

**Ambidexterity: Senior executive's lived experiences of implementing strategy  
in large corporate firms**

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration.

11 November 2019

## **Abstract**

This research project identifies a gap in the strategy implementation literature in which the lived experience of senior executives in large corporate companies is not well understood. Since senior executives are at the nexus of strategy implementation, being responsible for developing goals and measures that technically facilitate effective implementation, it was important to capture their lived experiences. Capturing lived experiences provided an important and novel contribution to the literature, as well as a contribution to an approach to make senior executives more effective at implementing strategy.

10 in depth interviews based on the narrative enquiry approach were conducted with senior executives across large corporate companies. The interview data was then coded, and themes emerged from the data.

It was discovered that senior executives acutely experience challenges with energising themselves and others to ensure that strategy implementation occurs, and must navigate strategic paradoxes, uncertainty and maintenance of organisational sustainability in the strategy implementation process. It was found that senior executives who were able to employ and take advantage of multiple manifestations of ambidexterity, possessed certain management styles, leveraged particular personality traits, and possessed certain cognitive and emotional frames were better equipped to implement strategy more effectively than senior executives who did not possess these qualities.

## **Keywords**

Strategy implementation, strategy design, ambidexterity, uncertainty, management styles, cognitive frames, challenges, reflections.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Oliver Nathan

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oliver Nathan', written in a cursive style.

11 November 2019

## CONTENTS

Abstract .....	i
Keywords .....	ii
Declaration.....	iii
List of Tables .....	VII
Chapter 1: Introduction to Research Problem .....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 The need for the research .....	2
1.3 Research objectives .....	2
1.4 Theoretical and Business Contribution of the Research .....	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	5
2.1 Introduction .....	5
2.2 Managing Strategic Paradoxes .....	7
2.3 Managing Uncertainty in Implementation .....	10
2.4 Senior Executive Strategic Mindsets.....	13
2.5 Organisational, Contextual and Leadership Ambidexterity.....	17
2.6 Summary and Conclusion .....	20
Chapter 3: Research Questions.....	21
3.1 Research Questions .....	21
Chapter 4: Research Methodology .....	23
4.1. Introduction.....	23
4.2. Choice of Methodology .....	25
4.3. Population.....	26
4.4. Unit of analysis .....	26
4.5. Sampling method and size .....	26
4.6. Discussion Guide.....	27
4.7. Data Gathering Process .....	27
4.7.1 Analysis approach.....	28
4.8. Quality Controls .....	28
4.9. Limitations .....	29
Chapter 5: Results .....	31
5.1 Introduction .....	31
5.2 Biographical and Demographic Data of the Research Sample .....	33
5.3 Relevance of Roles, Convergence of Roles and Career Progression .....	34
5.4 How do senior executives deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?.....	36

5.5	Dealing with Uncertainty .....	37
5.6	Understanding the Context of Strategy Implementation.....	42
5.7	How do senior managers resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival? 44	
5.8	Ambidexterities .....	46
5.9	Designing and Translating Strategy .....	51
5.9	How do senior executives enable other managers and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy? .....	54
5.10	Goal Setting and Measurement in Strategy Implementation .....	55
5.11	Managing and Developing Others.....	56
5.12	Managing Change and Failure.....	58
5.13	What Management Styles and Attitudes Assist Senior Managers to Implement Strategy More Effectively? .....	62
5.14	Personal Values in Strategy Implementation.....	62
5.15	Reflections on Strategy Implementation.....	64
5.16	Summary of Findings .....	66
	Chapter 6: Discussion of Results .....	69
6.1	Introduction .....	69
6.2	Discussion of Findings for Research Question 1.....	71
	6.2.1 Theme 1a.....	71
	6.2.2 Theme 1b.....	73
	6.2.3 Theme 1c.....	74
6.3	Discussion of Findings for Research Question 2.....	75
	6.3.1 Theme 2a.....	75
	6.3.2 Theme 2b.....	77
	6.3.3 Theme 2c.....	78
	6.3.4 Theme 2d.....	79
6.4	Discussion of Findings for Research Question 3.....	81
	6.4.1 Theme 3a.....	81
	6.4.2 Theme 3b.....	82
6.5	Discussion of Findings for Research Question 4.....	83
	6.5.1 Theme 4a.....	83
	6.5.2 Theme 4b.....	84
	6.5.3 Theme 4c.....	86
6.6	Overall Conclusion.....	87
	Chapter 7: Conclusion .....	88

7.1	Introduction .....	88
7.2	Principal Findings.....	88
7.2.1	Principal Findings for Research Question 1 .....	88
7.2.2	Principal Findings for Research Question 2 .....	89
7.2.3	Principal Findings for Research Question 3 .....	90
7.2.4	Principal Findings for Research Question 4 .....	90
7.3	Implications for Management and Other Relevant Stakeholders.....	91
7.4	Limitations of the Research.....	92
7.5	Suggestions for future research .....	92
	References .....	94
	Appendix 1 – Ethical Clearance Letter .....	98
	Appendix 2 – Sample Informed Consent Letter .....	99
	Appendix 3 – Interview Guide .....	100
	Appendix 4 – Codes Developed in Atlas.TI Software.....	102
	Appendix 5 – Consistency Matrix.....	107
	Appendix 6 – Completed Non-disclosure agreement (editor).....	108

## List of Tables

Table 1: Approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).....	28
Table 2: Coding relates to each research question. ....	31
Table 3: Respondent profiles.....	33
Table 4: Research questions, and related concepts and themes. ....	69





# Chapter 1: Introduction to Research Problem

## 1.1 Introduction

Implementing strategy effectively is extremely difficult. Much has been written by academics, practitioners, consultants and fieldworkers on systems, structures and mindsets to help organisations implement strategy effectively, yet strategy still tends to fail at the implementation phase in most cases (Thompson, Strickland, & Gamble, 2008; Chetty, 2010; Kaplan & Norton, 2008; Martin, 2010; Mohabir, 2008). Up to 70 percent of strategy implementations fail and around only 60 percent of the promised value of implementing a strategy is realised (Franken, Edwards, & Lambert, 2011).

Hrebiniak (2008) opined that implementation processes often lack dynamism and adaptability, being unable to respond to changes in the environment. Further, he suggested that large numbers of people in large organisations are difficult to coordinate, and that c-suite leaders tend to hand off implementation to senior executives and then blame them if a strategy fails, instead of being integrally involved in the implementation process. At the senior management level, executives often get bogged down by internal inertia, lacking stakeholder commitment, drifting off course, and dilution of the implementation by the realities of running the business today (Freedman, 2003).

Much of the literature on strategy implementation observes how organisational design, effective leadership and strategy support and management systems have an important role to play in translating, cascading and executing on a chosen strategy (Chetty, 2010; Freedman, 2003; Guth & Macmillan, 1986; Hrebiniak, 2008; Kaplan & Norton, 2008; Mohabir, 2008; Nyabadza, 2018).

In the literature, there is a missing perspective on the senior executive's lived experience of implementing a strategy and attempting to balance strategic paradoxes in contexts other than those of large corporate companies the United States (Smith, 2014). It is commonly understood that strategy design or strategic planning is performed by the leadership team in a firm. The strategy plan is then translated into measurable, implementable goals by senior executives, and then executed by those senior, middle and junior executives as well as employees in a firm (Faulkner & Campbell, 2003; Rumelt, 2012). Therefore, by not understanding

the senior executive's perspective on strategy implementation we are unable to explain the personal approaches, personality types, management and leadership styles that can enable or inhibit effective strategy implementation.

Smith (2014, p. 1592) investigated how senior executives navigate strategy dilemmas – what she called “strategic paradoxes”, which is a placeholder for the tension that exists between exploring new strategic opportunities and exploiting the current strategic choices in organisation. Executives manage these paradoxes by either accepting that paradoxes exist, accommodating paradoxes or finding ways to integrate them (Smith, 2014). Smith (2014) went on to suggest that a further area for research that is not well understood is how leaders can engage and communicate an inconsistent, paradoxical strategy to subordinates who may crave consistency.

