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Dan Kenyon/Getty Images

“We found the perfect strategy” ranks with “And they lived happily ever after” as a perpetual myth. A strategy is never excellent in and of itself; it is shaped, enhanced, or limited by implementation. Top leaders can provide the framework and tools for a team, but the game is won on the playing field. When a strategy looks brilliant, it’s because of the quality of execution. A dumb idea is the one you

fumble in the field by missing critical details, like how customers would react or what competitors might change while you're still picking up the ball.

In decades of teaching executives at Harvard Business School and interviewing CEOs for my research, I've observed that savvy leaders whose strategies succeed tend to focus on four implementation imperatives:

Question everything. When Apple launched the iPhone in 2007 with AT&T as exclusive service provider, telecom giant Verizon decided to launch its own smartphone. It knew it had to act fast, so top leaders began by challenging major assumptions about how they operated. Instead of do-it-ourselves, they worked with Google and Motorola. Instead of we-know-better, they used their partners' capabilities and shared data. Instead of waiting for every step to be finished before proceeding to the next, they worked on many fronts simultaneously. They created an excellent product in record time, in time for launch [in the 2009 holiday season](#). In the two months post-launch, Droid sales even [outpaced](#) the iPhone's launch numbers. Verizon would not have been able to so quickly and successfully change its strategy without being willing to question and overhaul traditional organizational structures.

Inform everyone, then empower champions. Excellent execution requires both breadth and depth. Big strategies need local options. A bank CEO who successfully implemented a new strategy for positioning the company as environmentally responsible in a country with strong environmental values started with broad awareness sessions for all employees, so they would know what was happening, and so the company could benefit from crowdsourced ideas. But then the CEO zeroed in on volunteer champions who stepped forward to realize the vision through innovations in products and customer relationships. He didn't worry about converting the skeptics, insist that all units make changes at exactly the same rate, or determine which innovations to undertake. He started a snowball rolling. The champions' wins became success stories that stimulated others to adopt practices or create their own.

Keep relationships tight and rules loose. Visionary leaders see further when they can see through many eyes. This means staying in close communication with their on-the-ground players, the way football coaches talk with quarterbacks on headsets throughout the game. The CEO and COO of a multisite nonprofit were rolling out a new strategy started with tight, rules-laden processes and playbooks. But as unexpected obstacles and shortfalls showed up on quarterly reports, they realized they should loosen procedural controls while working harder to get the on-site implementers working closely together and with HQ as allies in pursuit of a common mission. Once they articulated their shared purpose, took responsibility for how every other site performed, and developed mutual respect, they vaulted over hurdles and created better ways to meet goals. Shared values knit people together. Arrogance at the top and communication silos below undermine execution.

Modify quickly. David Kenny became the CEO of private-equity-owned Weather Company to bring its TV channel into the digital age by building on a wealth of data analytics. He also stressed synergies

between digital and TV. On-air meteorologists were expected to produce content for social media and digital channels, while digital producers developed short-form videos that could be viewed online, on mobile devices, or on TV. This became difficult and burdensome. At the same time, the divergence between the two sides increased: dramatic growth for digital, flat for TV. So instead of exhorting each to redouble their efforts, Kenny split them into two divisions. This increased TV's performance and led to a lucrative sale of the digital assets. "Try, test, learn, and modify" is a better approach than sticking to something that isn't producing results.

Strategy can be viewed as a literary effort to craft a complete script and then hand it over to actors who enact it word by word. I prefer to think of it as resembling improvisational theater. A strategy takes shape from what actors do in front of audiences that provide feedback. Like the rapid prototyping of products in the tech world, or like a capital campaign for hospitals or museums that begins with a quiet phase, strategy often emerges from thoughtful planning followed by serendipitous execution experiments, like doing better than expected in a particular market. In fact, successful leaders sometimes wait to announce a strategy until it's well under way.

For all the faddish talk about audacious goals and moonshots, the bigger an unproven promise, the harder the fall when execution doesn't match the hype. It is important to avoid the temptation to declare victory at an announcement of a strategy — the photo op of merger partners' handshakes, the external award for product design, or the big donation for work not undertaken — only to find that the merger dissolves, customers ignore the product, and the new work never gains traction.

In short, encourage innovation, begin with execution, and name the strategy later.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter's latest book is *MOVE: Putting America's Infrastructure Back in the Lead*. She is a professor at Harvard Business School and chair and director of the Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative. Follow her on [Facebook](#) and Twitter [@RosabethKanter](#).
