Implementation Takes Guts

Idea In Short

Implementation is harder than diagnosis because it involves people, inertia and risk. Consultants who dismiss execution as pedestrian miss the point: decisions sit idle without leadership, relational equity and sustained effort.

Consulting Is a Big Tent

Consulting comes in many flavors and spans all industries, nonprofits and government. Whatever story appears in the Wall Street Journal, a consultant and an attorney can help. The field covers mergers and acquisitions, sales growth, cost reduction, restructuring, digital transformation, business model change, regulatory matters and environmental challenges. The combinations of industry and function are endless, from petrochemical supply chain to big box retail artificial intelligence applications.

The diversity of consulting work means practitioners must be adaptable generalists who can quickly absorb new contexts. A consultant might work on healthcare policy one month and consumer goods pricing the next. This breadth demands intellectual agility and humility, because no one arrives at a new engagement as an expert. The best consultants learn fast, ask sharp questions and synthesize patterns across seemingly unrelated industries.

Diagnostic Versus Implementation

A diagnostic is an intellectual sprint involving a smaller set of senior people who are in the know. It is about assessing the situation, getting smart, making valid assumptions, developing options and making tough decisions. Diagnostics resemble creating blueprints, with a draftsman producing a deliverable.

An implementation varies enormously. Whether it lasts five weeks or six years, it takes longer than a diagnostic. It can be a kaizen event or an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) implementation. It involves many more people and moves only as fast as those people do.

Think change management, spelled out deliberately to emphasize its weight and difficulty. The diagnostic produces the blueprint, but implementation builds the house, and building always takes longer than drawing.

The Story of James McKinsey

James McKinsey, the founder and namesake of McKinsey and Company, discovered the difficulty of implementation the hard way. He was recruited by a client to become CEO. In 1935, Marshall Fields had lost $12 million over five years and faced an $18 million debt repayment. Trouble surrounded the retailer on all sides.

McKinsey the man attacked the problem aggressively, restructuring the firm and ensuring its long-term survival. Marshall Fields survived another 70 years until Macy's acquired it in 2005. These are the right and difficult decisions a CEO makes. McKinsey was an accounting professor who considered himself a management engineer.

Duff McDonald, author of The Firm, noted that these two years were brutal for McKinsey. The founder grew depressed, contracted pneumonia and died two years later. It was the hardest thing he had ever done. It is hyperbole to say implementation killed him, but letting go of 1,200 employees, cutting whole divisions, retiring people early and receiving 10 to 20 life-threatening letters takes a toll. McKinsey himself reflected: never in his whole life before did he know how much more difficult it is to make business decisions himself than merely advising others what to do.1

Some People Belittle Implementation

Some dismiss implementation as easy or boring, something pedestrian and blue-collar. While no one is foolish enough to say it does not matter, many readily and arrogantly suggest someone else should do the work. This disconnect undermines the value chain from strategy to results. The arrogance is particularly puzzling because implementation is where value either materializes or evaporates. A brilliant strategy poorly executed produces nothing, while a mediocre strategy well executed can still generate meaningful returns.

Ten out of ten MBAs will boastfully declare they want to do strategy, as if that is where the money is. That is a false choice. Strategy and implementation are two sides of the same value-driving coin. Consulting can be overly theoretical, and many consultants have been hired to clean up the strategy work of other firms. The cliche story involves a high-end consulting firm charging $500 per hour to produce a plan that sounds good on paper.

Consider a real example: a consulting firm advised a retail client to lay off more experienced salespeople because data showed only a loose correlation between years of experience and annual sales. That was cavalier and stupid. The recommendation ignored institutional knowledge, client relationships and the complexity of human performance.

Decisions Sit Idle

The command-and-control archetype is dead. The notion that decisions made in the boardroom swiftly trickle down through the organization is dead. Decisions are like raw ingredients on a chopping board. They do not cook themselves. They do not jump into the blender or frying pan. Decisions just sit there.

Organizational inertia is bigger than any individual. Changing direction is not a one-person job. Leadership requires relational equity and risk tolerance. It is work that demands sustained commitment.2

Change Requires Head, Heart and Hand

Change requires equal parts head for intellect and analysis, heart for leadership and passion, and hand for implementation. Organizations carry inertia built from legacy IT systems, veteran employees, mergers and acquisitions with limited post-merger integration, poor incentives, geographic distance and plain old laziness. However simple something seems on PowerPoint in the boardroom, it is often a hot mess when you try to implement it.

Everything seems easier in theory. Cutting costs on a spreadsheet looks straightforward until you are the one delivering the news to managers and employees. Layoffs are real. It takes more than an executive memo to turn an organizational supertanker. The McKinsey 7S framework from the 1970s identifies strategy, shared values, skills, staff, systems, structure and style. That is a lot to get right. Do not be surprised if clients are slow to adopt and adapt. They have been there long before you arrived and will remain long after you leave. We've had consultants before is a common refrain.

The 7S framework remains relevant because it captures the interconnected nature of organizational change. Adjusting strategy without aligning shared values or systems creates friction that stalls progress. Successful implementation requires attention to all seven elements simultaneously, which explains why so many transformations fail. Consultants who understand this interdependence approach implementation with appropriate humility and patience.3

Credit goes to all the consultants on the ground helping clients get things done. The goal is not recommendations that end up on a bookshelf. The business is making change happen, and that takes guts.

- 1McKinsey 7S Framework
- 2McKinsey 7S Framework Overview
- 3Organizational Alignment and the 7S Model

Summary

Strategy and implementation are two sides of the same coin. The best consultants stay engaged through execution because that is where value actually materializes and organizations truly change.