1. The purpose of this Guide and how to use it

That old axiom that "the only constant in life is change" gains in currency with every passing year.

Since in many instances we cannot control these changes, we must adapt our organisations to them. As a consequence, organisational strategies, designed to realign resources and capabilities with a constantly changing environment, have shorter and shorter life spans. Hence, our ability to implement a strategy or plan and bring it to reality has never been more critical or more challenging. Yet, despite the significance of implementation, there is a yawning chasm when it comes to guidance for achieving "Execution to Die For".

It is this critical gap in the operational process that this Simple Guide is designed to bridge. It provides a model that maps the complete operational cycle from planning and execution to monitoring, measuring, modifying and revising, using the analogy of building, operating and maintaining a wagon wheel.

The Guide also identifies 36 barriers to implementation and shows when and where you will encounter them on the Wagon Wheel model.

Regular use of the model will hone your organisation's implementation skills and lead to greater customer, client, patient, passenger or consumer satisfaction; enable your organisation to achieve its goals and provide your staff with a fun and rewarding place of work.

The Problem

The fundamental causes of failure or ineffectual implementation can all be traced back to planning. Not the technical side of planning but the human side of planning. Poor execution is inevitable if -

- Planning and execution are treated as two separate exercises
- Too little time is spent by the planners in analysing the implications of the Plan
- Too few people are involved in developing the Plan
- The Plan is long on vision but short on detail

A brief word about each of these factors.

Planning and execution are treated as two separate exercises

In a disturbingly large number of organisations, the planners plan and then metaphorically throw the plan over the wall for the implementers to execute. When the execution of the Plan fails to meet the planners' expectations, the planners blame the implementers for their lack of effort and commitment and the implementers blame the planners for their failure to consider the practicalities of bringing the Plan to reality.

Too little time is spent by the planners in analysing the implications of the Plan

An executable plan is made up of three components:

- Phase 1 - this is what we want to do
- Phase 2 - this is how we are going to do it
- Phase 3 - the initial Action Plan - based on Phase 2, not Phase 1

In all too many cases, the amount of time spent determining Phase 1 far exceeds that spent determining Phase 2 with the additional consequence that there is no comprehensive Phase 2 upon which to base Phase 3 - the initial Action Plan.

Too few people are involved in developing the Plan

There is a saying that the more people who plan the battle, the less there are to battle the plan. It is crucial to the Plan's implementation that those who will be charged with the responsibility for execution are involved in determining Phase 2. Not only should they have a more detailed understanding of the implications of Phase 1, they also have a better appreciation of the resources - time, money, people, equipment and infrastructure required to implement it. As a consequence of this knowledge, they may well be better qualified to assess the realism of Phase 1.

The Plan is long on vision but short on detail

Frequently, too much time is spent by executive management crafting Vision and Mission statements that are of little value as a guide to those charged with the implementation of the Plan.

Eileen Shapiro in her book "Fad Surfing in the Boardroom"[1] defined the Corporate Vision as

Vision: *What Moses experienced when he wandered for too long in the desert; coordinated and persistent hallucinations characteristic of dementia or paranoid schizophrenia*

and Mission statement:

Mission statement 1: *A short, specific statement of purpose, intended to serve as a loose musical score that motivates everyone to play the same tune without strict supervision; 2: Frequently, an assertion of underlying commitment to some amalgam of "total quality", "low-cost producer", "empowered workforce", "excellence", "continuous improvement" and other bizbuz shibboleths that, although written for a specific organisation, is equally applicable to an aircraft manufacturer, a software development firm, a community hospital, a department store chain, or a local dry cleaner; 3: In some companies, a talisman, hung in public spaces, to ward off evil spirits*

"Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four hours sharpening the axe"

I share her cynicism to a high degree - if an organisational strategy or plan is to guide and empower all those responsible for its implementation, it has to outline the implications of Phase 1 on each of the functions that will play a part in its execution. Uplifting words are no substitute for detail. As Abraham Lincoln said: "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four hours sharpening the axe".

Thus the seeds of success or failure in execution are sown the moment the planners sit down to plan. But what of the process of execution itself? What of the need to monitor, measure and modify the plan? What happens to a strategy when it reaches its use-by date? How do you know when this moment has arrived?

