Implementing leadership decisions

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6. Implementing leadership decisions

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Abstract

In this chapter it is demonstrated that the way in which leaders implement a decision largely depends on the nature of it, that is, whether it is strategic or not. Leaders must be as open as possible and not withhold information from the persons involved in the process. Therefore, they should distribute as much relevant information as possible to meeting participants before a meeting. At the same time, they must be able to steer the process. It is not unusual for there to be a separation between the formulation and implementation of a strategic decision. Often, it is the top leadership that formulates the decision problem and the middle managers that implement its solution. For this reason, it is relatively common that the top leadership signals that the implementation has been successful as soon as the middle managers begin to report positive results. This can sometimes happen even though most of the implementation is incomplete. However, there are also cases where the top leaders rule out certain implementation processes as failures when in fact they prove later on to be successful. A common problem in organizations is that leaders often inherit the task of implementing decisions that past leaders have made. In order to succeed with an implementation, leaders must understand the importance of the process. They must communicate their vision clearly, evaluate and monitor continuously, and allow interested parties to participate actively in the process. They should also understand that what at first may look like a failure, at a later stage may prove to be a success.

Different types of decision implementations

In order to implement a decision it normally implies that some form of change is executed in relation to the situation. Often, changes of various kinds create resistance in organizations. It is therefore important that leaders focus on the factors that are essential in order to achieve a desirable result. How leaders choose to implement a decision usually varies from situation to situation. There are two main factors that influence how the process will be executed. These are *the size of the strategic problem* and *the time horizon.* The implementation of decisions that have relatively small effects requires a completely different approach than the implementation of decisions that implies major changes and an extensive use of resources. In some cases, the entire organizational structure is changing. An organization that is in a state of crisis requires a completely different implementation philosophy than an organization that is about to undertake changes in its product range. In the first case it is important to act quickly, while in the other a long and gradual process is more appropriate. Based on the dimensions of strategic problem and time horizon, Hrebiniak and Joyce (1984) have defined four basic types of decision implementations.

The first type is referred to as *evolutionary implementation* and is used when the strategic decision is negligible and the time horizon for implementation is relatively long. This kind of implementation often involves relatively day-to-day and routine management decisions. The plans developed are therefore quite simple. An example of such a decision is when a leader implements local decisions aimed at improving the company's or entity's performance or safety. Evolutionary implementations do not usually imply substantial changes in business strategy or core work processes. Usually these changes are seen as realignments or differences over time in how things should be handled.

The second type is referred to as *managed implementation* and takes place when the strategic decision is marginal, while the time available to implement it is limited. Often, the issue concerns minor changes in the surroundings of the firm that the management wants to adapt to as quickly as possible. As the situation is relatively stable, the leader has the opportunity to focus on the individual problem area without other areas or tasks suffering.

The third type is referred to as *sequential implementation* and is used when the strategic decision is large and the time horizon for its implementation is long. In order to make the implementation successful the management must focus on a number of different areas and the relationship between them. As the time horizon is long, it is possible to analyze the underlying structures of the problems. Based on these analyses it is possible to design the chronological order of the various implementation measures.

The fourth type is referred to as *complex implementation* and is used when the strategic decision is significant and the time horizon is short. In such a situation, the leadership of an organization is forced to make decisions that significantly affect each other and then implement them. However, it is usually not sufficient to identify the various dependent relationships through a formal planning process. In order to ensure the necessary coordination and the full understanding it requires the use of different groups, and other forms of direct communication. Complex implementation processes are necessary in a lot of different contexts. A typical example is when the environment of an organization becomes more complex and turbulent (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994, Heller, 1998).

How to develop and follow an implementation plan

Most managerial decisions are worthless if they cannot be translated into action. One problem is that many leadership meetings do not result in solutions or recommendations, but only in a lot of free discussions. Also, all decisions that are made do not necessarily lead to implementation. One major reason for this is that the division of responsibilities is often unclear. Making decisions can often be easier than getting them implemented. There are several important dimensions of an implementation (Nobel, 1999). These include the execution of a strategic plan, the allocation of resources, and the control and governance of the decision making process.

