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## What It Takes to Improve Strategy Execution in Kenya's SACCO Sector: Insights from Heads of Department

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### **Abstract:**

*The main purpose of this study was to discover what it takes to improve strategy execution in Deposit Taking SACCOs in Kenya. This is on the backdrop that execution of strategy remains a major challenge in many organizations. The study surveyed 143 heads of department from the 164 licensed DT-SACCOs in Kenya. The study concludes that a focus on the leadership, involvement of all stakeholders and effective communication would significantly improve strategy execution. The insights from this study present scholars and practitioners in strategic management, policy makers, and the leadership in SACCOs with valuable recommendations on how to improve strategy execution. The main recommendation being that leaders must take up full responsibility of putting strategy into action.*

**Keywords:** Strategy, execution, SACCOs

### **1. Introduction**

Strategy execution is considered as the process of putting strategy into action leading to achievement of set objectives (Jones & Hill, 2013). Strategy execution involves 'identifying specific actions to be undertaken within the planning period, establishing clear time frame for completion of each action, creating accountability by identifying who is responsible for what action and each action has one or more specific, immediate objectives that the actions should achieve' (Pearce & Robinson, 2011, p. 14). Globally, strategic management has made great strides. Despite this advancement, strategy execution remains a major challenge. Only 8% of business leaders are said to be effectively executing strategy across the globe (Sull, Homkes, & Sull, 2015). Many business leaders are faced with a major nightmare of discovering how to ensure successful execution (Cândido & Santos, 2015).

In Kenya, local firms are lagging behind in the practice of strategic management (Aosa, 2011). The problem of poor strategy execution extends to Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs). Defined as "self-help cooperative financial organizations geared towards attaining the economic and social goals of members and wider local communities" SACCOs, are widespread in Kenya (McKillop & Wilson, 2010, p. 79). SACCOs play a major role in the country's social-economic development. They have especially been recognized as a vehicle for poverty eradication and part of the government's strategy to drive economic development (Gatuguta, Kimotho & Kiptoo, 2014; Mathuva, 2016). Kenya holds a leadership position in members, savings, loans, and assets in Africa and it is therefore of interest to the global map of SACCOs (WOCCU, 2014; 2015; 2016). SACCOs in Kenya are categorized into either non-deposit taking or deposit-taking. The deposit-taking SACCOs are licensed and supervised by SACCO Societies Regulatory Authority (SASRA). Even though these SACCOs represent only 5% of the SACCOs in Kenya, they control more than 75% of the industry's assets and deposits and 82% of the membership making them the ace of the SACCO movement in Kenya (SASRA, 2014). The DT-SACCOs offer a wide variety of financial services similar to those offered by mainstream banks. The number of the DT-SACCOs meeting the regulatory requirements has been dropping with 215 licensed in 2014, 181 in 2015, 164 in 2016 and 2017 and 162 in 2018 (SASRA, 2014, 2015a, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Despite their major contribution to social-economic development, scholars have not paid sufficient attention to SACCOs. The sector has been pinpointed as an abandoned area of scholarly research despite facing a myriad of unique management problems (Develtere, Pollet, and Wanyama, 2008). This argument is advanced by McKillop and Wilson (2010) who propose SACCOs as a "subject area for contemporary academic inquiry" (p. 112). Further, a major declaration at the first and second International Summit of Cooperatives held in 2012 and 2014 respectively was to interest researchers to study the cooperative movement (ICA, 2012; 2014). From an African perspective, Develtere et al. (2008)

point out that there is scanty literature on the cooperative movement in Africa although it plays a major role in alleviating poverty. Many SACCOs have died while others are limping along between life and death in Africa (Pollet, 2009). It is from this background that DT-SACCOs were identified as an ideal sector of study.