## **1.2 The need for the research**

The gap in the literature cited (Chetty, 2010; Freedman, 2003; Guth & Macmillan, 1986; Hrebiniak, 2008; Kaplan & Norton, 2008; Mohabir, 2008; Nyabadza, 2018) is to explore, from the perspective of the senior executive, how implementing strategy is experienced large corporate companies. The gap in the literature is that the personal experiences, cognitive frames, meanings, challenges and victories of senior executives in implementing strategy is missing. Better understanding these phenomena could assist with building more effective senior executives who can implement strategy more effectively, given the context in which companies operate. Moreover, it becomes critical to understand the trade-offs, tensions and choices that senior executives must make in order to implement a strategy effectively.

Dynamics in senior management decision making in general is a well-researched area of enquiry (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016; Smith, 2014). However, in the realm of strategy implementation, this aspect of decision making for senior executives is not well researched, nor is it well understood (Huy, 2002; Smith, 2014).

## **1.3 Research objectives**

The senior executive's ability to be flexible and ambidextrous in implementing strategy, and how they understand their own ability to balance possibly competing imperatives in their role as an implementer and communicator of strategy implementation, is the phenomenon to be understood. Clearly, a theoretical and

research gulf exists between senior executive's lived experiences of implementation, and how these impact on strategy implementation processes, approaches and challenges. By better understanding senior executive experiences of implementing strategy, it may be possible to develop strategy support systems that assist senior executives and organisations to implement strategy more effectively, and to help these organisations attain and maintain competitive advantage, innovate, and sustain growth.

#### **1.4 Theoretical and Business Contribution of the Research**

Considering a theoretical lens through which to understand the senior executive's experiences of implementing strategy is important. The literature on organisational ambidexterity, and more specifically on contextual and individual ambidexterity, is instructive here. Organisational ambidexterity is understood as the ability for organisations to exploit pre-existing markets efficiently through incremental improvement and explore new markets where flexibility and autonomy are required (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). At the business unit level, Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004, p. 209) defined contextual ambidexterity as "the capacity to simultaneously achieve alignment and adaptability at a business-unit level".

At the level of the individual, leadership ambidexterity was defined by Zacher and Rosing (2015) as the ability of leaders to oscillate between promoting opening behaviours that encourage themselves and their followers to do things differently, and promoting closing behaviours in themselves and others that promote following guidelines and sticking to plans. For this research, leadership ambidexterity is the theoretical lens that offers the best prospects for describing and understanding how senior executives experience, mediate and achieve effective strategy implementation.

For this research project, it was critical to attain knowledge on how closely senior executives stick to codified company strategy documents, predefined strategy implementation frameworks and guidelines, and agreed-upon strategy performance measurement tools. If executives diverged from these predetermined structures and frameworks for implementation, it was important to explain why and how far they diverged.

Many large companies have official strategy management systems and processes in place. These may be strategy offices, strategy project management offices (PMOs), and tools to assist with strategy implementation, such as balanced scorecards (Kaplan & Norton, 2005). Smaller organisations may not have these systems and structures in place, and so it was of interest to explore the phenomenon at large organisations. The research explored the senior executive's perceptions and experiences in using the tools and structures at their disposal, and whether these helped or hindered senior executives in their endeavours to implement strategy effectively.

The reason for choosing senior executives as the unit of analysis for the research project is instructive. According to Beer and Eisenstat (2000), senior executives are at the nexus of strategy implementation, responsible for translating strategy plans into achievable goals, managing and communicating change processes effectively, and measuring the performance of the organisation against the predetermined goals.

For Beer and Eisenstat (2000), implementing strategy effectively is won or lost at the senior management level. What these authors term "the six silent killers of strategy implementation" (top down management style, unclear strategy, dysfunctional management teams, a lack of communication, poor coordination between functions and poor leadership skills down the rank and file) can emanate from senior executives responsible for implementing strategy, and severely impede effective strategy implementation efforts (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000, p29).

To restate the research problem, senior executive's personal experiences and feelings in implementing strategy are not well understood nor well researched in the extant literature concerning strategy implementation. The research project sought to contribute meaningfully to this body of literature by harvesting senior executive's experiences and interpreting them through the lens of leadership ambidexterity. The research output seeks to make a meaningful contribution to the literature and hopes to equip senior executives with a toolkit to manage themselves and others better to implement strategy more effectively.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The literature review covered three content areas: 1) the pre-existing body of literature on the human dynamics of strategy implementation and ambidexterity, 2) strategy implementation theory, and 3) an exegesis on different forms of ambidexterity. The literature review argued that there is a link between strategy and ambidexterity, but there was a need to develop theory that takes into account the nexus between strategy implementation and different forms of ambidexterity. In particular, the literature review highlighted how the lived experience of senior executives was a key factor missing in the bodies of literature concerning both strategy implementation and different forms of ambidexterity. This gap in the literature concerned how senior executives made use of different forms of ambidexterity and mechanisms to generate ambidexterity. Promoting ambidexterity may have created certainty for themselves and others and to create consistency in implementation messaging. Furthermore, ambidexterity might also have been used to manage change effectively and to conceptualise and treat implementation failures. This could have been a learning process within implementation which developed the skills, talents and capacities of organisational members. How senior executives navigate strategy paradoxes that were sometimes created as a result of competing strategic imperatives has not been explored well at the level of individual, subjective senior executive experiences.

A form of ambidexterity that had not been well articulated in the extant literature was how senior executives made use of ambidexterity to overcome multiple strategic paradoxes that arose when organisations attempted to implement a chosen strategy. One example of a strategic paradox that was explored in this research project is the apparent paradox that can arise between a strategy design that envisioned new market segments and new ways for organisations to compete on the one hand, and a lack of the operational wherewithal and capabilities to implement the strategy as its design intended on the other hand.

A novel approach to exploring organisational strategic paradoxes that had not been well explored in the field of strategy studies lay primarily in the unit of analysis used to make fruitful enquiries. Much scholarly research and theorisation, discussed below, had used the organisation as a case study, or had cross-sectional or

longitudinal studies of executives or strategy processes to try and understand the nature of strategic paradoxes. This research project, however, was different – it made a case for studying senior executives, at the individual unit of analysis, in an attempt to better understand from their perspective the personal stories, anecdotes, experiences and reflections in trying to navigate strategic paradoxes across the strategy design, translation, and most especially, the implementation phases. Navigating strategic paradoxes included building consensus within the organisation through effective communication, managing change effectively, and developing others to enhance the effectiveness and competitiveness of the organisation. In summary, not only was there a gap in the literature concerning how senior executives enable successful strategy implementation, but also in the point of view – that of the senior executive – which has often been ignored in strategy implementation studies.

The literature review was structured in a manner as to provide a theoretical grounding for the four research questions raised to expand on the research topic, as well as to identify the gaps in the literature that the research findings hoped to fill. Four research questions were posited to help guide the enquiry:

1. How do senior executives deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?

The first research question sought to understand how executives navigated uncertainty in implementing strategy. While it was possible that specific plans, goals and measures were in place to help a senior executive implement strategy, there may have been uncertainty as to how and where these plans, goals and measures could be applied to generate successful implementation.

2. How do senior executives resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival?

The second research question sought to investigate how executives might resolve or balance possibly competing interests. These competing interests were around running the business unit efficiently, and exploiting markets, versus exploring new possibilities and opportunities that could be afforded when a strategy was implemented.

3. How do senior executives enable other executives and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy?

The third research question sought to understand the extent to which senior executives could enable executives and employees to implement a chosen strategy. This suggested that senior executives had an important role to play in clearing away obstacles and enabling executives and employees to achieve the goals of the organisation. This question sought to establish the degree to which senior executives could assist the line management in an organisation to prioritise and schedule efforts towards implementing a strategy effectively. At a deeper level, this was about how senior executives experienced controlling and directing the strategy implementation effort.

