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# **Implementing Strategy into Practice**

A Comparative Case Study

School of Management  
Master's thesis in  
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**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA****School of Management**

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**ABSTRACT:**

In today's fast-changing organizational environment, the ability to implement strategic visions into concrete results has become increasingly complex. Although considerable attention and resources are often dedicated to the formulation of strategic plans, many organizations encounter substantial difficulties during the execution phase. This thesis investigates the core barriers to successful strategy execution and examines the role of leadership in navigating those challenges. A particular emphasis is placed on the dynamic interplay between leadership practices and employee engagement in the strategy implementation context.

The research has been conducted using a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with employees across different industries to capture rich and experience-based insights into real-world implementation practices. The data has been thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and contextual variables that influence implementation outcomes.

The theoretical framework of the study draws on contemporary leadership theories and the strategy-as-practice perspective. Key concepts explored include transformational, participative and strategic leadership. In addition, the Deep Leadership model developed by the Finnish Defence Forces is introduced to explore how values-based leadership—emphasizing inspiration, trust, learning, and appreciation—can support implementation in complex and rapidly changing environments. The strategy-as-practice lens has been applied to highlight the everyday activities and interactions through which strategy is enacted across organizational levels.

According to the data, poor alignment between strategic goals, resistance to change and inadequate communication are the most frequent implementation barriers. A lack of a common vision and inconsistent leadership actions frequently make these difficulties worse. It has been noted that effective leadership is essential for influencing employee motivation, encouraging involvement, and making sure that strategic messages are understood. It is believed that leaders must be able to listen, adjust, and have constant conversations in order to bridge the gap between strategy and implementation.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of leadership that is both structurally aware and behaviorally engaged. By aligning leadership practices with strategic goals and fostering communicative cultures, organizations can better overcome implementation obstacles and realize their strategic ambitions in practice.

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**KEYWORDS:** Strategy, Strategy Implementation, Strategy in Practice, Strategy-as-Practice, Leadership, Resource Allocation, Resistance to Change, Motivation

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**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Nykyisessä nopeasti muuttuvassa organisaatioympäristössä strategisten visioiden muuntaminen konkreettiseksi tuloksiksi ja käytänteiksi on muuttunut yhä monimutkaisemmaksi. Vaikka strategisten suunnitelmien laatimiseen asetetaan sekä huomiota että resursseja, monet organisaatiot kohtaavat merkittäviä vaikeuksia toteutusvaiheessa. Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii strategian onnistuneen toimeenpanon keskeisiä esteitä ja tarkastelee johtajuuden roolia näiden haasteiden käsittelyssä. Erityinen painopiste on johtamiskäytäntöjen ja henkilöstön sitoutumisen dynaamisessa vuorovaikutuksessa strategian toimeenpanon kontekstissa.

Tutkimus on toteutettu kvalitatiivisella lähestymistavalla. Puolistrukturoituja haastatteluja tehtiin eri toimialojen työntekijöille, jotta saataisiin rikasta ja kokemukseen perustuvaa tietoa todellisista toimeenpanokäytännöistä. Aineisto analysoitiin temaattisesti toistuvien mallien ja kontekstuaalisten muuttujien tunnistamiseksi, jotka vaikuttavat toimeenpanon lopputuloksiin.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys pohjautuu nykyaikaisiin johtajuusteorioihin sekä strategy-as-practice-näkökulmaan. Keskeisiä käsitteitä ovat muun muassa transformaationaalinen, osallistava ja strateginen johtajuus. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa esitellään Puolustusvoimien kehittämä Syväjohtamisen malli, joka tarkastelee arvolähtöistä johtajuutta – painottaen inspiraatiota, luottamusta, oppimista ja arvostusta – ja sen merkitystä strategian toimeenpanossa monimutkaisissa ja nopeasti muuttuvissa ympäristöissä. Strategy-as-practice-näkökulmaa hyödynnetään korostamaan arkipäivän toimintoja ja vuorovaikutuksia, joiden kautta strategiaa toteutetaan organisaation eri tasoilla.

Tutkimusaineiston perusteella yleisimmät toimeenpanon esteet ovat heikko linjaus strategisten tavoitteiden välillä, muutosvastarinta ja puutteellinen viestintä. Yhteisen vision puute ja epäjohtamukaiset johtamistoimet pahentavat näitä haasteita entisestään. On todettu, että tehokas johtajuus on keskeistä työntekijöiden motivaation vaikuttamisessa, osallistumisen rohkaisemisessa ja strategisten viestien ymmärtämisen varmistamisessa. Johtajien on kyettävä kuuntelemaan, sopeutumaan ja käymään jatkuvaa vuoropuhelua strategian ja toteutuksen välisen kuilun kuromiseksi umpeen.

Yhteenvedonä tämä tutkimus korostaa johtajuuden merkitystä, joka on sekä rakenteellisesti tietoinen että käyttäytymistasolla sitoutunut. Johtamiskäytäntöjen linjaaminen strategisiin tavoitteisiin sekä viestinnällisten kulttuurien vahvistaminen auttavat organisaatioita ylittämään toimeenpanon esteet ja saavuttamaan strategiset tavoitteensa käytännössä.

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**AVAINSANAT:** Strategy, Strategy Implementation, Strategy in Practice, Strategy-as-Practice, Leadership, Resource Allocation, Resistance to Change, Motivation

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## Abbreviations

KPI	Key Performance Indicator
SAP	Strategy-as-Practice

## 1 Introduction

In today's fast-paced business world, a key factor in company success is the ability to turn big-picture plans into real-world actions. Studies show that even with lots of effort put into planning many firms still have trouble putting their ideas to work, which means they miss out on chances and don't do as well as they could (Hrebiniak, 2006; Kaplan & Norton 2004). How to make strategies happen has become a hot topic for study and use, because it affects how well companies compete and perform. To make sure strategic efforts pay off, there is a need to figure out the ways and problems linked to carrying out these plans.

Dealing with strategy implementation challenges matters more than ever due to tech advances worldwide connections, and shaky markets. In today's tricky and ever-changing business world, plans must line up with long-term aims and bend to fit new situations inside and outside the company (Mintzberg, 1994). Yet, studies show that poor strategy rollout often stems from not getting everyone involved, not having enough resources, and a mismatch between day-to-day work and big-picture goals (Beer & Eisenstat 2000). With these issues in mind, companies need to get better at bridging the gap between making plans and putting them into action.

Past research on putting strategy into action has pointed out that company culture how resources are shared, and leadership are key to success (Alexander, 1985; Noble, 1999). Experts like Kaplan and Norton (1996) have come up with helpful tools such as the Balanced Scorecard, to align how a company works with its big-picture goals. Other studies have looked at how different leadership styles and actions affect the success of efforts to implement strategy (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Yukl 2013).

## 1.1 Purpose of the study

Earlier studies have given key insights, but many questions still persist. For example, researchers know little about how leadership dynamics work with organizational barriers to influence implementation results. Many studies focus on broad challenges, but there's a lack of detailed study into how structural, cultural, and personal factors connect in various organizations. These missing details highlight the need to dig deeper in future research to find practical ways to solve ongoing obstacles in implementation.

This thesis seeks to address these knowledge gaps by investigating the primary barriers to implementing strategic plans and examining the impact of leadership on strategy execution. Specifically, this research will focus on answering the following questions:

1. What are the primary barriers to implementing strategic plans within organizations?
2. How does leadership impact the success or failure of strategy implementation?

The questions aim to develop a deeper understanding of how behaviors and organizational structures affect putting strategies into action. This study takes a close look at these issues through two main theories. The first theory focuses on using barrier-centered frameworks when implementing strategies. Researchers like Beer and Eisenstat (2000) and Hrebiniak (2006) discuss different hurdles such as unclear goals, lack of resources, and poor communication, which the framework highlights as critical factors affecting implementation success. The second theory centers on leadership and its relationship with strategy execution. It draws on ideas from contingency theory (Fiedler 1964) and transformational leadership theory (Bass and Avolio, 1994), which argue that leadership behaviors like creating shared vision, fostering collaboration, or staying flexible can either support or hold back strategic efforts. Together, the two approaches explore how leadership actions interact with organizational challenges offering a broader picture of what drives successful strategy outcomes.

This study focuses on turning strategy plans into real-world actions. It examines the important issues of obstacles and leadership behaviors that play a role in the process. The research mixes ideas from well-known theories with real-world evidence to provide useful advice to organizations wanting to get better at implementing strategies.

## **1.2 Structure of the study**

The thesis aims to study how businesses put strategies to use. The introduction sets the stage by explaining the study's background and laying out its framework. It highlights the problem, outlines the objectives, and poses the research questions. This chapter also talks about why the study matters and shares how the thesis is structured.

Chapter 2 dives into the literature review. It takes a closer look at past research on strategies and how they are carried out in practice. This part of the thesis discusses key ideas, identifies themes, and points out gaps in what we already know. It also brings in theoretical models to help explain the factors that affect strategy implementation.

Chapter 3 focuses on research methodology. It talks about how the study was designed and explains the case study approach. The chapter dives into the methods used to gather data and how the analysis was done. It gives reasons why semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main way to collect data. It also introduces the three companies examined in the research and explains how they were selected.

Chapter 4 shares the findings from the case study. This chapter presents the case study analysis results. It explores how the case companies create and grasp their strategies, the problems they face when executing them, and the role of employees and company structure in the process. It also discusses where the companies stand now and where they're headed, while highlighting how important leadership is in carrying out strategies.

Chapter 5 wraps up the case study analysis and focuses on key factors that influence how well strategies are carried out. It connects the results to earlier research in the thesis and looks at what the findings mean to improve both theory and practice. The chapter concentrates on drawing conclusions and giving recommendations. It pulls together the thesis by reviewing key insights proposing suggestions to help practitioners, and pointing out areas to investigate further. It shares useful ideas about how organizations can implement strategies while stressing the role of leadership, structure, and communication in achieving goals.

This thesis uses a clear and organized approach to explain how strategies can work in real-world situations.

### **1.3 How A.I. has been used in this thesis**

In accordance with the university's guidelines for the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models in teaching and learning, this chapter outlines how such technologies have been utilized in the preparation of this thesis.

AI tools have been employed strictly for language-related support. Specifically, ChatGPT (developed by OpenAI) and GoPilot were used for proofreading and grammar correction during the writing process. These tools helped improve the clarity and readability of the text without altering or generating its substantive academic content.

This thesis contains no artificial intelligence-generated content, arguments, analyses, or conclusions. The author carried out all original writing, critical analysis, research, and interpretations alone. According to university regulation, AI's function was restricted to recommending stylistic changes and verifying for grammatical consistency. This thesis's use of AI tools is consistent with the university's strategy for assisting students in using AI in an ethical and responsible manner.

## 2 Literature review

The idea of "strategy" has changed and grown in fields like business and military science. People describe it as a long-term plan made to reach certain goals or stay ahead of others (Mintzberg 1994; Porter 1996). Strategy acts like a framework to guide decisions. It explains what an organization wants to achieve and how it plans to do so (Grant 2005).

### 2.1 Strategy

Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (2009) believe that strategy can be understood through the prescriptive, descriptive, or emergent lenses. The prescriptive approach highlights how strategies ought to be created stressing formal methods and analytical tools. Organizations rely on tools like PESTLE analysis (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental) and SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) to evaluate their surroundings in a structured way and build solid strategies (Hill & Jones, 2012). This method often shapes traditional strategic planning models that prioritize organized decision-making processes.

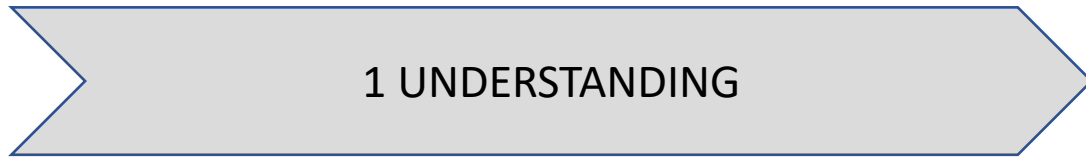
The descriptive perspective looks at how strategies function within organizations. It understands that strategies do not always emerge from structured top-down planning. Instead, they often arise from the complex involvement of different stakeholders. Mintzberg (1994) pointed out that organizations adjust their strategies based on unexpected challenges and opportunities. This shows that strategy involves learning and adapting just as much as it involves planning.

The emergent view explains strategy as an ongoing process that changes as organizations adjust to shifting environments. This flexible approach to strategy highlights the value of intuition testing new ideas, and making adjustments. For example digital technologies have pushed many organizations to shift their plans showing the need to stay adaptable in an unpredictable market (Binns 2014).

### **2.1.1 Strategy implementation**

The process by which developed strategies are carried out inside an organization is known as strategy implementation (Hrebiniak, 2006). In order to accomplish organizational goals, it includes converting strategic plans into targeted activities. Allocating resources, modifying organizational structures, and supervising daily activities that support strategic objectives are frequently included in this process (Noble, 1999).

