A long time client, a global nonprofit focused on global development, often speaks of the last mile. How can they ensure that the resources they prepare with such great care—the technology, medicine and food—are delivered to the people who need them in the rural countryside of poor nations?

Of course, those questions are usually answered (in the form of a strategy) before the journey to the countryside begins. But the ability to strategically execute becomes increasingly difficult as the supplies make their way toward the destination. Unexpected issues arise: complicated shipping logistics, uncooperative border patrols, wet weather that turns roads muddy, supply chain shortages, or a lack of on-the-ground resources to complete the distribution. Any one of these issues can derail the effort to deliver the value to those who need it most.

Suddenly, the last mile seems unbearably long.

Strategy, as it is often practiced in the guiding of organizations, has a last mile too. And it can take a similar path and fail to yield results.

According to Fortune magazine, 70-90% of well-formulated strategies do not carry through to successful implementation—that is a lot of useless strategy. Then consider that US organizations are spending approximately $100 billion a year in management consulting on the creation of brilliant strategies. Given that level of investment, a 70-90% failure rate, and the inability of organizations to successfully achieve their long-term objectives due to the lack of implementation, we have a substantial strategy crisis. Or is it a deployment crisis? In fact, it is both.

There are many contributors to this crisis. However, from our experience at Point B working with clients on the successful creation and implementation of hundreds of strategies, it all comes down to one fundamental issue: How effectively does the organization leverage its human capital in its strategy deployment? In other words, to rephrase the theme of the 1992 US

Brian Jorgensen has more than 14 years of experience in leadership roles, with an emphasis on strategy execution, process improvement and optimization using Lean, systems thinking, and other methods.
presidential election, “It’s the people, stupid.”

Strategy, in its most traditional sense, is often practiced in boardrooms or at off sites, by CXOs and other key leaders considering market forces, market share, approaches to growth, customers’ needs, and competitors, often in consultation with hired experts. Upon returning from these sessions, leadership presents their strategy to be implemented by the rest of the organization. A year or two or maybe five years later, the cycle repeats itself.

The element that is missing from this strategy narrative is the engagement of the people who will be implementing the strategy. And how are the day-to-day activities of those implementers actually going to change to take the new strategy into account? This challenge is underscored in Martin’s HBR article “The Execution Trap,” in which he describes the chasm between the “choosers” in the organization (those typically defining strategies) and the “choiceless do-ers” (those implementing the strategy). This chasm often leads to a strategy that fails due to the people’s disconnectedness from it, it lacks the voice of the people who are interfacing directly with the customers and who have some of the best ideas about how to improve things.

So the question becomes, how do we engage the people in the real work of strategy?

Strategy Deployment, used for decades in the Lean world, is a continuous-loop strategy, planning, and execution system to help ensure that an organization’s projects and initiatives—and employee work efforts—are all aligned with and directly supportive of the enterprise vision, the organizational strategy, and the objectives. When used appropriately, this system directly addresses the people. Specifically the Strategy Deployment approach fosters:

» Shared strategic thinking—the creation of structures that allow the organization’s plan for the future to be generated by and communicated to every person within the organization.

» Everyday strategic execution—a three-step process to develop structures for reinforcing the linkage between day-to-day practices and the overall business strategy.
In short, Strategy Deployment fully engages *the people* in the organization to complete that last mile.

**Shared Strategic Thinking or Strategy Planning is a Team Sport**

To understand the concept of shared strategic thinking within Strategy Deployment, it is important to have a clear definition of what is meant by “strategy.” The term can mean many different things to different people, and is often used so imprecisely it effectively glosses over a broad range of distinct and highly critical concepts. For our purposes here, “strategy” is simply a plan of action to achieve a goal. Strategy must have at least three basic elements: a measurable target, a set of actions to reach that objective, and a timeline for getting there.

**Concisely Document the Initial Strategy Hypothesis**

The organization must first define its target. Usually this process begins with leadership aligning on its current state. This happens through honest conversations on purpose, values, business need and opportunities, past activities, and their associated outcomes—good and bad.

Next, the leadership needs to define the organization’s long-term goals. These goals will usually include broad-brush business goals that describe a target condition (e.g., One Brand by 2015, No Layoffs, or Adding Value in Every Customer Interaction), and specific measureable numbers (e.g.,$2 billion in sales by 2012 or 97% customer satisfaction) which provide evidence that the target conditions are being met. Critical dialog about strategic value disciplines, competitors, market conditions, needs of the employees, macroeconomic forces and so forth are essential to validate that the right targets are set.

