Strategy Implementation: Insights from the Kuwaiti Public Sector

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Abstract: The strategy process is very important for any type of organization, be it private or public. Furthermore, the strategy process makes organizations competitive and even sustainable if managed effectively. Within this process, it has always been argued that the implementation of strategies is considered somewhat difficult when planning these strategies. Most research on strategy implementation have provided extensive results regarding the factors that can hinder strategy implementation from a quantitative perspective. In this study, we shed light on the top management perspective by gaining an in-depth understanding of why such factors cannot be overcome and what results in the planned strategy not being implemented from their daily work experience. We gathered data from a single case study that included 15 interviews with the top management team in one public sector organization in Kuwait. Our findings revealed that although some hinderances to the strategy implementation are already known to decision makers, in practice resolving and overcoming these factors requires considerable effort sue to the need to align similar mindsets and teamwork spirit. Our exploration represents a vital contribution to a description of the obstacles to strategy implementation from a qualitative perspective. Furthermore, the study provides some suggestions and recommendations by which decision makers might better achieve strategy implementation.

Keywords: strategy, strategy implementation, strategy implementation process, top managers, Kuwait

INTRODUCTION:

The area of strategy process is considered one of the more complex areas of research (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014). One of the probable explanations for such complexity is the multiple processes required to effect the overall strategy process. These processes include strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and strategy control. In reality, formulating strategies is difficult; however, executing them is even more difficult (Hrebiniak, 2006). In the strategy literature, researchers pay close attention to the strategy formulation process as well as the strategy implementation process to ensure business excellence and continuity (Warren, 2002; Brenes et al., 2008). Such commitment to excellence requires managers in different organizations to be flexible in the way they deal with strategic issues, as well as communicating these issues to relevant organizational members. This flexibility might be reasonably apparent within the private sector; however, it might be less so within the public sector due to the latter’s associated bureaucracy.

Public Sector Organizations and Strategy Relationship

The literature on the public sector calls for the importance of promoting change and communicating such change with as many people within the relevant organisations as required (Rossotti, 2005). Furthermore,
public sector performance has been a particular point of debate in the literature (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Effective strategy planning, as well as the consequent strategy process, could ensure sustainability as well as high performance levels amongst public sector organizations. In this regard, Jamroq et al. (2008) suggested that the use of performance management in public sector organizations could help attain higher performance. Treating strategy stages, namely formulation, implementation and control as separate processes from one another will likely result in the failure by organizations to successfully implement strategy. Organizations further treat strategy implementation in particular as an ‘isolated stage’, and evaluate the results against the intended results of a planned strategy at some later stage (Higgins, 1985). Due to the size of public sector organizations worldwide and the vast services provided to the public, a more dynamic and interactive relationship between strategy formulation, implementation, and control needs to be introduced.

As for the Kuwaiti context, the public sector in Kuwait is huge, where each of its several entities undertaken work of a particular nature that distinguishes it from the others. For instance, the public sector contains councils, agencies, authorities, and bureaus. Due to its large size, the public sector dominates most of the major activities in the country. In this regard, Ramadhan and Al-Musallam (2014) argued that the development of the countries’ infrastructure is mainly dependent on a public sector characterized by the heavy injection of governmental capital. The role of the public sector is not limited to the legislation and regulation of activities, but further includes the formulation and implementation of public strategies. Due to this, it is vital to investigate and understand the kinds of barriers that could hinder the execution of strategies from the experience of a top public sector management team.

**Barriers to Strategy Implementation**

In general, the strategy-related literature suggested that strategy formulation is easier than strategy implementation. This, in turn, has stimulated researchers to investigate the obstacles to strategy implementation across the globe in great detail. Furthermore, the topic itself sounds interesting as well as challenging at the same time for both researchers and practitioners alike. Looking at previous research, Alexander (1985), for instance, recognized ten obstacles to strategy implementation for medium- and large-sized organizations in the United States. These include the fact that strategy takes more time than scheduling, problems related to poor coordination across the organizational activities, various crises, external factors, lack of appropriate monitoring systems, insufficient employee capabilities, lack of defining tasks and activities, inadequate training, and directions given by direct supervisors not being appropriate. Equally, in 1994, a study was conducted by Kargar and Blumenthal on banks in North Carolina, which found the same barriers to strategy implementation identified by Alexander (1985) were also applicable to these banks, though to a lesser extent.