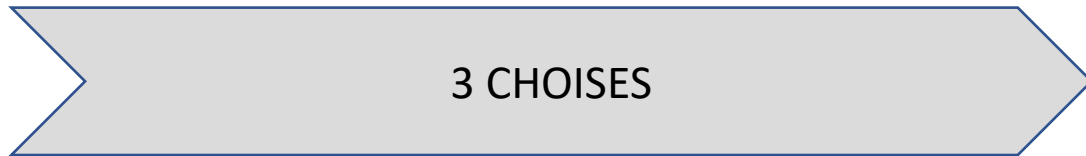
As Sutinen et al. (2023) present, a four-step framework can be used in strategy implementation, which is shown in Figure 1. The first step in the image focuses on understanding the current situation. It is important to understand the overall context and the basis of the perspective. Moving down the image, the second step emphasizes the understanding of changes in the operational environment and market. The third step highlights the importance of choices, focusing on building competitive advantage and uniqueness. The final step is implementation. This step concentrates on how the strategy is practically executed, focusing on the routines and methods used to put the strategy into action.



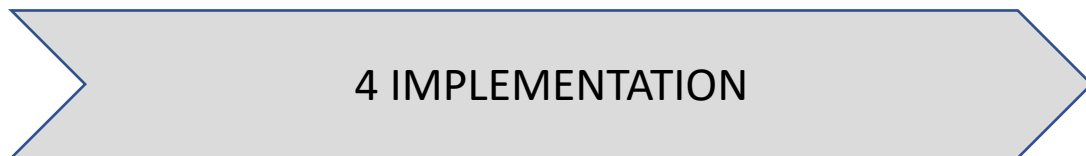
Where are we now?



What future competition and operational environment are we preparing our company for?



How do we decide to act and succeed in the future?



How do we implement the chosen changes?

**Figure 1** The Four Questions of the Strategy Implementation (Sutinen & Haapakorva, 2023, p. 59).

The way an organization operates affects how well strategies are carried out. Culture has a big role in shaping how employees act, think, and see things, which helps them stay involved and supportive during the process. Cater and Pucko (2010) explain that

when a culture resist change, it can block new strategies. On the other hand, a culture open to new ideas makes it easier to adjust and work together toward goals. Similarly, Beer and Eisenstat (2000) identify “silent killers” of strategy implementation, including poor communication, unclear accountability, and a lack of honest dialogue. These cultural barriers create an environment where strategic goals are misunderstood or resisted, hindering implementation success.

Allocating resources is yet another crucial factor that has a big impact on how a strategy is implemented. Inadequate financial, human, or technological resources are a major barrier for businesses trying to carry out their strategic plans, according to Hill and Jones (2012). Particularly smaller businesses may experience financial limitations that keep them from achieving their full potential. The viability and sustainability of strategic initiatives are compromised when sufficient resources cannot be allocated, which results in partial or abandoned implementation attempts.

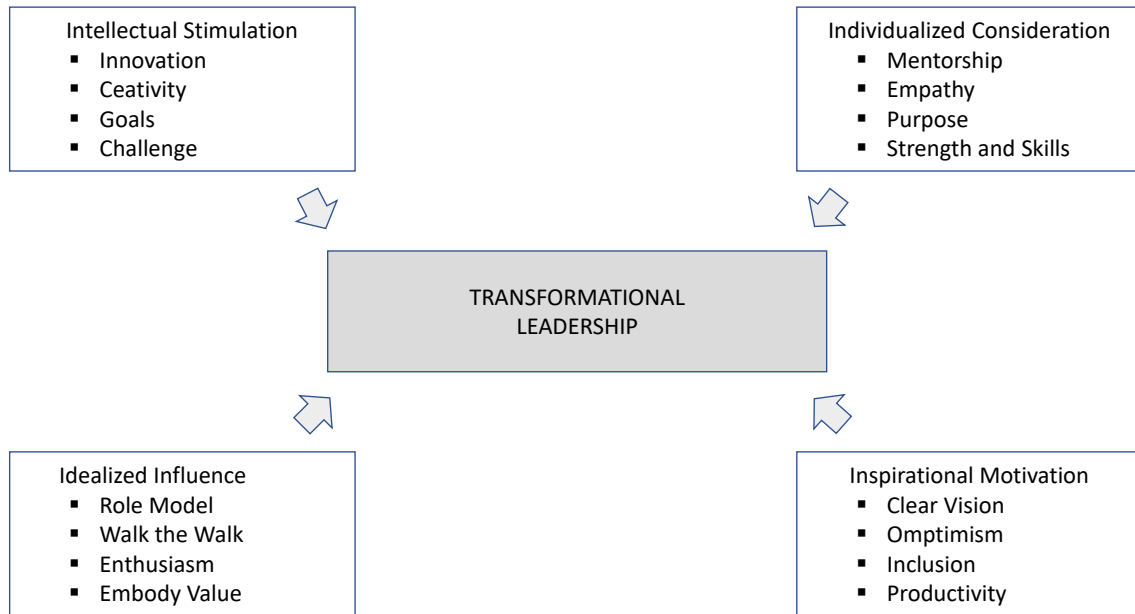
## **2.2 The role of Leadership in Strategy Implementation**

Leaders inspire, communicate, and drive strategy execution, which is why they are essential in helping a company navigate strategic change (Bass, 1990; Kotter, 1996). When organizational resources and culture are in line with strategic objectives, effective leadership increases commitment and reduces opposition (Daft, 2008). Therefore, leadership plays a crucial role in strategy since it establishes the prerequisites for strategic success.

### **2.2.1 Transformational and Participative Leadership**

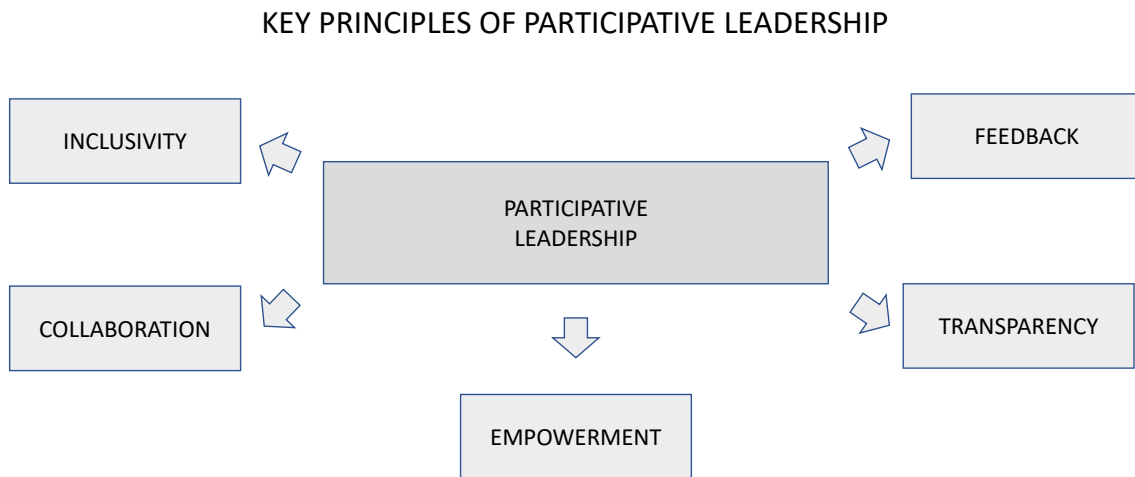
Transformational leaders push strategy execution by building a shared vision supporting new ideas, and giving employees the power to act (Burns 1978; Bass 1990). Transformational leadership includes parts like challenging ideas giving personal attention inspiring

others, and acting as a role model, as shown in Figure 2. Research shows these leaders boost both commitment to the organization and its ability to adapt, which are key to making strategies work well (Daft, 2008).



**Figure 2** Transformational Leadership (Ugochukwu, 2024).

Participative leadership, which emphasizes collaboration and inclusive decision-making, is also associated with higher levels of implementation success as presented in Figure 3. Hrebiniak (2006) argues that leaders who involve employees in the decision-making process are better able to secure buy-in and mitigate resistance. By creating a participative environment, leaders encourage employees to contribute their insights, enhancing the relevance and feasibility of strategic initiatives.

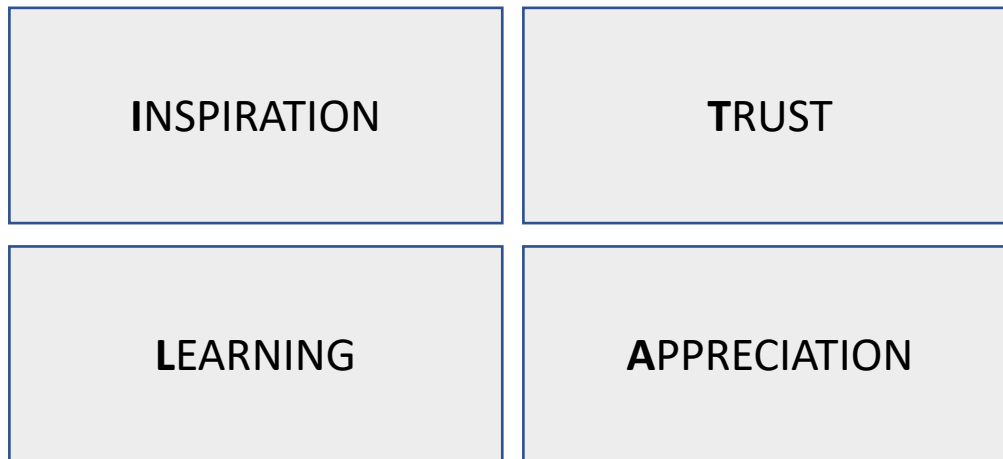


**Figure 3** Participative Leadership (Holistique training, 2024).

Adaptive leadership is a valuable addition to strategy implementation, especially in environments where change and uncertainty are present. This style of leadership emphasizes organizational learning and adaptability while empowering individuals challenge problems (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Teams can react swiftly to changing internal and external circumstances when adaptable leaders facilitate the iterative creation of strategies rather than depending only on set plans. Resilience and long-term strategic relevance are closely related to this responsiveness, which is important in today's fast-paced markets (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

Furthermore, coordinating operational efforts with long-term organizational objectives requires strategic leadership. Strategic leaders make sure that resources, institutions, and capabilities are set up to support their vision in addition to imagining future directions (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). They lessen the possibility of strategic drift by fostering consistency between daily operations and strategic goal. Additionally, strategic leaders play a crucial role in fostering an environment of accountability and ongoing performance evaluation, guaranteeing that implementation initiatives stay in line with corporate values and key performance indicators (Ireland & Hitt, 2005). By striking a balance

between the necessity of structure and the flexibility needed in dynamic contexts, these leaders promote both alignment and adaptability.



**Figure 4** Finnish Defence Forces Deep Leadership Key Pillars (Halonen, 2022).

The Deep Leadership model from the Finnish Defence Forces leadership guide (Halonen 2022) builds on earlier leadership styles by stressing values that focus on people. These values connect with ideas seen in transformational, participative, and adaptive leadership approaches.

This model is based on four main pillars: Inspiration, Trust, Learning, and Appreciation. It shines a light on the importance of relationships and growth in leadership to carry out strategies. The Inspiration pillar connects to aspects of transformational leadership like motivational inspiration and being an ideal role model. Leaders who inspire create meaning and purpose in their team's tasks, push for ambitious goals, and work toward a shared vision. By setting clear objectives and demonstrating the way forward themselves, they enhance teamwork and help their group feel confident about where they are headed.

Trust forms the base of adaptive and participative leadership. Leaders who earn trust show honesty, fairness, and strong ethics. These traits lower pushback and create a place where people feel safe to share ideas. Trust helps open up conversations and allows teams to take shared risks. These things are key when leaders need to adjust plans in changing conditions.

The idea of learning ties to adaptive leadership. Leaders can build a focus on constant progress by letting team members try new ideas treating mistakes as chances to grow, and including them in decisions. This becomes even more critical in situations when sticking to strict plans won't work because things change too.

Appreciation strengthens the focus on each person's needs in transformational leadership and promotes collaboration in decision-making. Leaders who value team members' growth and acknowledge their contributions help build motivation and dedication. These qualities play a big role in making strategies work.

