

Integration of Hard, Soft and Mixed Factors for Effective Strategy Implementation: An Eco-System with Strategic Agility Imperative

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Abstract. This study focuses on the “Integration of Hard, Soft and Mixed factors for Effective Strategy Implementation: An Eco-System with Strategic Agility Imperative.” The purpose was to examine the factors that conduce to effective strategy implementation with particular interest in the human aspects that often contribute to comprise the integrity of or outrightly stall effective strategy implementation. The investigation was based on desk-research which relied solely on secondary sources of data. Thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis were used as analytical tool. The research found out that many factors are involved in strategy implementation process and each factor has the potential to work for or against effective strategy implementation depending on the factors are streamlined, harmonised and synthesised . These factors classified as hard, soft and mixed need to be properly harnessed under the auspices of strong, capable and visionary leadership to power and drive the strategy implementation via clear communication that builds consensus, commitment, collaborations and vertical and horizontal fits across the organisation. Organisational competencies, reasoned actions of strategy executors and sound knowledge of project management should be leveraged. Grey areas bordering on ulterior motives and corrupt tendencies of strategy executors should be watched out for to be curbed in the bud. It is recommended that business organisations install strategic leaders adept in demands of strategy implementation to help concerned organisations achieve effective strategy implementation within both cost and time and stem the tide of strategy implementation failure.

Keywords: Strategy implementation, strategic agility, theory of reasoned action, hard, soft and mixed factors, eco-system.

1. Introduction

Strategy implementation in contrast to strategic intent, strategy formulation, strategy evaluation and control

occupies the most important or key position in the strategic management continuum (Homburg, Fassnacht & Guenther, 2000; Thompson & Strickland, 2003; Ahmadi, Salamzadeh, Daraei & Akbari, 2012; Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2007, 2013; Rajasekar, 2014). This point underscores the fact that the best strategy crafted cannot remove any hurdle on the way to achieve a competitive outcome as it remains more or less a paper tiger unless and until it is translated into action (David, 2013). This thesis explains why Vince Lombardi (cited in Thompson & Strickland, 2003) declares that “the best game plan in the world never blocked or tackled anybody.” Unlike strategy formulation which is intellectually tasking and market-driven in focus, strategy implementation is not only operations-driven but also a mentally and physically demanding, energy-sapping and time-consuming aspect of strategic management process (Li, Guohui & Eppler, n.d.; Thompson & Strickland, 2003; Singh, 1998; Hrebiniak, 2006; Rajasekar, 2014; Nkuda, 2019). Cogently, effective strategy implementation constitutes the hallmark and success or otherwise of a choice strategy of a business organisation (Thompson & Strickland, 2003).

Given the pivotal role that strategy implementation plays in the strategic management continuum, it is pertinent at this point to pose a seemingly simple and yet complex question: what is strategy implementation? Admittedly, a straightforward answer is elusive as there abound in the literature different strategic lenses from which strategy implementation can be defined notably: process, behavioural or action and hybrid lenses (Li *et al.*, n. d.). However, this author opts to adopt a hybrid viewpoint since strategy implementation, for all practical intents and purposes, involves both process and behaviour or action. In effect therefore, strategy implementation can be defined as the process by which a formulated strategy is translated into action in order to accomplish the nominated goals and/or objectives of a business organisation which informed the crafting of the strategy in the first place. Strategy implementation can

also be defined as the cognitive, action-oriented and step-wise process that involves the administration and control of chain of activities that comprise formulated decision-making strategy (Singh, 1998; Govindarajan (1988) and Sashittal & Wilemon (1996) cited in Li *et al.*, n. d.). Strategy implementation can also be defined as a pattern of decisions and actions intended to create functional strategies, systems, structures and processes required to achieve set strategic ends of an organisation. Yet, Wheelen and Hunger (2010) view strategy implementation as “the sum total of the activities and choices required for execution of a strategic plan.” Little wonder that David (2013) strategy implementation is described as “action stage” of the strategic management process because without taking concrete and specific actions on the plan resulting from strategy formulation nothing worthwhile will change (Harrison & St. John, 2000; David, 2013).

