall management is often missing when it comes to implementation after the workshop. This is also a reason why, because of inadequate overarching coordination, well intentioned implementation work after workshops unfortunately does not often achieve the desired effect or releases unnecessary friction in the organization.

5.   Integration into Systems

Studies show that strategic workshops that are integrated into the defined strategic planning process deliver distinctly better results than stand-alone events. One reason for that is their integration into standard operating procedures which makes better docking and feedback possible after the workshop. In two-thirds of companies that conduct strategic workshops, this is already handled in this way. The workshops are part of the strategic planning process that is internal to the firm. Toward this end, the workshops are scheduled in a suitable timeframe. Their results flow into the strategic planning process.

But integration also means that questions which result out of the customary planning process or other standard routines in the company's everyday activities are appropriately collected and prepared so that these can then be dealt with calmly in a subsequent strategy workshop.

Implementation Rate – Potential for Improvement

The not entirely unknown phenomenon that, after the euphoria of a workshop, there is the disillusionment of reality finds no exception at strategy workshops. It is believed that clear strategic decisions have been made, the measures have been formulated precisely and these things have also been communicated well only to find that snags occurred in implementation. As varied as the initial situation can be for different companies, one finds that all too often, the implementation after workshops is subject to the same typical issues. At least one can, with a little foresight and caution, largely avoid these.

MMag. Caroline Cerar MSc.
Managing Director – Management Counterparts
www.management-counterparts.com

Source:

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