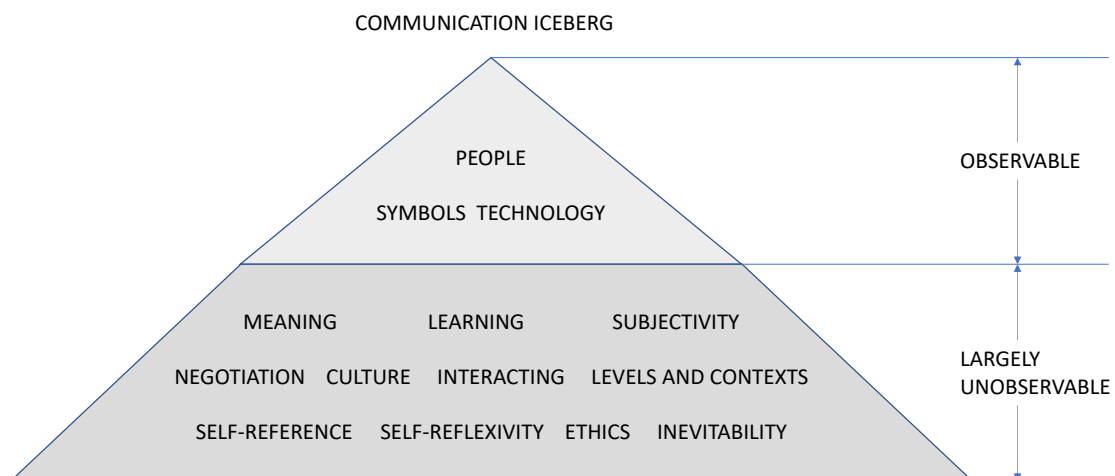
Together, these four key practices create a better environment to carry out strategic plans. They encourage respect shared goals, and collective accountability among the team. When combined with structured leadership methods like strategic and transformational leadership, the Deep Leadership approach provides a complete system. This framework supports both the people-focused and task-focused sides of strategy (Halonen 2022).

### **2.2.2 Communication and Motivation**

To make sure that staff members comprehend and support strategic objectives, effective communication is crucial. In order to match employees' behaviors with the objectives of the firm, leaders must effectively convey the justification for strategic changes (Hrebiniak, 2006). Furthermore, maintaining staff engagement during the difficult stages of implementation requires incentive.

During times of strategic change, uncertainty and ambiguity are frequently present; they can be lessened by clear and consistent communication. Successful strategy execution, according to Kotter (1996), mostly depends on a leader's capacity to communicate the vision and clarify how specific responsibilities contribute to overall strategic objectives. Employee engagement and effort toward plan implementation are higher when they are aware of their role in it. Additionally, two-way channels of communication, like conversation sessions and feedback loops, allow the organization to identify opposition early and modify the implementation process as necessary (Clampitt, DeKoch, & Cashman, 2000).

In the communication process, many of the functions and operations required to make it successful are often not visible. This distinction between the visible and the invisible can be demonstrated through the Figure 4. As Ruben and Stewart (2020) point out, the process is far more intricate than it seems. While the verbal message appears to be transferred effectively between people, much of the complexity behind how communication actually works remains hidden. This example highlights that, even in a basic interaction, the underlying communication mechanisms are far more complex than they may initially appear.



**Figure 5** Communication Iceberg (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2020, p.41).

Motivation acts as a sustaining force behind employee effort and perseverance during the often long and complex process of strategy implementation. Herzberg's (1968) two-factor theory highlights those intrinsic motivators—such as meaningful work, recognition, and opportunities for personal growth—are crucial in maintaining commitment to strategic initiatives. Leaders who cultivate a motivating environment by recognizing effort and fostering autonomy can enhance employees' psychological ownership of the strategy. In turn, this leads to increased commitment, creativity, and performance consistency across the implementation process (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

Strategic incentives that tie motivation to performance outcomes strengthen the alignment of company and individual objectives. Since they convey corporate priorities and recognize employee contributions, performance-based awards, goal-setting, and participative management can all be used as tools to boost motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). To prevent disengagement, motivation must be customized to the unique requirements and values of the workforce. Leaders are better able to maintain and generate enthusiasm for successful implementation when they are aware of the individual motivations of their teams.

### **2.3 Barrier-Oriented Frameworks in Strategy Implementation**

Numerous studies highlight the challenges that businesses face when implementing. Change aversion, organizational structure and strategy mismatch, and insufficient resource allocation are typical problems (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Okumus, 2003). Addressing the organization's structural and cultural problems is frequently necessary to overcome these challenges.

An organized method for defining goals, allocating resources, and choosing actions to accomplish long-term objectives is the strategy process. Strategy formulation,

implementation, and evaluation are the three main phases of the process (Johnson, Scholes, & Whittington, 2008). In order to lead companies from vision to action, each step is essential.

Establishing strategic goals, assessing the competitive landscape, and defining an organization's mission are all necessary steps in developing a strategy (Bryson, 2018). According to Kaplan and Norton (2001), strategy formulation should take into consideration both external and internal resources because doing so improves an organization's flexibility. In order to evaluate internal capabilities and external possibilities and help create actionable goals, this phase frequently makes use of tools such as SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, possibilities, and Threats) (Hill & Jones, 2012).

Once formulated, a strategy requires effective implementation to transition from conceptual planning to operational activities. This stage is where organizations allocate resources, build supportive organizational structures, and align employee activities with strategic objectives (Cater & Pucko, 2010). According to Kotter (1996), strong leadership is essential in this phase to foster buy-in, reduce resistance, and maintain momentum, ensuring that employees are motivated and understand their roles within the larger strategic vision.

The last stage is evaluation, during which businesses compare the results of strategies they have put into place to their original objectives (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). Organizations can analyze the success of their strategies and make necessary adjustments by conducting frequent performance reviews and evaluations. Since it allows firms to measure success across financial and non-financial metrics, the Balanced Scorecard is a popular evaluation tool that provides a comprehensive view of progress (Kaplan & Norton, 1992).

Each stage of the strategy process is interdependent, requiring organizations to approach strategy as an iterative cycle that adapts to changes within the organization and its environment. By focusing on these stages, organizations can enhance alignment

between their strategic vision and operational realities, thereby closing the gap between strategy and practice (Mintzberg, 1994).

### **2.3.1 Resistance to Change**

Resistance to change is frequently cited as a primary challenge in implementing new strategies. This resistance can arise from employees' fear of the unknown or from disruptions to established routines (Kotter, 1996). Addressing these concerns often requires clear communication, employee involvement, and supportive leadership.

Psychological and emotional reactions, like feeling helpless worrying about status, or imagining threats to job security often cause resistance (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Leaders should recognize resistance, not as a simple obstacle to remove, but as a natural part of making changes. Clear communication, honesty, and listening with care can reduce resistance and build trust. Interventions such as bringing in change agents or assessing readiness on, can help spot and address specific resistance areas (Armenakis & Harris 2002).

It has been demonstrated that involving employees in the development and implementation of change projects increases ownership and decreases resistance. Employee support for the change is higher when they believe their opinions are valued and their concerns are taken seriously (Lines, 2004). Teams are empowered by this participatory approach, which also makes implementation easier by coordinating individual actions with corporate objectives.

### **2.3.2 Misalignment of Organizational Structure**

A well-defined structure that aligns with the chosen strategy is critical for successful implementation. Structural misalignment can create inefficiencies and impede

communication channels (Chandler, 1962). Studies suggest that implementing matrix structures or cross-functional teams may alleviate these barriers (Galbraith, 1973).

Organizations must ensure that decision-making authority, reporting lines, and workflows support strategic priorities. When strategic initiatives are introduced without accompanying structural changes, friction often arises due to role confusion or conflicting objectives between departments (Miles & Snow, 1984). Structural realignment helps clarify responsibilities and allows for better coordination of resources and efforts.

Additionally, in order to preserve strategic flexibility, contemporary firms are using agile or hybrid structures more and more. These methods, which prioritize flexibility, ongoing input, and quick iteration, are especially helpful in contexts that are characterized by instability or innovation (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In order to implement these structures, executives must cultivate a collaborative culture that allows cross-functional teams to function independently while maintaining alignment with overall objectives.

Furthermore, a business may encounter difficulties with operations scaling if its structure is not appropriately matched with its strategy. As businesses expand, scaling frequently necessitates reevaluating the organizational structure to meet evolving business requirements. Businesses that start out with a functional structure, for example, could need to switch to a divisional or matrix structure if they enter new product lines or markets (Barney, 1991). Ineffectiveness, redundancies, and greater complexity can result from misalignment during growth, which makes it more difficult for the company to carry out its plan.

### **2.3.3 Resource Allocation**

Resource allocation is a practical aspect of strategy implementation that ensures sufficient support for strategic initiatives. According to Grant (2005), resource misallocation can severely hinder progress, making it essential to develop budgeting frameworks that reflect strategic priorities.

Effective resource allocation requires more than just financial investment; it involves time, personnel, technology, and knowledge. Strategic implementation often fails when resources are spread too thinly across competing initiatives, diluting impact and slowing execution (Kaplan & Norton, 2008). Prioritization frameworks such as strategic scorecards or portfolio management can help leaders align investments with high-impact goals.

Additionally, transparent and data-driven allocation processes increase accountability and employee confidence. When individuals understand how and why resources are being distributed, they are more likely to perceive the process as fair and aligned with strategic intent (Collis, 2005). Resource allocation should also be dynamic—capable of being adjusted as initiatives evolve or external conditions shift.

Making sure that the human capital needed for plan implementation is available and adequately trained is a crucial component of resource allocation. Investments in leadership development programs, skill training, and hiring talent in line with strategic objectives are crucial as firms work to execute complicated strategies (Jackson & Schuler, 1995). Implementation success may be seriously hampered by a misalignment between personnel skills and the demands of the new strategy. Achieving long-term strategic goals requires making sure that resources—particularly human capital—are in the proper locations.

## **2.4 Strategy in Practice: A Strategy-as-Practice Perspective**

Several connected and shifting factors shape how organizations put strategies into action. Common hurdles like opposition to change misaligned structures, and not enough resources continue to create problems. These issues often come from long-standing cultural and systemic habits that simple procedures cannot fix (Beer & Eisenstat 2000; Kotter 1996). Leaders need to respond and adapt to the specific situation to deal with these problems.

Traditional models tend to highlight structured planning and top-down control. In contrast, the strategy-as-practice (SAP) view changes the focus. Instead of asking what strategies an organization has, it looks at how people within the organization bring those strategies to life. This approach sees strategy as something that happens, built through everyday habits, discussions, and interactions among workers at every level (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl 2007; Vaara & Whittington 2023). From this perspective, strategy is not a straightforward process of planning and execution. It evolves and gets reshaped during real-world application.

Leadership plays a key role in this ongoing process. Studies show that transformational and participatory leadership styles work well with the SAP method since they boost employee confidence, build engagement, and create a shared purpose through teamwork and dialogue (Bass, 1990; Hrebiniak 2006; Langley et al. 2021). Adaptive leadership also strengthens this by helping organizations learn and stay flexible when dealing with uncertainty and change (Heifetz Grashow, & Linsky 2009; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). These leadership approaches not support strategic alignment, but they also shape small-scale actions and decisions that turn plans into reality.

In the SAP framework, communication does more than just pass along decisions. It helps shape how people understand and carry out strategy. Conversations about strategy, both formal and casual, have an important role. They either make it easier or harder for people to act on strategic goals (Kwon, Clarke, & Wodak 2023). Leaders who have honest and inclusive discussions with their teams work with them to build a shared understanding of strategy. This process can lead to a stronger sense of ownership and make carrying out plans less difficult. How people find meaning in these discussions also connects to what drives them. Motivation lasts longer when individuals see a sense of purpose or connect their identity to the strategy story instead of depending only on external rewards (Herzberg 1968; Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

SAP's viewpoint underscores how vital people, actions, and their execution are in strategy—focusing on who crafts strategies, what they do, and how their choices play out

over time (Whittington, 2006). This trio sheds light on the overlooked efforts of middle managers, frontline workers, and informal leaders. These individuals connect broad strategies with the everyday work by turning high-level goals into actionable steps tweaking them based on feedback, and weaving them into the company's regular processes.

This practical perspective pushes back against seeing strategy as a one-size-fits-all top-down approach. It emphasizes the chaotic nature of real-world execution and highlights how local actions play a role in shaping results. Mintzberg (1994) and Seidl & Whittington (2020) explained that good strategy develops by mixing careful planning with on-the-spot adjustments. Practitioners balance organization with flexibility while working through strategies.

Combining the SAP approach with traditional strategic methods allows a deeper look into how implementation works. It pushes organizations to stop relying on rigid templates and instead focus on building an environment to reflect, test ideas, and learn together. Strategy goes beyond just being a simple plan or document. It turns into an ongoing shared activity tied to the organization's daily experiences.

To wrap up viewing strategy as a practice shows that successful implementation depends on how people within the organization act, interpret, and interact. When strategy is seen as something people engage in rather than just a set of rules to follow, companies can create strategic processes to become more flexible, inclusive, and strong—better matching today's complicated challenges.

### **3 Research methodology**

This chapter explains the research approach and describes the methods used to explore the questions in this study. It highlights why this approach was chosen, talks about the kinds of data collected, and shares reasons behind picking particular research methods.

