FIRST STEPS: ‘OKAY – LET’S GO’

‘Okay, let’s go’ was the phrase that launched the largest armed invasion in world history. By mid-1944, the strategy and operational plans for Operation Overlord were in place, but uncertain weather reports made the crossing from Britain to the Normandy beaches hazardous. A decision had to be made, the first steps had to be taken – and in three words they were.

First Steps as a concept

That first step – that very moment when a strategy or operational plan has to be implemented -- can be the most disconcerting and the most telling: disconcerting, because it is that moment when even the most meticulously developed plans, precedents and approvals confront uncertainty and doubt; telling, because the results of those first steps will significantly determine the unfolding impact of strategies and operational plans.

In a world of ever more complex stresses and shocks, those responsible for implementing strategies and operational plans may well have to contend with increasing institutional ambiguity, last minute changes in hitherto agreed tactics, irrelevant standard operating procedures, contradictory information and ‘messes’ and contending stakeholders’ interests.¹

These are the sorts of challenges that more and more decision-makers will have to confront, and the First Steps Initiative is designed to provide insights into the very initial actions that those responsible for implementing strategies and operational plans feel compelled to do.

With that challenge in mind, the First Steps Initiative will test its potential value by bringing together a small group of participants from different sectors who have played central roles not only in strategic and operational planning, but also in triggering their implementation.

In the first instance, participants will be asked to define and consider the nature and challenges that they faced at the very first moment when implementing a strategy or operational plan – those First Steps. And, then to determine the extent to which exploring that issue is of value to decision-makers, and, if it is of value, then how and in what ways could that exploration enhance implementation processes?

¹ Alpaslan and Mitroff state that problems ‘resist our attempt to confine them and rein them in by reducing them to a single discipline or point of view. For example, different stakeholders rarely have the same definition of the individual problems that constitute a mess and of the entire mess itself. Indeed, the fact that different stakeholders have different perceptions of a mess is itself one of the keys defining attributes of messes! In C.M. Alpaslan and I.I. Mitroff, Swans and Swine and Swindlers: Coping with the Growing Threat of Mega-Crises and Mega-Messes, Stanford Business Books, Stanford, 2011, pg.xxi
A poignant example is the operational plan put into action by the London Fire Brigade (LFB) in response to the 14 June 2017 Grenfell Tower tragedy. In her response to what soon was deemed to be a ‘major incident’, the LFB’s Commissioner’s first step was to initiate what was the standard ‘stay put strategy’. Tenants, in other words, were told to remain in their flats until the fire was extinguished because of the presumed danger of trying to escape via the stairwells.

As it transpired, the stairwells remained smoke free for at least one hour. The Commissioner’s first step had triggered the wrong action; and, despite the fact that the mistake was becoming evident by 1:30 am, it would take the fire service until 2:47 am to abandon the advice and trigger an operational alternative that encouraged residents to evacuate.

Reflecting back on that tragic event, it could be construed that those initial actions to implement a well tried and tested response relied to a significant extent on standard operating procedures (SOPs) and a reluctance to go beyond established precedence. However, in light of the importance of those very first steps in the implementation process in general, this tragedy and a growing number of others force one to ask if there are ways to initiate action – not necessarily more easily, but at least more effectively targeted – when it comes to triggering strategies and operational plans.

Therefore, for those concerned with implementation processes, there are some important conceptual as well as practical issues to consider. In the first place, from a conceptual and operational point of view, can one really identify factors which would justify treating that particular moment of implementation – when that flag goes down – as a separate focus for analysis? And, if it were justifiable, then are there specific parameters that define that focus? To what extent, would an analysis of that First Steps proposition be of practical use to decision-makers; and, if so, what measures might be needed to ensure that first steps are integrated into strategies and operational plans?

**Plan beats no plan…..**

On Sunday, March 15th [Treasury Secretary Timothy] Geithner was summoned to the White House for a meeting with the President…about whether Obama should adopt Geithner’s plan [to entice the private sector to take bad loans off the balance sheet of struggling banks] – or scrap it and come up with something else….Geithner had a line that he often used that summed up how he and colleagues at Treasury would prevail: “Plan beats no plan.” The meeting lasted seven hours. Obama’s advisors were so divided that he left them in the Roosevelt Room after the first two hours, saying, “You guys work this out, and when I come back, I want you to tell me what your agreed-upon-approach is.”

*Ryan Lizza, ‘Inside the Crisis’, New Yorker, 12 October 2009*

**First Steps in context**

Those very first steps intended to trigger action depend upon clarity of objectives, levels and types of required action, availability of appropriate resources and means to support strategic and operational activities. Such considerations in turn reflect strategy and operational planning processes, which should take these into account. Hence, the context for implementation is the planning process, itself. And, though strategic and operational
planning, organisational behaviour and decision-making are part of an extensive literature, a few comments, below, will put some of the contextual challenges of the *First Steps* initiative in perspective.

**Implementation initiatives**

The on-board computer system in the Eagle space craft was blaring out warnings, the space craft was descending too fast, it was misaligned with the moon’s surface -- but nobody knew why. With 35 seconds remaining, Houston’s Mission Control had 20 seconds to decide whether or not to abort. It was a mission that in one way or another had brought approximately 400,000 specialists and support staff together, consumed 5% of the US national budget, was at the forefront of technology and 18 operational alternatives to respond to an aborted mission were in place, and, now the Eagle landing seemed in dire straights. With 15 seconds left, the Eagle’s pilot, Neil Armstrong, overoad the Mission Control’s SOPs, and took charge. Two seconds to spare, and the Eagle would soon land.

