

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

THE RESPONSIBILITY MATRIX: STRATEGIC EXECUTION

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

Contributor: Lawrence Hrebiniak, PhD, Emeritus Associate Professor of Management, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, and the author of *Making Strategy Work: Leading Effective Execution and Change*.

THE GOAL:

For effective strategy execution, be explicit about who's responsible for all execution decisions and actions.

NANOTOOL:

Even the most well-thought-out strategy can fail without clear responsibility and accountability for execution decisions and actions. Organizational cultures that say “everyone is accountable” often have ambiguous roles and responsibilities — and when things go wrong, it's too easy to blame it on someone else. You can avoid that trap by using an explicit, structured process for role negotiation and responsibility plotting before strategy execution begins (or use it to get a project that's floundering back on track). The five-step process in the Action Steps below will help you and your team create a responsibility matrix to make sure everyone agrees on who is responsible for *what* by *when*.

ACTION STEPS:

1. Identify a strategic goal or outcome that is not being executed satisfactorily.
2. List the key decision-makers and the tasks or activities that must be accomplished to achieve the desired outcome.
3. Have all managers* participating in the process fill out the matrix independently (to avoid groupthink) using the following code:
 - R = those having some responsibility
 - A = person ultimately accountable (has to answer for a decision, task, or activity)
 - C = those who must be consulted before a decision is made
 - I = those who must be informed after a decision is made
 - ? = don't know whether the role is involved or the extent of the involvement.

* *Make sure that all stakeholder groups involved in the execution are represented.*
4. Create small groups of participants and have them combine all responses on one matrix. Differences between their matrices will highlight underlying problems that are contributing to the current state of the process. Have each group present its matrix to the other groups; then, facilitated by a leader who can control the discussion, explore the differences in perceptions about who is responsible for what.



- Have each original small group create one ideal matrix, and then share it with the larger group. Address and debate similarities and differences, ultimately creating one responsibility matrix.

HOW ONE BUSINESS USED IT:

In a mid-sized Texas company, the goal was “new product development.” After many years as a market leader, they had no new products and were losing market share and competitive advantage. They started the process, and entered into heated discussions in Step 4, including criticism of the CEO (who gave himself mostly “A”s) for micromanagement. The conflict was managed successfully, and a final matrix was agreed on. With roles and responsibilities clear, new product development increased significantly. The company even published a “Guide to New Product Development” that explained who was responsible at every step of the process, ensuring that future execution efforts would be handled properly.

Strategic Goal: _____

Major Tasks, Activities, or Decisions to Achieve Goal	Key Positions/People					
1						
2						
3						
4						
5. Etc.						

Legend

- R - Responsible for decision or action
- I - Must be informed after a decision or action
- A - Final say/accountability for decision or action
- C - Must be consulted prior to a decision or action
- ? - Don't know

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Making Strategy Work: Leading Effective Execution and Change*, Lawrence G. Hrebiniak (Pearson FT Press, 2013). Offers a comprehensive, disciplined, research-based process model for strategy execution. It includes organizational structure, coordination, information sharing, incentives, controls, change management, culture, the role of power and influence, and more.
- “Got a New Strategy? Don’t Forget the Execution Part,” *Knowledge@Wharton*, July 31, 2013. Explores the common pitfalls and challenges of strategic execution and offers solutions.

- “What is Strategy?” Michael Porter. *Harvard Business Review*, November-December, 1996. Discusses how a series of integrated activities, activity systems, or processes thwarts imitation and leads to competitive advantage.
- Lawrence (Larry) Hrebiniak is academic director of [*Making Strategy Work: Leading Effective Execution*](#) and [*GBTA Academy: Global Leadership Professional Program*](#). He also teaches in [*Creating and Implementing Strategy for Competitive Advantage*](#).

ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director is Professor John Paul MacDuffie, Professor of Management at the Wharton School and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMI) at Wharton’s Mack Institute for Innovation Management.