Well thought-out business strategies only become profitable if successfully executed (Jones & Hill, 2013). Further, Thompson, Peteraf, Gamble, and Strickland III (2016) argue that the test of successful strategy execution is whether it matches or exceeds what was spelled out in the strategic plan. Nonetheless, weak execution continues to undermine the potential of many good strategies. A majority of failed strategies have been tracked down to a breakdown during the execution phase (Amason, 2011; Noble, 1999). Additionally, many senior managers continue to allocate more time and energy to strategy formulation and less on the intricacies of strategy execution, resulting in a high failure rate of new strategies (Hambrick & Cannella, 1989; Raffoni, 2008). The SACCO sector faces the same strategy execution challenge. Thatia and Muturi (2014) pinpoint bureaucracy and lack of top management support in implementation of technology projects as hindering strategy execution at K-Unity SACCO. Obunga, Marangu, and Masungu, (2015) in a study focusing on strategy implementation in SACCOs in Kakamega County, highlights the broad strategic leadership challenge. Additionally, Moturi and Mbiwa (2015) focuses only on implementation of information management systems, linking the execution challenges to inadequate collaboration both internally and externally. These past studies are limited in their ability to make substantive conclusions on what needs to be done to improve strategy execution in the sector. The strategy execution challenge remains unresolved and there is need for further scholarly investigation on this subject. This study's main objective was to discover what it would take to improve strategy execution in SACCOs in Kenya.

## 2. Literature Review

Strategy execution or implementation is one of the three facets of the strategic management processes. The other two are formulation or crafting and control and evaluation. Andrews (1971) is accredited with introducing formulation and implementation as key aspects of the strategic management process (Rasche, 2008). The strategic management processes is interconnected in a very complex way. Strategy formulation and execution are seen to be intertwined with each impacting the other and both exerting great influence on overall firm performance (Amason, 2011; Noble, 1999). In particular, strategy execution the focus of this study is seen as the crux of the strategic management process and has been described as the "Achilles heel" of strategic management (Roney, 2004, p. 233). Through strategy execution, strategic intent is turned into tangible action and organizational structures, resources and support systems are deployed as necessary bringing strategy to life (Amason, 2011). Strategy execution is a complex and difficult task and involves an organization in its entirety (Jones & Hill, 2013). It is considered as the most open-ended part of strategic management (Hough, Thompson, Strickland III, & Gamble 2011; Thompson et al., 2016). Ansoff and MacDonnell (1988) state that "it is no trick to formulate a strategy; the problem is to make it work" (p.165).

In explaining strategy execution, Miller (1997) argues that successful execution puts into consideration the completion of everything intended to be implemented within the expected time period; achievement of the performance intended; and acceptability of the method of implementation and outcomes within the organisation. David (2011) highlights the management issues central to strategy implementation such as setting objectives, having in place supporting policies, and resource allocation. According to Thompson and Martin (2011), to be considered effective, the intended strategy must be implemented successfully. However, the strategy execution process is complex, difficult and never-ending making it hard to decipher (Jones & Hill, 2013).

Success and failure in organisations, lies not in the designing of strategies but in their execution (Hambrick & Cannella, 1989). More than ever before, business leaders are today concerned with how to execute strategy in light of the changes happening in their internal and external environments. Subsequently, Amason (2011) proposes that good strategists should be obsessed with strategy execution because it is the key to strategic success and the only highway to organisational performance. However, there is no ready-made recipe for effective execution cutting across all organisations. Further, strategy execution challenge remains a novel area of study as it has not been exhaustively investigated in past studies. There is therefore need to investigate what it takes to successfully execute strategy in Kenya's SACCO Sector.

## 3. Research Methodology

To evaluate what can be done to improve strategy execution in DT-SACCOs in Kenya, all the heads of department in these SACCOs formed the study population. These heads of department were identified as vastly involved in strategy execution. They were heads of credit services, finance, human resources and administration, sales and marketing, operations, information technology and audit departments. The 164 DT-SACCOs are categorized into three tiers based on asset base. Those having an asset base of more than five billion Kenyan Shillings are considered large, five billion to one billion Kenyan Shillings are medium and less than one billion Kenyan Shillings are small (SASRA, 2015b). At the start of 2017, there were 15 large, 56 medium and 93 small duly licensed DT-SACCOs According to SASRA (2017). A list of all the 164 DT-SACCOs gazetted by SASRA on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017 and their categorization was obtained from SASRA. The total population of heads of department estimated at 500 is presented in Table 1.