When a strategic decision has been made, it is absolutely critical that the organization's resources follow it. In case a strategic decision is made without money, skills, equipment and other resources following it, the decision will develop into a clean paper product. Hence, the allocation of resources shows the direction of the organization's operational strategy. This is especially important if an organization finds itself in a situation characterized by scaling or down-sizing. The organization must then make clear what units are ultimately going to maintain its competitiveness. One area that is especially sensitive to resource reductions is R&D, as the development of new products or new technology is relatively time-consuming. However, it is not only the internal allocation of resources that is relevant. The amount of the expected return that will go to strategic reinvestments is also of great importance for the business. As a rule, investors, managers, and employees are always interested in getting their share of the pie (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

One of the most important resources in the organization is its employees. How these are organized is therefore of great importance for how well one succeeds in implementing a strategic decision. An important aspect is how the work is divided between groups and employees within a system. There is much research revealing a strong link between strategy, structure and efficiency. In order to ensure effective implementation, it is important that the number of levels in a hierarchy is kept as low as possible. As the number of levels increases the communication tends to be more complicated (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998). A leader must in addition be focused on the employees' values. Employees use their value systems in order to create an opinion of the implementation process. This is largely an individually and socially constructed process in which values play a crucial role. Therefore, in reality leaders only have a limited ability to quickly modify or transform employee values.

In order to transform decisions into action it requires that the decision maker makes a number of operational decisions in addition to the basic one. This means that a leader must focus on developing implementation plans as soon as the final decision is made. This work can start when a smaller number of options remain in the decision process. However, it is good if a leader is confident about what decision will be made before he or she begins to create action plans. There are a number of different models for the implementation of a decision. Perhaps the simplest model is that you disconnect the old solution when the new one is connected. The problem with this model is that there is no safety net built. You simply bet everything on one card. A second model provides for gradually implementing the decision until the last part is implemented. Here you can walk up gently and evaluate step by step. In a third model, the decision is implemented in a distinct environment as a test case. When everything is working correctly in this environment the solution can be executed in the rest of the organization. In a fourth model the old and the new solution are tested simultaneously. This is a relatively safe but costly solution (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

It is important that leaders involve others in creating an implementation plan for the made decisions. It is often useful to consult people with relevant expertise in the field. All involved in the process must have understood the decision and the reasons behind it. This can be acquired using a so-called briefing session. In such a session the leader of the team explains the circumstances which led to the decision and what measures can be made in order to make the decision effective. With the help of the team the leader analyzes the overall task and determines what measures will be implemented. It is also important that the team decides when the decision will be implemented. Each activity must have a beginning and an end date. A plan should specify different breakpoints where different activities can be evaluated and modified. It should also clarify how others who have a stake in the project continuously will be informed. In addition, feedback systems can be built up enabling the environment to provide comments on the implementation of the decision (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

Many decisions are so complex that it is difficult for leaders to fully implement them themselves. Needless to say, a leader can arrange meetings. However, it requires a whole team to, for example, introduce a new product. This is due to the number of tasks and the extensive work. These tasks can be divided into categories and delegated to various members of the team. In this way distributed planning works effectively. The individual team members

should be given the mandate to act independently and be personally responsible for the delegated tasks. They should also be given a responsibility to contribute their share to the implementation of the overall decision. The team leader's role is to ensure that responsibilities are clear and can be monitored. It is also good if the leader receives feedback from team members on the governance so that it is performed correctly (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

When a leader is building a project team, it is important for him or her to include people with different backgrounds, skills and experience. The objectives must be known to all the members and also shared by all. Despite this, the leader should continuously work with the relationships within the team. The leader's task is to make the rules clear to everyone. These rules should center around the following issues (Thompson, 2008):

1. When the team will meet.

2. Where the team will meet.

3. What questions should be addressed during the meetings.

4. How the team will work.

5. How decisions will be made and followed up.

In addition, the team’s activities must be evaluated regularly (Thompson, 2008).

The role of the leader is changed when a team is created. This means that monitoring, facilitation, and control are part of the role. The main task of the leader is to let the team work independently, and ensure that both individuals and teams work in an appropriate manner. It is important to remember that individual differences in a team are there to create synergies. *The leader must ensure that team members understand and recognize that their individual differences are considered to be strengths* (Thompson, 2008).

