Bridging the Chasm Between Strategy and Execution

by Sid Fuchs
Director of Professional Services
Strategic Services Organization
Rational Software

Have you ever seen the commercial that depicts consultants briefing a customer, and the customer responds that he wants them to begin delivering on their proposed solution immediately? The consultants, with puzzled looks on their faces, tell the customer that they don't deliver solutions; they only talk about them. He'll have to get another company, they explain, to actually do the work. This commercial is about the chasm between strategy and execution. So is this article, but I'll try to dig into the topic a little deeper.

Traditionally, managers view the world as divided into two groups of people, positioned on opposite sides of that chasm: those who can think strategically and come up with new concepts, and those who can implement others' ideas. Managers recognize that both types are necessary, and that without the other, neither group would be of much value to a results-oriented organization.

Often, however, managers cannot figure out how to get these two groups working together effectively. And this gap severely limits a company's ability to make changes and deliver results based on a mission or strategy. We've seen it time and time again: the charismatic CEO who is a great communicator, a visionary, a leader in all respects, but who has an organization rife with operating problems, miscommunication, and an inability to respond to competitive pressures. On the flip side, we've
probably all worked with people who can focus on the tasks at hand but have trouble seeing the big picture. The problems multiply if a company's mission or corporate strategy is continually changing -- one day it's client/server, next day e-business, then applications, networked computers, and so on. In an environment like that, with continually changing corporate messages and strategies, productivity comes to a halt unless you have people with both conceptual and practical qualities.

Of course, that's the environment we find in many small high-tech firms today. These companies need people who can think strategically, then go out and get it done. In these settings, the days of specialists who are deep into a single area are fading, as pressures to deliver results with smaller teams in a shortened time frame are becoming the standard. Small high-tech firms need everyone on the team to be both thinkers and doers, able to help define the path or plan, then execute and deliver results against that plan. In larger, more traditional companies, however, where people are more sharply divided into strategists and executors, the key for managers is still to figure out how to get these people working together seamlessly.

**Engineers vs. Scientists - Why Both Are Needed**

A classic and time-honored example of the great divide we have been discussing is the professional battle between scientists (abstract thinkers) and engineers (builders). As I worked my way through college to earn my BS and MS in Engineering, it was clear that engineers believed the physics and chemistry students were off creating stuff that no one would ever use. We in the engineering profession, however, were building things that would benefit mankind and change the course of the world as we knew it! The scientists and the engineers each believed that their problems were more difficult and more important than those of our counterparts on the other side. However, looking back on this situation, it's apparent that without the scientists who help create and discover new technologies, engineers would be hard pressed to solve many of the problems challenging them today.

Design, chemicals, materials, and other areas that capture the focus of the scientific community play a key part in the engineering field. Of course, if engineers were not able to take the results and products of the scientific community and put them to good use, then there would not be much point for a scientist to work hard at discovering the complex chemical compound that solves a medical mystery, for example. The point is that it takes both vision and strategy and execution and implementation to make the world go round.

**Bridging the Chasm**

So how do you develop the ability to move from strategy to execution within a business environment? This is my specialty. The charter of the Strategic Services Organization at Rational Software is not only to help customers plan and strategize their software development deployments, but also to assist in delivering against these plans. Unfortunately, I don't have a single recipe for success, but below are some practices and
techniques that I recommend.

**Combine the Tactical (the How) with the Strategic (the What)**

In most planning sessions I have attended, the majority -- if not all -- of the participants think of themselves as strategists. What happens at many of these meetings is similar to sitting down and drawing up plans for your dream house without consulting a contractor. You may devise the most elaborate, modern, attractive home, but what about reality? When you deliver your plans to the contractor, you may find it is going to cost twice as much and take three times as long as you thought, and that some of your plans are not achievable.

When holding a planning session, it is important to have tacticians as well as strategists in attendance. This will keep the outcome of this meeting -- the plan for moving forward -- reality based and improve its chances for success. It is also important to understand that a second-order mission for the strategists is to push the tacticians' envelope and not take "no" for an answer until all parties agree that what has been proposed cannot be done. Challenging the tacticians to develop new and innovative ways of approaching projects will only improve the organization's capability and performance.

**Start with the End in Mind and Think Like a Chess Player**

When setting out to plot strategy or devise a plan, start by thinking about the results that you want to accomplish. Too often we put plans in place that don't allow us to get from point A to point B. The results should be realistic and achievable, and they should be associated with a quantifiable metric. Creating a vague, overly broad goal to improve performance, for example, doesn't give you much to go on and is almost impossible to execute against.

In addition, never confuse activity with results. This simple phrase makes a powerful statement. How many times have we done something without any awareness of what the results would be, or whether there would even be results? Every activity should end in a clearly stated result, whether it be a deliverable or a control gate to the next activity. Once you understand what results are needed, it will become clear what steps you must plan to achieve them.

In projects that lack clearly defined goals, there may be a high level of activity, but not all of it leads to achieving the goals. This "Brownian Motion," as I call it, wastes resources and adds little value to organizations focused on achieving goals.

