

Three thoughts on bringing a radically different strategy to life

by Stephanie Owen (stephanie@strategy2life.com)



Bringing a new strategy to life is challenging for any organisation or function. Significantly accelerating the timeframe to find a cure for brain cancer was the challenge that the Cure For Life Foundation took on in 2012. While the journey is still in its early stages, here are my top 3 reflections on implementing a radically different strategy. These themes will undoubtedly resonate with other bold change leaders.

Bringing a new strategy to life is challenging for any organisation or function. When your new strategy is radically different from your current strategy, and involves trying to align potentially hundreds of leaders from as many organisations across the globe, the strategy execution challenge takes on colossal proportions.

Significantly accelerating the timeframe to find a cure for brain cancer was the challenge that the [Cure For Life Foundation](#) took on about a year ago. Brain cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in Australians under 40 (including children). The survival rate remains dismal, with some types of malignant tumours almost 100% fatal. Yet we are still unable to identify significant risk factors and no screening procedures are in place. The timeframe to find a cure has been estimated at 50 years from now. Unlike many cancers, outcomes for most brain cancer patients have barely improved in the last 30 years. These factors have caused Cure For Life to revisit its strategy, changing the way it funds medical research from traditional grant making approaches, to closing funding gaps and funding enablers that fast-track research projects to clinical trials.

I had the privilege of working closely with the CEO and the Board of Cure For Life Foundation to implement the core element of the new strategy, in partnership with [MG Taylor Corporation](#), [The Difference](#) (a business unit of PwC), and [FutureBuilders Group](#). Together, we designed and delivered a highly successful collaborative workshop to launch a movement, dubbed the Global Brain Exchange (GBX), which seeks to change the system for brain cancer research in order to find a cure in 10 years. While the journey is still in its early stages, I'd like to share my top three reflections on helping an organisation implement a radically different strategy, because I believe these common themes will resonate with leaders of organisations across different industries and functions.

1. Moving to a different strategy requires courage, but the alternative is usually more painful.

Changing Cure For Life Foundation's strategy has required, and continues to require, enormous courage on the part of its Board and management. The strategy calls for a different model in how the Foundation raises and uses funds. It requires letting go of the notion of predictable controlled journeys and familiar roles such as funder vs researcher, client vs supplier, and competitor vs collaborator. It raises risks of being misunderstood and criticised by some stakeholders. Yet it is also an opportunity for standing out from the crowd, for making a giant leap towards achieving its mission, and for instigating an international movement which opens up new opportunities for Australian researchers and ultimately, patients.

Cure For Life Foundation's historical funding strategy is similar to most other medical research charities, which in turn is aligned to how the Australian government funds medical research. It is

comfortable, understood, and predictable – for donors and supporters, the government, researchers and patients. Unfortunately, the current approach has become less effective over time: government and philanthropic budgets are under pressure, and funding is prioritised for high-incidence age-related illnesses, as with most developed countries with ageing populations. All the while, researchers spend an ever-increasing proportion of their time on administration and fundraising, and impediments in the system mean that basic research does not progress to improved treatments as quickly as we would like. Clinical trials alone can take years – time that most brain cancer patients do not have.

Adopting a different strategy is confronting, but not changing direction can be worse in the long run, as adverse external factors erode gains made under the current strategy.

The courage to take on a different strategy also requires courage in execution. Here, too, Cure For Life has shown courage by using the best people they could find to help execute the strategy. Although that sounds obvious, it has to be remembered that Cure For Life is not a large charity, and as a non-profit, it is particularly cost-conscious. What is more typical in many organisations is that they hire the lowest-cost resources possible, without considering that executing a new strategy is inherently risky, and that the best mitigation comes from having people who have the wisdom and broad experience to navigate the unknown.