Category	Asset Base in Ksh Billions	Number of SACCOs	Average Number of Heads of Department per SACCO	Total Number of Heads of Department
Large	> 5	15	6	90
Medium	5 – 1	56	4	224
Small	< 1	93	2	186
Total		164		500

*Table 1: Population of Heads of Department in the 164 DT-SACCOs*

A 95% confidence level equivalent to the 5% level of significance widely used in business research was employed in computing the sample size. The sample size was computed according to Yamane (1973) formula  $n = N / [1 + N (e)^2]$ . Where  $n$  is the computed sample size,  $N$  is population size of 500, and  $e$  the error term is equivalent to the 5% level of significance (.05) giving a sample size of 222. The DT-SACCOs categorization according to asset base was used to stratify the population during sampling. The sample was distributed disproportionately to give the best representation of the three tiers.

Data was collected using a self-administered survey questionnaire which was either dropped and picked up later or sent and received via postal mail. The survey questionnaire had one open-ended question. The open-ended question allowed the heads of department to share openly what they felt was the most important aspect that needed to be considered to improve strategy execution in their sector. The question stated, "Kindly state and explain the one major thing that you believe could improve strategy execution in SACCOs". The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter that explained the purpose and benefit of the study as well as the confidentiality of responses.

After receiving the survey questionnaires from the field, the hand-written responses were captured in Microsoft Word. The responses were analysed by coding according to key words and common themes. An inductive approach helped draw conclusions based on the main themes observed (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016).

#### 4. Results and Discussion

There were 143 respondents who wrote in a response to the question on the one major thing that they believe could improve strategy execution in their SACCOs. This gave a 64.4% response rate out of the sample size of 222. More than three quarters of the respondents gave more than one suggestion and as such in total, there were 213 relevant statements that were analysed. The most common themes from these responses were involvement followed by communication. Other key themes that featured significantly were leadership, governance, regular reviews, training, cooperation, resourcing, innovation, and alignment. Overall, all the thematic areas identified converged on the humongous role that leadership has in putting strategy into action.

The heads of department felt that there was an opportunity for the leadership especially at the board level to do things differently. The study revealed that strategy execution can be improved by having clear definition and separation of the roles and responsibilities of the board and those of management. The board was described as not letting go resulting to poor relationships, heightened politics, lack of trust and conflict between board and management characteristic of the SACCO sector. In addition, it was highlighted that the leadership both at the board level and within the SACCO need to be highly competent, of unwavering integrity as well as strategic in driving strategy execution and especially in guiding and coordinating the overall change process. Other key leadership responsibilities pointed out were creating some unity of purpose and sense of urgency, driving accountability and motivating the staff. This finding postulate that leadership can positively or negatively influence strategy execution.

Involvement and engagement of all stakeholders during the strategy process was another factor identified as very crucial in improving strategy execution. The heads of departments felt that involvement of the staff and the members should start at planning stage and not at implementation as is often the case. The implementers should especially be involved in choosing between alternatives during strategy formulation. Involvement was said to reduce resistance to change and to create ownership. Involvement by itself is not adequate, the stakeholders must be ready and willing to work together. As such, cooperation both internally and externally were deemed having the potential to improve strategy execution. Teamwork was the main term used to refer to internal cooperation. Externally, the need to cooperate with others SACCOs, share information as well as share infrastructure was proposed.

At the core of successful strategy execution is effective communication. More than 25% of the heads of department felt that communication is the one thing that was needed to improve strategy execution in the SACCO sector. According to the heads of department, effective communication would create awareness, give clarity and result to a common understanding of the chosen strategic direction. Further, effective communication would help the staff cope better with uncertainties resulting from execution of new strategies. As one respondent stated "it is not only important to communicate what needs to be done but also on why it needs to be done".

A key feature of the strategic management process is the need to keep track of the plans against a given timeline. Regular reviews as another key word that heads of department highlighted as leading to improved strategy execution. From the feedback, it was evident that most SACCOs only hold an annual strategy review in which they go through the strategic plan. The heads of department felt that the annual reviews lead to delays in execution and proposed shorter review periods such as quarterly. They felt that more timely and regular review would assist in tracking strategies, gauging the performance, making necessary adjustments to fast-track execution and ensuring that the organisation is moving along its chartered strategic course.