#### **3.1 Different research methods**

Qualitative and quantitative data gathering methods are the two main types of research methodologies used in academic studies. The goals of the study, the characteristics of the data, and the kind of analysis needed all influence the technique choice. An outline of these two primary research techniques can be seen below.

When a thorough analysis of complex phenomena is the aim, qualitative research methods are usually employed. These methods are particularly useful for comprehending people's perspectives, experiences, and the underlying causes of particular choices or acts. Qualitative research frequently uses non-numerical data, in contrast to quantitative methodologies. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and case studies are examples of common methods. The context and meanings people ascribe to their experiences are crucial elements in qualitative research (Silverman, 1993).

When the goal is to measure variables and derive generalizable conclusions from a sample population, quantitative research methods are used. These techniques, which can include surveys, experiments, and statistical tests, usually entail the use of numerical data. The primary advantage of quantitative research is its capacity to extrapolate results and spot trends or connections among broader populations (Robson, 1995).

For this study, a qualitative research approach was chosen as the primary method for data collection. This approach was selected due to the exploratory nature of the research, which aims to gain a deep understanding of how business strategies are

implemented and the challenges organizations face in translating strategic theory into practice. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research method, as they allow for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences and provide rich, detailed data (Hirsjärvi, 2004; Flick, 1998).

## **3.2 Introduction of the case companies**

Three separate case companies that operate in various industries and employ differing strategic methods are examined in this study. The companies have decided to stay unnamed in order to preserve confidentiality. They offer invaluable insights into the real-world application of corporate strategy, notwithstanding their anonymity. The chosen businesses are perfect cases for examining how organizations apply strategic theory to practice since they differ greatly in terms of operational strategy, market positioning, and leadership styles. The study intends to illustrate the many ways in which organizations overcome obstacles, adjust to market developments, and accomplish their strategic objectives by contrasting these businesses.

A representative with years of experience in the industry and a thorough comprehension of the company's strategy was chosen for each case company. By doing this, it was made sure that the viewpoints expressed were based on actual experience and provided genuine, useful insights into how each company matches its operations with its strategic goals. These representatives' knowledge is essential for offering a thorough understanding of the strategic decision-making procedures and how they affect the performance and long-term objectives of the business.

### **3.2.1 Case Company A**

The creative agency Case Company A specializes in brand development and marketing. It started out as a small advertising firm in the early 2000s and has since grown to

become a full-service creative firm with dozens of staff members dispersed over multiple locations. The agency offers many services, including design, advertising, digital marketing, and brand strategy, to help clients build effective brands that enhance their business performance. The business has expanded its experience and enhanced the services it provides in these areas by acquiring a video production firm and a digital marketing company in recent years. focusing on the growth of a brand holistically.

The case company A works with a wide range of clients from start-ups to giant corporations in sectors like retail, technology and healthcare. In an increasingly competitive market, the organization assists businesses in building a strong brand presence by creative storytelling with data-driven analytics. By emphasizing teamwork, its methodology guarantees that every project meets the specific requirements of the customer. The agency puts money into research alongside its core services to stay ahead of industry changes. It studies new tools like artificial intelligence and virtual digital experiences to keep improving how it creates. It also prioritizes sustainability and social responsibility in its operations because it wants to develop ethical and significant brand experiences that appeal to consumers.

The strategy of Case Company A is based of customer-centric innovation, data-driven decision-making, and creativity. Helping organizations build genuine, enduring relationships with their customers while adjusting to the constantly shifting marketing environment is the main goal of its long-term mission. The business uses approaches which combine technology, design, digital marketing, and branding to produce comprehensive brand experiences. Key strategic principles that enable the agency to react smoothly to client demands and market changes are flexibility and customer-orientation.

Because it demonstrates how a strategic vision is implemented in day-to-day operations, this example company is especially pertinent for research on the shift from strategy to practice. By coordinating internal procedures, team structures, and project execution with its fundamental strategic tenets, Case Company A effectively executes its plan.

Researchers can investigate how the agency handles issues like preserving brand consistency across many platforms, using data to inform decisions, and encouraging an innovative culture by using case analysis. Studying this organization gives academics and business professionals useful insights into how theoretical strategy frameworks are implemented in a real-world corporate setting.

### **3.2.2 Case Company B**

Case Company B is a well-known entity in Finland's defense industry that specializes in air operations. With a focus on the deployment and control of aerial assets to protect national security and support international defense operations, it functions within the military framework as a vital part of the Finnish Defense Forces. With distinct duties and responsibilities, the organization's highly hierarchical and structured structure guarantees efficient coordination and mission execution amongst its many air units.

Air defense is Case Company B's primary objective. From fighter jets to transport planes, a wide variety of aircraft are used in its operations. All of these are utilized in operational monitoring of territorial integrity and peacekeeping training. In order to guarantee operational readiness in any circumstance, the personnel are highly skilled and trained, frequently completing demanding training programs. Flexibility and agility are crucial organizational qualities since the business's operating environment is dynamic and demands quick response to new threats or shifts in strategic direction.

In addition to its military function, Case Company B plays a vital role in the broader defense strategy of Finland, working closely with other branches of the military and allied forces. The coordination and collaboration between different units are essential to ensure a seamless response in both national and international contexts. The organization is also involved in technological innovation, constantly upgrading its systems and equipment to maintain a strategic advantage in an increasingly complex and rapidly evolving defense landscape.

Overall, Case Company B is a critical part of Finland's national defense framework, providing air support and ensuring security through advanced military aviation capabilities. The organization's operational excellence and ability to adapt to changing circumstances are central to its role in protecting the country's airspace and contributing to international defense efforts.

### **3.2.3 Case Company C**

Case Company C is a Finnish primary school that makes use of the national curriculum. It emphasizes children's social and academic growth in order to provide them with a high-quality education. It complies with the law and the national curriculum because it is a public institution and is therefore subject to the laws and regulations set forth by the Japanese government. Creating a safe and encouraging environment for children to grow and learn is the school's primary goal.

Instructions from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture serve as the base for the school's approach and strategy. A wide range of topics are covered by these principles. Examples like student welfare, teaching strategies, and curriculum design are covered in this. By making sure that its procedures comply with these national requirements, Company C is able to provide its students with a consistent and excellent education. To suit the changing requirements of its students, the school also continuously assesses and modifies its teaching methods.

Establishing a collaborative and inclusive learning environment is a key goal of Case Company C's activities. The school promotes a strong sense of community by encouraging students and their families to actively participate in the educational process. Additionally, it complies with regulatory frameworks that place a high value on accessibility and equality. This aims to guarantee that all children, regardless of background, have an equal chance at success. By employing this strategy, Company C advances the larger goals of

Finland's educational system. These goals aim to give students the abilities and information necessary for success in the future.

### **3.3 Why semi-structured interviews?**

For the collection of the data semi-structured interviews were used. The central methods of qualitative research are observation, text analysis, interviews, and transcription, as defined by Silverman (1993). For this study, the potential methods for data collection are observation and surveys. Observing case companies' strategies would be highly labor-intensive and require a long timeframe (Metsämuuronen 2006, p 88). Although it would be possible to follow the process of an individual making strategy but the aim of this research is to gain a broader perspective on companies' experiences with strategy implementations.

Surveys, on the other hand, leave two options: interviews or questionnaires. The target audience is relatively small for a survey study, even if some of the other workers were included. While a survey study would be possible for this target group, challenges such as response attrition and superficial answers make it less practical (Hirsjärvi, 2004, pp. 172–184; Robson, 1995, pp. 188–189). Addressing the most critical topics of this study could be difficult when collecting written responses. Company representative written answers might not delve deeply enough, as their motivation could be questioned when faced with additional tasks. It could have imposed extra work on them, potentially affecting the quality of their responses.

Thus, the most natural research method for studying the implementation of the strategy within these companies is semi-structured interviews. This approach enables the collection of perspectives from both companies using the same method without causing undue burden on either interviewee. Semi-structured interviews allow the motivation of the target audience and obtaining their personal experiences. This method treats individuals as subjects in the research situation, enabling interviewees to freely express their

opinions. These interviews can elicit in-depth responses from the target group, for example, by asking for justifications for opinions through follow-up questions (Hirsjärvi 2004, p. 194). In an interview, the interviewer and interviewee are in direct interaction, making the discussion natural and personal. Interviews are recorded and conducted orally from start to finish (Tuomi et al., 2002, pp. 75–78). While interviewees may initially feel nervous about the recorder, they often forget its presence as the interview progresses. Recording ensures that the entire interview is captured, allowing the interviewer to focus on the conversation without being distracted by note-taking (Hirsjärvi et al., 2006, p 92).

In thematic interviews, topics and themes are predetermined. The aim is to address each theme with the interviewee, though the order of themes may vary. The interview situation is as informal as possible, and clarifying questions are shaped by the context. This flexibility adds freedom to the interview process and helps maintain the interviewee's motivation (Flick 1998, pp. 149–155; Eskola et al., 2005, p. 86).

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

This research involved qualitative interviews with organizational leaders and therefore required careful attention to ethical principles throughout the research process. Ethical considerations were addressed in the following areas: informed consent, participant anonymity and data protection, and voluntary participation.

#### **3.4.1 Informed Consent**

Prior to the interviews, all participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and how the data would be used. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and clarify any concerns. Written informed consent as seen in *Appendix 2. Suostumus tutkimushaastatteluuun* was obtained from each participant before the interview began. The consent form

also emphasized the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences.

### **3.4.2 Anonymity and Data Protection**

All personal identifiers were eliminated from the data after transcription in order to protect participant confidentiality. To protect their identity, organizations and individuals were given pseudonyms. The obtained data was safely kept on a password-protected device that the researcher alone could access. The data will only be kept for as long as is required to finish and assess the thesis, after which it will be erased in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

### **3.4.3 Voluntary Participation and Ethical Approval**

Study participation was completely optional. Participants were given the assurance that they might end the interview at any moment and that they were under no obligation to respond to any particular questions. The study complied with the ethical standards established by the University of Vaasa. Formal ethical assessment by the institutional ethics board was not necessary because the research involved adult professionals discussing non-sensitive topics and did not represent any harm to participants. However, the study was carried out completely in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

## 4 Findings

The results of the empirical study, which involved interviewees from the three case companies, are presented in this chapter. The objective was to comprehend the practical application of strategic plans, the obstacles faced along the way, and the function of leadership in overcoming these difficulties. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and conducted in Finnish. For analytical purposes, the transcribed texts were then translated into English.

The results highlight the "doing" of strategy—how practitioners understand, implement, and modify strategy in their day-to-day work—in line with the strategy-as-practice (SAP) lens (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Golsorkhi et al., 2015). This approach shows that strategy is a socially situated, evolving, and frequently challenged process rather than a static plan. Three businesses from various industries were interviewed for the case studies. These groups were chosen because they offer a variety of viewpoints on how strategies are implemented in various industries. Each participant had direct experience implementing organizational initiatives and held high positions in strategic or operational leadership.

### 4.1 Understanding of Strategy and Its Creation

When asked what strategy means, all organizations offered insights aligned with their operational contexts. The interviewee from Case Company A described strategy as

*“a roadmap for creating long-term value for clients by combining insight, design, and innovation.”*

In contrast, the interviewee from Case Company B defined it more operationally:

*“Strategy for us means ensuring mission success while maintaining national and operational readiness.”*

Responsibility for strategy creation also differed. In Company A, it was seen as a shared effort between leadership and key client teams:

*“It’s iterative; we often co-create strategy with our clients and internally across units.”*

Meanwhile, Company B followed a hierarchical approach:

*“Strategy comes from the top—it’s defined by the defense ministry and higher command. Our role actually simplified is to execute.”*

Case Company C offered yet another perspective, shaped by resource limitations and the demands of public service. The interviewee commented:

*“Strategy, for us, is about trying to maintain quality education despite budget cuts and staff shortages. We don’t have the luxury of abstract vision—it’s about keeping things afloat.”*

Responsibility for strategy in Company C was vague and inconsistent.

*“We technically have a school strategy, but it changes whenever leadership does,”*

the interviewee noted.

*“Most of us aren’t even sure who actually creates it.”*

This highlights a lack of strategic continuity and ownership in the organization.

The companies’ conceptualizations of strategy diverged based on their institutional logics and operational pressures. Company A articulated strategy as a design-led, collaborative roadmap for value creation, aligning with the SAP view that strategy is co-constructed through iterative practices (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). The emphasis on co-creation across units and with clients illustrates a distributed approach to strategizing, often found in creative industries.

In contrast, Company B's definition reflects a command-and-control model tied to institutional hierarchy, characteristic of military and bureaucratic settings. Strategy is interpreted here as a top-down directive that demands disciplined execution. This resonates with what Whittington (2006) describes as “strategy as planning,” a more traditional approach that often conflicts with the emergent nature of practice in fast-evolving contexts.