A vital part of the decision process is to inform all those involved in it. It is important that all involved participants understand why the decision was made and what the alternatives were. A leader must also be prepared to specify the consequences of the decision for each individual. In the information phase the leader must be responsive to questions and

suggestions from those involved in the process. It is imperative for a leader to be as honest as possible when he or she communicates a decision to staff members.

A leader should try not to withhold information. Everyone must be informed and not just a few. In traditional organizations, decisions are sometimes made behind closed doors and very little information is disseminated. This has the disadvantage that rumors are easily created and spread. Normally the result is that the employees become anxious and experience insecurity, which in turn can lower morale. Sometimes a leader may have to withhold certain information, even if it is positive in nature. There may be security reasons for this. However, many times it is counterproductive to withhold negative information. In case a leader is forced to withhold certain information he or she should tell the people involved when they can expect to receive more details (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

When you call for a meeting, it is good if you can distribute the agenda and other relevant information in advance to meeting participants. This will save you time. It is often advantageous if the number of participants can be minimized as much as possible. The leader should during the meeting be focused on a limited number of issues which are linked to the implementation of the decision. This requires a streamlining of the work process. Open critical discussions are not useful in this phase. Each issue should be treated carefully. The leader must ensure that all necessary data relating to the decision is included in the discussion. It is good if as many participants as possible can be involved in solving the problems (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

The decisions made at the follow-up meetings should result in an action agenda. Different participants can be responsible for ensuring that the agenda is kept. Follow-up meetings are just as important as the initial discussions and should therefore be given the same status. Any planned action is then given a deadline and the leader, or one of the participants, must make sure that the times are kept. The action agenda should be reviewed at every meeting. Discrepancies, changes and delays must be explained in detail. In addition, necessary decisions must be made. Sometimes, a follow-up meeting may indicate that the original decision must be changed. In such a case, one should not hesitate to do this (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

It is important that the implementation of a decision is followed up regularly, either at natural breaking points or at specific intervals. A leader must constantly test the sustainability of the

original decision. This is especially important when an individual decision affects an entire project. Sometimes it may require drastic action steps to get a project back on track. Such measures may result in a substantial rewriting of the action plan. Therefore, it is always good to develop contingency plans in case the main plan is not working. At each breaking point the leader should ask whether or not to proceed with the project. Regardless of whether a decision has succeeded or failed, it should be evaluated after it has been implemented (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

To evaluate an implementation plan

When a decision is evaluated you should ask yourself whether or not it should have been made once again if you were able to move back in time. If not you should go through the decision and change the parts that do not work. This may imply that you have to invest additional capital or change the staffing structure. For example, it is not unusual that a complete product concept may need to change as a result of an evaluation meeting. (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

In the evaluation of a decision, it may be found that it is malfunctioning or has become a victim of events. Also, it may sometimes happen that the leader has to change a decision that someone else has made. At such times it is important to be diplomatic. The organization and its members' best must always be put first. If a decision is threatening the organization's financial situation the leader should act promptly. In such a situation he or she should talk with all persons involved in the implementation of the decision. Should the problem be impossible to solve it should be considered to restart the entire decision process (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

By the use of evaluation and control a leader can ensure that the strategic decisions will be implemented in a satisfactory manner. It is important to follow up the developments to adapt to the required overall objectives. However, it can be difficult to establish good assessment criteria or standards to establish if an implementation of a decision has been effective or not. When choosing criteria, it is important to note that with the help of these the leader can measure whether the plan gives satisfactory results. The leader should also ensure that the choice of the criteria results in that the implementation process itself works (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

Traditionally, quantitative criteria have been used for evaluating the effectiveness of an implementation. Typical examples of such criteria consist of profits, share prices, returns on equity, market shares, sales growth, production costs, etc. The results obtained on these parameters may well be compared with the results of the same from previous years. Comparisons can also be made with current competitor performance on these parameters. This makes it possible to gain both an idea of the development over time and of the relative position one has established.