With a well-defined target, leadership can now identify the activities that would need to be completed to give evidence that that the target conditions have been met. These activities are typically structured in the form of initiatives, programs, improvement efforts, or projects. After that, leadership places these aligned activities in a high-level timeline or roadmap which shows when the activities would likely generate evidence of
Playing catchball recognizes that many of the best ideas come from the individuals doing the work.

having successfully met the identified targets.

In the world of Strategy Deployment, this set of targets, activities and timelines—this strategy—is simply a working hypothesis. Leadership documents this strategy hypothesis on a single page. Granted it is a big page (usually 11”x17”), but a key factor in succeeding with Strategy Deployment is the precision and clarity of thought that comes from telling your strategy story on a single sheet of paper. This 11”x17” strategy, often called an A3, becomes a powerful collaboration and communication tool in engaging the broader organization in thinking through the strategy.

Take the Strategy Out for a Game of Catch

With the one page strategy in hand, leadership begins engaging all employees in the strategy process through a structure called catchball. Catchball involves a set of frank conversations between and within managerial layers that scrubs the proposed plan, adds to it, and removes from it until shared understanding is achieved. This approach recognizes that many of the best ideas come from the individuals doing the work, and demonstrates trust by leadership in the teams’ ability to contribute to the strategy.

Through catchball, leadership engages everyone down to the front line workers, sometimes for the first time, about what is best for the organization. In this system, leadership develops the first hypothesis (which will necessarily be at a high level of abstraction) about how the company should proceed, and then tests the hypothesis by tossing the ball to peers or the next layer of leaders in the organization to consider, modify, add their own ideas and then toss to another group. In a short time, the catchball concept can be used to gather and return strategy feedback to leadership, and to empower and invigorate the people through direct engagement in the strategy process. The executives can now modify the hypothesis into the final strategic plan that reflects the input and impressions of the entire organization (see Figure 1).
Figure 1 Shared Strategic Thinking

After the high level strategy is prepared, the next layer of leadership completes its own set of plans in the form of “baby A3s” which would lay out the action plans necessary for its functional areas to successful deliver the higher level strategy. This next level of managers would again engage its teams through catchball to ensure involvement and understanding, and to spark enthusiasm for the strategy. This shared strategic thinking creates a virtuous loop.

In short, Strategy Deployment is a team sport that places great respect for people at the forefront, by allowing them to have a role in defining their future. And it works well. One client used catchball to guide a one-day offsite meeting where a third-party facilitated a series of conversations about the organization’s hypothesized strategy. Through open-ended questions, analytical conversations and frank dialog, the team provided their best ideas to the executive sponsoring the session. Based on what she heard, she modified the hypothesis into a final strategy. At the end of the day, the objectives, the targets, the metrics and the plan were all captured on an A3 and distributed broadly. A large plotter sized version of the strategy was hung up in a common area for all to see, and which is regularly used as a visual tool during daily and weekly meetings.

By engaging her team and sharing in the work of strategic thinking, every person in the room had greater clarity about the strategy, greater enthusiasm towards it, and a level of shared responsibility for its delivery. Every member of the team had a quick reference point for where the organization was going, what it planned to do to get there, and how these tactics would be measured to show progress. Leaders were also being created at all levels of the organization. Further, the shared strategic thinking allowed everyone to walk out of the room already thinking about how to begin to pursue the strategy.
Strategy Deployment provides a structure that keeps the improvement work front and center, regardless of the ebbs and flows of the daily work.

Strategy Deployment’s shared strategic thinking provides the core elements that, according to Daniel Pink’s *Drive*, motivate the modern knowledge workers: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Through catchball, individuals feel a sense of autonomy—a sense of having a high degree of control over their destiny. They have identified areas of improvement both for themselves, their group, and for the organization thereby gaining a sense of mastery. And most importantly, the strategy work has connected them with something with a purpose, something greater than themselves—the long-term vision of the organization.

**Everyday Strategic Deployment**

With A3s in hand, leaders turn their focus to maintaining engagement of the people through the long hard work that is everyday strategic deployment.

This is where the last mile looms largest.

On the surface, the idea of everyday strategic deployment seems straightforward. But businesses seldom operate in a strictly linear fashion. The daily crush of work, fire-fighting, and economic pressures strive to take precedence over the strategic plan. In this sense, crisis management and responding to events in a reactionary mode risk inhibiting strategy deployment. However, done well strategy deployment allows the common theme of crisis management to be managed within the bounds of the strategic plan itself.