Strategic management literature is replete with anecdotal accounts of alarming rate at which strategy implementation fails. Rajasekar (2014) citing sundry sources rate the failure of strategy implementation at between 50% and 80%. Li *et al.*, (n. d) corroborate these statistics based on Economist Survey of 276 senior company executives in 2004 and a white paper on strategy implementation of Chinese corporations in 2006 which also indicated strategy implementation failure rate of 57% and 83% respectively. Specifically, Prieto (2015) states that the management and implementation of large projects fail 2/3 or 67% of the time. This leaves a paltry success rate of 10% to 20% in most cases. Again, this stark reality check brings to the fore, as it were, the need to examine the myriad factors that need to be taken into account to ensure 100% success rate in strategy implementation.

This constitutes the burden of this academic exploration and analysis with a view to critically looking at the hard, soft and mixed factors that characterise strategy implementation and on the basis of which, interrogate the failure of strategy implementation using analytical tools of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis (Kazmi, 2002). Failure of strategy implementation seems to put on the garb that cuts across different sectors of national economies (public and private) worldwide with however, varying degrees of prevalence. For instance, Nigeria as a nation via the instrumentality of its ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), like some other countries and corporate organizations, is noted to be very good at the formulation of public policies but a terrible and woeful failure when it comes to ensuring successful implementation of the policies so formulated. Urieto (1999) buttresses that the major problem of Nigeria as a country has nothing to do with planning as such but rather the lack of effective implementation strategies. Prieto (2015) identifies weak and haphazard strategy implementation associated, among other things,

with people, processes and technology as a causative factor of strategy implementation failure.

2. Literature Review

The theories that underlie this research work are resource-based view, project management theory and the theory of reasoned action.

2.1 Resource-Based View

The resource-based view was originated by Edith Penrose in 1959 and popularise by scholars such as Barney, Weatherfelt and others about 1990 (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 2001; Grant, 2008; Raduan, Jegak, Haslinda & Alimin, 2009, Nkuda, 2017). This theory emphasises the deployment of organisation’s bundle of heterogeneous internal resources which are valuable, inimitable, rare and non-substitutable to achieve competitive advantage reflected in superior performance (Porter, 1998; Grant, 2008; Raduan *et al.*, 2009; Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2007, 2013). To the extent that effective strategy implementation tailored to achieve superior performance entails leveraging on the competencies at the disposal of the organisation reflected, among other things, in executors having full knowledge of the minutest details of the strategy being implemented and ensuring cross-functional collaborations in course of the implementation, the resource-based view becomes appropriate and relevant (Kazmi, 2002).

2.2 Project Management Theory

The project management theory came into existence in the form of a code known as Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) issued in 1969 by Project Management Institute and intended to provide a common architecture to manage most projects most of the time (Prieto, 2015). Its main building blocks rest on the tenets of the classical theorists comprising scientific management of Sir Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856 – 1915) and his students Henri Fayol (1841 – 1925) and Henry Laurence Gantt (1861 - 1919) which stress scientific approach to job design and division of work, careful selection, planning, organizing, leading and controlling as well as scheduling of work respectively (Weihrich, Cannice & Koontz, 2013; Sapru, 2013; Prieto, 2015). Given however, the size, time frame and complexity of project, project management body of knowledge has failed to cope in terms of delivering competitive advantage on a consistent basis reflected in timely delivery of projects within budgets and to scale and therefore, in dire need of improvements. These improvements on project management body of knowledge span industrial (Traditional approach, Prince2 and Process-based management), Agile (focus on human considerations) through biological (Lean and Critical Chain Project Management (CCPM) of Eliyahu

Moshe Goldratt) to evolutionary (Extreme Project Management (XPM)). In other words, extreme project management currently advocated embraces both chaos and complexity theories and is markedly different in theoretical orientation from the traditional project management theories just as Newtonian Physics is different from Einstein’s theory of relativity (Prieto, 2015). The strategic contexts and demands of strategy implementation underscore the pertinence and relevance of the applicability of extreme project management approach.

2.3 The Theory of Reasoned Action

The theory of reasoned action was the brain-child of Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen around 1975 – 1980. The theory is an advance on Information Integration Theory which primarily seeks to predict behaviour. The theory of reasoned action is basically pre-occupied with behavioural intention. The theory is built on two major building blocks viz: attitudes and norms as they relate respectively to what individuals want to do and at the same time, what others expect them to do (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975). The influence of attitudes can be exemplified using an individual who desires to go on Valentine date but cannot do so because of lack of money. This example brings to the fore what is termed behavioural intention in the parlance of psychology of

persuasion. Consistent lateness to hypothetical project site by some key project executors on advice by some other colleagues that their punctuality and regularity in attendance was not adequately rewarded is capable of derailing successful implementation of the project. Development such as this, borders on the influence of norms i.e., acting in line with expectations of others.