Moving towards some recent studies, Sorooshian et al. (2010) in their studies into processing industries in the Middle East grouped strategy implementation obstacles into three categories, namely leadership style, organizational structure, and organizational workforce. In a similar vein, Pella et al. (2013), in their studies into selected Indonesian companies, found seven major hinderances to strategy implementation. These were directly related to the corporate scorecard, KPI, competence, information technology, performance appraisal, financial support, and strategy management office. Furthermore, van der Merwe and Nienaber (2015) conducted a study into selected South African electronics organizations, finding 10 obstacles to strategy implementation. These are problems related to communication, insufficient senior leadership, inadequate skills, inadequate monitoring, insufficient details, poor accountability, no approved strategy, leadership barriers, lack of consequences in the strategy process and insufficient focus.
METHODOLOGY:

Sample and data collection

Since this study is exploratory in nature, focussing on understanding obstacles to strategy implementation from a top management point of view, a quantitative approach was adopted. Data were collected from a single case study into one public sector organization in Kuwait, with 15 semi-structured interviews targeting its top management team (Roulston, 2010). Therefore, the sampling technique followed in this research was that of purposive sampling, as this study targets specific people according to specific criteria, who are believed to provide appropriate knowledge, skills, and relevant experience to fulfil the intent of the research questions (Noy, 2008). We designed the interview questions in such a way as to ensure effective coverage of the research problem under investigation. For instance, we introduced questions relevant to strategy obstacles, strategy facilitators, decision making, vision and mission, strategy agreement, and objectives priorities, amongst others.

The fieldwork was carried out in Kuwait over a period of two months. We have chosen a public sector organization which provides general public services and interacts with other public sector organizations. The interview process was divided into two main stages, namely the initial phase and essential phase. In the initial phase, we interviewed three participants; as a result, we amended the interview questions to ensure the clarity of the terminology used therein (Saunders et al., 2016). As for the essential phase, we continued the interview process to reach an additional twelve participants, providing a total of fifteen interviews. All participants were assured of their anonymity in compliance with the ethical considerations of the research. Table 1 below reports the profile of the interviewees.

Table 1: Profile of the interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Work Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>M1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7-10 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7-10 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>More than 10 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7-10 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7-10 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M6</td>
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<td>7-10 Years</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>7-10 Years</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>M11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7-10 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>M12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7-10 Years</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>M14</td>
<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>M15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7-10 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
Keys: M1: Manager number 1; M2: Manager number 2, ... etc.
Additional note: due to ethical considerations and at the request of the organization, the job functions of the interviewees have been removed.
Data analysis and coding procedure

The data were analysed manually by assigning open codes to each answer provided by the interviewees. These open codes were subsequently divided into sub-codes to provide a meaningful interpretation of the data. Open codes were assigned to each instance including words, phrases, special terminologies, expressions, and others. This practice was followed by aggregating all possible codes and combining them in two main categories, namely strategy facilitators and strategy obstacles. Table 2 below shows the coding process.

Table 2: Coding process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Similar Words</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Strategy facilitators</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Equal mindsets, general agreement, people support, authority, freedom in decision, necessary training, available expertise</td>
<td>2-5, 7, 9-11, 13-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Strategy obstacles</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Improper planning, budgeting problems, centralization, no teamwork, lack of proper reward, poor accountability, unclear tasks</td>
<td>1, 3-4, 6-10, 12-15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Empirical Data and Findings

The findings show that that the participation and support of a top management team does indeed influence the way in which organizational strategies are implemented. The role adopted by the top management team regulates how other organizational members interact and execute relevant tasks and objectives. However, it was found that the role itself is insufficient for overall successful strategy execution unless this role is supported through other factors. This point of view was shared across the representative quotes of 11 out of 15 interviewees. For instance, when asked about what ensures that organizational strategy can be successfully implemented, M2 shared his opinion through the following quote:

