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# Successful Strategic Plan Implementation in Public Organizations: Connecting *People*, *Process*, and *Plan* (3Ps) Viewpoint Article

**Abstract:** *Strategic planning (SP) remains the dominant approach to strategy formulation at all levels of government, and it is an enduring topic of public administration research and practice. Simultaneously, little is known about the conditions under which strategic plans are successfully implemented in government. This Viewpoint essay provides evidence-based recommendations from SP initiatives in Flemish municipalities using multi-informant and multisource survey data. It shows that successfully implementing strategic plans is influenced by the people, process, and plan (3Ps) underlying SP. Involving creators in SP helps make the SP process more informed. An informed SP process that includes constructive conflict helps induce high-quality strategic plans. High-quality strategic plans contribute to successful strategic plan implementation. Practitioners are encouraged to consider SP not as a one-size-fits-all solution to strategy formulation, but as an approach in which variation in people, process, and plan influences implementation success.*

Strategic planning (SP) has long been the preferred approach to strategy formulation in public organizations at all levels of government. It typically includes an analysis of an organization's mandate, mission, and vision and an analysis of an organization's internal and external environment, identifying strategic issues based on these analyses and stipulating strategies to address these issues (Bryson 2018). A recent meta-analysis indicates that SP contributes to organizational performance—and particularly organizational effectiveness—thus explaining its popularity (George, Walker, and Monster 2019).

While this evidence suggests that there is—on average—value in adopting SP, it does not provide insights into *how* to do SP in practice. Most public administration research has considered SP as a fixed routine, and typical measurements of SP only focus on whether a set of steps were conducted (e.g., George, Desmidt, and De Moyer 2016; Poister, Pasha, and Edwards 2013). SP in practice, however, is not one fixed routine but very much something practitioners *do*, and one can expect much variation in who is involved during SP (*people*), what the SP process looks like (*process*), and what strategic plans ensue (*plan*) (Bryson 2010). In turn, this variation can be expected to influence the extent to which strategic plans are successfully implemented (Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke 2018). This argument has long been clear to practitioners: simply adopting SP does not magically induce the successful implementation of the ensuing strategic plan—indeed, more effort is needed.

Simultaneously, there is little research focusing on successful strategic plan implementation in public organizations, resulting in a lack of evidence-based insights into how to make strategic plans succeed (George and Desmidt 2014; Poister 2010).

This Viewpoint essay addresses this practice–research chasm in public administration by drawing on evidence from Flemish municipalities (Flanders is the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) to identify conditions under which strategic plans are more likely to be successfully implemented. First, theoretical propositions are formulated connecting the *people*, *process*, and *plan* (3Ps) underlying SP with successful strategic plan implementation. Next, the propositions are tested based on multi-informant and multisource survey data from 127 Flemish municipalities. These municipalities are multipurpose public organizations, they have wide-ranging autonomy to formulate and implement policies that protect the interest and well-being of their inhabitants (Goeminne and George 2019). They have an elected council, mayor, and aldermen and a management team that oversees daily operations. They can vary widely in size and budget, with the smallest municipality containing only 85 citizens (Herstappe) and the biggest 510,610 citizens (Antwerp). On average, they encompass close to 21,000 citizens, and the bulk of the municipalities have between 10,000 to 30,000 citizens.

Since January 2013, each municipality is required to formulate a multiyear plan for the coming policy cycle. The rationale underlying this requirement is

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the Flemish government's attempt to improve the financial stability of Flemish municipalities, make them more accountable, and force them to write one plan for the entire municipality, as opposed to separate plans for each policy domain (George 2017). Finally, a flowchart with a series of characteristics is presented to help practitioners think about successful strategic plan implementation as an interplay between *people*, *process*, and *plan*, thus providing an evidence-based tool that can help practitioners achieve strategic plan implementation success.