4. What management styles and attitudes assist senior executives to implement strategy more effectively?

This question pondered what senior executive management styles and attitudes assisted with successful implementation of strategy. Executives who possessed an entrepreneurial orientation (discussed in the literature review) may have been better equipped to implement strategy more effectively. Entrepreneurial orientation might predispose executives to sensing and seizing opportunities to implement strategy, rather than waiting for plans and instructions from organisational leadership before action was taken. This question therefore sought to understand how proactive senior executives are in taking action to implement strategy with the given resources at their disposal.

The central ideas in each research question were interwoven into the literature review and allowed for an exposition of the appropriate theory to support the questions and identify the theoretical and conceptual gaps in understanding senior executive's lived experiences of strategy implementation. A comprehensive review of strategy implementation and ambidexterity based on academic studies, journal articles and books was performed in order to assess whether there was a knowledge and/or theory gap for the research project on the topic of senior executive lived experience of implementing strategy.

## **2.2 Managing Strategic Paradoxes**

Regarding academic research projects, several authors had observed interesting dynamics with regards to strategy implementation in organisations. Chetty (2010) observed the organisational mechanics that helped to drive effective strategy implementation in organisations. He found that six factors, namely were key to



implementing strategy effectively longitudinally and horizontally through organisations (Chetty, 2010): gaining top management commitment; generating cross organisational engagement; communication; accountability; selecting effective staff to drive initiatives; and having effective measurement systems.

This research finding was further supported by the work of Beer and Eisenstat (2000) and Hrebiniak (2008) who suggested similar drivers for implementing strategy effectively. Hrebiniak (2008) made a far more astute set of observations than Beer and Eisenstat (2000) in analysing the obstacles to effective strategy implementation. These obstacles were understood as follows (Hrebiniak, 2008):

- Ignoring the idea that strategy design and implementation were interdependent and not siloed.
- Implementation took more time than design.
- Execution involved many people to effectively communicate.
- Implementation required people from all management levels in the organisation, not just the line management.

While the above research (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Chetty, 2010; Hrebiniak, 2008) developed distinctive but related frameworks for driving effective strategy implementation, and helped us to understand obstacles to implementation, it did not drill down into individual senior executive's lived experiences of implementing strategy, nor did it provide analysis on how senior executives navigated strategic paradoxes that sometimes emerged between the design of a strategy and its implementation. Put another way, these frameworks provided a useful theoretical base to begin to unpack and answer the research questions around how senior executives might effectively drive implementation within an organisation, it failed to allow us to begin to tap into the senior executive lived experiences that capture the blocks and challenges to implementation that may have been faced. Some examples of challenges to be faced may have included how senior executives experienced uncertainty in implementation, and how this was managed; how senior executives were possibly able to enable and empower others to implement strategy; and how reflecting on their own management style and attitudes may have helped senior executives to better understand how these mindsets either enabled or disabled implementation efforts.

One other theoretical understanding that was missing in the analysis of effective strategy implementation was how senior executives experienced competing interests (paradoxes and dilemma) and objectives within organisations, that arguably heavily impacted strategy implementation processes and outcomes. Raynor (2007), one of the progenitors of the notion of the “strategy paradox”, defined the paradox that leaders faced: choosing a strategy to position an organisation to succeed exposed it to unknown risks that could cause it to fail. Both competing paradoxes existed at the same time. He further suggested that the trade-off between risk and reward in strategy discussions in firms is missing (Raynor, 2007).

Dameron and Torset (2014) pushed the envelope in terms of our understanding of what the lived experience of the strategist was by expanding the notion of strategy paradox to the subjective and individualised experiences of leaders charged with designing strategy. These authors (Dameron & Torset, 2014) noted that three subjectively constituted tensions (paradoxes) existed for the strategist, namely, social tension, focus tension and cognitive tension in the strategy formulation process. Social tension existed where there was contestation between social actors in the organisation around what the strategy should look like. Tension was resolved by fusing moments of quiet reflection by the strategist, interspersed with the strategist sharing ideas with others. Focus tension existed when a strategist felt conflicted between reading the competitive environment (exogenous focus) versus understanding the internal issues and challenges of the organisation (endogenous focus). This tension was resolved by fusing the exogenous and endogenous factors together into a single boundaryless manner of focussing on both simultaneously. Cognitive tension, lastly, existed between using analysis to make strategy decisions versus using intuition for decision making. This last tension was resolved through experience and knowing when to use which cognitive frame to make strategy decisions.

While the above research reveals much about the individual process of designing strategy by the strategist, very little light was cast on the individual senior executive’s subjective (lived) experience of, firstly, translating the strategy plan into actionable goals and task and, secondly, implementing the strategy to enhance the effectiveness, sustainability and profitability of the organisation. Dameron and Torset's (2014) subjective perspectives on resolving strategy paradoxes succeeded in convincingly elucidating the actual mechanisms by which senior executives

achieved a balancing of the paradoxes, and the ease (and dis-ease, for that matter) of harnessing ambidexterity as a method of balancing identified strategic paradoxes.

Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) framed strategic paradoxes quite differently from Dameron and Torset (2014). From their perspective, strategic paradoxes were actually paradoxes around the organisational intent of the strategy to drive profitability, on the one hand, and to drive creative breakthrough innovations, on the other (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). These strategic impulses were framed as paradoxical because the organisation needed to achieve both, but made trade-offs about resource allocations to achieve one or the other at any single point in time.

The framework developed by Dameron and Torset, (2014) and Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) provided a powerful analytical tool to explore the research question based around how senior executives experienced strategic paradoxes in strategy implementation, and to explore if any of the mechanisms for resolving these dilemma were employed by senior executives to ensure strategy implementation occurred effectively. An additional theoretical treatment of the senior executive experience that the abovementioned framework provided for was based around the idea that senior executives possibly developed and employed forms of ambidexterity between these multiple mechanisms to resolve different kinds of strategy paradoxes.

### **2.3 Managing Uncertainty in Implementation**

Smith (2014) investigated how senior executives navigated strategy dilemmas (analogous to strategy paradoxes), which were a placeholder for the tension that exists between exploring new strategic opportunities and exploiting the current strategic choices in organisations. Leaders managed these paradoxes by either accepting that paradoxes exist, accommodating paradoxes or finding ways to integrate them (Smith, 2014). Smith (2014) went on to suggest that a further area for research that was not well understood was how leaders could engage and communicate an inconsistent, paradoxical strategy to subordinates who craved consistency. The framework by Smith (2014) was slightly different from those by Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) and Dameron and Torset (2014) because where the former focussed specifically on how general internal uncertainty was generated within the when it came to designing and implementing strategy, the latter's focus was more around how organisations and organisational members navigated competing decisions about the strategy itself, not the impact of this on the

organisation directly from an uncertainty creation perspective. As far as this research project is concerned, the research questions that were raised, particularly as to how senior executives manage uncertainty for themselves and others, as well as the management styles, attitudes and frames that assist to possibly create certainty for themselves and others, are informed by Smith's (2014) work, as well as his que for the researcher to perform research in how senior executives communicated strategy paradoxes in a manner that helped to create certainty for the organisation.

As mentioned earlier, several important gaps in the strategy implementation literature was to explore, from the perspective of the senior executive, how implementing strategy was experienced in large corporate companies. This gap in the literature implied that the personal experiences, attitudes, cognitive and emotional frames, meanings, challenges, victories and failures of senior executives could assist with building more effective senior executives that could implement strategy more effectively. The following portion of the literature review therefore identifies how several authors contributed towards developing the research questions and some theoretical basis for understanding and interpreting the data that was collected in the field.

Raffaelli, Glynn and Tushman (2019) suggested that it was the cognitive and emotional frames of senior executive teams and individuals that were of chief importance in the innovation processes (analogous to the strategy processes observed in this research project), particularly when it came to dealing with strategic paradoxes such as those mentioned by Smith (2014). Raffaelli et al. (2019) defined cognitive frames as the mental templates used by those to make sense of environmental information, while emotional frames were those templates used to process feelings about the information being perceived and how these were aligned by the team or individual actor's aspirations, passions, desires and fears. The cognitive and emotional frames of the senior executive became especially important when it came to consistently communicating through the organisation about strategy paradoxes and their resolution.