The theory of reasoned action pointedly bears a significant correlation to strategy implementation during which process a litany of behaviours (overt and covert) is exhibited by executors of strategy implementation. Admittedly at the inception of strategy implementation, tremendous excitement, enthusiasm and commitment may be demonstrated by executors towards successful strategy implementation. But later on, some members of the team may begin to develop cold feet and thus, constitute themselves into a cog in the wheel of strategy implementation once they sense that their ulterior motives or selfish interests (particularly pecuniary in nature) may not be served at the end of successful strategy implementation. In a nutshell, both attitudes and norms which characterise behavioural intention need to be watched out for during strategy implementation to ensure that they are detected early and controlled to ensure strategy implementation succeeds

2.3 Conceptual Architecture

The conceptual discourse of this work is guided by the schematics orchestrated with modifications below:

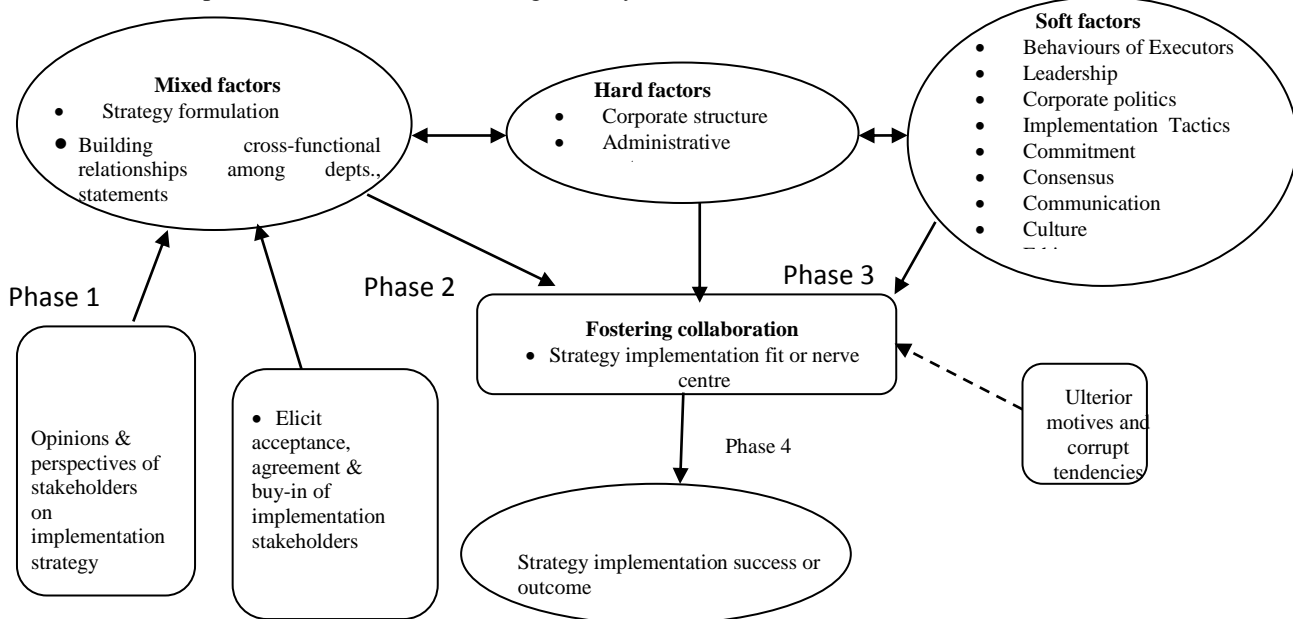


Fig.2.1: Strategy implementation framework

Source: Adapted with modifications from Li, Guohui & Eppler (n.d). Making strategy work: A literature review on the factors influencing strategy implementation, p. 38 and inputs from Kazmi (2002). Business policy and strategic management, 2nd ed., pp. 291 -413.

The schema depicted above is phased into pre-implementation articulation of viewpoints, arrangement of buy-in of key organisational staff, promoting collaboration across board and monitoring results to ensure that positive performance is assured and sustained (Li et al., n. d).