It's also important to think strategically as you move through a project. Chess players approach the game not only by thinking about their current move, but also by simultaneously considering future moves, based on their opponents' options. The same approach is optimum in business: Anticipating reactions is a key to keeping your plan on track and reducing
the time it takes to analyze your implementation. Experience and careful observation are key ingredients in being able to do this effectively; both people and organizations do, over time, follow patterns in the way they respond to events.

**Leverage Your Team's Talents and Assign Responsibilities**

When staffing your team or company, make sure you have a healthy mix of strategists and implementers. It is important for management to understand which people fit in which category and also to identify players who perform well in both categories. To use a football analogy, if you are going to execute a pass, you don't want your fullback going down field instead of your receiver. Maintain a balanced mix of talent on your team and use people appropriately. Not only will you get better results; your team members will also feel a greater sense of accomplishment if they are operating in areas in which they can excel.

In addition to identifying the tasks required to execute against the plan, it is just as important to tie people's names to the task and hold them accountable. Don't assign an action item to a group: If you do this, you won't know who is responsible. Instead, assign it to an individual and establish a delivery date, what is to be delivered, and the criteria for success.

As in a software development project, each person on the team should have a specific role: analyst, tester, developer, project manager. Process tools like the Rational Unified Process (RUP) can assist with identifying not only tasks, but also which role should be responsible for these tasks, including inputs and outputs required to achieve success.

**Plan and Work in Increments**

Nothing can slow down a solid start out of the gate like taking on too much at one time. It's the proverbial "trying to put a river in a coke bottle" that overwhelms people and results in teams not having a clear picture of where to start. Starting with a high level of abstraction in order to understand the big picture and establish success criteria is great, but eventually, you will have to break down this high-level view into manageable chunks that each contribute to meeting the goals. When identifying these tasks, make sure to establish control gates with checkpoints to help determine progress and whether goals have been met.

How does one do this? Take advantage of your team's experience and brainstorm with them. It's important not only to define the tasks, but also to define the ones that make the most sense and can actually be performed, given your particular constraints and demands. Brainstorming with your team is a "force multiplier" that can provide checks and balances, as well as innovative ways of solving a problem. It also provides the team with a sense of ownership that will help drive the project in the right direction.

**Get Everyone on the Same Page**
No matter how good the message or how good the plan, if everyone on your team is not pulling in the same direction, then failure will occur. Moving from strategy to execution means enabling everyone on the team to understand where the team is going and what each person's roles and responsibilities are. To use another football analogy, the playbook is the plan, but the team can only win if everyone can perform all the tasks that lead to a well-defined result: first down, touch down, etc. Football practice, for me at least, was a constant learning process with respect to both communication and refining techniques.

Both at the start of the implementation and throughout, communication is key. Never underestimate how easy it is for teams to fall a little off track if inter- and intra-team communication is lacking. I find that most of the obstacles our clients encounter, whether technical, interpersonal, or business-related, can be overcome if people just talk to each other. It's human nature to assume the worst when a problem arises, but I have found that worst-case scenarios rarely play out. Most problems can be resolved, especially if the team understands the situation and what needs to be done.

Avoid Changes in Strategy for the Wrong Reasons

How many times have we seen a company's corporate message change dramatically but not necessarily for the better? This "flavor of the month" syndrome creates a very difficult environment for teamwork and often leads to poor results and frustration. I'm not saying that strategy should never change (it must, if a company is going to stay competitive in today's world), but the reason for change needs to be sound. Is the company impulsively playing defense or "catch up" and reacting to a competitor or a market trend? Or is the company making wise changes because of core competencies, new technologies, or acquisitions? Organizations that make frequent strategic changes for defensive reasons probably don't have a firm understanding of their mission, the market, and their competencies to begin with.

Learning From Experience

As you gain more experience in your field of expertise, it should become easier to bridge the gap between strategy and implementation. Each time you execute against a plan, you are building a knowledge base from which to draw from the next time you are faced with a similar challenge. It is also important to understand the value of the role that each person plays in the organization and to make sure the organization is well balanced with a healthy mix of thinkers and doers. In an ideal scenario, everyone would be able to do both, but that is rarely the case in real life.

---

1 The BBC's "Science Shack" editor, Adam Hart-Davis, (http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/scienceshack/) explains Brownian motion as follows: "Brownian motion is caused by the bumper car like tendency of molecules to crash into each other. ... molecules in a liquid or a gas are constantly moving around, jostling and bumping each other. Put a small particle into this environment and the chances are that, at any one point in time, it will be hit more on one side than another. The extra hits on this side have the effect of jettisoning the particle off in the opposite direction.
"The effect was first seen by Robert Brown in 1827. He saw through his microscope that tiny pollen grains floating in water were constantly jigging about. At the time no one knew about molecules so Brown assumed the pollen grains must be alive. It wasn't till 50 years later that Einstein proved this movement was due to the constant bombardment of the pollen grain by water molecules."

For more information on the products or services discussed in this article, please click here and follow the instructions provided. Thank you!