Ashforth, Rogers, Pratt and Pradies (2014) provided a useful framework to assist with theoretically understanding senior executive approaches to dealing with the uncertainty and ambivalence that came about when senior executives had to navigate strategy dilemmas. In the framework, senior executives could either avoid ambivalence by (Ashforth et al., 2014):

- Evading it by “pretending the problem didn’t exist”.
- Using domination, favouring one choice over another, crowding out the other choice and thus creating a type of certainty.
- Compromising, or “giving and taking” and seeking to find a middle road between the choices to create a compromised certainty.
- Employing holism, whereby opposing choices were consciously embraced and accommodated uncompromisingly.

The above typology helps to provide an assessment framework for the research questions around how senior executives used their personal attitudinal positions, behaviour, beliefs, cognitive and emotional frames to attempt to ensure that strategy implementation occurred in ways that developed other people, and secured competitive success for the organisation. Discovering senior executives’ self-reflection on their decisions and their impact on others provided a renewed focus on strategy implementation using a different perspective. Therefore, new theory and frameworks could be built which could help senior executives and organisations implement strategy more effectively.

Dynamics in senior executive decision making in general was a well-researched area of enquiry (Schad et al., 2016; Smith, 2014). However, in the realm of strategy implementation, this aspect of decision making for senior executives was not well researched, nor was it well understood (Huy, 2002; Smith, 2014). The senior executive’s ability to be flexible and ambidextrous in implementing strategy, and how they understood their own ability to balance possibly competing imperatives in their role as an implementer and communicator of strategy, was the phenomenon to be understood in this research project. By better understanding senior executive experiences of implementing strategy, it might be possible to develop strategy support systems that assist senior executives and organisations to implement strategy more effectively, and to help these organisations to attain and maintain competitive advantage, innovate, and sustain growth.

The implication of this missing link between the risks of a particular strategy and its hope for reward created an interesting theoretical backdrop to begin to understand not only what a senior-executive-as-strategist did to get the implementation work done successfully, but also who and what an effective strategist actually looked like – that was to ask what experiences, mindsets, behaviours and cognitive frames characterised a successful strategist.

## **2.4 Senior Executive Strategic Mindsets**

Making use of the five-factor model for personality, Nyabadza (2008) assessed whether the chief executive officer (CEO) personality had an impact on strategy implementation outcomes in large companies. Findings in this qualitative research suggested that certain personality types (explorer and visionary) correlated to positive outcomes for strategy implementation, insofar as CEOs that possessed these personality characteristics were able to drive a strategic leadership agenda in organisations, steering overall strategy processes (designing, cascading, implementing and measuring) well. While this research touched on the CEO's lived experience in strategy design and implementation, a deeper dive into senior executive lived experiences, at a level below the c-suite, was required.

Nyabadza's (2018) research on the lived experience of CEOs as strategic leaders (the intersection of strategy and leadership, or leading the organisation strategically) revealed that the CEO's leadership philosophy and emotional states impacted on the strategy processes within organisations. This finding is borne out by authors such as Mintzberg and Waters (1985), who suggested that the leader's ability to accurately read the 'mood' of an organisation impacted on the strategic choices that organisations made to attain success.

The combination of strategy and ambidexterity studies was well put together by Mohabir (2008), who suggested that the greater the combination of structural and contextual ambidexterity capabilities (defined in the sections below), the greater the sustained performance of organisations in the banking sector. Again, while this research revealed an important conceptual connection between ambidexterity and strategy implementation, the lived experiences of individuals responsible for implementing strategy, using leadership and other forms of individual ambidexterity, was missing from the analysis.

Booth (2017) unpicked some of the quandaries that executives faced in balancing explore and exploit imperatives in ambidexterity. Her research illustrated that executives employed several mechanisms to resolve this tension, namely, synthesis, temporal cycling and spatial delegation to combine the seemingly contradictory impulses that executives face to innovate versus run the organisation efficiently (Booth, 2017). In a similar vein, de Almeida (2018) performed a quantitative analysis on executive ambidexterity, arguing that an executive's absorptive capacity (the

ability to assimilate externally generated, new knowledge) enhanced their explorative capacity, and did not impede their exploitative capacity. While these research projects provided an excellent background to some of the dynamics in executive ambidexterity, it discussed executives in general, and did not explicitly connect ambidexterity as a mechanism for senior executives to implement strategy effectively, nor did it tap into the lived experience of the senior executive in this activity – the gap identified in the literature.

Eisenhardt and Bingham (2017) provided a useful framework for understanding strategy implementation in entrepreneurial settings. These authors went on to suggest that even well established, large firms with an innovation driven strategy could be considered as entrepreneurial in orientation. Strategy was broken down into two areas, namely thinking about strategy (commonly referred to as designing strategy) and doing strategy (strategy implementation, in common parlance). In entrepreneurially oriented firms, and firms in general, effectively competing in high velocity, competitive markets meant that firms took part in both major strategy activities described above.

Thinking about strategy, in Eisenhardt's and Bingham's (2017) view, was dominated by the traditional narratives on strategy, mainly around competitive positioning and resource utilisation, with organisations seeking to take a holistic view on trying to understand the logic of the market. On the other hand, in terms of doing strategy, Eisenhardt and Bingham (2017) suggested that it was executives who were responsible for taking action and adapting themselves to be able to take advantage of the opportunities revealed in the strategy processes. They went on to suggest that competitive advantage is short lived and unpredictable, so executives had to be able to constantly adapt themselves and take new actions to capture value in the market.

Both Jarzabkowski (2004) and Whittington (2006) made important contributions to the notion of strategy as a practice in firms. This related directly to strategy as implementation, and the idea that strategy design and implementation must be thought of not as separate endeavours, but as complementary, iterative activities. This view on the interdependence of design and implementation was well captured by Hrebiniak (2008) who suggested that:

*“Logically, implementation follows formulation; one cannot implement something until that something exists. But formulation*

*and implementation are also interdependent, part of an overall process of planning-executing-adapting. This interdependence suggests that overlap between planners and 'doers' improves the probability of execution success" (p1).*

Strategy as practice melded strategy design and implementation into a single process where the emphasis was on the work that executives do to implement strategy, but also the notion that executives had a critical role to play in forming the strategic agenda (Whittington, 2006). For Jarzabkowski (2004), strategy as practice was a recursive process, meaning that the job of defining, implementing and refining strategy was never finished. Strategy as practice was therefore iterative in nature. The literature on strategy as a practice cited by the authors above provided an ideal manner to tap into the senior executive's lived experience of implementing strategy.

It may be argued that by understanding how senior executives operationalised strategy through others, with their actions, mindsets and attitudes, while at the same time navigated possibly competing strategic interests, and managed uncertainty, all while developing others, would constitute a novel approach to understanding strategy as a practice from a different, more reflective and humanistic perspective. The intended outcome of this research project was to contribute to the literature on strategy implementation and provide senior executives and organisations with insight on how to manage strategy implementation processes more effectively. Researchers and practitioners would do well to better understand how new perspectives on strategy as a practice could contribute meaningfully to the debate on strategy implementation in academia. Strategy practitioners and senior executives with self-reflection tools would be able to boost the types of mindsets that senior executives should possess in order to enhance strategy implementation in organisations.

Teece, Peteraf and Leih (2016) conceptualised 'successful' strategy for organisations in highly competitive and fast-moving markets as a dynamic capability. This capability ought to have been dynamic because for these firms to generate value, they must have sensed opportunities and seized opportunities before competitors did. This logic was applied to executives in organisations competing in high velocity, high competition markets too. Executives could have been both strategy makers and strategy implementers and developers of a dynamic capability to sense and seize opportunities that they identified.



Cultivating a senior executive-based dynamic capability was possibly a recursive process too and was arguably the epitome of strategy as a practice. The dynamic capability framework provided a slightly different perspective on strategy as a practice, and the research questions that were developed used this framework to assess how senior executives navigated uncertainty and strategic paradoxes, and reflection on the notion of whether they had developed an arguably entrepreneurial mindset of sensing opportunities and seizing (capitalising on opportunities) them – a dynamic capability – rather than following structured but often ineffective organisational strategy processes. Simultaneously, it became critical to assess whether senior executives, while sensing and seizing on strategic opportunities, ensured that organisation members were well looked after and developed, that organisational change was managed effectively, and that the long-term sustainability and profitability of the organisation was prioritised.