### Connecting *People*, *Process*, and *Plan* with Implementation Success

Chronologically, SP typically starts off with the question of who to involve during SP. Subsequently, the process of SP is carried out and, ultimately, a strategic plan is delivered as the product of that process. One starts off by identifying the *people*, moves on to the *process*, and finally delivers the *plan*, which then needs to be implemented.<sup>1</sup>

Following this sequence, it can be argued, the people involved in SP will influence how the process of SP takes place. How the process of SP takes place, in turn, will influence the quality of the strategic plan, which, finally, will influence the implementation of the strategic plan. While, of course, many different aspects exist within *people*, *process*, and *plan*, this essay focuses on aspects that have been shown to be crucial during SP in earlier work and are core concepts in strategic management theory—namely, (1) the cognitive style of the SP team (*people*), (2) procedural rationality and constructive conflict during SP (*process*), and (3) the strategic decision quality of the strategic plan (*plan*).

#### **People: Cognitive Style of the Strategic Planning Team**

Who is involved during SP is likely to influence the actual process of SP. While there are many team characteristics one could look at (e.g., expertise in SP, functional diversity, demographic diversity), this essay focuses on a team characteristic from cognitive psychology that has been shown to be particularly important for strategic management theory (e.g., Cools and Van Den Broeck 2008; George et al. 2018; Hough and Ogilvie 2005), namely, the cognitive style of the SP team. The cognitive style indicates the favored approach to information processing within teams and constitutes three dominant styles: a creating style, a knowing style, and a planning style (Armstrong, Cools, and Sadler-Smith 2012).

A creating style implies that team members are—on average—open to variety, like new ideas and innovation, avoid routine, search for creative solutions, and extend boundaries. A knowing style implies that team members are—on average—attracted to logic and reasoning as well as a deep understanding and detailed analysis of problems. A planning style implies that team members are—on average—attracted to time management and clear agendas, meticulous follow-up, being well prepared, and having clear structures as well as detailed action plans (Cools and Van den Broeck 2007). Each cognitive style thus indicates a favored approach to information processing, and one can expect that these favored approaches in SP teams will influence how these teams actually do SP in practice (*process*) (George et al. 2018).

Planning teams with a creating style can be expected to be more open to constructive conflict and procedural rationality during

SP. They search for innovative solutions, engage in out-of-the-box thinking, and encourage new ideas. These teams foster an ideal environment for listening to each other, having an open dialogue, and debating potentially new solutions—all of which require constructive conflict. Similarly, to avoid ideas that are unfeasible or irrelevant, these teams have to actively look for and analyze relevant information—for example, through experimentation—to back up creative ideas and turn these into realistic and effective strategies, which links with procedural rationality.

Knowers can be expected to also actively look for and analyze relevant information grounded in facts and evidence, but once said facts and evidence are found, they are not going to encourage constructive conflict as the data speaks for itself and does not require further debate. Planners are going to favor time management above all and probably are not going to actively encourage constructive conflict and procedural rationality, as these might hamper a timely delivery of the process steps and the team's ability to deliver on time, scope, and budget. This results in the first proposition:

**Proposition 1:** A creating style positively associates with constructive conflict and procedural rationality during strategic planning, a knowing style positively associates with procedural rationality but not with constructive conflict, and a planning style has no significant association with both concepts.

#### **Process: Procedural Rationality and Constructive Conflict during Strategic Planning**

The process of SP is likely to influence the resulting strategic plan. Specifically, SP can be considered an information-processing mechanism during which an SP team uses a range of tools to gather, analyze, and act upon information from its internal and external environment (George and Desmidt 2018). Hence, the content of strategic plans is contingent upon the quality of the collected information as well as the underlying analysis during SP.

Strategic management theory has typically distinguished between two sources of information. One source is the SP process itself, and specifically the procedural rationality underlying the process (i.e., the extent to which teams extensively search for and analyze information, use analytical tools, and focus on crucial information during SP) (Elbanna and Child 2007).