When selecting evaluation criteria, it is not the number that makes a difference. If too many criteria are chosen, this may lead to a lack of focus on the criteria that are truly critical for the organization's activities. The leader should therefore seek to define a number of critical success factors. It is important that these are not only defined but also integrated in the planning itself. In this way it becomes easier to determine quantitative and specific standards. In addition, critical values should be defined. These values express the weakest performance level with which an organization can live without a comprehensive reassessment of the decision being necessary. When one makes use of quantitative criteria, it is important to note that these are by no means neutral or absolute. For instance, it can happen that changes in the external environment result in a criterion no longer being relevant. It is therefore important that leaders constantly monitor that the criteria used are really critical for the organization's ability to achieve success. In addition, it is important to take into account to what degree long term or short term results are to be evaluated. This can have an impact on what factors are considered critical (Roos, Von Krogh, & Roos, 1994; Heller, 1998).

How to measure the success of strategic decisions

According to a study conducted by Nutt (1986) the success of an implemented decision is defined in three ways. The most common definition relates to whether the strategic objectives have been achieved or not. Another common definition is based on key informants' perception of the implementation. A third definition takes the cost-benefit analysis as a point of departure for determining whether an implementation has been successful or not.

In order to gauge whether a strategic decision has been successful or not an important precondition is that an action alternative has been chosen and implemented. The implementation of a decision often means that the leader detects obstacles, gaps and errors that have been overlooked in the choice between alternatives. The problem is that techniques

such as scenarios, simulation and sequential implementation only provide limited information of the processes themselves. In addition, a leader cannot use the techniques to take away the uncertainty completely. In order to succeed with their strategic decisions, leaders must often commit themselves to the use of certain resources to ensure that the implementation is successful. Reversing such commitments is often costly for the organization. It is therefore important for leaders to focus on the factors most likely to have the potential to affect whether the strategic decision is successful or not. This should be done before the organization commits itself to follow a course of action that is difficult or impossible to fulfill. In many cases measures have to be taken in the implementation of a decision which aim to correct perceived defects and shortcomings. In case a leader fails to implement a decision alternative he or she must immediately begin to search for a new one and this is often costly for the organization. For this reason it is very important for the organisation to make as informed decisions as possible (Harrison, 1999).

According to Harrison, it is important that a strategic decision is compatible with established business methods to be able to achieve success. There is usually an advantage if one is able to follow policies, procedures, and already established practices. This will make it easier to succeed with the strategic decisions. This is especially important if a leader wants to implement a strategy designed to reduce costs (Barney, 2007). It is also important that the "timing" is right. Often there is an optimum timing for each strategic decision. Time is therefore a critical variable for all strategic decisions. A leader should also ensure that he or she has access to optimal amounts of relevant information before making a strategic decision. In this context, the relevance of the information is more important than the maximization of its volume. It is also positive if the leader has the opportunity to influence the decision as much as possible. For this reason, it can be useful if the top executive team can follow up the strategic decision. Regarding the implementation of the decision, it is important that the leader understands the link between risk and reward. It has, among other things, proved that leaders who fail to identify and evaluate risks in general have difficulties to reach success with their strategic decisions. These leaders usually also have a problem clarifying for themselves what risks they are willing to accept. It is important that all those involved in the implementation understand the reasons for why the decision was made, who are going to implement it and what other implications the strategic decision has brought with it (Harrison, 1999).

It is not unusual that there is a separation between the formulation and implementation of a strategic decision. Often, it is the top leadership that formulates the decision while it is the middle managers that implement it (Nobel, 1999). When a strategic decision is to be implemented, it is therefore common that the middle managers are given the task of translating the strategic objectives to the everyday worklife conditions (Whittington, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). This is accomplished by establishing operational plans based on a short term perspective. In addition, the middle managers translate the strategic goals to individual goals and ensure that activities are started up in support of the top leadership initiatives (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992, 1997). It is fairly common for the top leadership to signal that the implementation of a strategic decision has been successful when the middle managers start to report positive results. This can sometimes happen even if most of the implementation is unfinished. One consequence of this is that an implementation success is perceived differently depending on who you ask in an organization (Pettigrew, 1998).

There are several factors that can hinder a successful implementation. First, the knowledge that decision makers have access to when making the decision may be inadequate. The decision makers may not have an enough good understanding of what measures are necessary to implement the decision.