**Deploy the Strategy**

Every leader in every organization has two jobs: the daily work and improvement of that daily work in alignment with the organization’s strategy. Strategy Deployment provides a structure that keeps the improvement work front and center, regardless of the ebbs and flows of the daily work. So, the first step in everyday strategic deployment is to commit leaders to actively manage the plan agreed to and developed through the shared strategy process. Executives have a natural role here; however, team leaders and individual employees having participated in the strategy planning process are deeply vested in seeing the outcomes become a reality. Leaders, once committed, begin executing their focus area action plans according to the strategy.
Everyday strategic deployment builds a culture of problem solving

This distribution of responsibility for the doing increases the likelihood that decisions employees are making every day are in alignment with the overall plan, helps to keep responsibility for decision making as close to the impacted area as possible, and allows those willing to be decision-makers to grow as leaders by taking on strategic responsibilities. This process can include the big decisions related to budgeting and project planning, as well as the everyday decisions related to the priority of fire-fighting over strategic work, problem solving, and resource allocation.

Check the Strategy

As execution progresses, Strategy Deployment insists that leaders monitor the metrics identified in the plan. These are process metrics that measure how the day-to-day work is progressing towards the overall business strategy. Consider the maxim that organizations will focus on what they measure. Measurement is critical to everyday strategic execution.

With Lean Strategy Deployment, deployment leaders meet at regular intervals to check on progress. They review the plan, discuss variance from plan, and collaboratively generate countermeasures if necessary to get back on plan. These sessions should be open and honest opportunities to communicate problems that are preventing progress, and to enlist the support of teammates in identifying remedies. Everyday strategic deployment builds a culture of problem solving.

The exact frequency for these sessions will depend on the culture and the layer within the organization. For example, one division we work with meets every two weeks and uses a dashboard to list objectives and document progress to show how they are working collectively toward the plan. A different group meets weekly for a maximum of 15 minutes (often less) to quickly touch base on blocking problems and brainstorm solutions. Another organization operating at a higher level of abstraction schedules a regular conference call and talks more informally about the A3, plans, objectives and metrics.

Regardless of specifics, organizations need regularly scheduled sessions to dialog openly about progress and challenges. The regular checkpoints also help employees to internalize the strategy, keep it top of mind, and
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approach their daily work in such a way that they are continually making decisions that support the organization’s long-term objectives.

Adjust the Strategy

Finally, where necessary throughout the course of the strategy delivery timeframe, leaders and individual contributors will identify adjustments that need to be made and countermeasures deployed to bring the organization back into alignment with the strategy. This adjustment process happens all the time as no strategy is perfect and the deployment of any strategy is even less perfect. Again, the deployment leaders are in the best position to make these adjustments with the support of their teams (see figure 2).

Note that these adjustments could be at the line level or could be actually plan-level changes. The goal is to understand what is happening well enough to be able to

Figure 2 Everyday Strategic Deployment

course correct as required. In traditional organizations, where problems are usually hidden, course corrections are often impossible to make until it is too late and drastic shifts are required. Here again, the power of the Strategy Deployment system is the empowerment of the people who through every day engagement are able to make small adjustments that keep the strategy on track.

And the cycle of creating, deploying, checking, and adjusting the strategy continues, leveraging the Strategy Deployment approach.

Achieve the Last Mile

With Lean Strategy Deployment, and the correlated structures of shared strategic thinking and everyday strategic execution, organizations can help ensure that every initiative, every division, every project and every employee is in sync with and contributing to the
With Strategy Deployment, the last mile becomes achievable—even memorable—by leveraging your greatest asset, your people.

Figure 3 Shared strategic thinking and deployment

Strategy Deployment can help companies focus more effectively on their customers and achieve better results.

With Strategy Deployment, the last mile becomes achievable—even memorable—by leveraging your greatest asset, your people.

About Point B

Point B is a national management consulting firm. Our 400+ consultants have a single focus: helping our clients solve their toughest business challenges. We serve organizations from visionary start-ups to Fortune 100 companies across a variety of different industries — health care, financial services, technology, government, non-profit, retail—and functional areas—M&A, business IT, organizational design, project leadership, operations improvement. Point B is regularly honored by many publications as an exceptional place to work, including the Wall Street Journal and Consulting Magazine.

About Point B’s Lean Practice

Point B’s Lean Practice assists clients in solving complex strategic and operational problems from diagnosis to implementation.