The second source is the SP team, and specifically the extent to which the team feels free to share and debate information in a climate of constructive conflict (i.e., there is give-and-take as well as constructive challenge, and members can share dissenting viewpoints and respect each other's viewpoints as well as debate the issues and not the individuals during SP) (Danneels 2008). Both aspects of the SP process ensure that strategic plans are grounded in the best available information, with a clear understanding of issues and viewpoints, as opposed to being grounded in the whim of the day or the perspective of overly dominant leaders, thus raising the quality of the plan as a set of strategic decisions. The second proposition reads as follows:

**Proposition 2:** Procedural rationality and constructive conflict during strategic planning are positively associated with the strategic decision quality of the strategic plan.

### **Plan: Strategic Decision Quality of the Strategic Plan**

Most public SP studies have not focused on the actual strategic plan as an important antecedent of successful strategic plan implementation. However, a strategic plan is, in itself, not an invariant thing or tool—much variation exists in the quality of strategic plans (Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson 2009). Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson (2009) argue that strategic plans can act as important boundary objects, grouping people, teams, and units together and motivating organizations to implement strategies and goals. However, for this to occur, strategic plans need to have high strategic decision quality (i.e., positive effects and results are expected from the plan, the plan covers relevant strategic issues and addresses these in an integrated and well-reasoned manner, the plan clearly expresses the reasoning behind decisions, and the plan is generally perceived to be of high quality) (Olson, Parayitam, and Bao 2007). A plan with high strategic decision quality makes it clear to the organization and its stakeholders what it wants to achieve, how, and why—thus encouraging the actual implementation of the strategic plan. This results in the final proposition:

**Proposition 3:** The strategic decision quality of the strategic plan is positively associated with successful strategic plan implementation.

## **Methods and Results**

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Multi-informant and multisource survey data were collected in Flemish municipalities to test the aforementioned propositions. As mentioned, Flanders is the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Flemish municipalities have a similar institutional and economic context, thus offering a relatively homogeneous sample to test the propositions. Moreover, each Flemish municipality has to write a strategic plan and has much discretion in how it does so. Because Flemish municipalities are quite homogeneous and all of them have to produce strategic plans in the same time frame, this essay focuses on variation in the *people*, *process*, and *plan* underlying SP without needing to control for a range of institutional or economics factors (Goeminne and Smolders 2014).

The first survey was sent to all SP team members in Flemish municipalities in March–April 2015. These key informants are most knowledgeable about the *people*, *process*, and *plan* underlying SP, as they were actually responsible for delivering the strategic plan. This survey included Likert-scale questions (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree) on SP team members' cognitive style (18 questions based on Cools and Van den Broeck 2007), procedural rationality (5 questions based on Elbanna and Child 2007) and constructive conflict (5 questions based on Danneels 2008) during SP, and the strategic decision quality of the strategic plan (6 questions based on Olson, Parayitam, and Bao 2007). A total of 439 SP team members replied to the survey. These replies were aggregated to one mean score for all variables per municipality. Because the data should be multi-informant, municipalities with only one reply were removed from the final sample. This resulted in a final data set of 127 municipalities (i.e., 41 percent of the population).

The second survey was sent one year later (March–April 2016) to all council members (i.e., politicians who are part of the municipal council) in Flemish municipalities. This survey included

Likert-scale questions (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree) on successful strategic plan implementation in the municipality (five items based on Elbanna, Andrews, and Pollanen 2016). It is the responsibility of the municipal council to assess progress on strategic plan implementation in the municipality. In other words, council members should be knowledgeable about how successful the municipality is in implementing its strategic plan. In total, 1,647 council members replied to the survey, and each municipality had at least two council members who replied. Again, a mean score per municipality was created, and this mean score was linked to the earlier data set based on the SP team members. The final analysis is thus based on multi-informant and multisource data for 127 Flemish municipalities (i.e., 41 percent of the population). All variables and the accompanying items are included in appendix S1 in the Supporting Information online. Importantly, there have been no major shocks—politically or economically—in the 2015–2016 period. This is in the middle of the policy cycle in Flemish municipalities, there are no elections coming up, and there is no new leadership just coming into office due to elections. Moreover, there is no evidence that the budget of Flemish municipalities significantly altered—on average—from 2015 to 2016.