Secondly, it may be that the resources the decision makers have access to are inadequate. A variant of this problem is that you have sufficient access to resources, but that you receive these at the wrong time in the process.

Thirdly, the decision makers may be met with resistance from key groups that makes it difficult to implement their plans (Bryman, 1996). All this implies that almost exactly the same decision can be made in two roughly similar organizations operating in the same branch with two completely different implementation processes. Often, an important difference lies in how quickly an organization is willing to implement the decision (Hickson & Miller, 1992).

It is impossible to get away from the fact that the evaluation of a decision is subject to interpretation. This is particularly true for complex decisions whose results can only be detected months or years later. A practical problem is that leaders' decisions are difficult to separate from their values. For instance, it is usual that leaders are weighting various performance dimensions differently. When a decision has many consequences the criteria

used to evaluate it depend on what consequences are highlighted. Different leaders may emphasize different implications differently. The time factor is also important. In the late 1950'ies the development of a specific computer at IBM was regarded as a leadership failure because of the high development costs. Ten years later, the same leadership concluded that the development of this particular computer was the best investment they had ever made. Experience also shows that it can often take three to five years to get a company back on track after a serious crisis. During this time, other factors may influence the process. For this reason, it is sometimes difficult to figure out the causes which actually brought about the effects. Another consequence is that the leaders who have made a decision necessarily are not the same as those who have to live with the consequences.

Decisions can often be rather vague and thus allow for different interpretations. This can imply that those who are implementing them do not really know what to do or what is expected of them. Since information is transmitted from one individual or group to another, it is very easy that the meaning of the content changes. However, it happens that those who are to implement the decisions do not understand what to do, even if the directives are clearly articulated. In such situations they are forced to "translate" the decisions to practical action. Often, such translations take the form of reinterpretations which can lead to quite different implementations from what was intended in the original decision (McCall & Kaplan, 1990; Nadler & Tushman, 1990; Bryman, 1996).

Leaders often get the task of implementing the decisions of others. In these situations, it is not unusual that they may receive criticism for the results that they have not given rise to. To determine whether the implementation of a decision has been successful or not can therefore often be a matter affected by negotiation and impression management. Leaders who have been involved in making a decision increasingly tend to regard the implementation as a success compared with those who have not been involved. It is therefore not always the case that evaluations of an implemented decision are entirely based on a process that is founded on facts and driven by continuous objective analyses (McCall & Kaplan, 1990; Nadler & Tushman, 1990; Bryman, 1996).

Factors that make the decision implementation a failure or a success

Many leaders are aware of how to act in order to succeed in implementing a decision. Yet these leaders often experience disappointments and setbacks in the implementation process.

A first step towards success is therefore to create an understanding of why the implementation does not succeed in relation to the needs and goals that have been established. According to Ulrich (1997), the following factors contribute to a decision implementation failure:

1. A lack of connection to the strategy.

2. The implementation is seen as a gimmick or a "quick fix".

3. A short term perspective is used.

4. Political realities undermine the implementation.

5. Grandiose expectations.

6. An inflexible change design.

7. A lack of implementation leadership.

8. A lack of measurable results.

9. A fear of the unknown.

10. A lack of ability to mobilize commitment and responsibility in support of the implementation.

The famous organization researcher J.P. Kotter (1996) has also identified a number of factors likely to negatively affect the implementation of decisions:

1. A too weak perception of the implementation as necessary and important.

2. A lack of a coalition that takes the lead and follow up the implementation.

3. An underestimation of the power of a meaningful, clear and inspiring vision.

4. A sub-communication of the vision in words and deeds.

5. An allowance of different events to block the new vision and thereby impeding the implementation.

6. The failure to create short-term and visible results and forgetting to mark these.

7. A tendency to stop the implementation process too early with the explanation that it has been successful.

8. An underestimation of the importance of anchoring the implementation in the organizational culture.

In his book, *Why Decisions Fail,* Paul C. Nutt presents a thorough analysis of what often goes wrong when the implementation of a decision fails. A reflection he makes is that a leader or a team often has trouble handling the persuasion aspect. The leader or the team often gathers a number of arguments to support a particular line of action and then seek evidence from experts that underpin them. In addition the leader or the team develops a strategy for how the implementation best should be sold in. If difficulties arise when it comes to pitching the arguments, it is not unusual for the leader or the team to try to dramatize what can be gained by various demonstrations. This fails too often. One problem is that the leader or the team often overestimates the benefits of trying to persuade others. Persuasion is often regarded as a low-risk strategy. When you have convinced yourself with the help of some arguments, you often assume that there should be as easy to convince others. Unfortunately, the failure arises when you cannot convince others with the help of your best arguments. Leaders and teams often put down too much time and energy to document that a decision is right without simultaneously acquiring acceptance from the key people involved in it. When people have something to lose in an implementation process, persuasion is often a poor method (Nutt, 2002).

Another problem that managers and teams face when they are about to implement decisions relates to charters and regulations. Often this problem centers on the regulation of who is going to implement the decision. This regulation is often done without consulting the people affected by the changes that the decision inevitably will bring about. In order to issue such a regulation, leaders and teams must make use of their position power within the organization. However, leaders and teams often overestimate their power and underestimate the resistance that the involved parties are able to mobilize. To succeed as a leader, you have to build up social credit in the form of trust and goodwill that can easily be exchanged for fast action. Nutt (2002) describes a case in which a top leader was interested in implementing a new IT system at one of his departments as a pilot project. When none of the department heads

volunteered to undertake the mission, one of them was ordered to test the new system. As a result, people at the concerned department in various ways attempted to sabotage the new system by putting in incorrect data, while they at the same time used their old system. The basic problem that leaders and teams face is that their use of position power to carry out the implementation of a decision undermines their social credit in the form of trust and goodwill (Nutt, 2002).

There are also a number of studies that have identified key factors which are important for the *successful* implementation of a decision (Tichy, 1983; Kanter et al., 1992; Jacobs, 1994; Drucker, 1995). From these studies, Ulrich (1997) has identified the following key factors for a successful implementation:

1. *Anchorage of the implementation*. It is important to have a sponsor or someone who owns and leads the implementation initiative. It is also positive if every member of the team at some point may be in charge of the implementation.

2. *Providing an understanding of why the implementation is needed*. It is important that the people involved understand why the implementation is necessary and that the need for the implementation is perceived as stronger than the resistance that may exist. It is also important for the leader to ensure that the implementation is linked to the business objectives and outcomes.

3. *Creating a vision*. It is good if the leader or the team can formulate the outcomes that are desirable as a result of the implementation. The vision must be linked to values and needs so that an active responsible citizenship could be created.

4. *Mobilizing commitments*. It is important to identify, involve, and convince the principal "owners" of the implementation initiative. In case there is a resistance to the implementation it must be overcome and all participants must actively commit themselves and take responsibility.

5. *Changing systems and structures*. The leader and the team should make use of personnel management tools to ensure that the implementation of the decision is built into the organization's infrastructure. Such tools can relate to staffing, personnel development, rewards, organizational design, communication, etc. Many times, both leadership functions and roles need to be renewed when a major decision is being implemented.

6. *To monitor the implementation progression*. It applies to leaders and teams to define methods to measure and demonstrate the success of the implementation. In addition, leaders and teams can try to draw as much attention to the implementation as possible.

7. *To get the implementation to persist*. The leader and the team must ensure that the implementation is carried out by the use of established plans for each phase. In addition, accountabilities and responsibilities must be sorted out. Also, an environment conducive to learning based on action and reflection should be established. Both the allocation of responsibilities and deadlines are important.

According to research conducted by Nutt (2002) leaders and teams should use intervention as a method to position the implementation as early as possible in the decision process. Many decision makers assume that the reasons they have for acting are obvious to others. Unfortunately, it is often the case that key stakeholders are completely unaware of these reasons, or perhaps think that they are not so important. Sometimes they even wonder if there is a hidden agenda at work, even if this is not the case. A good way to convince key stakeholders is to compare the organization's performance with that of other more successful organizations through benchmarking. The next step is to show what standards these organizations work with and what makes them successful. You can then network with the key stakeholders and explain the new standards, documenting achievements and focus on ideas that might work.