Company C revealed a fragmented understanding of strategy, shaped by resource scarcity and frequent leadership turnover. The lack of strategic ownership and fluidity in responsibility indicates an absence of routinized strategy practices (Balogun et al., 2014). Strategy in this context appears as an externally imposed artifact rather than an embedded organizational practice—highlighting the risk of strategy becoming decoupled from operational reality (Mantere & Vaara, 2008).

## 4.2 Challenges in Implementing Strategy

All organizations acknowledged challenges in turning strategy into practice. In Company A, one recurring theme was maintaining coherence between creative freedom and strategic focus:

*“Sometimes our designers get carried away with ideas that don’t align with client KPIs. Balancing vision with metrics is a constant challenge.”*

Company B faced challenges in agility due to rigid structures:

*“Translating strategic directives into real-time air operations isn't always straightforward—especially when threats evolve faster than our protocols.”*

This highlights the often-cited “strategy-practice gap” (Johnson et al., 2007), where formal strategies can falter in practical execution due to organizational frictions or misalignment.

All companies employ methods to mitigate these challenges. Company A uses agile project cycles and internal workshops:

*“We hold ‘strategy meetings’ where strategists, and data analysts refine briefs together. It helps align execution with intent.”*

Company B counters inflexibility through extensive simulation and scenario planning:

*“We train for unpredictability. Tactical-level drills allow us to adapt faster in real scenarios, even within a strict chain of command.”*

Case Company C faced its own set of implementation hurdles, primarily driven by structural constraints. The interviewee described the situation sincerely:

*“We get these strategy documents from the education board, but we rarely have time to read them—let alone implement anything.”*

And also added:

*“Everything we do is reactive. Strategy implementation? It's more like daily survival.”*

No formal mitigation processes were identified in Company C. Instead, informal workarounds and personal initiative were the norm.

*“If something strategic gets done, it's usually because someone took it upon themselves—not because it was part of a plan,”* said the representative.

All three organizations encountered barriers in implementing strategy, but the nature of these challenges varied significantly. Company A struggled with aligning creative

autonomy with strategic KPIs, a tension often noted in project-based environments. The organization attempts to reconcile this through agile methodologies and collaborative refinement sessions, illustrating what Jarzabkowski and Balogun (2009) call “strategic sensemaking in action.”

Company B, on the other hand, faced rigidity due to hierarchical protocols, which complicates the translation of strategy into dynamic field operations. The use of simulations and scenario planning reflects efforts to bridge the strategy-practice gap by embedding adaptive routines within a structured framework—supporting the notion that even highly formalized institutions can incorporate flexible strategy tools (Vaara & Lamberg, 2016).

Company C’s implementation challenges were structural and cultural. The disconnection between strategy formulation and day-to-day operations exemplifies a lack of “strategizing” at the practitioner level. Employees operate reactively, with strategic efforts relying heavily on personal initiative. This aligns with findings by Chia and Holt (2006), who argue that in many public-sector organizations, strategy is more of a coping mechanism than a coherent process.

### **4.3 Organizational and Personnel Roles**

When discussing how employees are involved in strategy implementation, Company A emphasized inclusion:

*“Everyone is involved. From interns to senior strategists—we believe innovation can come from anywhere.”*

In Company B, involvement is more structured but equally intentional:

*“While orders come from above, feedback and debriefs are encouraged. Pilots and unit leaders often participate in post-mission reviews that inform future plans.”*

Cultural support was viewed differently. Company A sees its collaborative, flat structure as a key enabler:

*“Our culture is built on openness and experimentation. It really helps us implement strategy dynamically.”*

Conversely, Company B acknowledged that structure can be both a strength and a constraint:

*“Our discipline ensures consistency, but sometimes it slows down necessary change.”*

In Case Company C, employee involvement in strategic processes was described as sporadic and unclear. The interviewee stated:

*“Teachers aren't usually consulted about strategy. It comes from the top and rarely makes it to the classroom in a usable form.”*

The interviewee also remarked:

*“If strategy implementation happens, it's usually because a few motivated individuals decide to take the lead.”*

The organizational culture in Company C, while described as supportive among peers, was seen as resistant to strategic change.

*“We support each other, but the system doesn't support change,”* the interviewee said. This suggests a disconnection between cultural cohesion and strategic adaptability.

Employee involvement in strategy varies by context. Company A exemplifies a participatory model where strategic practices are democratized across hierarchies. This inclusion fosters a culture of experimentation and aligns with Whittington's (2006) view of strategy as a socially distributed activity.

Company B maintains more structured involvement mechanisms—post-mission debriefs and feedback loops—which offer limited but meaningful avenues for bottom-up influence. This hybrid model blends top-down control with select bottom-up reflexivity, supporting a controlled yet responsive strategy process (Fenton & Langley, 2011).

Strategic roles in Company C are vague and undefined. In addition to their incidental rather than systematic contributions to strategy, teachers and staff are rarely consulted. This lack of participation points to a lack of what Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) refer to as strategy practitioners—people who actively mold and impact strategic outcomes within their environment.

#### **4.4 Leadership's Role**

Leadership plays a critical role in all cases, though styles differ. In Company A, leadership is described as *"empowering rather than directing,"* with a focus on inspiration and horizontal decision-making.

*"Our leaders act more like facilitators—they remove roadblocks and guide the team visionally."*

Company B embodies a more directive leadership model:

*"Decisions must be clear, fast, and respected. There is no room for ambiguity when lives are at stake."*

These align with transformational versus transactional leadership models respectively (Bass, 1990), supporting the idea that leadership approaches should match the operational context.

Leadership development also differs. Company A invests in coaching and peer mentoring:

*“We’ve created leadership tracks for creatives, so they can grow without having to leave the craft behind.”*

Company B emphasizes structured military training:

*“Our leadership development is codified through the chain of command—from officer school to mission command doctrine.”*

In Company C, leadership was seen as inconsistent and often lacking the necessary capacity to drive strategic initiatives.

*“Leadership turnover is so frequent that we barely finish implementing one direction before a new one begins,”* said the interviewee.

Furthermore, leadership development was described as nonexistent:

*“There’s no formal leadership training. If you get promoted, you’re on your own,”* the interviewee observed. This reflects an absence of systemic support for cultivating strategic leadership.

Leadership styles closely mirrored organizational needs and constraints. Company A’s facilitative leadership model reflects a transformational approach that empowers teams, encouraging innovation and strategic agility. Leaders act as “enablers of practice,”

supporting the SAP notion that leadership is not just about authority but about structuring spaces for strategizing (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2010).

Company B's directive leadership style fits its operational environment, where clarity and control are vital. Here, leadership functions more transactionally, aligning with the demands of high-stakes decision-making. Yet, structured feedback and leadership development programs suggest an embedded system for sustaining strategic competence across levels.

Company C's leadership context is marked by instability. Frequent turnover and absence of formal development mechanisms have eroded strategic consistency. The leadership vacuum results in fragmented strategy practices, reinforcing what Mantere (2008) describes as discursive barriers to strategizing—where leaders fail to create meaning or mobilize actors around strategic goals.

#### **4.5 Current State and Future Outlook**

When asked to evaluate the current state of strategy execution, Company A noted growing alignment thanks to digital integration:

*“We’re better now at connecting insights to creative outputs through tools like dashboards and analytics.”*

Company B acknowledged continued gaps:

*“We’re highly effective in operations, but aligning long-term defense strategy with emerging technologies is still a challenge.”*

Both foresee evolution. Company A aims to deepen data integration and expand into immersive digital experiences, while Company B focuses on strengthening cyber-defense and joint interoperability with allied forces.

In contrast, Company C reported stagnation and frustration. The interviewee commented:

*“We’re stuck in a cycle. Every year we make plans, but without staff and time, they stay on paper.”* The interviewee also added:

*“We know what would help: more support, more coordination, more voice. But right now, we’re running on goodwill.”*

There was hope for improvement tied to potential policy reforms and digitalization. However, respondents were generally skeptical: *“Unless something changes at the structural level, the strategy will continue to be a theoretical exercise,”* said the interviewee.

Company A appears to be advancing toward a more data-integrated and practice-aligned strategy model. The integration of digital tools supports real-time decision-making and reinforces SAP principles that emphasize material and technological dimensions of strategy (Golsorkhi et al., 2015).

Company B continues to face alignment challenges between long-term strategic intent and operational realities. Nevertheless, the organization actively adapts through structured learning and cross-functional collaboration, maintaining strategic resilience.

Company C remains caught in a cycle of planning without execution. Despite pockets of hope tied to digitalization and reform, the strategy process remains largely aspirational. The structural and cultural impediments indicate a need for institutional transformation to embed strategy into everyday routines.

## 4.6 Comparison of the findings

These chapters provide a deeper knowledge of how strategy is developed, implemented, and carried out across various organizational contexts by highlighting the main areas of comparison in Table 1. Every business has different difficulties, leadership philosophies, employee engagement, and goals for the future, all of which impact how it approaches strategy. These variations show how intricate and varied strategy execution is across different industries.

By contrasting the cases along important strategic dimensions, this section expands on the analysis. It looks at how strategic practices vary by industry, organization, and culture rather than just providing descriptive insights. The results demonstrate the applicability of the Strategy-as-Practice perspective, which shows how commonplace actions, people, and resources contribute to the implementation of strategy (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006).

### 4.6.1 Understanding of Strategy and Its Creation

The way organizations define and practice strategy is deeply shaped by their operational circumstances, structural conditions, and broader institutional contexts. As Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) observe, strategy is not a fixed concept but is enacted differently across organizations. This is clearly reflected in the distinct strategic orientations of Case Companies A, B, and C.

Case Company A views strategy as a long-term roadmap for creating value through insight, design, and innovation, as shown in Table 1. This definition emphasizes imagination and foresight, aligning with the company's focus on delivering tailored solutions to clients. The approach is iterative and collaborative, with strategies developed jointly by client teams and leadership. This fluid and co-creative mode of strategizing reflects the Strategy-as-Practice perspective, where strategy emerges through the everyday actions

and interactions of practitioners (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). It is a practice-oriented model that values adaptability and innovation as central to strategic work.

In contrast, Case Company B adopts a more operational and mission-driven definition of strategy: “ensuring mission success while maintaining national and operational readiness.” This reflects a top-down, hierarchical model suited to high-stakes environments like defense. Strategy is directed from the upper echelons—such as the defense ministry and higher command—and cascades down the chain of command. As one interviewee noted, “Strategy comes from the top—it's defined by the defense ministry and higher command. Our role actually simplified is to execute.” This approach underscores the performative nature of strategy, where practitioners follow authoritative, institutionally defined templates (Balogun et al., 2014). Stability and alignment with mission-critical goals are prioritized, and leadership adopts a directive role to ensure coherence across the organization.

Case Company C, shaped by public service demands and significant resource constraints, offers yet another perspective. Strategy here is less about vision and more about practical survival. Facing budget limitations and staffing shortages, the organization's strategic focus is on preserving educational quality and maintaining system functionality. As one participant stated, “We don't have the luxury of abstract vision—it's about keeping things afloat.” This constrained, reactive view of strategy embodies “strategizing under duress,” where limited autonomy and resources force individuals to act within narrow parameters (Mantere, 2008). Moreover, strategic ownership in Company C is inconsistent and often shifts with changes in leadership, resulting in a lack of clarity and continuity in strategic direction.

These contrasting approaches also reveal important differences in how strategic agency is distributed. Company A's collaborative model allows broad participation in strategy-making, reflecting a culture of creativity and flexibility. Company B's hierarchical structure centralizes strategic authority, mirroring the institutional logic of control and

predictability. In Company C, fragmented ownership and shifting responsibilities highlight the effects of institutional ambiguity and chronic resource scarcity on strategic capacity.

Together, these cases illustrate how definitions and enactments of strategy are inseparable from the organizations' goals, institutional roles, and environmental constraints. Strategy, as these findings suggest, is not merely about planning or vision but is deeply embedded in the practical realities and power structures within which organizations operate.

#### **4.6.2 Challenges in Implementing Strategy**

Strategy creation depends on an organization's specific circumstances, but the execution stage often exposes similar struggles within varied organizations. The idea of the "strategy-practice gap" (Johnson et al., 2007) highlights how strategic plans fail to turn into real actions because of obstacles like culture, structure, or daily operations. Table 1 outlines how Case Companies A B, and C each face these challenges.

In Case Company A, the core challenge lies in maintaining coherence between creative freedom and strategic focus. Designers, central to the company's innovation-driven model, sometimes produce ideas that do not align with client-defined key performance indicators (KPIs), creating a tension between creativity and operational accountability. As one interviewee put it, "Sometimes our designers get carried away with ideas that don't align with client KPIs." This situation reflects the broader dilemma faced by hybrid organizations operating under competing professional and performance logics (Denis et al., 2007). The company addresses this challenge through agile project cycles and internal workshops aimed at aligning creative output with strategic intent and client expectations, as indicated in Table 1.

