



Voices

The challenges to executing your 2018 government relations strategy



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Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

By now your government relations team has its strategy for the coming year. The strategic planning meeting usually features clever phrases to motivate organizational stakeholders to follow the strategy. However, if you time travel six months into the future and nothing has changed, it's probably because of inferior strategy *execution*. I have found that strategies usually never fail in their development. Where they tend to fail is in the execution, which is a real world, practical exercise. I've always believed that strategy *execution* is the talent in short supply, and thus it must be a part of any strategic planning session.

Don't fear – it's not too late to adjust your plan and mitigate strategy execution failures by improving your strategy execution tasks.

The Strategic Plan Communications = Strategic Plan Persuasion Myth

A prominent execution myth is the proverbial "communication = persuasion" belief. Many government relations professionals measure strategy communication in terms of output, rather than by the only measurement that really counts – how well your team members and other departments whose cooperation you need have been persuaded that the strategy should be embraced and that they should share it with their team.

Ask yourself . . . Has your team made a list of previous strategies / events that were communicated best over the last two years, and those that were communicated worst? Have you listed the distinctions between the two lists? Those distinctions will form the key items for improvement in the communication of your new strategy.

Low Levels of Cross-Functional Cooperation

I've often heard government relations professionals lament the challenges of getting other departments to "understand what they do," as well as to get their cooperation on very basic tasks required to execute the government relations strategy. This obstacle isn't uncommon. Research from over 40 experiments in a nine-year period and a survey deployed to 8000 managers in more than 250 companies (Sull & Homkef) reveals that only 9% of managers said they "could

rely on colleagues in other functions and units all the time.” Half said they “can rely on them most of the time.”

What happens when you can't rely on your colleagues in other parts of your organization? Efforts are duplicated, projects are delayed or left unfinished. Your strategy stays in the hefty three-ring binder, placed neatly in your bottom desk drawer.

Ask yourself. . . . Do your strategy sessions include discussion on how coordination would be handled, and how that will be monitored and measured?

Lack of Strategy Reinforcement and Oversight

Compounding the problem of uncooperative colleagues are “leaders” (you’ll read why I place that in quotes below) who neglect to reinforce the strategic direction through behavioral accountability. A common problem in execution is a lack of rational self-interest for individuals to align their behaviors with the strategy. It’s the leader’s job to encourage that self-interest by tying their individual performance objectives to the strategic outcomes. Even when your strategic goals *are* translated into individual performance objectives, if there’s no oversight, performance slips. While the performer can be “punished” at the annual salary and incentive evaluation, that’s too late to compensate for misguided performance.

For example, the Sull & Homkef research found that 60% of the respondents believed that a manager in their organization who achieved objectives, but failed to collaborate with colleagues in other units would be held accountable inconsistently or after a delay. Twenty - percent believe it would be tolerated.

Ask yourself. . . . Who’s responsible for leading team behaviors that align with the strategy?

Direction, Not Destination

Any depiction of your organization’s future is, by definition, uncertain. In the

ideal situation, as conditions change, it's a moving target. The goal isn't to hit a certain spot, but to move in the right direction. Strategy execution is essentially about direction, not destination.

Public and legislative support for your issues morphs and changes based on current cultural flashpoints (#MeToo, anyone?), sometimes radically altering what you can accomplish. In addition, many strategies discount their prowess of their legislative opponents, which should require you to adjust your strategy accordingly. As Colonel Tom Kolditz, the head of the Behavioral Sciences Division at West Point reminds us, "No plan survives contact with the enemy. You can have the best plan, but your enemy gets a vote." Similarly, no strategic plan survives totally intact after contact with reality.

Ask yourself. . . . As you execute your strategy, do you seize opportunities, even if they don't perfectly align with your plan?



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