Barrick, Thurgood, Smith, and Courtright (2015) suggested that collective organisational engagement was an organisational capability that could bring about competitive advantage for organisations if developed and wielded properly. According to these authors, the antecedents for collective engagement ought to be in place. These were, namely, motivating work designs, engagement-inducing human resources practices, and transformational leadership behaviours (Barrick et al., 2015). Strategy implementation played a moderating role in bringing these antecedents to bear on the organisation in the form of collective organisational engagement. The reason that strategy implementation played this moderating role is because senior executives made decisions around which organisational resources to deploy, where these were deployed, as well as monitored the strategy implementation process (Barrick et al., 2015).

The implication of senior executives implementing strategy effectively is that it could have led to organisational members finding meaning in their work, and discovering how personal purpose and the organisation's purpose could be aligned, leading to greater collective engagement by organisation members. This theoretical framework was used in this research project to assess how senior executives were able to marshal the organisation's human capital resources by creating motivating work designs, developed human resource management practices that promoted employee engagement, and employed transformational leadership to implement strategy effectively. At the same time, this research project sought to understand if

and how effective strategy implementation leads to the creation of meaningful and purposeful work for the organisation's members.

The gap apparent in the executive adaptation view on strategy promulgated by Eisenhardt and Bingham (2017), and the strategy as practice literature (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006) was that it was not clear how executives balanced the trade-offs between doing strategy (or adapting themselves) and running the organisation effectively from their own perspective, making use of particular mindsets, cognitive and emotional frames, attitudes and behaviours to achieve these trade-offs in ways that enhanced the effectiveness of organisations. Similarly, the lived experience of these trade-offs and adaptations for senior executives in implementing strategy were not well understood. By making use of ambidexterity theory and frameworks, this researcher was better equipped to go into the field and research senior executive's lived experiences of balancing some of these seemingly competing imperatives in strategy and operational effectiveness.

## **2.5 Organisational, Contextual and Leadership Ambidexterity**

Organisational ambidexterity referred to the ability of an organisation to pursue efficient operations, including serving current markets well and sustaining incremental innovation, while at the same time pursuing new markets and potentially discontinuous innovations in order for long-term firm survival (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). The imperatives of sustained innovation and disruptive discontinuous innovation were neatly defined by March (1991) as exploitation and exploration respectively. For March (1991), exploitation was characterised by an organisation seeking ever greater efficiency, enhancing routines and refining processes; while exploration was characterised by experimentation, risk taking and flexibility. Organisations needed to balance both of these competing imperatives in order to ensure firm survival in the long term.

Simsek, Heavey, Veiga and Souder (2009) provided several mechanisms for how organisations might have balanced and possibly resolved the inherent tensions between exploit and explore imperatives. Before this could have been explained, it was important to elucidate some of the mechanisms by which ambidexterity was temporally and structurally achieved. Ambidexterity was achieved by organisations when explore and exploit initiatives occurred either at different times, or in structurally

separate locations in organisations (Lavie, Stettner, & Tushman, 2010; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

Simsek et al. (2009) took this observation one step further by developing a typology for organisational ambidexterity which helped to diagnose the mechanisms by which firms balanced the imperatives of exploration and exploitation, but also, the level at which this balancing occurred within the organisation. Simsek et al. (2009) defined the 'how' of organisational ambidexterity in terms of a temporal continuum between sequential and simultaneous ambidexterity. The 'where' of organisational ambidexterity referred to its location, which is characterised as a continuum between independent business units (or divisions) and interdependencies between business units (or divisions).

Simultaneous exploration and exploitation efforts that occurred within a standalone (independent) business unit was known as harmonic ambidexterity; a simultaneous exploration and exploitation split between interdependent business units was known as partitioned ambidexterity; a sequential exploration and exploitation that occurred within independent business units was known as cyclical ambidexterity, characterised by an equilibrium of exploitation, punctuated with 'bursts' of exploration; and sequential exploration and exploitation between interdependent business units was characterised as reciprocal ambidexterity (Simsek et al., 2009).

Of particular importance to this research project was the notion of punctuated equilibrium theory. This was an important component of cyclical ambidexterity cited by Simsek et al. (2009). According to Romanelli and Tushman (1994), punctuated equilibrium theory promulgated a view on organisational change whereby organisations spent long periods of time remaining stable (exploitation), which was known as the equilibrium phase. This was punctuated by short bursts of fundamental change (exploration). The changes were then subsumed into the stable equilibrium of the organisation, until the next punctuated phase of change (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994). This theory is of importance to this research project as it paved the way to understanding how senior executives managed the changes that were brought about when a strategy was being implemented within 'strategic episodes' (analogous to punctuations) – periods where strategy was being implemented or designed – and how successful senior executives were at guiding and supporting reports through the change journey, eventually incorporating the changes into the operational routines of the organisation.

Simsek et al. (2009) suggested that an important way in which tensions could be resolved was at the level of the business unit. The level at which this ambidexterity was achieved was known as contextual ambidexterity. In contextual ambidexterity, Simsek et al. (2009) argued that ambidexterity could be 'harmonious', as business units were able to run exploration and exploitation simultaneously and independently from other business units. This form of ambidexterity was also linked to the notion of dynamic capability (Teece et al., 2016) and strategy as practice (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006).

It was important to remember the role that executives possibly played in driving dynamic capabilities within organisations, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Regarding the in-depth mechanics of how individual executives might balance ambidexterity in terms of their behaviours and actions, it was important to review the literature on individual ambidexterity.

As described in the research problem portion of this research report, Zacher and Rosing (2015) characterised leadership (or executive) ambidexterity as a form of ambidexterity that occurred at the level of the individual leader and was characterised by leaders promoting closing and opening behaviours for themselves and their followership that sought to guide and strike a balance between exploration based behaviours and exploitation based behaviours. Tuan Luu (2017) took this description of leadership ambidexterity one step further to suggest that under instances where leaders balance ambidextrous behaviours well, followers were more likely to exhibit greater entrepreneurial orientation (EO). EO, in turn, was defined by the following behaviour characteristics: an elevated appetite for innovation; proactive behaviour and acceptable risk taking. EO was also linked to enhanced operational effectiveness for firms.

For this research project, taking leadership ambidexterity as a theoretical framework helped to diagnose the existence and extent of ambidexterity in the senior executive's lived experiences of strategy implementation, the level in the organisation at which ambidexterity occurred (individual, team, business unit and/or the whole organisation) and how senior executives were possibly able to take advantage of different forms of ambidexterity, at different levels in the organisation to ensure that strategy implementation was carried out effectively. Since the intended outcome of strategy implementation was to enhanced operational effectiveness, it was critical to understand what opening and closing behaviours senior executives

made use of, to strike a balance in behaviours for themselves, and tried to instil in others in order to achieve the optimal combination of ambidextrous behaviours that got a strategy implemented effectively (Nieto-Rodriguez, 2014).

## **2.6 Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter of the research report sought to review the literature on strategy implementation, and the three major forms of ambidexterity in order to arrive at a working definition of strategy that helped to frame the senior executive's lived experience of implementing strategy effectively. Further to the literature on strategy implementation dynamics and ambidexterity, literature from further afield assisted to ascertain a theoretical base for the research questions and research topic, as well as helped to identify gaps in the literature that the findings of the research project hoped to fill. This literature helped us to understand cognitive and emotional frames, as well as collective organisational engagement, dynamic capability and entrepreneurial orientation.

## Chapter 3: Research Questions

### 3.1 Research Questions

Four research questions were developed which helped to frame the research problem:

1. How do senior executives deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?
2. How do senior executives resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival?
3. How do senior executives enable other executives and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy?
4. What management styles and attitudes assist senior executives to implement strategy more effectively?

These research questions sought to unpack the research problem identified and assisted the researcher to draw up interview schedules, and access data on senior executive's experiences of implementing strategy.

