Lack of Implementation—The No. 1 Obstacle to Success

By Joseph A. Tarasco

"Have a plan. Follow the plan, and you'll be surprised how successful you can be. Most people don't have a plan. That's why it's easy to be most folks."—Paul Bryant, football coach, University of Alabama.

Implementation is a process that transforms plans and strategies into detailed action plans to achieve an organization's goals and objectives on a continuous basis. The planning process is the easy part; however, successful implementation is difficult. The old saying by Robert Burns, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry," is still true today.

Common obstacles

Unfortunately, many firms fail to implement their strategies, goals and objectives, and business plans or do so in a painfully slow manner. It has been said that accountants move from deadline—to vacation—to deadline and do not pay proper attention to their most important client: their firm. This is the main obstacle to taking their firm to the next level of success and is a major issue that is fueling the volume of mergers occurring across the country. Focusing solely on daily issues instead of devoting time and energy to business goals and strategies can threaten the success of your firm.

No follow-through. Based on studies conducted by McKinsey, the Harvard Business School, and others, most strategies fail because of a lack of execution. This poor track record of improperly implementing goals and objectives is not due to a lack of quality plans, but rather to overcoming the obstacles that most firms have in implementing their plans. Properly implementing short- and long-term plans is vital to a firm's growth and survival as an independent entity.

No responsibility or accountability. Lack of partner responsibility and accountability is a significant obstacle in implementing change at firms. There is a natural tendency with most partners to allow current client service demands and administrative issues to become a major obstacle in implementing plans for future success and not focusing on the firm's future business demands and issues.

Some of the most common excuses that partners provide for either failing to implement action items or executing plans improperly are:

- A deadline is approaching (*e.g.,* April 15, May 15, September 15, and October 15).
- The partner views his/her staff as under-qualified and, therefore, performs the work of lower-level professionals rather than delegating it.
- The partner is overwhelmed with multiple client crises simultaneously.
- The partner will be out of the office taking required continuing professional education courses.
- The partner is going on vacation shortly and is extremely busy preparing his or her workload prior to leaving.
- The partner returns from vacation and needs to catch up with work not attended to while on vacation.
- A staff person resigned, and the partner must finish that person's incomplete work.
- The partner must take on administrative duties and responsibilities because the firm will not invest in hiring additional administrative staff.

Overcoming the obstacles: commitments and accountability

Responsibility is a commitment you make to yourself. Accountability is a commitment a partner makes to the firm and to other partners. Partner accountability is an integral component in achieving the firm's goals and objectives, and partners should be assigned specific action items for which they are held accountable. In addition, they should be held accountable for executing their assigned action plans and rewarded or penalized appropriately with compensation adjustments based on their efforts and accomplishments. Each goal and objective should have a list of defined tasks, including those partners responsible for completing the tasks and when each is to be completed. It is important to develop a reporting mechanism and designate a partner in charge of monitoring action plan progress. Too many firms reward their partners prematurely for short-term accomplishments, rather than waiting until the long-term objectives have been met.

Holding partners accountable for implementing a segment of the strategic plan is "putting your firm in a position to win the game" more often. It is a team approach to winning by having each team member know and understand his or her responsibilities and that his or her personal performance criteria contribute to the team's success. Once a partner takes ownership of an action item or task, there is a better likelihood that it will be accomplished in a timely fashion.

Partner performance accountability and related compensation decisions are an integral part of what defines a firm and its future success. It is worth the time and effort to manage partner performance and to encourage behavior needed to implement plans. There is a much better chance that firms will reach their peak potential if partners are formally accountable to each other for performance and attaining stated strategic goals and objectives. Getting your firm to the next level of success is not solely about working hard and producing billable hours; it is also about inspiring change and making contributions to the firm's long-term future.

Short and long-term strategic action items should be reviewed and assessed monthly by the managing partner or executive committee in partner meetings or in one-on-one discussions with partners. All partners involved in this process need to know what is expected of them and how their progress will be measured and evaluated.

Areas in which partners should be held accountable include:

- a high level of comprehensive accounting and tax skills;
- practice development and marketing skills with a commitment to a specific dollar amount of new business engaged each year;
- a high level of client retention;
- assistance in managing the firm;
- managerial and supervisory ability, including being a good role model to the staff and younger partners;
- excellent client-practice management skills;
- contribution to succession planning; and
- partner relationship and teamwork skills.

Leadership as a driver of implementation

Most managing partners are aware of the value of a well-defined business strategy; however, few give thought to the leadership that is required to implement such a strategy. Without proper hands-on leadership, even the best plans will not get implemented successfully. Leaders need to be available as resources, role models, and mentors to drive the progress and completion of action items. They must establish an implementation culture within the firm as part of its business model. A key element of this culture is the ability of leaders to effectively communicate the implementation process to their partners and staff. Lack of such communication can lead to significant barriers in the implementation process.

The existing culture needs to be assessed to determine whether it will slow or stall implementation. A low-accountability culture will often resist change and either slow progress significantly or stop it completely. According to Charles Darwin, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, not the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

In the process of implementing plans, a firm must be prepared for partners who may seek to obstruct change. The process of change can be painful for some employees. Partners may feel vulnerable, and staff may find change to be challenging and disruptive. In this case, the firm should appoint a partner-in-charge of implementation to determine the reasons for resistance to change and address these problems. Putting in place the proper people and structure to implement change and continually checking for obstacles can assist the firm in moving plans forward. Zig Ziglar said it best, "People often complain about the lack of time, when the lack of direction is the real problem."

Delegation and support

The most fundamental of all management skills is delegation—getting things accomplished through others. Partners need to delegate action-item tasks and projects to reliable, capable people, whether they are professional or administrative staff, and manage their progress. Effectively using delegation to complete action items on a timely basis is a significant factor in building a successful firm of the future. However, lack of delegation by partners can lead to neglect of more important tasks that are critical to the future of the firm.

Effective delegation is an important tool that many partners hesitate to use. When delegating action items, partners should establish a follow-up schedule and monitor progress. Delegating not only allows partners to leverage their time, but also allows staff to grow professionally.

When a plan is too large to manage efficiently, the firm should focus and prioritize a number of small action plans that can be easily delegated. Smaller action plans make it easier to keep team members focused on completing the plans required to achieve goals and objectives.

Conclusion

Football team game plans are meant to keep the team competitive, score touchdowns, and ultimately, win the game. However designed, it is not always the team with the best players that is successful. Many times, it is the team that can successfully execute a good game plan that wins more often. Similarly, a firm with a well-designed strategic plan, including marketing, human resources, and technology, will only be successful if its plan is implemented in a timely fashion.

About the author: Joseph A. Tarasco is the founder of Accountants Advisory Group, LLC, (*www.accountantsadvisory.com*), a consulting firm that incorporates state-of-the-art practice management, marketing, and human-capital strategies to assist CPA firms in achieving long-term success and profitability. Voted "Top 10 Most Recommended Consultants" by INSIDE PUBLIC ACCOUNTING. Joe can be contacted at *Joe@AccountantsAdvisory.com* or 845-265-9046. ✦