You should also let as many key stakeholders as possible participate in the decision process. You can for example create a special task force group where they are included. This means that the key stakeholders will share the power when it comes to both making the decision and implementing it. There are many who think that there actually is an ethical imperative tied to letting key stakeholders be involved in the decision process. In order to make the method successful, it is important that the key stakeholders involved are provided with tasks that are perceived as relevant to their interests. It is important to create motivation. It is also important that trust can be established between all parties involved and that there is no unduly questioning of each other's views.

One reason why it is important to let the key stakeholders be involved in the implementation process is that business life in general has become increasingly complex. Modern leaders do not know all the interests that the key stakeholders have. Moreover, it is less likely that the

key stakeholders will try to undermine the implementation if they are allowed to play an active role in the process as early as possible. Involving key stakeholders in the process also means that they are likely to perceive their role as more interesting and meaningful (see for instance Kotter, 1996; Quinn, 1980; Hrebeniak, 2005). An important point is to strike a balance between the commitment of the key stakeholders and the range of tasks that the work group will be responsible for. One can only expect a limited commitment from key stakeholders if a group receives unlimited tasks. If the tasks of a group are limited, it is natural that the key stakeholders can be involved to a higher extent (Nutt, 2002). It is important to remember that an overly participatory implementation process is risking to interfere negatively with everyday activities (Harrison & Freeman, 2004).

The use of consultants in the implementation of decisions

It is not uncommon for an organization to hire consultants in connection with the implementation of strategic decisions. Often, the consultant plays the role of an expert, and can be likened to a "company doctor" who is consulted in order to help a client. Hiring external consultants has several advantages. The first is that external consultants often have a more free approach to the organization than those who work in it. Employees in an organization often develop what is usually called "blind spots". This means that there are certain things that you cannot see because you are so used to them. External consultants are not hampered by these blinkers and therefore often arrive at accurate diagnoses more easy.

The second advantage is that external consultants are often specialists in the fields of organization and leadership. These skills are generally missing among leaders and employees in the organization. This fact implies that the consultants are often in a better position to diagnose the situation and find the right solutions to the problems.

Thirdly, it is often easier for external consultants to take a holistic approach to the organization. Often, employees see problems and solutions from their perspective, which often makes them place great emphasis on problems and solutions that are directly related to what they are working with on a daily basis. In addition, external consultants' use of analytical tools force them to consider more elements in the organization (Schein, 1987; Ginsberg & Abrahamson, 1991; Neill & Mindrum, 2000; Jacobsen, 2008).

Many large consulting firms routinely prepare reports that contain overviews and action recommendations. Often, these reports also include proposals that focus on how the consulting firm would like to implement these recommendations. The proposals often specify actions, timetables and costs associated with the implementation of the decision. It is often not so difficult for a client to persuade leading consulting firms to produce reports of this nature. For most larger projects the lion part of the resources are linked to the implementation phase and not to research and survey work. Therefore, it may sometimes occur that consulting firms undertake to make this kind of work more or less for free, in the hope of also getting contracted on the implementation part. When a client asks for an implementation plan, this normally implies that the consultant's preliminary work is perceived as serious (Stroh & Johnson, 2006).

A close link is often established between the consultants and the formal leadership. This means that consultants seldom create deeper relationships with everyone in the organization, but mainly with the key decision makers. On occasion, it happens that the consultants themselves are part of the formal leadership. This is a trend that is becoming more common in the implementation of strategic decisions. In this context, it is often little difference between the consultants and the formal leadership (Jacobsen, 2008). This has some negative consequences.

