

STRATEGY EXECUTION – OPPORTUNITY FOR CONSULTANTS

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Old News is New News!

The inspiration for this case is the July-August 2010 *Harvard Business Review*. The HBR cover features articles under the theme, “The Effective Organization: Turn Great Strategy into Great Results.” In the lead article, Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, calls attention to a fatal gap most consultants have probably encountered. Martin’s article, “The Execution Trap,” warns that “drawing a line between strategy and execution almost guarantees failure.”

This may be “old news” to most consultants whether one comes to consulting by way of company management or is a long term consultant like me. Despite appreciation of this reality, the article should be a “wake up call” that reminds us to consider whether our solutions do cross the line. This advice applies whether our services favor the upstream strategy side or the downstream execution – and is certainly essential if we claim to prospects that we do both planning and implementation.

Dr. Martin, in his article, promotes the metaphor of a white-water river. Senior management at the “source” of the river makes broader decisions. These decisions guide downriver “arms and legs” who implement the strategy within the strategy-makers’ parameters. Feedback from the downstream doers assures the strategy-setting managers that the right actions are occurring.

This insight is not new, and solutions are available. Most consultants are aware of several robust methodologies that could fill the gap. Examples include a *Total Quality Management* tool called Policy Deployment, or *Hoshin Kanri* from its Japanese origins. Another is *Change Management* that often accompanies implementation of information technology systems. A third is *Project Management*. In fact, Change Management and Project Management are included in the *Common Body of Knowledge* maintained by IMC USA. Prospective CMC’s are expected to demonstrate awareness of these disciplines.

My Case

At the outset of a 30+ year consulting career, I was firmly ensconced on the downstream side of the white-water river. In fact, my first 18 years were at a firm claiming the capability to put corporate strategy to work by designing company operating processes that were linked to the strategy. In the late 1980’s, a publisher of my articles asked me to write a book that became the [Handbook of Supply Chain Management](#). I covered, and still do today, the *activity system* tool from Michael Porter. It does a good job of translating top level decisions into the activities, processes, and systems necessary to implement them.

Subsequently the publisher asked for another work to create a project management framework for implementing supply chain strategies. This led to a sequel book, Supply Chain Project Management. In the writing process, the publisher had the savvy to put me in touch with the Project Management Institute (PMI). PMI maintains the Project Management Body of Knowledge similar to that maintained by IMC. However, I had spent almost three decades in consulting blissfully unaware of the available tools.

Today, both works are in their second editions. One byproduct of the effort is that my IMC colleague, Chris Christensen CMC, put me in touch with UCLA Extension. This led to multi-day courses and other shorter formats for teaching and facilitating supply chain methodologies that apply over the spectrum from upstream planning to downstream execution.

This activity has broadened me personally – forcing me to dig deep to come up with new ways of connecting the dots between strategy and operations. It has also enhanced my reputation, credibility, and my bank account.

Issues/Questions

The fact that HBR devotes so much recent attention to this topic is significant, particularly for consultants seeking more revenue and personal satisfaction from their profession. For these consultants, I would suggest considering the following if you think augmentation of your services might work for you like it did for me:

1. Would the client market for your skill set support “full service” (strategy to implementation) consultants? If “yes,” move to the next question.
2. Where is your practice? Do you currently work on one side (upstream or downstream) or both?
3. Do your market prospects’ perceptions match yours from #2? If not, why not?
4. If you are unbalanced or your prospects consider you unbalanced, would you be more successful if you had extended capabilities in one direction or another? (This is not necessarily “yes” if you want to continue to focus on a narrow specialty where you are comfortable and satisfactorily profitable.)
5. If so, what path would work for you – writing, public relations, networking, speaking, teaching, collaboration with consultants with complementary skills, etc.?

If your answers indicate a desire to move ahead, map out a plan and experiment with different paths that match your temperament and skills. Good luck.