Company B faces a different set of difficulties rooted in organizational rigidity. Its hierarchical structure ensures consistency and alignment with national defense priorities, but this same rigidity impairs flexibility in fast-paced or unpredictable scenarios. Translating high-level strategy into real-time operations proves difficult: “Translating strategic directives into real-time air operations isn't always straightforward.” This demonstrates a classic instance of the strategy-practice gap, where formal strategies may falter under the constraints of a rigid command chain (Johnson et al., 2007). To bridge this gap, Company B employs scenario planning and simulation exercises to adapt strategic directives to real-world demands—an approach documented in Table 1.

In Company C, the gap is both systemic and cultural. Implementation efforts are often sidelined by time pressures and the lack of formal mitigation processes. One interviewee noted, “We rarely have time to read strategy documents—let alone implement anything.” This leads to a situation where strategy execution is neither structured nor prioritized, and outcomes depend largely on individuals taking personal initiative. As another participant observed, “If something strategic gets done, it's usually because someone took it upon themselves.” These patterns exemplify the phenomenon of “strategic disempowerment” in bureaucratic settings, where actors at the middle and lower levels have limited influence or support in executing strategic goals (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). These challenges are also reflected in Table 1, which shows how Company C's strategy is inconsistently implemented and often reactive in nature.

Despite these divergent circumstances, Companies A and B both recognize the need for adaptability in bridging strategy and practice. Their respective approaches—agile alignment mechanisms in A and scenario-based simulations in B—represent context-sensitive efforts to ensure strategic intent is realized in day-to-day operations. In contrast, Company C lacks institutionalized processes to support implementation, resulting in a fragmented and highly individualized approach to strategy execution.

In sum, these findings highlight that effective strategy implementation depends not only on having a clearly articulated plan but also on the organizational conditions that enable or constrain the translation of that plan into practice. As shown in Table 1, structural design, cultural norms, and the distribution of strategic agency play critical roles in determining whether strategy lives as a guiding force or remains a theoretical aspiration.

#### **4.6.3 Organizational and Personnel Roles in Strategy Implementation**

Employee involvement in strategy implementation and the distribution of strategic agency differ significantly across the three organizations, reflecting their institutional logics, organizational cultures, and structures. These differences are clearly illustrated in Table 1 and resonate with Whittington's (2006) concept of "strategic practitioners"—those who engage in strategizing activities regardless of formal title or rank.

In Company A, strategic involvement is broad and inclusive: "Everyone is involved. From interns to senior strategists—we believe innovation can come from anywhere." This open and collaborative approach reflects a democratized view of strategizing, where strategic agency is embedded across all organizational levels (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). As seen in Table 1, this inclusive culture fosters dynamic execution and empowers employees to contribute meaningfully to the organization's strategic goals. The culture values openness, experimentation, and continuous improvement, providing a strong foundation for adaptive and effective strategy implementation.

Company B adopts a more structured but participatory model. While strategy remains largely top-down in design and decision-making, the organization ensures that those at the operational level—such as pilots and unit leaders—are included through feedback mechanisms. "Pilots and unit leaders often participate in post-mission reviews," one interviewee noted, indicating that frontline insights are formally looped back into the strategic process. This structured engagement embeds experiential knowledge into future planning, bridging the divide between decision-makers and implementers. However, the

same cultural emphasis on discipline and hierarchy that ensures consistency may also restrict rapid adaptability, as noted in Table 1.

In sharp contrast, Company C displays a fragmented and limited approach to employee involvement in strategy. Teachers and frontline staff are rarely consulted: “Teachers aren’t usually consulted about strategy,” a participant noted. When strategic directives do reach the classroom, they are often in formats that are difficult to apply, making them largely ineffective. As shown in Table 1, the burden of implementation frequently falls on a few motivated individuals who take personal initiative, leading to what Golsorkhi et al. (2015) describe as “shadow strategizing” and localized improvisation outside formal strategic channels. This indicates a system where strategic agency is neither distributed nor institutionally supported.

Cultural dynamics further shape these patterns of involvement. In Company A, a supportive and collaborative culture underpins strategic participation. The belief that “innovation can come from anywhere” is more than rhetoric—it is structurally and culturally embedded in how strategy is enacted. In Company B, the culture of discipline supports coherence and stability but also slows responsiveness to new strategic goals. In Company C, while peer-level support exists, the broader culture is resistant to strategic change. This creates a significant mismatch between local collaboration and organizational-level innovation, which—as highlighted in Table 1—serves as a major barrier to successful strategy implementation.

In summary, these cases reveal that the effectiveness of strategy implementation is closely tied to how strategic agency is distributed and how organizational culture either enables or constrains participation. Broad inclusion, as in Company A, enables emergent, adaptive strategizing; structured participation, as in Company B, ensures operational feedback is utilized; whereas the lack of institutional support in Company C results in sporadic and informal execution. These findings underscore that strategy implementation is not merely a matter of cascading plans, but a socially embedded practice that

depends on who is involved, how they are empowered, and the cultural context in which they act.

#### **4.6.4 Leadership's Role in Strategy Execution**

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping and executing strategy, but the philosophies and practices of leadership vary markedly across the case organizations. These differences—outlined in Table 1—demonstrate how leadership style, development practices, and consistency can either enable or hinder strategic success.

Company A embraces a transformational leadership style, where leaders act as facilitators rather than directors: “Our leaders act more like facilitators—they remove roadblocks and guide the team visionally.” This leadership philosophy aligns with Feldman and Orlikowski’s (2011) view of leaders as “enablers of practice” in Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) research. Leadership is embedded in everyday coaching structures and peer interactions, fostering a flexible and horizontally integrated approach to strategy. The organization also actively invests in leadership development through coaching and peer mentoring, enabling professionals to grow into leadership roles without abandoning their creative identities. As shown in Table 1, this leadership model supports a culture of growth, experimentation, and innovation.

In contrast, Company B employs a directive and transactional leadership model, reflecting the high-stakes and risk-averse nature of its operating environment. “There is no room for ambiguity when lives are at stake,” one respondent emphasized, underscoring the necessity for formalized and prompt decision-making. Leadership is tightly structured and formal, consistent with military traditions and institutional logic. Leadership development is similarly structured, with clear training programs and hierarchical career pathways. While this ensures that leaders are well-prepared for operational execution, it may constrain adaptability and innovation in less rigid contexts. These features are

detailed in Table 1, highlighting how structure supports strategic coherence but limits flexibility.

Company C, however, faces significant leadership challenges stemming from inconsistency and lack of development. The organization suffers from frequent leadership turnover: “Leadership turnover is so frequent that we barely finish implementing one direction before a new one begins.” This instability disrupts strategic continuity and undermines the organization’s ability to maintain a consistent direction. Moreover, there is no formal leadership training: “If you get promoted, you’re on your own.” Employees often step into leadership roles without preparation, resulting in a reactive and informal leadership process. This points to a systemic failure to build leadership as a strategic capability (Balogun & Johnson, 2004), as noted in Table 1. The absence of structured development mechanisms contributes to weak strategic capacity and further fragments implementation efforts.

In summary, the way leadership is conceptualized and enacted across these organizations has a profound influence on their ability to formulate and implement strategy effectively. Company A’s empowering leadership fosters innovation and adaptability. Company B’s command-driven model ensures consistency in high-risk environments, though at the cost of agility. Company C, lacking leadership stability and development structures, illustrates how leadership gaps can undermine even the most well-intentioned strategies. As Table 1 demonstrates, leadership is not just a background factor—it is central to whether strategy becomes an actionable and sustainable organizational practice.

#### **4.6.5 Current State and Future Outlook**

When assessing the current state of strategy execution and future outlook, the three case organizations show vastly different levels of strategic maturity and momentum, as summarized in Table 1.

Company A demonstrates a relatively high level of strategic alignment and adaptability. Digital tools such as dashboards and analytics have improved the organization's ability to connect insights to creative outputs: "We're better now at connecting insights to creative outputs." This integration suggests a maturing strategy process where real-time data supports creative decision-making. Looking forward, Company A's plans are innovation-driven, with a focus on expanding immersive digital experiences and advancing analytics integration. These forward-looking initiatives reflect a dynamic and evolving strategy that builds on existing digital strengths and supports long-term value creation.

Company B, while operationally proficient, acknowledges persistent gaps between long-term strategy and technological evolution. Although it excels at executing missions, aligning strategic direction with rapidly emerging defense technologies remains a challenge: "Aligning long-term defense strategy with emerging technologies is still a challenge." Plans for enhanced cyber-defense and increased interoperability with allied forces, as outlined in Table 1, point to a recognition of changing geopolitical and technological demands. These initiatives reflect a strategic pivot, though there are still critical structural and capability gaps that must be addressed before full implementation can occur.

In contrast, Company C finds itself in a state of stagnation and strategic frustration. Despite crafting strategic plans, execution remains elusive due to a chronic lack of staffing, coordination, and resources. As one interviewee explained, "We're stuck in a cycle. Every year we make plans, but without staff and time, they stay on paper." This quote encapsulates the recurring gap between intent and action. Although there is some optimism surrounding future digital tools and potential regulatory changes, there is skepticism that meaningful progress can occur without systemic reform. This view is reinforced in Table 1, where the disconnect between planning and action, and the absence of execution infrastructure, are seen as major barriers to progress.

Together, these cases highlight a spectrum of strategic execution maturity. Company A shows growth through digital integration and innovation, Company B maintains operational strength while grappling with strategic-technical alignment, and Company C remains hindered by structural deficiencies. As Table 1 demonstrates, these organizations are shaped not only by their strategic intentions but also by their capabilities to realize them under varying internal and external constraints.

**Table 1.** Comparison Table of the Findings.

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Case Company A</b>	<b>Case Company B</b>	<b>Case Company C</b>
<b>Understanding of Strategy</b>	A roadmap for long-term value through insight, design, and innovation.	Operational focus on mission success and maintaining readiness.	Maintaining quality education despite budget cuts and staff shortages.
<b>Creation of Strategy</b>	Collaborative, shared effort between leadership and key client teams.	Top-down, defined by the defense ministry and higher command.	Vague and inconsistent, changes with leadership turnover.
<b>Challenges in Implementing Strategy</b>	Balancing creative freedom with strategic focus (KPIs).	Inflexibility due to rigid structures and evolving threats.	Structural constraints; strategy implementation seen as daily survival.
<b>Mitigation of Challenges</b>	Agile project cycles, internal workshops.	Simulation and scenario planning, tactical-level drills.	No formal processes; reliance on informal workarounds and individual initiative.
<b>Employee Involvement</b>	Inclusive—everyone from interns to senior strategists involved.	Structured involvement through feedback and post-mission reviews.	Sporadic and unclear; teachers not consulted.
<b>Cultural Support for Strategy</b>	Collaborative, open, and experimental culture supports dynamic strategy execution.	Structured discipline supports consistency but slows change.	Supportive among peers but resistant to strategic change.
<b>Leadership Style</b>	Empowering, horizontal decision-making (facilitators).	Directive, hierarchical, clear and fast decision-making.	Inconsistent leadership, frequent turnover.
<b>Leadership Development</b>	Coaching, peer mentoring, leadership tracks for creatives.	Codified military training through the chain of command.	No formal leadership training; "on your own" after promotion.
<b>Current State of Strategy Execution</b>	Growing alignment through digital tools (dashboards, analytics).	Effective in operations, but struggles to align with emerging tech.	Stagnation, plans remain theoretical due to lack of resources.
<b>Future Outlook</b>	Expansion into immersive digital experiences and data integration.	Strengthening cyber-defense and joint interoperability.	Potential for improvement, but skepticism without structural change.

## 4.7 Summary of the findings

The findings of this study reveal significant contrasts and contextual nuances in how strategy is understood, created, and implemented across the three case organizations. These differences are deeply tied to their structures, cultures, leadership models, and operational realities, as well as to the distribution of strategic agency and the availability of implementation mechanisms.

In terms of strategy definition, Case Company A frames strategy as a creative and value-driven roadmap, emphasizing client collaboration and innovation. According to the senior creative director, strategy is “a roadmap for creating long-term value for clients by combining insight, design, and innovation.” By contrast, Case Company B views strategy through a lens of national security and operational readiness. Their air operations commander defined strategy as “ensuring mission success while maintaining national readiness and operational superiority.” These conceptualizations reveal how foundational ideas like “strategy” are shaped by institutional logic and sector-specific imperatives (Chandler, 1962).

Company C, however, presented a less coherent understanding of strategy. While formal plans exist, they are often disconnected from practice, with interviewees describing strategy as something “we rarely have time to read—let alone implement.” This gap reflects not only resource limitations but also a cultural and structural disconnect between planning and action.

