As objective outsiders, we’ve been able to observe executives implementing hundreds of strategic initiatives. In implementing strategy, the executive’s mission is to go beyond the creation of grand strategy and develop those innovative business solutions that aid and ensure successful execution – only then do they create the legacy of implementation excellence.

**Strategy** is a word with so many different interpretations that any collection of executives debating the issue could well be talking past each other.

We’ve come to realise that there are five levels of “strategy” and that the ideal strategy process must move seamlessly from the one level to the next. At any point in time, a company might have to focus its strategic planning process on only one or two of these strategy levels.

Critical to successful implementation is having a clear view of which of these levels is this year’s point of focus.

The strategy levels that we observe are:

1. **Grand Strategy:** Fundamental re-direction of the business, an example being an insurance company repositioning itself as a financial services group.
2. **Getting the big picture into focus:** This is the process of understanding market scenarios and deciding the shape of future opportunity.
3. **Creating innovative marketing initiatives:** This is about creating new propositions to the market and upstaging competition.
4. **Functional re-alignment of the organisation:** A truly new strategy cannot be implemented between the big strategic idea and innovative categories of “strategy break points” that come at the cause of non-delivery.
5. **New implementation excellence:** This involves a wide variety of activities such as benchmarking against the competition and other industries; introducing new systems and getting third parties (e.g., distributors, retailers or advertising agencies) to understand their new role.

**Implementing strategy is really hard work**

**Big strategic ideas** are plentiful, yet relatively few strategies can be described as having revolutionised the entire organisation. Execution is extraordinarily difficult – this is where real innovation and ingenuity is required.

Successful strategy execution is a unique blend of nuts, bolts and bright ideas!

**The pitfalls of implementing strategy and what to do about them:**

Having been involved in more than 370 strategic implementation projects, we’ve noted many categories of “strategy break points” that come between the big strategic idea and innovative implementation excellence. Identify these early and avoid disappointing execution down the line. Some examples are:

1. Not clearly identifying which of the five levels of strategy the debate should be focused upon: The first step is to decide this using the diagram in this article to ensure that the debate stays focused. Companies usually need focus on only one or two of these in a given planning period. If you’re finding that you must address all, you’re going to have to totally reinvent your company – an event that, fortunately, doesn’t happen every year!
2. Increasing misinterpretation of the big strategic idea vision as it moves out of the executive suite into the organisation. A quick survey by people who understand your strategy and how this should bring fundamental change can quickly pinpoint if and where this is the cause of non-delivery.
3. Not starting the process with a thorough unpacking of the detailed changes required to implement the new strategy. Often this is hindered by the “not knowing what we don’t know” syndrome. Again perhaps outsiders can help your team both understand the nuances and the extent of the many changes required.
4. Inadequate realignment of company resources with the new strategy. Old habits die hard! For example, the sales team might concentrate on customers that have been historically important. Strategy might, however, require considerable investment in emerging groups of customers. Fundamental questions must be asked about how to successfully “break with the old” – a tough thing for incumbent managers to do.
5. Leaving the brand/product portfolio untouched. New strategies require a hard look at which brands/products to repurpose, divest and where new ones may be created or acquired. For example, a decision to be the low-cost leader is a decision to streamline the portfolio – but often “old favourites” are allowed to remain at the cost of efficiency.

**Moving quickly to overcome implementation constraints maintains the momentum of change and the achievement of the holy grail of “successful strategic execution”**.