Achieving great execution is complex. If the plan under consideration is a strategic one, it will have implications for every function within the organisation. Time is of the essence so we are tempted to take short cuts. We go in search of the silver bullet; we cut corners; we address issues of execution in the incorrect order; we confuse strategies and objectives, means and ends.

The Solution

The solution to this problem was to develop a model that integrated the complete operational cycle. If this could be married to a sequence of barriers that needed to be overcome to achieve execution to die for, the model would provide management with a formalised, consistent, common, operational framework that, to use computer jargon, would act as an "operating platform" upon which "applications software" selected for each individual step in the process could be run. Such a model would need to:

- Cover the complete operational cycle
- Work from basic principles so it could be applied to every type of organisation
- Be highly specific – a detailed route map, not a world atlas

The use of such a model, in conjunction with a checklist of execution barriers, would confer many benefits.

- The planners would gain a greater appreciation of the human side of planning
- The more the model was used, the more proficient at planning and execution the organisation would become
- The use of the same model throughout an organisation would result in a "common language" - understanding and communication would both be enhanced
- Armed with a knowledge of the execution barriers to be avoided, plans would be brought to reality more effectively and efficiently
- With more people having involvement in the planning, not only would the quality of the Plan be improved but ownership would be more widely dispersed with beneficial impacts on change management, leadership, teamwork and ultimately organisational culture
- The distinction between thinkers and doers and planners and implementers would be blurred - communication would flow upwards and from side to side as well as downwards
- Organisational alignment would be enhanced which would have a beneficial impact on employee engagement levels
- With greater job mobility being a fact of life in the 21st century, having a defined process greatly aids the task of new arrivals to the planning or the implementation phase in getting up to speed

[1] **"Fad Surfing in the Boardroom" by Eileen Shapiro, published by Addison-Wesley Publishing Company 1995**

The challenge was to create a model that gave the above outcomes and which satisfied the following criteria:

- It had to be universal in its application – an open rather than a closed system
- It had to separate – but demonstrate the connection between – "this is what we are going to do" and "this is how we are going to do it"
- It had to demonstrate the interdependencies within and between the three major components of a) planning, b) execution and c) monitoring, measuring, modifying
- It had to be simple
- It had to be memorable
- It had to be dynamic
- it had to be practical

As will be demonstrated, the construction, operation and maintenance of a simple wagon wheel meets all the above criteria. Because it functions as an open operating platform, it enables the user to run a vast variety of more specific programs - applications software. So if you have a preference for a particular planning technique; or you wish to run a team building program; or outsource your IT; or collaborate with a supplier in an R&D program; or introduce a CRM or Six Sigma program, these are all forms of applications software that can be run on the **Wagon Wheel Way™ Enterprise Operating Platform** or **www.eop** for short.

The **www.eop** is used in conjunction with a list of barriers to execution. There are 36 of these in total of which:

- 13 relate to Planning (Constructing the Wagon Wheel)
- 14 concern Execution (Operating the Wagon Wheel)
- 6 relate to Monitoring, Measuring & Modifying (Maintaining the Wagon Wheel) and,
- 3 relate to Revising the Plan (Rebuilding the Wagon Wheel)

Just as significantly, 16 involve technical issues and 20 involve people management or empowerment issues. Great execution involves both technical expertise and the ability to empower all those who will play a part in the Plan's implementation.

I liken the list of barriers to execution to the pace notes that rally crews use. (If you are not familiar with pace notes, go to YouTube and type in "Ari Vatanen dear God" and see driver and navigator at work.)

As an enterprise proceeds down the track on the course set out by the **www.eop**, management is forewarned of the next barrier that threatens the quality of execution. Just as the pace notes would be useless if they were not in sequence, the barriers to execution are listed in the order in which the enterprise will encounter them.

The rationale behind pace notes is simple. They prevent the driver from going too fast but they also prevent him from going too slowly. Their objective is to find the optimal point between speed and safety. The rationale behind the use of the **www.eop** and the **Organisational Pace Notes (OPN)** is exactly the same.

The following Sections of this Simple Guide will set out how a plan is developed, implemented and then monitored using the **www.eop** as a framework/process. Throughout the text, you will find the appropriate **OPN**[2] that will warn of the next execution hazard to be overcome if the Plan is to be implemented in the most effective and efficient way.

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