



7 Steps for Avoiding Initiative Gridlock

By Tom Spencer

What looks good on paper doesn't always translate to real life. All too often annual strategic planning processes at the corporate and department level establish objectives without adequately considering the time, effort, and focus required to implement them. More times than not, this creates gridlock at the frontline as supervisors and the workforce attempt to juggle competing priorities while staying on top of their core work (i.e., the work that produces short- and long-term revenue and/or customer delight).

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While each planned initiative might appear well worth the time and effort in isolation from everything else that's going on, there's a practical limitation to how many priorities can be juggled. The leaders making these higher level decisions typically are not impacted as heavily as those further down the organization. It's also common for leaders to be caught up

in their own cycle of "busyness," thinking that more is always better. When asked to do too much, frontline supervisors will prioritize the tasks with the greatest short-term consequences (positive consequences for doing them or negative consequences for not doing

them). They often end up ignoring whatever tasks will get them in the least amount of immediate trouble if left undone. However, these decisions might not be in the best long-term interest of the company.

With ever-increasing supervisor-to-staff ratios, many frontline supervisors are already functioning more like administrative supervisors rather than performance coaches. What effective strategy execution requires is a clear understanding of the priorities by an engaged and motivated workforce. Frequent starts and stops in the face of changing priorities will only cause frustration and suppress momentum and discretionary effort. This is especially true when poorly understood projects pull resources away from what's seen as the core work of the business.

Before cascading strategic plans to the frontline, the capacity of the frontline should be evaluated against a detailed list of the resources, new learning, and new behaviors that will be required. When possible, the implementation of initiatives should be staggered and carefully coordinated to avoid overburdening the frontline at any one time, especially during peak business periods.

Follow these steps to coordinate corporate and departmental plans so that the quality and volume of the core work isn't sacrificed:

1. **Bring the initiative owners together face-to-face** and establish a common understanding of the what, why, when, and how of their planned initiatives.
2. **Highlight any redundancy with existing initiatives** or other planned initiatives and consolidate when and where possible. Identify process and outcome success measures for each initiative. Eliminate or at least postpone initiatives that have no easily measurable benefit.
3. **Create a matrix that specifies the behavior required** at each level of the



organization for each initiative (e.g., a column for each initiative and rows for each level in the organization, with specific behaviors filling the cells). Evaluate the behavior required and determine the extent to which the separate initiatives will drive competing behaviors. Eliminate any potential conflicts.

4. **Discuss the difficulty** (time, effort, and any other naturally occurring, negative consequences for those required to perform the new behaviors) and potential impact (positive and negative) of the planned initiatives on the core work and other initiatives.
5. **Sequence the launch of each initiative** based on its expected benefit, the need to coordinate with external events or other planned activities, and resource capacity.
6. **Plan frequent feedback and positive reinforcement** to shape and motivate the new behavior required. Whenever possible, reduce the negative consequences that might be associated with the behavior (e.g., provide clear direction to avoid rework and the necessary resources for efficient performance).
7. **Monitor the impact** of the requirements on supervisors and the frontline to ensure that the work environment is supporting the desired behavior without having a negative impact on the core work or the culture.

New initiatives are inevitable. Companies cannot expect to thrive without improving and adapting to changes in the business environment. Yet effective strategy execution most often depends on the performance of the frontline and their supervisors. Proclaiming a new strategy does not make it so.

To avoid initiative gridlock at the frontline, leaders need to temper their vision and optimism about what can be accomplished with a pragmatic view of what will produce the best outcome. This likely means keeping some cars off the road (limiting initiatives), carpooling (integrating initiatives with the core work and other initiatives), scheduling road usage (beginning initiatives only when capacity allows), increasing the speed limit (increasing capacity by tapping into the discretionary effort of the workforce), and/or building a bigger highway (expanding operations).

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[About the Author]

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Tom is President and CEO of Aubrey Daniels International (ADI). For nearly 25 years, Tom has provided consulting services in areas such as instructional and performance systems, behavioral process design and improvement, leadership development, and strategy integration and implementation. Tom's pragmatic approach, grounded in the science of behavior, is focused on clients successfully creating positive change in management practices, organizational systems, and critical business results. Tom has published articles and blog posts on leadership, consequence management, performance fluency, and technology development.

[About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing re-mains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

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