“Mmmm... I think that the most important thing is the qualm insets between organizational members who are in charge of the strategy implementation!” (M2)

Top manager 2 clearly argued that equal mindsets make it easier for people to work together and understand each other. His answer further implied that such alignment can ensure the successful implementation of strategies. His answer stressed that this is important for all the team members assigned to executing strategies. Top manager 5 also added that not only are equal mindsets important, but that a general agreement on strategy is also vital to strategy implementation. This is reflected in the following quote:

“Yes, I believe that beside mindsets,... general agreement over strategy is also equally important for successful strategy implementation!” (M5)

Other people’s support also sounds important in terms of how strategy is executed in public sector
organizations. This view is shared by top manager 7, and is exemplified in the following quote:

“Well… although we are the top managers here, we also need the support of other people such as other organizational members and other managers at various managerial levels.” (M7)

Top manager 7 shared his opinion by arguing that a top management team cannot in fact proceed with strategy implementation unless they have gained the appropriate support from other organizational members, including middle managers and front-line staff. This implies that strategy execution is about the spirit of teamwork in the first place. Another supportive factor for strategy execution is related to the necessary training that has to be provided to all relevant staff for strategy execution. Training is very important practice as it helps organization members achieve the appropriate technicality and skills to deal with the strategy implementation process. This view is shared by top manager 10, as reflected in the following quote:

“I guess we cannot execute any strategy unless you provide us with the right skills, practice, role play, seminars, and relevant workshops... [Unrecorded]... all of these issues will be acquired by the relevant training!” (M10)

In addition to training issues, top managers 13 and 14 argued that freedom of decision is very important to acting professionally during the strategy process. They argued that, as top managers, they need to have the freedom and specific authority to take what they deem to be appropriate decisions if things deviate from the plans set during the initial planning phase. Freedom of decision sounds important to successful strategy execution, a view that is reflected in the following quotes by top managers 13 and 14, respectively:

“In my opinion, giving you the space to act according to what you see appropriate without any intervention is critical to strategy execution!” (M13)

“Mmmmm... [Unrecorded]... honestly, I think we should take the right decision at the right time... this will provide us with the opportunity to be close to events and therefore execute the right strategic objectives accordingly!” (M14)

By contrast, interviewees also shared their ideas from their work experiences, as well as their daily involvement in the work as to what they consider to be obstacles to strategy implementation. They mentioned several factors which can be grouped under particular main reasons. For instance, top manager 1 argued that:

“Improper planning is a serious problem in the strategy implementation... I personally think that if we don’t plan very well, we can’t execute any strategic objective as appropriate!” (M1)

The above top manager demonstrated that improper planning is a serious problem facing strategy execution. He further extended his comments to say that a lack of planning will negatively affect the achievement of strategic objectives. Furthermore, if there is a lack of planning, then it is more likely that this will result in a communication gap between strategy formulation and strategy implementation. Proper planning could also be related to the availability of a necessary budget, as claimed by top manager 3 in the following quote:

“Normally strategies should be implemented as previously planned, however, the lack of budget could turn the situation upside down in the organizations!” (M3)

Top manager 3 suggested that a lack of budget is considered a serious problem facing strategy execution. He further extended his comments to state that the budget could change the whole situation regarding organizational strategy. From the interviewee’s answer, it can be concluded that budget is strongly
associated with planning. Beside planning and budgetary barriers, lack of teamwork also seems to hinder strategy implementation, as claimed by top managers 6 and 8:

“You want successful strategy execution… then give me a successful teamwork concept”. (M6)

“Well… we can achieve any objective, no matter how big it is, however, this needs effective members and teamwork spirit!”. (M8)

The above top managers stated that teamwork spirit is a very important element of successful strategy implementation. Their answer implied that teamwork spirit in fact needs effective teammates and extensive cooperation between them. A lack of teamwork could in fact create another problem, which is the lack of clear roles and responsibilities; this represents another strategy implementation barrier, as mentioned by top manager 12 in the following quote:

“Oooooh… what can I tell you about this… we have a big problem about the clarity of roles and responsibilities of employees, I mean some tasks are unclear for them and this makes it difficult for them to execute the required objectives… [Unrecorded]!”. (M12)