The first research question sought to understand how executives navigate uncertainty in implementing strategy. While it is possible that specific plans, goals and measures are in place to help a senior executive implement strategy, there may be uncertainty as to how and where these plans, goals and measures can be applied to generate successful implementation. At a deeper level, this question sought to understand how senior executives navigate uncertainty sufficiently to decide on when, where and how to apply plans, goals and measures to implement strategy.

The second research question sought to investigate how executives might resolve or balance interests which might compete. These competing interests are around running the business unit efficiently and exploiting markets, versus exploring new possibilities and opportunities that could be afforded when a new strategy is implemented. This question is essentially based around resource allocation. This is to suggest that executives may face competing interests as to where and how firm resources should be allocated: to current business operations, or to the implementation of a possible new strategy.

The third research question sought to understand the extent to which senior executives can enable other executives and employees to implement a chosen strategy. This suggests that senior executives have an important role to play in clearing away obstacles and enabling other executives and employees to achieve the goals of the organisation. This question sought to establish the degree to which senior executives can assist the line management in an organisation to prioritise and schedule efforts towards implementing a strategy effectively. At a deeper level, this is about how senior executives experience controlling and directing the strategy implementation effort.

This question pondered which senior executive management styles and attitudes might assist with successful implementation of strategy. It may be that executives who possess an entrepreneurial orientation (discussed in the literature review) are better equipped to implement strategy more effectively. Entrepreneurial orientation might predispose executives to sensing and seizing opportunities to implement strategy, rather than waiting for plans and instructions from organisational leadership before action is taken. This question therefore sought to understand how proactive senior executives are in taking action to implement strategy with the given resources at their disposal.

## **Chapter 4: Research Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The research methodology and design section of this research project illustrates the important choices that were made in order to operationalise a successful and impactful research project. This section therefore covers key considerations around the chosen research philosophy, approach, methodological choices, research strategy, timeline and techniques and procedures for data collection and analysis. It is critical to present a cogent research design that speaks to the research problem investigated and helps to answer the research questions in order to meaningfully contribute to the body of literature on strategy implementation.

According to Saunders and Lewis (2012, p. 106): "...research philosophy refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development and nature of knowledge". Interpretivism was chosen as the philosophy underpinning the research. Interpretivism refers to how people act and think in a social setting, and how these actors interpret their actions and thoughts with regards to the social setting in which they are embedded (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Since this research sought to understand the senior executive's lived experience of implementing strategy, it was critical to tap into experiences, feelings and stories from the perspective of the senior executive as to how they get the task of strategy implementation done. Leitch, Hill, and Harrison (2010) suggested that interpretivist research entails capturing the meanings and interpretations that social actors (respondents in the research) apply to phenomena. This suggests that it is not only important to learn about senior executive's lived experiences of implementing strategy (how it gets done), but also what meanings they ascribe to the process of implementation – what it means to them.

In terms of the approach to the research, a position must be taken on how theory ought to be developed or tested. Since this research was qualitative in nature, and sought to interpret individual perceptions of senior executives, it aimed to build on the pre-existing canon of theory in strategy implementation and leadership ambidexterity. According to Saunders and Lewis (2012), inductive reasoning refers to making observations in the field (collecting data), observing and describing patterns in the data and developing propositions based on the patterns, with the view to generating new theory that can help explain the patterns observed. The approach



for this research was therefore inductive, as this project argued that theory must be adapted and developed to adequately describe findings in the field. Through adapting and developing theory, it is hoped that a substantial contribution can be made to the theory cannon.

The purpose of the research is to explore social phenomena as well as explain why they might occur. According to Bhattacharjee (2012), exploratory research helps to scope the magnitude of phenomena, and to generate some initial ideas about the phenomena under research in order to draw some tentative conclusions about the phenomena. Senior executive's lived experience of implementing strategy is not well understood, and this research sought to shed light on a relatively unknown aspect of strategy implementation processes. It is the senior executive's personal experiences, told in their own words, in the context of strategy implementation, that is not yet covered in the research.

While the research was primarily exploratory, there are elements that must be both described and explained. Saunders and Lewis (2012) explained that descriptive research seeks to accurately describe people's actions and thoughts, while explanatory research seeks to explain why people may have thought and acted in that manner. Explanatory research therefore seeks to tease out various factors that may influence or correlate with a particular outcome in order to give reasons as to why a phenomenon may be happening.

The approach taken by the research, which supports exploration, combines rich descriptions of senior executive's lived experiences with explanations on how their experiences shape strategy implementation outcomes. The researcher's aim was to accurately describe the practices and processes of strategy implementation in organisations, and how senior executive's lived experience of these practices and processes may impact the implementation outcomes in terms of enabling subordinates and themselves to implement strategy, balancing possibly paradoxical strategic imperatives and managing uncertainty. Once a rich description was achieved, it was necessary to begin explaining why senior executives may interpret strategy implementation processes this way and how this may or may not make them more effective at successfully implementing a chosen strategy.

From a research strategy perspective, a narrative enquiry was the most appropriate choice of research strategy for this research project. Saunders and Lewis (2012)

suggested that a narrative enquiry can help to gain an understanding of the realities within an organisation that are linked to the experiences of the members of that organisation. Similarly, Bhattacharjee (2012) suggested that research respondents' lived experiences are captured best in the form of a narrative enquiry. Since the research interviewed senior executives and gained insight into their lived experiences of implementing strategy, the narrative approach – tapping into respondent's personal stories of implementation – helped yield useful data to explore, describe and explain this lived experience. These these narratives were captured by in-depth semi-structured interviews, which is described in the section below.

## **4.2. Choice of Methodology**

The choice of methodology was qualitative using a single data collection method, namely the in-depth interviews. According to Saunders and Lewis (2012), qualitative, exploratory research is required when an area of study is not well explained or understood. Senior executive's experiences of implementing strategy is not well understood, hence a qualitative approach that seeks to explore the lived experience of respondents was instructive here. Bhattacharjee (2012) went on to suggest that, unlike quantitative analysis which is statistically driven and independent of the researcher, qualitative analysis emphasises understanding and making sense of social phenomena. Phenomenology implies appreciating the social reality of respondents by understanding the subjective experiences of respondents (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

The research project did not seek to make broad generalisations about the lived experiences of senior executives in order to test the explanatory power of a particular theory or theories, but rather sought to capture these lived experiences to build on our understanding of strategy implementation processes, and contribute to theory that helps to diagnose and prescribe more effective means to achieve successful strategy implementation.

Time horizons for performing research can either be cross-sectional or longitudinal. Cross-sectional research "is a 'snapshot' of a particular research setting at a particular time" (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, p. 129). The choice of time horizon for this research was cross sectional as data was collected from senior executives at different organisations within a short period of time, during which their lived

experiences were collected, coded and analysed, and the research report written up. The intention was not to provide a longitudinal study which measures the lived experience at a moment in time and is measured again later in order to compare differences over time.

### **4.3. Population**

The population for this research was senior executives in large corporate companies in South Africa that are currently involved in strategy implementation processes at these organisations. Senior executives usually report to more senior executives or executive committee leadership teams and have subordinates that report into them as well. Senior executives also carry the responsibility for the effective running of business units as well as for implementing strategy inside organisations.

### **4.4. Unit of analysis**

According to Bhattacharjee (2012), unit of analysis refers to the individual, group, organisation or country that is the target of the research. In the case of this research, the unit of analysis is the individual senior executive. Since the research sought to uncover the lived experience of strategy implementation, it is the individual who must be the target of the research in order to capture these experiences in narrative form. The research is less interested in studying the social relations between executives or between executives and subordinates, but rather how these social relations, norms and values around organisational life in general, and strategy implementation, are understood by individual senior executives.

### **4.5. Sampling method and size**

The chosen technique for sampling was non-probability, purposive sampling. According to Saunders and Lewis (2012), non-probability sampling must occur when the researcher does not have a complete list of the entire population and therefore the sample cannot be considered to be statistically generalisable. Non-probability sampling, they argue, is best suited to qualitative research as a researcher can use their judgement to select a sample which helps to best shed light on the research problem and helps to answer the research questions (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). For this research, a sample size of ten respondents was chosen.