Symbolic decision making

There are many cases where the primary purpose of making a decision is not to implement it. The point of making such decisions is often that the leadership of an organization wants to reveal their ability to act or express their opinion. In these situations, decision makers are primarily interested in the symbolic or expressive aspects of the decision. They are usually less interested in following up this kind of decisions on a concrete level. Symbolic decisions are therefore designed to gain legitimacy by showing a willingness to carry some things through without necessarily intending to implement them. These decisions must be distinguished from the purely instrumental, which aim to solve concrete problems. It is easy to perceive the symbolic decisions as something negative. However, the use of symbols can have strong effects on the organization's functioning. An organization is to a greater extent characterized by common perceptions than by formal structures. These perceptions have to be created and sustained. The symbolic decisions signal in what way the leadership desires that

the organization should develop. In this way, the symbolic decisions express the core organizational values in a simple and straightforward manner. Therefore, these decisions do not seldom have a motivating power inside the organization. When leaders outline visions for the organization, not unexpectedly, this has a motivating effect on staff. Since visions are often both vague and hard to reach, they are in possession of a highly developed symbolic side. Through this similarity with visions, symbolic decisions may also serve as interpretations of what has happened in the past (Podsakoff et al., 2000, Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

Conclusions

How a leader chooses to implement a decision heavily depends on the decision in nature, that is, if the leader is dealing with a strategic, tactical or operational decision. Another important factor is the time horizon that the leader is working with. The first thing a leader should do is to develop a plan for how he or she intends to implement the decision. In this context it is important to be clear about what resources are needed to carry out the implementation and how the leader intends to involve others in the process. Often it may be expedient to create a team that works together to implement the decision. The leader should also create an action agenda for each meeting, specifying the responsibilities of each person. It is important for the leader to be as open as possible and not try to withhold information from the persons involved in the process. For instance, the leader should distribute as much relevant information as possible to meeting participants before a meeting. At the same time, one must be able to steer the process. For this reason, open critical discussions should be banned during the meetings.

The implementation plan that has been created must be evaluated and monitored regularly. This is most easily done by working with critical evaluation criteria. A common way to determine whether an implementation has been successful is to focus on the achievement of the strategic objectives. It is also common to inform oneself about how the key stakeholders have perceived the process. Thirdly, a cost-benefit analysis can be used as a starting point for deciding whether the implementation has been successful or not. It is not unusual that there is a separation between the formulation of a decision and the implementation of it. Often, it is the top leadership which formulates the decision and the middle managers that implements it. For this reason, it is relatively common that the top leadership is signaling that the implementation has been successful when the middle managers begin to report the positive

results. This can sometimes happen even though most of the implementation is unfinished. However, there are also cases where top leaders judge certain implementation processes as failures and where it later is found that these projects have been successful. A problem in organizations is that leaders often inherit the task of implementing decisions that past leaders have made.

There are many factors that can make the implementation of a decision fail. One major reason is that the leader or the team does not really take the task seriously. Often, they simply do not understand how important the task is. Another important reason is that leaders fail to communicate with the people that is most concerned by the process. For example, a clear vision may be lacking. Also, interested parties may not have been allowed to participate actively in the process. A third important reason is that the leader or team take out the victory in advance and overestimate the progress being made. In order to succeed with an implementation, it is necessary to understand the importance of the process, communicate the vision clearly, evaluate and monitor continuously, and allowing interested parties to participate actively in the process. Leaders should also understand that what at first may look like a failure at a later stage may prove to be a success.

It is not uncommon for the leadership to hire external consultants when they are about to implement a decision. There are several reasons for this. First, consultants generally have a more free approach to the organization than those who work in it, and therefore can see some things that employees cannot see. Often, consultants from leading firms are also specialists in organization and leadership which makes it easier for them to diagnose the situation and to find the right solutions to the problems. Major consulting firms are working routinely to develop action steps, timelines and cost estimates associated with the implementation of a decision.

It is not always the case that leaders are really interested in that the decisions they have made should be implemented. These decisions are often referred to as symbolic. Often, the purpose of symbolic decisions is that the leadership wants to document their ability to act or express their opinion in general. The symbolic decisions signal in which way the leadership desires the organization to be developed. In this way, leaders can easily and in a readily understandable manner express the core values of the organization.

Checklist

1. Why is it important to create an implementation plan? How should you as a leader work with such a plan?

2. How does you as a leader manage and control an implementation process?

3. Why can it sometimes be a good thing to let a team be responsible for the implementation of a decision?

4. How can one determine whether the implementation of a decision has been successful or not? What problems can be found in this connection?

5. What can make the implementation of a decision fail?

6. Why is it sometimes useful to hire external consultants when to implement a decision? For what kind of decision is this recommedable?

7. What are the pros and cons of symbolic decision making?

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