The lack of clarity regarding tasks amongst employees makes it difficult for them to accomplish the required strategic objectives and, therefore, the planned strategy will not be implemented or at best will only be partially implemented. Employees are therefore left unaware of their roles in the strategy implementation process. Consequently, this may suggest that directions from top management were not clear to other employees. This lack of clarity may also lead to poor performance, which again leads to a lack of rewards. Rewards, as one of the principal means of encouraging staff to go the ‘extra mile’ was seen as particular hinderance to strategy implementation. Employees at various employment levels value rewards, and if these are not being offered, employees may only expend the minimum effort required for the organization, regardless of whether organizational strategy is ultimately implemented or otherwise. This view is also shared by top manager 15, as seen in the following quote:

“Why should we work and put in extra effort if we receive little, or sometimes no incentives?... [Unrecorded]... we should only do our daily work but without any extra effort in such scenario!” (M15)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS:
The section discusses the findings of this research in line with the literature. Although there have been a number of research efforts that have investigated strategy implementation barriers, our findings shed light on the top management team’s role in this regard in particular, and support the importance of understanding how such barriers can be resolved within the workplace. The findings of this research suggest that the role of top management in fostering strategy communication is very important to ensuring a similar understanding amongst other organizational members. The relationship between internal organizational members was found to be very complex due to the different perspectives of the various managerial levels. It is important decision makers in various organizations to acknowledge the nature of this complexity, as understanding this nature will help resolve strategy implementation barriers to a large extent.

The research also found a number of enablers of strategy implementation in the public sector domain. For instance, it was suggested that similar mindsets are more likely to promote positive change and successful strategy implementation. This is similar to the findings of Keating and Heslin (2015), who argued that fixed mindsets are unlikely to gain the cooperation of relevant staff when exposed to various challenges. Furthermore, training is also important to overcoming the barriers to strategy implementation. This
supposition is also supported by Clayton and Headley (2019), who found that training was important to the maintenance of good results and is an essential factor in the successful implementation of plans. Moreover, the research found that several factors beside similar mindsets and necessary training contribute to the successful implementation of strategies, such as a general agreement between decision makers over strategies’ objectives, the support of various organizational members in terms of meeting the strategic objectives, the availability of strategy expertise, and the freedom of decision making which gives the relevant managers the authority required to take what they deem to be appropriate actions without further reference to their colleagues.

As for the strategy implementation barriers, the research found that improper planning could result in organizational strategies being not implemented or being only partially implemented. This is further supported by the available literature, as the notion of paying attention to smaller details within the strategy process and gaining the approval of relevant members regarding the strategy has been remarked upon by van der Merwe and Nienaber (2015). The findings of this research also revealed that teamwork is essential to archiving strategic objectives. This also echoes the findings of Mandourah et al. (2017), who found that teamwork has a considerable influence on overall organizational performance, and further mediates the relationship between competency and performance. Moreover, besides improper planning and a lack of teamwork spirit, the research found other factors that hinder the implementation of strategies within public sector organizations. These include budgeting problems, centralization in taking decisions, lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities of employees in terms of achieving strategic objectives, and the lack of a proper reward system.

CONCLUSION:

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of top management teams in the strategy implementation process and how they overcome the most frequently encountered strategy implementation barriers from their daily work experiences. To reach this objective, fifteen interviewees were targeted to help form an understanding of the research phenomenon. Based on the findings of this research, two main points could be concluded. Firstly, the role of the top management team effectively dictates how other organizational members interact and execute relevant tasks and objectives within the strategy implementation process. Secondly, we provided qualitative evidence from the daily work experience of the interviewees as to how strategy implementation barriers can be resolved. Furthermore, based on the findings, several suggestions can be provided for decision makers within organizations. Firstly, it is important to align mindsets to mitigate any potential conflict while implementing organizational strategies. Secondly, decision makers need to boost the teamwork spirit between organizational members to ensure better strategy results. Lastly, the top management team needs to ensure the participation of other managers at other managerial levels in both the strategy formulation as well as the implementation process.

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