A sub-set of non-probability sampling is purposive sampling. Purposive sampling means that some members of the population are selected, and some are not, in order to best answer the research questions posed (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). The research made use of non-probability sampling to select a 'typical case' of a senior executive who executives others, reports into more senior leaders, is responsible for running a business unit, and implements strategy. This sampling frame is representative of the type of respondent required to answer the research questions, but is not necessarily statistically representative of the entire population of senior executives in an entire sampling frame (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

#### **4.6. Discussion Guide**

The research project made use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews in order to access data, shed light on the research problem, and answer the research questions. Semi-structured interview schedules contain a range of topics and questions, some of which the researcher may wish not to ask or discuss with the respondent, depending on how the respondent answers previous questions (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). The decision to develop a semi-structured interview schedule as the research instrument was key to gaining insight into the lived experiences of strategy implementation by senior executives, by encouraging in-depth conversations, stories and anecdotes from their own perspective. A draft discussion guide for the research can be found in Appendix 2.

#### **4.7. Data Gathering Process**

The data gathering process for the research involved a combination of literature review and semi-structured interviews. Reviewing the relevant literature assisted with developing themes around which the semi-structured interview questions could be built, as well as provided thematic structure for the data analysis. Once the discussion guide (in-depth interview schedule) was finalised, interview sessions were set up with the respondents ahead of time, and the purpose and nature of the interview explained to them.

The interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone, with the permission of the respondent, and notes were taken during the interview. Once recordings of the research were completed, these were transcribed into text.

### 4.7.1 Analysis approach

The transcribed interview text data was entered into Atlas.TI software to assist with identifying key words and the frequency at which key words came up. Transcribing data and performing thematic analysis in Atlas.TI assisted with clustering responses around certain themes that developed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative method for analysing themes within a data set. Themes in the data tend to emerge when similar or identical key words and ideas recur more frequently than others.

The below table is an approach to thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

**Table 1: Approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).**

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

### 4.8. Quality Controls

This portion of the research project deals with validity and reliability. According to Saunders and Lewis (2012), internal validity can be assessed on five factors to ascertain whether the research is valid:

1. The research findings correspond and are consistent with the subject matter as a whole.
2. The history of the project does not have a major impact on the quality of the project (the researcher is upfront about any major setbacks and limitations).

3. The elimination of unwanted biases that may emerge in the data collection process.
4. The loss of any respondents along the way (for longitudinal studies).
5. Ambiguity about the causal direction of relationships between constructs.

Several mechanisms can be used in order to achieve internal validity, by ensuring that (Saunders & Lewis, 2012):

- The research topic corresponds with the broader body of knowledge and emerges out of extant literature and theory on strategy implementation and ambidexterity.
- The researcher was upfront and honest about any major setbacks in the research, should these emerge.
- The researcher in no way unduly influences the respondents by offering payment or any other reward for participating in the research interview
- The cross-sectional timeline for the research does not result in any respondents being 'lost' along the way.
- No causal relationships are established between constructs.

External validity, referring to statistical generalisability to other populations (Saunders & Lewis, 2012), was well managed in that the qualitative research (theory development and findings) makes no claim to be generalisable to another population.

Content validity was assured by designing an interview schedule that met the objectives of the research questions, while construct validity was assured by developing questions that measure the constructs to be tested – these are embedded in the theory on strategy implementation and the theory on leadership ambidexterity.

Reliability, on the other hand, refers to using data collection methods and analysis that produce consistent findings (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). If the same interview schedule is used to interview senior executives as defined by the researcher, similar findings can be achieved. Readers of the research report should clearly and consistently see how conclusions were reached from the data collected.

#### **4.9. Limitations**

The key limitation of this research is that the findings cannot be statistically generalisable to a larger population, that is, senior executives in all settings. Another

key limitation is that causal relationships between factors cannot be able to be established.

## Chapter 5: Results

### 5.1 Introduction

The following chapter covers the arrangement and presentation of qualitative data that was collected in the field in order to add to the ongoing academic discussion on strategy implementation within academia and in the practitioner and management fields. The semi-structured interview recordings were transcribed, and open coding was completed in order to structure the data into discrete units of meaning. The open codes were then grouped together into code groups that sought to answer the four research questions developed from the research topic. The code groups and major themes that emerged from the data are discussed below in a manner which added insight to senior executive lived experiences of strategy implementation. The code groups were then linked to the four research questions in a logical fashion, as to provide evidence of results of the research. Table 2 indicates which code groups appeared under each question.

**Table 2: Coding relates to each research question.**

Code Group 0:	Biographic and Demographic Data
Question 1:	How do senior executives deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?
Code Group 1.1.:	Dealing with Uncertainty
Code Group 1.2.:	Understanding the Context of Strategy Implementation
Question 2:	How do senior managers resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival?
Code Group 2.1.:	Ambidexterities
Code Group 2.2.:	Designing and Translating Strategy
Question 3:	How do senior executives enable other managers and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy?
Code Group 3.1.:	Goal Setting and Measurement in Strategy Implementation
Code Group 3.2.:	Managing and Developing Others
Code Group 3.3.:	Managing Change and Failure
Question 4:	What management styles and attitudes assist senior managers to implement strategy more effectively?
Code Group 4.1.:	Personal Values in Strategy Implementation
Code Group 4.2.:	Reflections on Strategy Implementation

The questions contained in the interview guides for the semi-structured interviews were developed out of the four research questions, which themselves emerged as an approach to gather data and interpretation missing from the literature on the lived experience of strategy implementation. Theory that was reviewed, as well as past studies in the field of strategy implementation, then informed how open codes were



grouped together in a logical fashion as to cast light on senior executive's lived experience of implementing strategy. Each of the below sections are arranged as per the table above, to maintain a logical flow in the presentation and the structuring of the data.

The remainder of this findings chapter is dedicated to exploring the lived experiences of senior executives in implementing strategy in their organisations. In order to achieve this, the findings chapter is structured in such a way as to reveal how managers deal with uncertainty in their roles (whether dual or single role) and how they seek to create certainty for their reportees, which, as will be described, is a critical element in effective strategy implementation. Reflecting on uncertainty and the creation of certainty for themselves and others is discussed at length. The section on 'Dealing with Uncertainty' gives way to an important finding – namely senior executives reflecting on how they understand the organisational context of strategy implementation. How the organisational context is understood and knowing which organisational 'levers' to pull and when to pull them was a key marker of implementation success.

The findings chapter then segues into an exposition around how senior executives reflect on, and seek to resolve sometimes competing strategic interests between exploiting incumbent innovation (that is, the sustained innovation of current and past business models) and incoming new innovations (referring to new strategic choices that seek to launch businesses into new, uncharted territory, sometimes with new business models). This section unpacks two subsections, namely, the notion of senior executive ambidexterities as well as reflections on designing and translating strategy within organisation. A section on the design and translation of strategy is deliberately discussed in this section in order to convincingly illustrate that the effectiveness of strategy implementation is linked to how strategy is designed and translated within organisations.

The next section of the findings chapter explores at length the 'people' and 'management' elements in strategy implementation, by exploring how senior executives enable other managers and reportees to act in accordance with new strategies, once they are set. This section delves into how senior executives set and measure implementation goals for their business units and reportees, and the effectiveness of these approaches for implementing strategy effectively. The subsection that follows explores senior executives' reflections on how developing

and grooming other people in the organisation is a key indicator of implementation success and long-term sustainability for the firm. Coupled with this section is an exploration of senior executives' multifarious approaches to managing change and treating the failures that inevitably arise as strategy is implemented.

The final portion of the findings chapter caps off the exposition of findings by exploring senior executive reflections on the attitudes and management styles that assist with the effective implementation of strategy. Subsections to this portion explore personal values and broad reflections on the strategy implementation processes possessed by senior executives – further indicators of their ability to implement strategy effectively.