Responsibility for strategy creation also diverges significantly. Company A embraces a co-creative, iterative model involving both clients and cross-functional teams: “We often co-create strategy with our clients and internally across units.” Company B follows a top-down directive structure: “Strategy comes from the top—it's defined by the defense ministry and higher command. Our role is to execute.” Company C lacks a formalized

strategy-making structure altogether; strategic direction is often interrupted by leadership turnover, with one respondent noting: “We barely finish implementing one direction before a new one begins.”

Challenges in strategy implementation varied in nature. In Company A, the key challenge is aligning creative autonomy with strategic KPIs. In Company B, it is translating high-level directives into real-time operations—a classic strategy-practice gap (Johnson et al., 2007). Company C’s challenges are both systemic and cultural: implementation often depends on a few motivated individuals, with little formal support or accountability. This aligns with the notion of “shadow strategizing” and strategic disempowerment (Golsorkhi et al., 2015; Mantere & Vaara, 2008).

To address these challenges, each organization applies different tactics. Company A utilizes agile sprints and interdisciplinary workshops. Company B relies on simulation exercises and tactical drills to bridge the gap between abstraction and practice. Company C, however, lacks formal processes entirely, leading to reactive decision-making and a reliance on informal efforts by isolated actors.

Employee involvement in strategy implementation also varies. Company A encourages widespread participation across all levels: “Everyone is involved. From interns to senior strategists—we believe innovation can come from anywhere.” Company B incorporates feedback through structured reviews, while Company C shows minimal involvement from frontline staff, particularly teachers: “Teachers aren’t usually consulted about strategy.” This lack of inclusion further contributes to its weak strategic culture.

Organizational culture is a key enabler or inhibitor. Company A fosters openness and experimentation, supporting agile adaptation. Company B’s disciplined and hierarchical culture ensures consistency but may hinder rapid change. Company C exhibits peer-level support but resistance to strategic change, with siloed operations undermining broader strategic coordination.

Leadership approaches further differentiate the cases. Company A adopts a transformational model where leaders act as facilitators: “They remove roadblocks and guide the team visionally” (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Company B emphasizes transactional, directive leadership tailored to high-stakes decision-making. Company C’s leadership is marked by inconsistency and lack of development: “If you get promoted, you’re on your own.” This undermines strategic continuity and highlights the absence of leadership as a strategic capability (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Leadership development mirrors these orientations. Company A supports creative leadership through mentoring and coaching. Company B maintains formalized, hierarchical leadership training through the chain of command. Company C, by contrast, lacks any formal leadership pipeline, further exacerbating execution issues.

Intrinsic motivation plays a critical role in strategy execution. In Company B, shared mission and role clarity drive engagement: “You don’t need to be someone’s boss to make strategy happen—you just need to understand the goal and take responsibility.” Company A’s more fragmented motivational climate results in inconsistent follow-through, while Company C depends on individual initiative to compensate for systemic inertia.

Communication emerged as a cross-cutting issue. Company A struggles to cascade strategy beyond leadership. Company B, despite better integration, still noted room for improvement: “We could always do better at keeping everyone aligned.” These findings echo Kotter’s (1996) emphasis on clear, continuous communication in effective strategy implementation.

Finally, all companies acknowledged the evolving nature of strategy. Company A is expanding its use of data and immersive digital experiences. Company B is focusing on cyber defense and interoperability. Company C sees digital tools and potential regulatory shifts as opportunities but remains skeptical of meaningful change without deep

structural reform. This reflects Whittington's (2006) view that strategy is not a fixed plan but a continuous practice shaped by context, actors, and tools.

## 5 Conclusions

### What Are the Primary Barriers to Implementing Strategic Plans Within Organizations?

The findings from this study reveal that the implementation of strategic plans is often hindered by a complex interplay of organizational challenges. Rather than a single dominant obstacle, several recurring barriers emerged across the three case companies. Among the most significant were structural rigidity and fragmentation, inconsistent or unstable leadership, a lack of employee engagement, and the absence of a shared understanding of strategic objectives.

These issues echo long-standing insights in strategy literature, where unclear roles, misaligned incentives, and poor communication are frequently identified as key inhibitors to execution (Hrebiniak, 2006; Alharthy et al., 2021). In the organizations examined here, these barriers were not isolated but often compounded each other, creating environments where strategic intentions failed to translate into sustained, coordinated action.

Company A, for instance, exemplified structural fragmentation and a lack of clear accountability, despite a strong emphasis on innovation and co-creation. This aligns closely with the “silent killers” identified by Beer and Eisenstat (2000), where internal ambiguity and competing priorities undermine strategic follow-through. Meanwhile, Company C suffered from high leadership turnover and weak staff engagement, which collectively eroded motivation and strategic clarity—findings that resonate with research on the demotivational effects of organizational instability (Mantere et al., 2022).

A key theoretical parallel can be drawn from Mintzberg’s (1994) conception of strategy not as a singular plan but as a pattern in a stream of decisions. Without the mechanisms to embed strategic thinking into the everyday routines and structures of an organization, implementation remains abstract. Jarzabkowski and Balogun (2009) support this view,

emphasizing that strategy only becomes real when translated into shared meaning and local practice.

The empirical cases confirm that formal plans alone are insufficient. Strategy must be enacted and interpreted continually through dialogue, ownership, and adaptation. These ideas come together in both thought and action supporting the idea that obstacles to implementing strategies come more from unique organizational factors than from problems with the strategy itself.

#### How Does Leadership Affect Whether Strategy Implementation Succeeds or Fails?

Leadership stood out as the key and most context-dependent factor influencing whether strategy implementation worked in all three cases. However, the nature of effective leadership varied considerably, shaped by the organization's sector, structure, and cultural context.

In Company B, strategic implementation succeeded largely because of a leadership style that combined directive clarity with symbolic alignment. Leaders communicated purpose effectively and modeled desired behaviors, thus aligning operational decisions with strategic objectives. This finding supports contingency and strategic-fit theories of leadership, which argue that effectiveness depends on alignment between leadership style and organizational context (Yukl, 2013; Long et al., 2022).

Company A, in contrast, exhibited a more transformational leadership approach, encouraging creativity and innovation. While this fostered ideation and engagement at certain levels, it fell short in execution due to weak follow-through and ambiguous mid-level leadership. This reflects Boal and Hooijberg's (2001) and Zhang and Zhu's (2021) arguments that leadership must evolve as organizational maturity increases—what works for initiating vision may not sustain its realization.

Company C's experience further illustrates the negative impact of leadership instability. Frequent turnover and lack of coherent guidance undermined trust and strategic continuity, creating a vacuum where employees operated based on individual initiative rather than shared direction. This outcome confirms Bryson et al.'s (2022) conclusion that inconsistent leadership destabilizes strategic implementation efforts.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings align strongly with the strategy-as-practice view (Whittington, 2006; Vaara & Lamberg, 2023), which emphasizes leadership's role not just in formulating strategy but in embedding it into everyday organizational life. Leaders must act as interpreters, facilitators, and communicators of strategy, enabling collective sensemaking and localized adaptation.

Empirically, the variation in leadership effectiveness also mirrored differences in communication structures and motivational climates. Company B's success was supported by transparent communication and a culture of shared responsibility, which energized intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Auvinen et al., 2021). Conversely, the absence of these conditions in Companies A and C weakened their ability to translate strategic intentions into coherent action.

The convergence of empirical data and theoretical frameworks thus underscores a critical insight: leadership effectiveness is not about control but about creating the conditions for strategic thinking and action to emerge organically throughout the organization. Communication, trust, and adaptability are essential ingredients of such leadership.

## **5.1 Shared themes**

The analysis of the three case organizations highlights that successful strategy implementation is less about isolated actions and more about embedding strategy into the everyday practices, routines, and relationships of organizational life. Four interwoven

themes emerged as particularly significant: leadership, communication, organizational culture and structure, and motivation through engagement. These themes both echo and extend theoretical discussions on strategy as practice and highlight their complex interplay in real organizational contexts.

Leadership was consistently central to implementation outcomes, though its effective form varied by context. In Company A, transformational leadership encouraged innovation and ideation but lacked the structural consistency needed to carry initiatives forward. In contrast, Company B benefitted from directive and symbolic leadership that provided both clarity and continuity, aligning behaviors with strategic priorities. Company C's experience revealed the risks of leadership discontinuity, where frequent turnover created fragmentation and a lack of shared direction. These findings support the strategic-fit and contingency theories of leadership (Yukl, 2013) while also affirming the strategy-as-practice perspective (Whittington, 2006), in which leaders are key interpreters and enablers of strategy in daily work.

Communication functioned not only as a supporting process but as a fundamental medium through which strategy became shared meaning. Company B's use of structured communication channels—like dashboards, debriefs, and regular strategy reviews—ensured alignment and accountability. By contrast, Company A's dynamic but occasionally ambiguous messaging caused confusion about strategic priorities. Company C struggled with irregular and uncoordinated communication, compounding its leadership challenges. These observations affirm that communication, to be effective, must be dialogic, recursive, and co-constructed—an insight strongly supported by recent research (Tourish & Robson, 2024; Kwon et al., 2023).

Organizational culture and structure shaped both the capacity and the agility of implementation. In Company A, an open and participatory culture encouraged bottom-up innovation but struggled with focus due to lack of structural anchoring. Company B's tighter structure enabled consistent execution but sometimes limited responsiveness.

Company C's strong peer support culture lacked the systems to support strategic alignment. These findings underscore that neither culture nor structure alone ensures success; rather, their alignment with strategy is key (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000). Strategic cultures must be reinforced by enabling structures that facilitate participation, coordination, and adaptive learning.

Engagement and motivation were crucial to sustaining implementation momentum. Where employees perceived a meaningful connection between their work and strategic objectives—especially in Company B—motivation was high and action was aligned. In Companies A and C, however, a lack of strategic ownership led to disengagement and inconsistent follow-through. This highlights the relevance of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) and confirms that intrinsic motivation arises when individuals understand the “why” behind strategic goals and see their own role in achieving them.

Taken together, these themes reinforce that strategy implementation is not the result of top-down command but of embedded organizational practice. Strategy lives in the daily conversations, decisions, and interactions of people across all levels. As such, implementation succeeds when it becomes not merely a managerial concern but a shared and evolving process.

## **5.2 Practical Recommendations for Effective Strategy Implementation**

The insights gathered from this study lead to several practical recommendations for organizations seeking to embed strategy more effectively within their operations. Rather than treating strategy implementation as a discrete phase following formulation, organizations must approach it as a continuous and embedded process—one that is deeply woven into the leadership culture, communication practices, structural arrangements, and everyday employee experiences.

First and foremost, leadership development must be aligned with the organization's specific strategic needs and contextual realities. The cases analyzed show that there is no one-size-fits-all model for effective leadership. Instead, successful leaders are those who can interpret and adapt strategy to the organization's unique structure, culture, and level of operational maturity. In flat or innovative environments, leaders who cultivate autonomy and encourage experimentation tend to foster greater engagement and creativity. In more hierarchical or high-stakes contexts, leaders must provide clear direction and ensure alignment through structured oversight. Leadership development efforts should therefore aim not only at enhancing individual capabilities but also at shaping leaders into strategic interpreters who are capable of guiding collective understanding and execution of strategy.

Equally vital is the role of communication. Strategy must be communicated not as a static message but as a living dialogue that evolves alongside organizational learning and external shifts. This demands systems that support regular, transparent, and reciprocal communication. Organizations need to move beyond just using communication during initial strategy launches. They should set up tools like interactive dashboards, group feedback sessions, and strategy reviews to let employees understand goals, share concerns, and offer ideas. These systems help explain roles, build trust, and create a feeling of shared purpose making strategy flow in day-to-day work.

Organizational culture and structure must also be deliberately shaped to support strategy implementation. Strategic responsiveness can be significantly improved by fostering a culture that values accountability, creativity, and participation—but only if this culture is supported by a framework that encourages these kinds of actions. Even the most aspirational cultures may find it difficult to enable execution in the absence of suitable feedback systems, decision-making procedures, and incentives matched to strategy results. On the other hand, cultural flexibility required for prompt adaptation may be impeded by too rigid frameworks. Therefore, in order to make sure that culture and

structure support one other and are both in line with strategic goal, organizations must constantly assess and modify both.

The success of implementation was found to be significantly influenced by employee involvement. Motivation rises and execution becomes more targeted when people can recognize how their job fits into larger strategic goals. Promoting participation in strategic conversations through cooperative planning, open goal-setting, and joint progress reports fosters psychological ownership in addition to accountability. When workers can actually affect results and see the results of their efforts, their sense of ownership is further enhanced. Therefore, in order to embed strategy, businesses must enable staff members to co-create strategy rather than merely receiving orders from above.

