

On timing and rhythm for strategy implementation

Every executive needs to address four timing dilemmas in their strategy process, write Josef Oehmen, Joana Geraldi and Iben Stjerne



We know that time is important – after all, timing is everything! And time is money! If used skilfully, time and timing can be allies in strategising. But, surprisingly (or maybe not-so-surprisingly), getting time right is hard; it involves a complex balancing act. For example, if you push your strategy too much, you overwhelm your team, whereas if you do not establish a burning platform for the change, your strategy loses momentum. Thus, effective strategy work is not only doing the right things right, but also **at the right time**. The key question then is: how do you get the timing of your strategy to work right?

That was the starting point for our study. We wanted to understand what time and timing mean in the practice of strategy work. We interviewed senior executives in Denmark (where we work), as well as observed C-suite strategy processes in a large international company. Our key take-away is the articulation of four timing dilemmas that every executive needs to address in their strategy process (see this [infographic](#)). Each dilemma has answers on opposite ends of the spectrum – and you have to balance both ends in a way that works for your organisation. The four dilemmas are:

1. The time horizon dilemma: how far into the future do we look?

One end of the spectrum: Be realistic, play safe and develop a strategy that you know you can get. Understand where you are, and whether the strategy is within reach. This will enable you to create tangible goals and related action plans. If you tend too much towards this end of the spectrum, you may be too conservative and lose your competitive advantage.

The other end of the spectrum: Be visionary and focus on an ambitious future. Be bold, and dare to stretch the organisation to develop a new, innovative and exciting competitive edge. Your risk here is that you may be unrealistic, and loose valuable resources in strategies that don't work.

2. The urgency dilemma: how quickly do we need to take action?

One end of the spectrum: Create urgency, a burning platform and focus on quick actions now. People have too many things to do. To get anything done, it is well known that we need to establish a sense of urgency, and remind people that 'this work' is more relevant and imminently urgent than anything else they currently have on their plates. If you overdo this, though, your organisation **risks** that people may actually NOT buy in to your strategy or understand what it means to them, or how best to implement it in their daily practices.

The other end of the spectrum: Plant ideas and create time for them to flourish. You cannot execute a strategy by yourself, instead, you need your organisation to come with you. Sometimes, you need to just plant ideas and have the patience for them to flourish. A key risk here is that you lose momentum, the many other ongoing tasks in the organisation get the bulk of people's attention, and your strategy fails.

3. The process dilemma: what is our idea of a "good plan"?

One end of the spectrum: Plan carefully and then stick to the plan. Consider carefully the sequence of activities of your strategy execution. A good process can guide you and your employees, provide a sense of structure, control and safety. If you overdo this, the plan becomes too rigid and reinforced, sometimes in detriment of the purpose of the initiative. Yet, the purpose should be the ultimate 'guiding north', not the plan.

The other end of the spectrum: take the first step, then iterate, and in so doing, plan on the way. A good process is iterative, as all requirements and constraints are unknowable at the start. The approach here is to take one step at a time, learn, and then decide what to do next. Such a process is extremely flexible, but it may encourage short-term thinking, as people are encouraged only to think one step ahead, and it may also lead to a chaotic implementation, if you need to coordinate the work of many people in the organisation.

4. The leadership rhythm dilemma: how do you harmonise action across your organisation?

One end of the spectrum: Synchronise existing rhythms. An organisation has different heartbeats, the quarterly and annual review, quarterly board meeting, a yearly performance appraisal, weekly meetings, daily stand-up meetings, etc. In this end of the spectrum, you choose to respect the rhythms, and attempt to develop your organisational strategy in harmony with the required heartbeats of the organisation. The risk here is that, sometimes, organisations are too slow, and different rhythms cannot be reconciled. Attempts to synchronise with the current rhythms will compromise your strategic initiative, by e.g. losing the sense of urgency.

The other end of the spectrum: Create a new rhythm. Impose a new type of cycle on your organisation, e.g. adding daily scrum stand up meetings to push the strategic work. The risk here is that the new rhythm is not accepted, or that the meetings and reports are a waste of time, because there is too little to report (or if meetings are too far apart, the work cannot be continued, and it pends, (e.g., approvals that can only be given in specific meetings).

How to work with the four dilemmas in your organisation

So far so good, but how do you get the timing right? Exclusively using one of the extremes will lead to classic failure modes of strategy work. We have to find the 'right timing' by balancing between those extremes. Yet, there is obviously not one right answer to each

organisation and management style, but here are a few questions you can ask yourself when designing and implementing your strategy:

Time horizon dilemma: adjusting the time horizon of your strategy

- Ambition: How far can you stretch? How much risk are you willing to accept?
- Realism: Where are you? What can your organisation cope with now? Is the organisation ready for change?

Urgency dilemma: adjusting the time pressure you exert on the organisation, your team and employees

- Urgency: When should you push and ask for immediate action?
- Patience: When should you let go and allow ideas to 'sink in'?

Process dilemma: setting and adjusting your plans

- Follow plans: What sequence of activities should you use in the strategy execution? What sequence will put you in the most advantageous position? Do you have enough flexibility to change to unexpected events? Did you build in iterative phases that allow learning and experimentation?
- Change plans: Is the change in conditions big enough to justify a change in the plans? What impact will the change have on the strategy and organisation?

Rhythm dilemma: setting the strategy execution heartbeat

- Sync with the organisation: What is the organisational heartbeat (e.g. board meetings, department meetings, quarterly reports)? Are they in harmony with your strategy execution? Are there different rhythms between the different teams involved in the strategy execution? Could they be harmonised? Should they be changed?
- Disrupt the rhythm of the organisation: Is the organisational rhythm too slow for the current market conditions? Or are you rather trying to push too many things through, too quickly and end up 'running around like a headless chicken'? How can your strategic initiative be used to establish a healthier organisational rhythm? If you can't change, how could you bypass a (too slow) organisational rhythm?

Timing the execution of a strategy is hard and getting it wrong will endanger its success. While we accept that strategy is about doing the right things, in strategy execution we also need to do it right at the right time.



Notes:

- This is the fifth in a **series** of five articles based on research carried out at the engineering systems division of the **Technical University of Denmark (DTU)** and supported by **Brightline Initiative**.
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