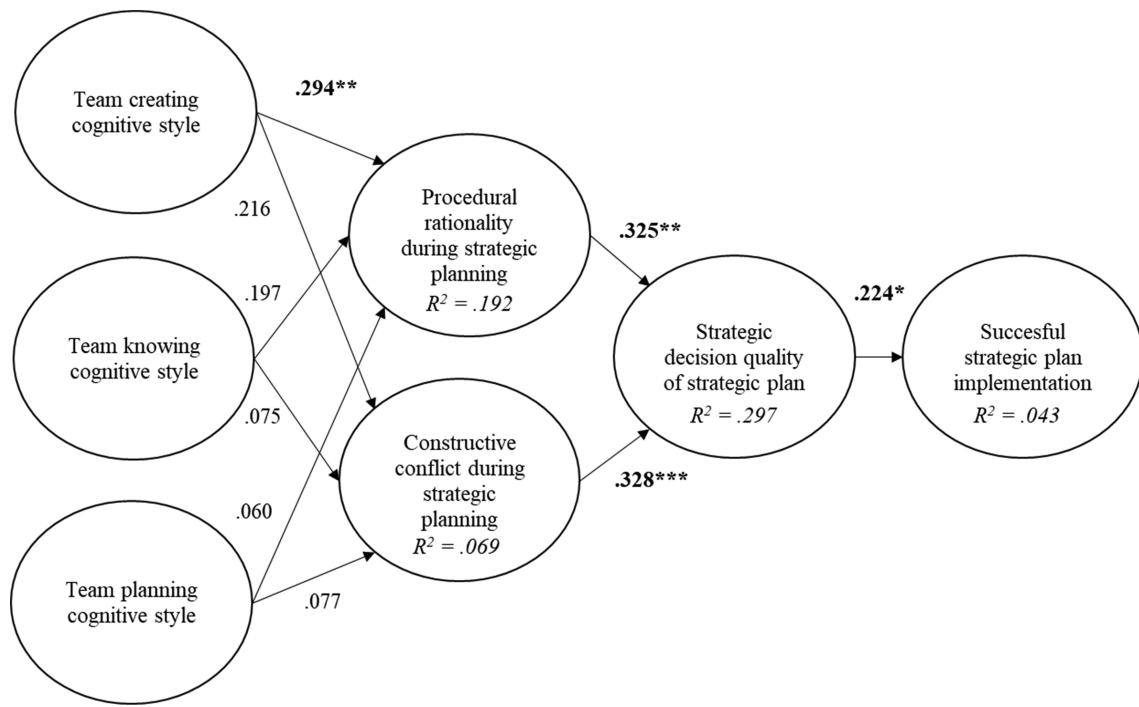
The earlier mentioned propositions include multiple equations—connecting *people* to *process*, *process* to *plan*, and *plan* to *implementation*. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is an analytic technique that can run multiple equations simultaneously (Mehmetoglu and Jakobsen 2017). Partial least squares (PLS) SEM is used because it is more adept at handling smaller samples than maximum likelihood (ML) SEM and allows the constructing of complex models. Because PLS SEM is a distribution-free method, bootstrap estimation is required (with 5,000 replications) (Venturini and Mehmetoglu 2019).

### **Measurement Model**

The first step in PLS SEM is assessing the validity of the measurement model (Venturini and Mehmetoglu 2019). First, all factor loadings of the observed variables on their latent variable were above the threshold of .50, and only three were below .70—which implies acceptable factor loadings throughout. Second, Cronbach's alpha, Dillon-Goldstein's coefficient, and rhoA values were all above the threshold of .70 (and even above .80), indicating internal consistency. Third, all of the average variance extracted (AVE) scores were above the threshold of .50 (indicating convergent validity), and none of the squared correlations had a higher value than the AVE scores (indicating discriminant validity). Finally, the average  $R^2$  value was .165, the goodness-of-fit index was .325, and the average redundancy was .108—all of which indicate acceptable model fit, taking into account the sample size of the analysis and the number of included latent variables.