Whether in the corporate sector, the public sector – including the military – or the world of international and non-governmental organisations, a growing number of ‘decision-makers’ are pointing to the rapidly increasing complexity of the environments in which they operate and the very decisions they have to make. According to one senior diplomat interviewed for the 21st Century Statesmanship Global Leaders Programme:

> We find it more difficult today than was the case in the recent past to understand what is going to be challenging us in coming weeks, months, or years. We lack the instruments for predicting developments that we should have seen coming….There is clearly growing a sense of growing uncertainty, a sense of growing inability, a sense of lack of governance, a sense of lack of capability to grapple with these issues which show up without warning, all of a sudden.²

‘Deresponsiblilisation’ and ‘managerialism’ for many are increasingly means to disengage from the exponential growth of uncertainty. They heighten fear that ‘the personal cost of standing one’s ground on facts and arguments is real, and therefore a limiter for first imagining then tabling ‘unthinkables’.³

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³ Ibid, p.14
This finding relates to the those by McKinsey & Co, which recognises that there are at least three types of decision-making -- big-bets, cross-cutting, and delegated decisions, and that each requires different sorts of triggers. In a subsequent study, McKinsey also stated that, 80% of corporate executives that were interviewed believed that much of the time they devoted to decision-making was used ineffectively, though they nevertheless felt that ‘good decision-making practices tend to yield decisions that are both high quality and fast’.

And, of fundamental importance is the individual decision-maker who is responsible for putting a plan into action. To what extent are security, reputation – individual and organizational, contending interests, conflicting policies and ambition all factors that most likely will also influence action at the very brink of implementation? How might the ‘proactive paradox’ dilemma, where proactive initiatives are acceptable as long as they are consistent with the expectations of the person in charge, be a significant determinant in the initiation process?

The decisional process and the immediate triggers for implementation are tightly intertwined. This in various ways reflects military perspectives from the Prussian 19th Century war strategist, Carl von Clausewitz, to US General Stanley McChrystal who had been in charge of US forces in Iraq. At best, Clausewitz suggested, he could develop the strategy, but how it was implemented was determined by those on the field of battle. Similarly, in McChrystal’s ‘team’, implementation of strategy depended upon the appropriate person at the relevant time, in the relevant place, and, should they fail, McChrystal was there to mentor and not condemn.

In so saying the relationship between strategy, operational plans and implementation also might have generational factors that need to be taken into account:

…a new generation of smart military personnel in the middle or lower ranks now realise such a [hierarchical] command relationship stifles initiative, innovation, flexibility and adaptability in the era of hybrid warfare. Many have fresh new eye son the shortcomings in what remains a largely hierarchical style of leadership with little

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4 McKinsey & Co, Decision-making in the Age of Urgency, April 2019, ‘…the survey results confirm that not all decisions are created equal; different types of decisions require different approaches. We asked about three decision types in particular: Big bets are infrequent and high-stakes decisions, often with the potential to shape the company’s future—for example, acquisitions and annual resource allocation. Cross-cutting decisions, like big bets, are broad in scope, but they are more frequent and familiar. They consist of a series of smaller, interconnected decisions made by different groups in the company as part of a collaborative, end-to-end decision process, as with a pricing decision. Finally, delegated decisions are frequent decisions that are much narrower in scope, such as changes to HR policy. These decisions are effectively handled by a single individual or working team made accountable for the decision, and they usually require limited input from others.

5 McKinsey & Co, Decision-making in the Age of Urgency, May 2019, And while most organizations seem to make trade-offs between velocity (how fast was the decision made and executed?) and quality (how good was the decision?), faster decisions tend to be higher quality, suggesting that speed does not undercut the merit of a given decision. Rather, good decision-making practices tend to yield decisions that are both high quality and fast.

6 Sharon Parker and Ying Wang, ‘When to take initiative at work, and when not to’, Harvard Business Review, 21 August 2019

7 ‘Strategy must go with the Army to the field in order to arrange particulars on the spot, and to make the modifications in the general plan, which incessantly become necessary in War.’ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, Book III, Chapter I, 1827.

or no scope for much that is different. “The lower ranks are well ahead of the chiefs. The need is to bring along the 20-25 year olds”, said one behaviour and leadership analyst.\footnote{Op Cit. #1, p.18}

The \textit{First Steps Initiative} as a preliminary exploration

As noted earlier (pg.2), there are important practical as well as conceptual issues that need to be explored if the \textit{First Steps Initiative} is to have use and relevance for decision-makers and operational planners.

Of fundamental importance for exploring the implications of the \textit{First Steps Initiative} are the practical experiences of others, who from different sectors and perspectives, have had to initiate policy and operational action. Do those experiences suggest common or disparate paths? Do participants’ reflections provide significant lessons for others in the group? Or, are the processes so diverse and the parallels so limited that few lessons can be drawn?

Answers to these questions bring to the fore the third element of the \textit{First Steps Initiative}. If participants believe that the initiative should be explored further, both in terms of concept and practical guidelines, what would that next exploratory initiative look like? What types of participating organizations should be invited, and what sorts of modifications should be made to the exploratory process?

Finally, in testing the \textit{First Steps Initiative} further, one of the most fundamental issues is its wider usage and audience. One would hope that a successful outcome from the \textit{First Steps Initiative} could be of significant benefit to the humanitarian community, but are there others who should be the focus and organizational beneficiaries of the exercise?

\textbf{A humanitarian gap….

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul led to what were seen as significant proposals for broad strategies for the humanitarian sector and for ways ‘to move it forward into the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century’. But, at the back of a room in one of the many side events, came the frustrated comments of a former senior UN official: \textit{The proposals are fine, but how will they be implemented and by whom. Why haven’t we looked at why it takes so long to get these plans into action? How clear is the ‘go’ message? To what extent do you have to override, “fill in the blanks”? What happens to the people we’re supposed to be helping? And, just as a by the way, what happens to me?}
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