Mixed Factors (a):

The formulation of strategy is primarily intended to arm the organisation to better cope with the competitive landscape (Pearce & Robinson, 1991). At the heart of strategy formulation is the business of determining the domain definition and domain direction and navigation which answers the fundamental questions: where are we going to compete, how and against whom are we going to compete? (Pearce & Robinson, 1991; Harrison & St. John, 2000; Grant, 2008). Strategy formulation relies on access to reliable data which can be gathered from both internal and external sources using SWOT analysis, Boston Consulting Group (BCG) matrix, General Electric Business Screen, external environment evaluation (EEF), competitive profile matrix (CPM), internal-external matrix (IEM), strategic position and action evaluation (SPACE), grand strategy matrix and quantitative strategic planning matrix (QSPM), (Pearce & Robinson, 1991; Harrison & St. John, 2000; Kazmi, 2002; Thompson & Strickland, 2003; David, 2013; Nkuda, 2019). The requisite data to be incorporated into strategy formulation include: information about new customer needs, forecasted future demand, competitors’ activities, new business opportunities, inputs to plan for improvements in capacity and workforce diversity, new products and services as well as technologies (Harrison & St. John, 2000). The essence of this exercise is to provide a broad and panoramic view on the state of the whole economy to allow viable strategic decisions to be made on the choice industry in which organisation will play and long-term goals of the organisation (Pearce & Robinson, 1991; Grant, 2008). These pieces of information can be obtained from marketing officers or salespersons that interface with customers on regular basis. In this wise and by virtue of this strategic role, the marketing officers or salespersons invariably put on the toga or garb of strategic leaders without being so designated on the hierarchy of the organization.

This explains and justifies why Ivancic, Mencer, Jelenc and Dulcic (2017) state that managers being helpless to alter, the contextual conditions in the competitive marketplace, need to collect, process and address environmental information always. Although top-level strategic managers in respective business organisations are saddled with this responsibility, it is vitally important therefore to invite and incorporate some representatives below the top management echelons especially the functional managers who double as foot-soldiers and on whose shoulders the burden of strategy implementation squarely rests (Pearce & Robinson, 1991; Kazmi, 2002; Thompson & Strickland, 2003; David, 2013). Harrison and St. John (2000) corroborate thus:

Members of our sales force are surrogates for customers. They should be able to reach back into Motorola and pull out technologists and other people they need to solve problems and anticipate customer needs. We want to put the salesperson at the top of the organisation. The rest of us then serve the salesperson.

Strategic Management Pyramid

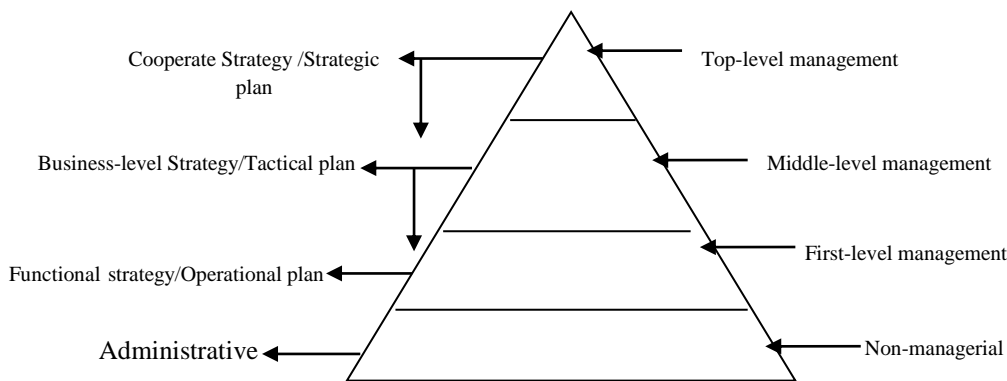


Fig 2.2: Strategic Management Pyramid
Source: Researcher’s Desk (2020).

The strategic plan crafted by the top-management, needs to be interpreted into relative concrete details to generate tactical plan upon which, the functional strategic managers are expected to further work on to reflect their respective functional areas viz: production, finance, human resource, marketing, research and development etc., in terms of generating

cognate operational strategies and plans as reflected in the above schema (Fig. 2.2), (Harrison & St. John, 2000; Kazmi, 2002; Li et al., n. d.). The approach has the merit of articulating viewpoints and perspectives of critical stakeholders as well as eliciting acceptance, agreement and buy-in of critical staff thereby creating, abinitio, ownership mind-set of the

strategy formulated preparatory to actual implementation. Moreover, this strategic romance in the words of this author becomes imperative to bridge the gap between strategy formulation and implementation which Kazmi (2002) refers to as forward and backward linkages. These actions which complete the specifics of phases 1 and 2 of the pre-implementation demands in the operational schema (Fig. 2.1) are considered more or less sine-qua-non to achieve effective strategy implementation (Li et al., n. d).