### **Structural Model**

Figure 1 illustrates the results of the PLS SEM analysis.<sup>2</sup> As expected, there is indeed a causal pathway between *people*, *process*, and *plan* and successful strategic plan implementation. Involving creators in the SP team is positively and significantly associated with procedural rationality during SP but not with constructive conflict, while involving knowers and planners has no significant impact (i.e., partial acceptance of proposition 1). Procedural rationality and constructive conflict during SP are positively and significantly



Note:  $N = 127$  Flemish municipalities, standardized coefficients are presented, bootstrap (5,000). \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Figure 1** Structural Model Connecting *People, Process, and Plan* with Successful Strategic Plan Implementation.

associated with the strategic decision quality of the strategic plan (i.e., acceptance of proposition 2). The strategic decision quality of the strategic plan is positively and significantly associated with successful strategic plan implementation (i.e., acceptance of proposition 3). Importantly, all of these significant associations are not small or trivial. Rather, each significant standardized coefficient has a value above .20, which can be interpreted as a large effect size (Mehmetoglu and Jakobsen 2017).

### Evidence-Based Recommendations

Figure 1 clearly indicates that successful strategic plan implementation in Flemish municipalities is influenced by a causal chain connecting *people, process, and plan*. To make this finding more actionable for practitioners, figure 2 offers a flowchart that includes specific characteristics for each of the 3Ps. Importantly, this flowchart is grounded in evidence presented from Flemish municipalities but also draws on a variety of other studies showing beneficial outcomes tied to involving creators in SP (e.g., George et al. 2018; Hough and Ogilvie 2005), ensuring procedural rationality (e.g., Andrews et al. 2009; Elbanna and Child 2007) and constructive conflict (e.g., Kirchmeyer and Cohen 1992; Matsuo 2006) during SP, and developing high-quality strategic plans (e.g., Amason 1996; Olson, Parayitam, and Bao 2007). In other words, these characteristics can be considered best practices in SP and practitioners can use the flowchart to actively assess whether their SP adheres to these best practices or which factors might hinder adherence.