Lastly, using useful tools that translate strategic goals into doable tasks is necessary to close the gap between strategy development and implementation. Techniques like strategy sprints, cross-functional seminars, and scenario planning are very helpful. They encourage interdisciplinary cooperation, convert intangible objectives into tangible activities, and equip businesses to quickly adjust to unanticipated changes. The idea that effective execution depends not only on the strategy itself but also on how adaptably and meaningfully it is implemented is strengthened by these technologies, which allow strategy to stay flexible and adaptable.

In summary, strategy implementation should be viewed as an organizational practice that is co-produced by participation, leadership, communication, and structural alignment rather than as an operational afterthought. When these components come together, strategy can transcend the conceptual level and become a shared and experienced reality. In the end, this integrated strategy improves the organization's ability to adjust, maintain momentum, and accomplish its long-term goals in a setting that is becoming more and more dynamic.

### 5.3 Limitations of the study

The scope and applicability of the findings may be impacted by a number of constraints, despite the fact that this study offers insightful information about the strategic processes of organizations. When interpreting the findings and evaluating their applicability in different situations, these limitations must be taken into account.

Only three case organizations were interviewed for this study, making the comparatively small sample size one of its main drawbacks. Despite the fact that these organizations were chosen to reflect a variety of industries, including design, the military, and education, the results might not be entirely representative of the larger organizational landscape due to the small sample size. Making firm inferences or generalizations about the implementation of strategies in various industries is challenging when only three organizations are included in the sample. Future research with bigger sample sizes and a wider range of industries would offer a more thorough comprehension of the difficulties and optimal approaches associated with plan implementation.

The results of this study are mostly derived on qualitative interviews, which are by their very nature subjective. The subjective experiences, viewpoints, and prejudices of the interviewees are reflected in qualitative data, even though it can provide deep and complex insights. When there are differing interpretations of the same organization's events, procedures, or tactics, these subjective opinions might not accurately reflect the larger organizational reality. In addition, the role or position of the interviewee may cause considerable differences in individual views, which could result in inconsistent conclusions. Recognizing that the findings of this study are a snapshot of individual opinions and might not give a fully accurate or impartial picture of the organizations involved is crucial.

Organizations from three different industries—design, military, and education—are included in the study. The implementation of strategies can be greatly impacted by the distinct features, organizational restrictions, and structures of each of these sectors.

Comparisons between these groups must therefore be done carefully. Variations in operational procedures, company culture, and legal restrictions can all influence how plans are developed and carried out. For this reason, even while the study offers insightful information within each sector, making direct comparisons or attempting to extrapolate across sectors could result in inaccurate findings. Understanding sector-specific difficulties and responses would benefit from additional study that explicitly looks at each area in greater detail.

The way language was handled in the interviews presents a challenge. The interviews were done in Finnish and then translated into English for this study. Despite careful efforts to ensure accurate and faithful translations, some idioms subtle meanings, or unique phrases may not have translated into English. Translation can sometimes lead to slight shifts in meaning or a loss of context, which has an impact on how the data gets understood. Even though the team tried hard to protect the integrity of the original responses, language differences might have made it harder to convey certain thoughts or ideas.

To sum up, the study gives useful ideas about how strategies are carried out in different types of organizations, but it also has limits that suggest careful interpretation is important. Researchers should work to address things like sample size, interview data bias, industry-specific problems, and language barriers in future studies. This would make the results stronger and easier to apply to a wider range of cases helping people better understand what leads to effective strategy execution.

#### **5.4 Suggestions for Further Studies**

This study shares useful ideas about the steps in carrying out strategies. There are chances to dig deeper into understanding the tricky parts of this process. Based on the findings here are some ideas to investigate further. These areas might help uncover

clearer and more adaptable lessons about how strategies work in various types of organizations.

This study's focus on three businesses from different industries is one of its limitations. Future studies could increase the number of case studies to cover a greater variety of industries and organizational kinds in order to obtain a more thorough grasp of the contextual aspects of strategy execution. Researchers were able to find common trends and sector-specific obstacles in strategy implementation by integrating businesses from different industries, such as manufacturing, technology, and healthcare. More generalizable insights would result from this, which would facilitate the application of discoveries in various organizational situations. Researchers would also be able to examine how sector-specific factors, such market dynamics, technical developments, or regulatory restrictions, affect strategy execution with a larger collection of case studies.

The gap between strategic planning and its actual execution, especially in Case Company A, was one of the study's main conclusions. This brought to light the possible advantages of more methodically include staff members in the planning process. Future studies could examine the effects of various approaches to employee participation in strategy-making, such as co-design, or participatory planning. This could outcome benefits like organizational commitment, strategic understanding, and overall performance. Research could concentrate on the connection between employees' degree of investment in the company's performance and their involvement in the strategy process. This study might also look at how different employee involvement levels help people's personal and organizational goals line up, which could result in better plan execution.

The influence of leadership behaviors and styles on strategy implementation was highlighted by this study. The precise functions of transformational and adaptive leadership in various organizational contexts and industries might be investigated in more detail. In settings where creativity and adaptability are important, transformational leadership—which encourages and inspires staff members to put the needs of the company ahead of

their own—may work especially well. On the other side, businesses going through times of disruption or transition could benefit more from adaptive leadership, which is defined by the capacity to handle difficult issues and navigate change. A more thorough examination of how different leadership philosophies fit with company culture and strategic objectives may provide important new information. Such as how leadership might enhance strategy execution, particularly in high-stakes or complex situations.

As this study progressed, it became clear that communication was essential to making strategy a live component of the company. Future research should focus further on the precise communication techniques that help firms integrate strategy into their daily operations. Scholars could investigate how various communication methods, like team talks, town hall meetings, and digital platforms, affect strategic alignment. The ways that feedback loops and communication transparency help employees comprehend strategy and act in ways that support corporate objectives could also be the subject of future research. For businesses looking to enhance their strategy communication procedures and, eventually, the results of their strategy execution, this study may provide useful suggestions.

Case Company B showed that essential employee engagement and a strong task-oriented culture were key factors in enabling successful strategy execution. Future studies should examine how employee motivation, organizational culture, and strategic success interact, especially in situations where organizations are expanding or changing significantly. Researchers could look into how employees' approaches to strategic projects are influenced by various cultural characteristics, such as creativity, teamwork, or hierarchy. Studies could also look at the ways that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation elements support the accomplishment of strategic goals, especially in companies where staff involvement is essential to execution. This could assist in determining which motivational and cultural components are most helpful in bringing staff members into line with the strategic objectives of the company.

Given that this study focused on three organizations within specific contexts, it would be valuable to conduct comparative research across different industries and national cultures. Studies could explore whether the findings of this research hold true in industries that differ significantly in structure, regulation, or operational complexity. Cross-cultural studies could also provide insights into how strategy execution is influenced by cultural norms and values in different countries. Comparative research in this area could provide critical insights into how to adapt strategy execution practices for different cultural and industry-specific challenges.

Expanding our knowledge of how strategy becomes a lived practice in companies should be the main objective of future research. This study emphasized how crucial it is to combine several organizational components—like communication, culture, structure, and human behavior—into a cohesive plan execution method. Future research could examine the ways in which these components interact to help or impede the effective application of a strategy. In order to provide more comprehensive methods to strategy implementation, research could concentrate on creating integrated frameworks that incorporate structural, cultural, and human components. Organizations looking to develop more sustainable and holistic strategies that complement their overarching objectives and core values would benefit greatly from such study.

In conclusion, the suggested research directions aim to expand our knowledge of the practical challenges and success factors involved in strategy execution. By exploring a broader set of case studies, employee involvement, leadership styles, communication practices, and organizational culture, future studies can provide organizations with deeper insights and actionable strategies for improving the effectiveness of their strategic initiatives. These areas of inquiry will also contribute to the growing body of knowledge on how strategy becomes more than just a plan, but a reality embedded in the daily practices and behaviors of organizations.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Teemahaastattelun runko

#### Johdanto

1. Esittely
    - Esittelen itseni ja tutkimuksen tarkoituksen.
    - Korostan haastattelun luottamuksellisuutta ja vapaaehtoisuutta.
    - Pyydän luvan äänitykseen.
  2. Haastateltavan tausta
    - Voisitko kertoa lyhyesti taustastasi ja roolistasi yhtiössä?
    - Kuinka pitkään olet ollut tässä organisaatiossa ja nykyisessä roolissasi?
- 

#### Johdatus aiheeseen

1. Mitä mielestäsi termi strategia tarkoittaa?
    - Mikä on strategian tärkein tavoite organisaatiossanne?
  2. Kenen vastuulla on mielestäsi strategian luonti?
- 

#### Teema 1: Strategian käytännön toteuttamisen haasteet

3. Yleiskuva strategian toteutuksesta
  - Millainen prosessi strategian toteuttaminen on organisaatiossanne?
  - Mitkä ovat tärkeimmät tavoitteet strategianne toteutuksessa?
4. Teorian ja käytännön välinen kuilu
  - Oletko kohdannut haasteita strategian viemisessä teoriasta käytäntöön?
  - Mitkä osat strategian toteutuksessa ovat olleet erityisen haastavia?  
Miksi?
  - Millä keinoilla haasteita on pyritty ratkaisemaan?
5. Organisaation ja henkilöstön rooli
  - Miten henkilöstö otetaan mukaan strategian toteuttamiseen?
  - Koetteko, että yhtiön rakenteet tai kulttuuri tukevat vai hankaloittavat strategian toteuttamista?

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**Teema 2: Johtajuuden merkitys strategian toteutuksessa**

1. Johtajuuden rooli
  - Millainen rooli johdolla on strategian toteuttamisessa?
  - Miten johto varmistaa, että strategiaa viedään eteenpäin organisaatiossa?
2. Vaikutukset onnistumiseen ja epäonnistumiseen
  - Voisitko kertoa, miten johtajuus on vaikuttanut strategian toteuttamisen onnistumiseen tai epäonnistumiseen?
  - Voitko kertoa esimerkkejä tilanteista, joissa johtajuus on ollut ratkaisevassa asemassa strategian toteuttamisessa?
3. Johtajuuden kehittäminen
  - Onko organisaatiossanne kehitetty johtajuutta strategian toteuttamisen tueksi? Jos kyllä, miten?
  - Mitä parannettavaa näkisit johtajuudessa strategian toteutuksen näkökulmasta?

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**Teema 3: Yhteenveto ja tulevaisuuden näkymät**

1. Nykytila ja kehitysehdotukset
  - Miten kuvailisit strategian toteutuksen nykytilaa organisaatiossanne?
  - Mitä konkreettisia muutoksia suosittelisit strategian toteutuksen kehittämiseksi?
2. Tulevaisuuden odotukset
  - Miten näet strategianne toteutuksen kehittyvän tulevaisuudessa?
  - Mitkä ovat suurimmat mahdollisuudet ja haasteet strategianne toteuttamisessa?

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**Lopetus**

1. Kiitos
  - Kiitän haastattelusta ja haastateltavan ajasta.

## 2. Jatkotiedot

- Kerro, miten haastattelun tuloksia hyödynnetään ja miten haastateltava voi tarvittaessa saada lisätietoa tutkimuksesta.

## Appendix 2. Suostumus tutkimushaastatteluun



### SUOSTUMUS

[\_.\_.2025]

#### **Suostumus tutkimukseen osallistumisesta ja haastatteluaineiston käyttämisestä pro gradu -tutkielmassa**

Olen saanut riittävästi tietoa tutkimuksesta ja suostun osallistumaan haastatteluun. Allekirjoituksellani annan suostumuksen Vaasan yliopiston kauppa- ja hallintotieteiden tiedekunnan kauppatieteiden maisteriohjelman maisteriopiskelijalle Aaro Meisalmelle, käyttää antamaani nauhoitettua haastattelua opinnäytetyössään "*Strategian vieminen käytäntöön*" (*Implementing Strategy into Practice*).

Haastatteluaineisto käsitellään luottamuksellisesti, ja tutkimukseen osallistuneiden henkilöiden yksilöintitiedot jäävät ainoastaan tutkijan tietoon. Valmiista pro gradu -tutkielmasta ei voi tunnistaa yksittäisiä henkilöitä. Haastattelu nauhoitetaan ja litteroidaan, ja aineiston analysoinnin jälkeen aineisto hävitetään.

Tutkimukseen osallistuminen on täysin vapaaehtoista, ja osallistumisen voi keskeyttää koska tahansa ilman perusteluja.

#### **Nimeni saa liittää tutkimuksen lopussa olevaan haastateltavien nimilistaan:**

Kyllä: \_\_\_\_\_ Ei: \_\_\_\_\_

Aika: \_.\_.2025

Paikka: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Haastateltavan allekirjoitus ja nimenselvennys:**

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#### **Suostumuksen vastaanottajan allekirjoitus ja nimenselvennys:**

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