Hard Factors

It is proper to state for the umpteenth times that due recognition needs to be given to the fact that strategy implementation succeeds strategy formulation. Besides, the public policy formulation at national and sub-national levels is basically the same with policy implementation in terms of the processes and phases but differ in respect of intensity, contents and complexity. At corporate level where strategy formulation mostly obtains, strategy implementation is also in phases and policies are required in course of implementation process essentially to make corporate behaviours conformable in such a way as to ensure effective strategy implementation (Kazmi, 2002). The many factors that serve as enablers of strategy implementation could as well constitute the cog in the wheel of effective strategy implementation particularly when they are not well streamlined, harmonised and synthesised.

Kazmi (2002) classifies these factors into activating strategies, structural, behavioural, functional and operational issues. Some sources list governance, structure and behaviours as individual factors constraining strategy implementation. Noble (1999) lists factors influencing strategy implementation as communication, interpretations, adoption and enactment. Rajasekar (2014) enumerates influences on strategy implementation to include: "leadership style, information availability and accuracy, uncertainty, organisational structure, organisational culture, human resources and technology." Li et al., (n. d) creates an holistic schema of factors influencing strategy implementation which has organisational structure and administrative systems as hard factors; implementation tactics, consensus and commitment and communication among executors comprise the soft factors while the mixed factors capture environment-based strategy formulation, building relationships across different strategy management levels (vertical fit) and across different operational departments, sections and units (horizontal fit) for the purpose of driving effective strategy implementation.

The corporate structure as a hard factor is characteristically of different types ranging from simple or entrepreneurial, functional, matrix, geographic, product-based, customer-based, team-based, network and boundaryless structures (Harrison & St. John, 2000; Kazmi, 2002; Amah & Nkuda, 2014). Corporate structure serves as the fulcrum around which strategy implementation revolves and it can either precede or follow strategy depending on the peculiar circumstance of organisational size and environmental context of the organisation concerned (Chadler, 1962; Mintzberg, 1987 cited in Camus, 2002). Corporate structures are product of organisational design which could be mechanistic or organic in terms of broad classification. The choice of one design against another depends on the environmental situation a business organisation faces because there has to be a fit among strategy, structure and environment (Kazmi, 2002). Given the environmental dynamics and the highly competitive landscape, a team-based structure largely empowered by teams with both requisite knowledge and capability to adjust structure to cope with agility of strategy becomes ideal and most desirable in driving strategy implementation. Pearce and Robinson (1991) and Hitt et al., (2007, 2013) state that given the reality of continuous change which could warrant a major shift in strategy, a suitable organisational structure needs to be aligned with strategy in relation to the operating environment and also effecting necessary changes to both corporate structure and strategy as the need arises.

The corporate structure needs to be strengthened by the right administrative systems viz: planning, information, control, appraisal, motivation, reward, communication and development and related strategies across relevant functions (Harrison & St. John, 2000; Kazmi, 2002). To strike the strategic import of the right choice of structure, strategic hindsight has evidenced that International Business Machines (IBM) whose sales stood at 15% before 1980 but suffered drastic decline to 3% after, was able to reverse the sliding trend by strategically converting its highly centralised functional structure to highly decentralised strategic business unit-based which succeeded in enhancing its product development capacity and strategy (Pearce & Robinson, 1991). Similarly, Chrysler and General Motors faced with the competitive challenge posed by entry of Japanese cars into American market at affordable cost, were constrained to shift from Fordism (mass production system) to shiftily adapt the lean production system of the Japanese with the active support from U.S., government (Amberg, 2013).

Soft Factors

In both instances cited above, the adjustments of the corporate structure were clearly communicated to elicit the consensus and commitment of the executors as soft factors (Fig. 2.1). Strategic steps must be taken to ensure that the relevant actions pervade the entire organisation building and fostering collaborations both vertical and horizontal fits (Li et al., n. d.) which underscores the phase 3 of the conceptual architecture. The right implementation tactics are required, capable strategic leaders imperative, unhealthy and illegitimate organisational politics eliminated or minimised, sound strategy-culture support enthroned, and ethical consciousness to the organisation and immediate community (corporate social responsibility) animated to ensure effective strategy execution (Kazmi, 2002; Li et al., n. d.). Over all, the soft factors will be better strengthened where the organisation exhibits good governance in its operations.