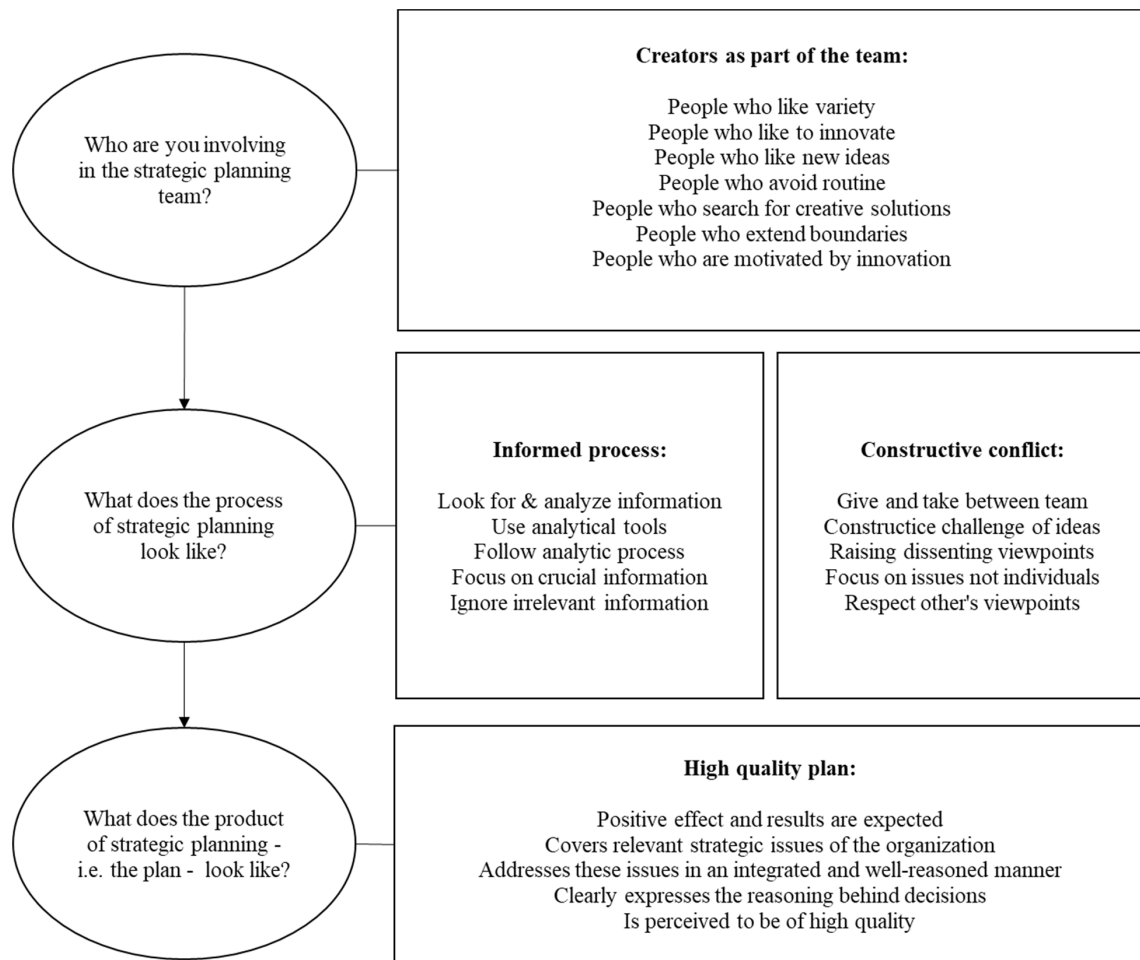
While this essay is one of the first to present evidence-based recommendations on how to influence strategic plan implementation success in public organizations by looking at the *people, process, and plan* underlying SP, some nuance is required. The

flowchart presents important best practices but—of course—does not present an exhaustive list that, on its own, induces successful strategic plan implementation.

- It remains important that practitioners adopt a SP model including some formality (i.e., analyzing the internal and external environment and formulating strategies, goals, and plans based on this analysis), comprehensiveness (i.e., generating many strategic options before selecting strategies), and stakeholder management (i.e., carefully considering which stakeholders to involve and how) (George, Walker, and Monster 2019).
- Similarly, these best practices are unlikely to work in organizations in which SP is not taken seriously or receives little resources (Ugboro, Obeng, and Spann 2011).
- Finally, actual implementation activities are also important—such as providing the necessary resources to support strategic plans and linking performance management systems to the strategic plan (Poister 2010).

The flowchart should be considered a *strategic tool* that helps ensure that the *people, process, and plan* underlying SP are optimally geared for strategic plan implementation success but do not act as a replacement for a lack of formality, comprehensiveness, and stakeholder management during SP; a lack of organizational support and resources for SP; or a lack of concrete implementation activities once the plan is developed. With that being said, this Viewpoint essay clearly demonstrates that SP is not a one-size-fits-all solution to strategy formulation, but rather an approach in which practitioners have to carefully consider the optimal combination of *people, process, and plan* to increase the likelihood of successful strategic plan implementation.





**Figure 2 Recommendations on the *People, Process, and Plan* Underlying Strategic Planning.**

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## Notes

1. This sequence is not necessarily linear but, rather, continuous. Indeed, it might be that during the process of SP, a team needs to include an additional member with specific expertise or an amendment needs to be made to an existing strategic plan, requiring a new SP process.
2. The structural model does not include control variables. Initially, three control variables were considered based on earlier work on SP and strategic decision-making, namely, municipal size, municipal deprivation and municipal financial situation. However, none of these variables significantly correlated with the included variables in the model, and adding these to the model reduced model fit and did not influence the coefficients significantly. They were thus omitted from the presented structural model.

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## Supporting Information

A supplementary appendix may be found in the online version of this article at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/puar.13187/full>.