2. Communication alone is not enough to lead and sustain change.

A radically different strategy calls for a radically different execution approach. If you want to accelerate brain cancer research, you can't exactly just tell people to "do things differently". After all, who does the telling? And who needs to change? Who "owns" brain cancer research? It's everybody and nobody. The government does not own brain cancer research, nor does the United Nations World Health Organisation. Rather, it is research organisations, hospitals and universities, doctors, patients and their advocates, pathologists, pharmaceutical companies, government and non-government funders, and so on. And while many believe that collaborative research is the way forward for acceleration, it is not entirely clear how it would work in practice.

Cure For Life's initial strategy involved the design and building of a technology platform that would enable collaboration among brain cancer researchers. The change management strategy would essentially consist of inviting researchers to help design the system, piloting it, and raising awareness of its benefits. Although this classic approach works in most situations, and is more sophisticated than the common approach of building a system and telling people to use it, take-up of the platform presumes that brain cancer researchers agree on both the problem and the solution – neither of which was found to be the case based on early investigative interviews. From there, it was decided that the strategy implementation approach would involve the engagement of representatives from different parts of the brain cancer research system in order to co-design a way forward, without presuming a solution. This change management strategy is worlds away from telling researchers to collaborate – even when the communication is done by renowned experts at high-powered conferences.

Other organisations that have successfully implemented major changes have harnessed the power of peer groups, altered the work environment, changed their formal and informal incentive structures, designed immersive learning experiences, and so on, often in combination. Even those successful leaders that focus primarily on the communication component of change management, do the "telling" in strategic and creative ways: for example, storytelling, and ensuring that communication is two-way and using varied channels and approaches.

Many leaders who are charged with leading change still cling to the notion that change management is just fancy consultant-speak for good old-fashioned communication. Unfortunately, merely telling people (including yourself) to do things differently rarely works, even when they

know they should change. If telling alone resulted in change, we would not be seeing whole industries created around weight loss, quitting smoking, parenting, and so on.

3. Most problems can be overcome if our intents are aligned.

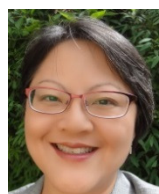
Executing a radically different strategy to solve a complex problem like brain cancer research is hard. In addition to its inherent difficulties, we faced most of the same challenges found in projects everywhere: budgetary and time pressures, creative tensions when people from different backgrounds, geographies, functions and organisations have to work together, disparate stakeholder needs that have to be met.

However, there was one thing that was far easier to achieve in this endeavour than most other strategy execution exercises: alignment of intents. Everyone involved, from the Chair of the Board to the workshop caterers, supported the cause and wanted the strategy to succeed. And when the going got tough, it was the trust that came from aligned intents that allowed the team that included several suppliers in multiple geographies, as well as the Board, CEO and workshop participants to move forward and resolve differences and issues with grace and integrity.

The enormity of the power of aligned intent surprised me, despite having worked with other management teams to align stakeholders to strategic visions and intents in the past. This suggests to me that the power is proportional to the level of alignment. Nonetheless, it is the lack of alignment which is most obvious. A lack of alignment is usually manifested as resistance to change – for example, among frontline employees and supervisors. Unfortunately, some leaders prefer to ignore the problem or attribute resistance to personal deficiencies, reasoning that “sooner or later they will need to get on the bus or stay off it”, to paraphrase certain business bestsellers. When alignment is absent, the seed is sown for a slow execution journey characterised by resistance or even sabotage, and the stage is set for a vicious circle of resistance or learned helplessness in future change efforts. Successful change leaders spend the time to ensure that both the “why” and “how” of strategic transformations are understood at all levels, in terms that make sense to everyone involved. The time spent on aligning intents and vision, at an early stage of execution and throughout the journey, typically repays itself abundantly through faster execution and, more importantly, building an organisation that is more agile and change-able.

Most leaders’ strategy execution challenges are not matters of life and death; nor are they charged with instigating changes that call for international collaboration from hundreds of leaders from as many organisations. Yet the Cure For Life strategy execution journey, by the sheer enormity of its challenge, brings into sharp focus at least three themes that are common to other organisations: the courage required to take a different path, the necessity to go beyond simplistic communication to lead and sustain change, and the enormous power of aligned intent.

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