How to Put a Strategy Into Action

Associations Now | Mark Athitakis | February 20, 2026

A strategic plan must do more than collect dust. But success involves trust, attention, and accountability.

No association leader wants a strategic plan that just sits on the proverbial shelf. But what does it mean to actually put it to use?

Create initiatives that achieve the goals stated in the plan, would be the obvious answer. But execution doesn't always happen so simply, and a lot of organizations can get hung up on what "create initiatives" means. Are you building something from the ground up, or updating something? Who's involved in this creation, and do you have access to different departments, budgets, or third-party vendors to make it happen?

And beyond the practical matters, there's also a mindset problem—are your people comfortable sharing progress (or lack thereof) on efforts to meet strategic goals? Writing last week at Inc., author and executive coach Moshe Engelberg notes that execution on strategy can be hobbled by a lack of trust—teams can be afraid to note that operational activities don't align with the strategy. So step one for a leader is creating an environment where that problem is addressed head-on.

"Alignment work lands only after leaders create psychological safety and go first," he writes. "What is the bottom line? Leaders must let go of the things that no longer fit and act. Otherwise, all that hard-earned trust will quickly vanish."

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It can help to make alignment a regular part of team discussions. Writing at Forbes recently, leadership expert Tony Gambill recommended regular meetings with an explicit focus on strategy execution: "Protect time for strategy," he writes. "Treat this time as sacred, not optional. Build a consistent rhythm and process."

What may emerge from those conversations, Gambill suggests, is less "doing a lot of stuff" and more "focusing more deeply on key initiatives that satisfy the strategic goals." A recent Bain & Company report on execution notes that too often, initiatives are framed more like action items like "win in China." "Well, yeah, sure, sounds good, by all means let's win in China," the report notes. "But what's the definition of winning? Win at what? How?" (And can AI help define the answers to those questions? Perhaps.)

That challenge reminded me of the experience of the National Asphalt Pavement Association, which a few years back was charged by its board to do more to address climate change and sustainability. Few things can sour an association leader's day quite like an ask that's both big and vague, but NAPA acted fast to develop a meaningful effort around the goal: It stood up

a task force, gathered data, and not only developed an action plan for the industry but made it a revenue driver, adding more partners since its launch in 2022.

Your own initiative around strategic goals will look different. But the apparatus that gets you there will likely be the same across associations: Develop and understanding of member needs, align resources, and define success. During the process, Gambill recommends that teams establish a clear governance structure that defines who will be responsible for what. "A clear governance framework defines: Who owns each strategic priority?" he writes. "Who approves changes or reallocations? How are cross-functional issues resolved?"

None of those questions are as enchanting or ambitious as the big hairy ambitious goal laid out in the strategic plan. But a big reason those plans are forever at risk of collecting dust is that the small-bore questions around execution don't get asked. A successful plan means empowering teams to do the necessary work, and establishing real accountability around it.