Training for both the boards and staff members is another key theme as proposed by the respondents. Through training and development, the heads of department felt that the board, managers and the rest of the staff would be better

equipped to put strategy into action. The need to be innovative was also highlighted by the respondents as an element that would improve strategy execution. Innovation both in coming up with new strategies and as a strategy in itself were pointed out. Key aspects of innovativeness stressed were knowing what customers need and using technology to stay ahead. Further, another common theme was adequate resourcing. Resourcing was underlined as being at the centre of successful strategy execution. The main types of resources that were highlighted are human and financial. In particular, the need to have a budget in support of the activities to be implemented was emphasised.

Another key theme revolved around the need to tighten the strategic planning process. The respondents pointed out that to improve execution there is need to focus on the intricacies of strategy formulation. They proposed having in place realistic and measurable targets or goals both for the short, medium and for the long term. In support of the goals set, action plans with clear timeliness and accountabilities need to be developed. Further, the respondents noted that there is need to choose the best timing for a particular strategy and align strategy with both the internal and external environment. Aligning the structure and culture with the chosen strategic direction. In addition they felt that to improve strategy execution the SACCOs must understand the environment in which they operate and adhere to the regulatory requirements.

The findings in this study compare to results of previous studies focusing on ways in which strategy execution can be improved. Siciliano (2008), presents a strong case for board involvement in execution in the SACCO sector especially when the financial situation is unfavourable. Further, Dezdar and Sulaiman (2009) found communication and cooperation critical in determining implementation success of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems. Similarly, Kini and Basaviah (2013) found that user involvement as also being crucial during ERP implementation. Parker and Brey (2015) point out the need to develop a good relationship with all partners involved during implementation of new products. To the contrary Dooley, Fryxell, & Judge (2000) found out that pushing for decision commitment slows down implementation contradicting the findings in this study on the need for involvement and cooperation

On the need for reviews, Kaplan and Norton (2008) argue that lack of a formal strategy execution system results in below average performance and that having a formal strategy execution system makes success two or three times more likely. This is in agreement with the findings in this study on the need for regular reviews. Further, Brauer and Schmidt (2008) demonstrate that successful strategy execution is a function of the board's ability to track strategy execution. On innovation, Jimenez-Jimenez, Sanz-Valle, & Hernandez-Espallardo (2008) found out that innovation leads to improved strategic performance. Similarly, Baer (2012) linked highly motivated employees with the likelihood of having innovative ideas pushed forward to realisation supporting the need to focus on staff engagement in order to improve strategy execution.

From a Kenyan context, Tarus and Tuwey (2016) advocate for board involvement in the strategy process and argue that involvement is a function of board knowledge, chairperson efficacy, members' personal motivation and background. Kibicho (2015) and Mwijuma, Omido, Garashi, Odera, and Akerele (2013) underscore the importance of managerial competencies in strategy implementation. Further, Kibicho (2015) links innovation to strategy implementation success. In the SACCO sector, Thatia and Muturi (2014) found lack of innovation, bureaucracy, and lack of top management support as detrimental to ICT implementation at K-Unity SACCO. Additionally, Muturi and Mbiwa (2015) link the execution challenge to inadequate collaboration during implementation of information management systems in DT-SACCOs. The studies concur that strategy execution can be improved if the right steps are taken. Overall, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge on how to improve strategy execution.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reiterates the central role that leadership plays in strategy execution. It concludes that to successfully execute strategy, SACCOs require competent and committed leaders at all levels. In addition, it concludes that all stakeholder need to be involved during the entire strategic management process and that communication should be streamlined to support the strategy efforts. The study also concludes that internal and external collaboration, regular reviews of the action plans, an innovative spirit as well as adequate resourcing and strategic alignment all reinforce strategy execution. The study reckons that if organisations focus more on each of these factors, they will be better placed to deal with the strategy execution challenges they may face. Overall, this study provides great insights on what needs to be done to improve execution. The study recommends that leaders need to take up the full responsibility of making strategy work because they can influence all the other aspects of an organization. This study opens opportunities for further research based on the study findings as well as the study limitations. It is proposed that further research can fully investigate each of main factors highlighted by the heads of department as leading to improved execution to get deeper insight into the specific actions that are needed. In addition, further research can expand the study population to include board members as well as the rest of the staff.

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