Mixed Factors (b):

The mixed factors point directly to the functional level at which strategy implementation takes root. The corporate strategy which cascades from the top-level management through the middle-level management to the first-level management or functional level finally becomes operational strategy/plan for the purpose of ease of implementation (Pearce & Robbinson, 1991). This top-down strategic sojourn creates in the process vertical strategic fit (Kazmi, 2002). More importantly however, is what then happens at the different functional areas whose responsibility it is to translate the corporate cum business-level strategies into action to generate desired outcomes or results as reflected in phase 4 of the schema (Fig. 2.1). Perhaps, this is the arena where strategy implementation often goes amiss or haywire. The reason of course has to do with ingenuity and smartness required to streamline, harmonise and synthesise different and chain of activities within and across functional boundaries to ensure and forge horizontal fit (Kazmi, 2002). A careful handling of strategic activities at these levels may trigger strategy implementation success. This is so because at this critical point, the hard, soft and mixed factors are expected to melt and blend seamlessly engendering a phenomenon which this author refers to as strategy implementation success nerve-centre or fit. The eco-system created at this point, makes strategy so implemented to become nimble and malleable to respond promptly and proactively to environmental dynamics and thus, helps business organisations to realise their set goals

in the long run and objectives in the short to medium terms.

However, a caveat needs to be introduced here and that is, it may happen that some of the strategy executors nurse serious ulterior motives which may border on the desire to corruptly enrich themselves on or before the completion of the strategy implementation. When this happens, a major threat is posed against successful strategy implementation as subtle and/or obvious cracks will suddenly develop on the wall of synergy needed to advance strategy implementation thereby making forging collaborations across board difficult. Consequently, successful strategy implementation at this point risks serious failure. These cracks on the wall of strategy implementation synergy may manifest in many ways that are overt and covert such as: undue lateness to and irregularity at work, feign illness, taking French leave from work, deliberate failure to meet timelines, selfishness, greed, indiscipline, connivance and collusion to subvert planned implementation activities in terms of supply of critical materials and other manipulative devices resulting in bankruptcy of integrity identifiable with some strategy executors (Ekpe, 2012). Strategy implementation strategists charged with the responsibility to deliver on strategy implementation have to be vigilant, alert and mindful of actions of people, status of processes and technology while constantly ensuring that good efforts are duly rewarded to serve as morale booster and motivation and also punish bad and unethical behaviours as Hatim Tyabji, the founding Chairman and CEO of VeriFone, Inc., did as (cited in Weihrich, Cannice & Koontz, 2013). He sacked his excellent performing manager in charge of foreign operations found to have been involved in unethical practices thus, reinforcing the fact that “this is a company with a culture in which performance, no matter how impressive, cannot be achieved by unethical behaviour –period” (Weihrich, Cannice & Koontz, 2013).

3. Methodology

The research design adopted in this investigation was fundamentally descriptive-desk research which relies on archival and extant strategy literature. The method of research involved thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis.

3.1 Limitations of the Study

The investigation not only relied on secondary data but also tilted more in emphasis on corporate business organizations as opposed to public institutions to which strategy implementation is equally application.

4. Conclusion

Insights from the above research inform that successful strategy implementation depends on how the strategic leaders handle the myriad issues tangential to the strategy implementation. Right from strategy formulation to actual strategy implementation people, structure, processes and technology, inter-alia, are involved and how these variables are manipulated can either lead to success or failure of strategy implementation. Since the most critical factor is people or stakeholders in strategy implementation, hindsight dictates that actions of the relevant people before, during and even after strategy implementation should be carefully monitored to allow for prompt adjustments and changes as need arises. The ulterior motives and corrupt tendencies on the part of strategy executors should be nib in the bud as soon as they are spotted. Above all, inspirations should be drawn from the baseline theories namely: resource-based view, theory of reasoned action and extreme project management which leverages and draws heavily on chaos and complexity theories.

5. Recommendations

Business organisations desired to achieve successful strategy implementation should build capable strategic leadership that can forge organisation-wide synergy through clear communication, elicits consensus and commitment as essential ingredients to create owner-ship mind-set right from strategy formulation through the network of activities necessary to drive successful strategy implementation. With strong, capable and visionary leadership in place which should be mindful of ulterior motives and corrupt tendencies of some strategy executors, there is high prospect that the alarming rate of strategy implementation failure may be reversed and strategy implementation literature would cease to be replete with gory statistics of strategy implementation.

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