

# Take a leaf out of Library Board's book

Strategy implementation and execution will not succeed if leaders do not speak with one voice about their vision. BY THOMAS MENKHOFF, JOCHEN WIRTZ AND FRANK SIEGFRIED

**A**CCORDING to management textbooks, strategy matters because it helps organisations to be different. While many firms succeed in asking the right questions as part of their strategic management process such as 'do we aspire to play to win?', others fail to align value propositions and internal capabilities with new megatrends, future-ready scenarios and the right strategic choices as evidenced by innovation flops such as Apple's Lisa Computer (Lisa was one of the first computers with a graphical user interface but it turned out to be too costly).

Visionary organisations often lack the internal capabilities to support their strategy. Strategy implementation and execution will not succeed if leaders do not speak with one voice about the vision thing; if goal-oriented programme objectives are detached from leadership accountabilities and future-oriented metrics; if early warnings such as an idea-unfriendly culture or the denials of major quality problems are not escalated to the top; or when team-related, intra-organisational interdependencies are poorly managed.

Corporate leaders who want to make innovation work need a winning innovation strategy. Innovation strategy is about the big decisions surrounding innovations, for example, whether, where and when to innovate and enter a new market. The failure of Borders and the success of Amazon underline the importance of strategic innovation aligned with corporate strategy in an era of digitisation and accelerated innovation. One local organisation which has managed to close the strategy-to-execution gap with a robust innovation strategy is the award-winning National Library Board (NLB), a statutory board established in 1995 to play a defining role in setting up a world-class library system in Singapore. If one looks at the innovation strategy development process as a series of cascading stages where each stage derives from or acts upon the results of the preceding stage, NLB managed to ask the right questions and decisively followed up step by step.

NLB's mission ("We make knowledge come alive, spark imagination and create possibilities") and innovation objectives were indicated in several masterplans envisioning the establishment of a world-class library system. These plans provided strategic purpose for both NLB's leadership team and staff. National aspirations such as becoming an intelligent nation or the computerisation of the civil service paved the way for NLB to find "the right playing field" in terms of its vision, mission, localities, product and service categories, customer segments and channels.

Driven by the "Library 2000" vision, which aimed to bring library and information services closer to the citizens and introduce a wide range of services to different communities, NLB underwent a major transformation from the 1990s which redefined the roles of the library and its key stakeholders – staff and library users. The focus of these early transformation efforts was to develop the infrastructure of a world-class public library in Singapore aimed at enhancing the learning capacity of the nation.

This gave way to Wave 2 ("Library 2010"), where technology was adapted and mastered to bring libraries to the next level of knowledge services, deepening capacity building to focus on specialised capability-building. 2016 heralded in Wave 3 ("Library 2020") with the vision to create "Readers for Life, Learning Communities, and a Knowledgeable Nation", enabled by a new generation of public and digital libraries, including 24/7 online access to materials from the National Archives of Singapore. The main fundamentals underpinning these visionary changes include effective strategic leadership, an enduring culture of innovation and a strong focus on user-centric service delivery.

Important questions which NLB's management team had to answer concerned the Intensity Level of Innovation Efforts (*How much incre-*



NLB outlines its mission and innovation goals in masterplans envisioning a world-class library system. These plans provide strategic purpose for its leaders and staff. FILE PHOTO

*mental or radical innovation do we want?*) and the strategic approach towards pursuing innovation goals on the basis of a compelling value proposition (*How to Win?*). NLB is a pioneer in deploying Radio Frequency Identification technology to enable self-service borrowing and returning. It has also developed a new mobile application enabling library members to borrow materials using their mobile devices on-the-go. One of NLB's numerous strategic innovation approaches is service co-creation, an efficient way to meet the needs of stakeholders and to identify internal and external service opportunities.

An example of NLB's boundary-spanning collaboration approach is the library@chinatown which opened in 2013 (its whole day-to-day operations are fully run by volunteers). Through this novel approach, NLB involved community members and public organisations such as CPI Pte Ltd (the property developer for the Chinatown Point shopping centre) and Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple based on the 3Ps sector motto (3Ps = People, Public and Private). It enabled NLB to tap into the knowledge, inputs and resources of the wider community, contributing to improved public service delivery. Gradually, NLB further strengthened its customer value proposition with a focus on "non-customers" and the ability to create and capture new demand as evidenced by its "Verging All Teens" programme rolled out in the Jurong Regional Library (the first library space created for teens by teens) or "My Tree House", the world's first green library for children (created in collaboration with City Development Limited) to promote the habit of learning and reading for life in line with the Library 2020 vision.

All this wouldn't have worked if not for a strong foundation comprising a set of reinforcing capabilities and competency-enhancing activities such as the Master of Science in Library Science programme for library staff (developed together with NTU) embedded in a robust culture of learning and innovation.

Besides good innovation governance and strategy execution in general, one needs to acknowledge the establishment of various supporting management systems for innovative IT deployment such as the OneSearch service which enabled NLB's transformation towards a project-centric organisation. Rather than focusing on traditional librarianship duties, staff across all levels can provide ideas for innovation and engage in new initiatives such as crowdsourcing, a core component of NLB's Citizen Archivist Project which enables the public to contribute to the nation's intellectual memory. NLB's innovation success rests upon numerous value-adding business processes such as rapid prototyping or open innovation and an integrative performance measurement approach. A recently deployed novel tool is the use of geospatial analytics to understand the borrowing behaviour of library users across the island.

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## Seven critical aspects of a strategic innovation cascade

- 1. What's our purpose?**  
*Why innovate on the basis of what objectives?*
- 2. Where to play (Where not to play)?**  
*Where should the innovation focus and scope be?*
- 3. With what intensity?**  
*How much innovation (eg incremental or radical) is wanted?*
- 4. How to win?**  
*How to pursue corporate innovation goals based on which unique value proposition?*
- 5. With whom to innovate?**  
*Who to collaborate with (eg internal partners and/or external complementors)?*
- 6. With what capability assets?**  
*How to ensure that people in the organisation are capable and motivated to make innovation work?*
- 7. With what management systems?**  
*How to structure and organise working relationships to "get things done" innovatively? What business processes need to be built to create and capture innovation value? How to keep tabs on strategic innovation matters and evaluate innovation efforts?*