## 5.2 Biographical and Demographic Data of the Research Sample

All ten of the respondents in the sample worked in major corporate companies in South Africa, often having progressed from a technical role to a more general role at the general management level, and into the executive suite. Table 3 illustrates each respondent's role and the industry in which the respondent's company was located.

**Table 3: Respondent profiles.**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Role or Title</b>	<b>Industry or Company Type</b>
Respondent 1	Head of talent	Global advertising agency
Respondent 2	Senior project manager reward: Africa	South Africa headquartered multinational bank 'A'
Respondent 3	Commercial partnerships lead	Global technology company
Respondent 4	Chief marketing officer (CMO) and chief operations officer (COO)	Global technology company
Respondent 5	Independent strategy consultant	Independent consulting firm, formerly global beverage company
Respondent 6	Head of Africa investments	South Africa headquartered multinational bank 'B'
Respondent 7	Head of global innovation	Global beverage company
Respondent 8	Head of legal and corporate affairs	Global technology company
Respondent 9	General manager (GM): underwritten life and high advice channel, Executive committee member	South Africa headquartered multinational bank 'C'
Respondent 10	Chief financial officer (CFO)	Multinational legal and professional services company

All respondents had tertiary qualifications, ranging from certified project planners, to Masters of Business Administration (MBA) to Chartered Accountancy (CA), and brought a depth of experience to bear on their current roles, with the respondents ranging from a minimum of nine year's corporate tenure, to a maximum of 21 years' experience. Demographically, the sample ranged in age from age 32 to age 60. From a gender and race perspective, the sample contained one coloured female, three Indian males, two white males, two African males and two white females. Maximum variation in the sample was achieved by selecting individuals to interview from different race, gender and industry categories in order to better understand experiences in strategy implementation across these categories, with the intention of drawing out convergence and divergences in the lived experiences.

In line with the sampling criteria discussed in the methodology chapter of this research report, all off the respondents were responsible for the successful implementation of corporate and/or business strategy in their firms. They had responsibilities for managing others and have employees that report to them. They also reported to the executive committees and other senior leadership structures of their respective businesses.

### **5.3 Relevance of Roles, Convergence of Roles and Career Progression**

From a career progression perspective, three of the respondents cited that facing challenges in implementing strategy effectively, and overcoming those challenges was a key inspiration for them to remain in their current role, and to continue to meaningfully contribute to the success of the companies in which they work.

One mechanism by which challenges in implementing strategy were overcome was by 'combining roles'. In the global technology company, which employed three of the respondents, instead of separating senior roles into discreet functional or business areas, some senior roles were combined. The CMO and COO roles were combined so that the incumbent executive has a greater bird's eye view of vastly different operational areas in businesses and ensures strategic alignment of competencies across the different operational entities of the businesses. This allowed the senior executive to effectively manage both the COO and CMO role that he was tasked with running, while simultaneously developing his reportees, and strategically contributing to the strengthening of the technology company into a fully sales-based organisation.

Respondent 4 had the following to say on the experience of combining roles for effective implementation:

*“I came from a background where I ran divisions that were very customer focussed, so she wanted me to come with her when seeing customers so I could add to the discussion. So rather than pushing me back because that’s what the corporate guidelines say, or wanting to know who will manage the operational side, this allowed me to delegate some other things that needs to be done, which allowed some of my own people to step up, and that helped us to create a strong slate.”*  
(Respondent 4, 2019)

The transition of the respondents from specialist to generalist roles was also a key indicator of their ability to effectively manage the implementation of strategy at their organisations. The transition to a generalist role, coupled with managing dual roles in different business units or functional areas, yielded a potent combination that allowed senior executives to get the implementation work done. Combining roles and transitioning to a generalist was not without challenges as tensions exist between very different and sometimes competing traditional versus innovative business models that exist in different business units or between the corporate business and its business units themselves. Respondent 9, who worked in a multinational bank as a general manager, explained the following about his transition and coupling of roles and the concomitant challenges that this brought:

*“I sit on the [Company Name] exco at the moment and [Business Unit Name] exco. [Business Unit Name] is digital life company that is partly owned by [Company Name] that is where I started in life insurance until I was moved to [Business Unit Name] so I sit on both excos. There is the traditional advisor world with traditional life insurance product and the other hand with [Product Name] it is innovative new age digital do it yourself and I have got the two extremes which is quite interesting and so I am trying to bring those two together which is an interesting strategy in itself.”* (Respondent 9, 2019)

The above quote clearly illustrates the inherent tensions that exist when a senior executive straddles two or more discrete roles within an organisation. Although having to straddle two or more roles is not something that all executives in the sample

had to face, at least five out of the ten respondents faced this challenge and had developed multifarious strategies and tactics to overcome and balance the inherent tensions, uncertainties, and trade-offs in their dual roles.

#### **5.4 How do senior executives deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?**

In some cases, the respondents in the sample suggested that they were responsible for 'disrupting the status quo', that is, the way that strategy and operations currently ran in their organisation, as a means for the organisation to become more innovative. One consequence of disrupting the status quo is the creation of uncertainty for the organisation as a whole, as well as the employees who report to senior executives. One respondent had this to say about disrupting the status quo:

*"I think that there is so much rapidly changing and in our world, technology changing, that there is part of it that is done to you, that you've got to adjust to and part of it, depending on the skill and capability you've got, that needs to look at the world ahead and bring in that capability and slowly turn around." (Respondent 1, 2019)*

This was backed up by Respondent 3, who had this following to add on diversity as a source of innovation and challenging the status quo. The below quotes clearly illustrate that disrupting the status quo brought with it elevated risk to the organisation, as well as the need to generate new capabilities in order to innovate and effect change in the organisation. Implicit in these findings is the notion that pursuing an agenda of innovation (understood as risk taking and the desire to acquire new capabilities that the organisation or its people do not yet possess) generates uncertainty for the organisation:

*"Diversity of thought is sought after because if you find yourself in a large corporate you find a lot of common thinking, people that do not challenge enough. People get used to the way things are done, they expect the way policy works and do not ask enough questions, whereas in an entrepreneurial company nothing is sacred, you always challenge and ask: could [we] be doing this better? Should we be doing different things? Yes, it is exposes you to more risk (it is a more risky*

*environment) but it is also how you push the envelope in terms of doing things differently.” (Respondent 3, 2019)*

*“We definitely aren’t your run-of-the-mill company. We take lots of risks. I often have to say to senior leaders, ‘You do know that your career is going to part, that this isn’t a good idea.’ I somehow get away with it, I don’t know how, but I do. Whereas a McKinsey or Deloitte probably wouldn’t do that.” (Respondent 5, 2019)*

Arguably, the strategy process in organisations requires a questioning of the status quo, and asking of the organisation and its members, “Why are things being done the way they currently are?” It was in the implementation of strategy that uncertainty was created for members of the organisation. It became incumbent on senior executives to explore ways of thinking and behaving that help to generate certainty for the organisation’s members.

## **5.5 Dealing with Uncertainty**

One key mechanism of dealing with uncertainty internal to the organisation, and making an uncertain future more certain for an organisation’s members, was referring to the chosen strategy itself, and how the strategy set out a road map for the future for the organisation. This tended to give reportees comfort in the sense that the new strategy would allow members to pivot the change brought about by implementing the strategy off the knowledge and circumstances already known by reportees.

The notion of strategy as a roadmap to create comfort and certainty for people was clearly explained by Respondent 6, who explained that:

*“We have to spend an enormous amount of time with key staff and senior management level towards the end getting to implementation and to sit down with consultants to talk to senior management about their concerns. What do you think from your business unit point of view, how is that going to affect you and your people from your viewpoint and there were concerns? I would say about 80 percent of people have concerns and giving them comfort in terms of the strategy and the long-term sustainability is important.” (Respondent 6, 2019)*

It appeared a great deal of time was spent by senior executives in consulting and holding conversations with various organisational stakeholders to try and create comfort with the new strategy, which generated uncertainty, and sought to rein in discomfort with the new status quo, thus generating some certainty for stakeholders. Understanding how to generate greater certainty for stakeholders when strategy was implemented was a key concern for senior executives. Respondent 2 had this to say on the matter of generating certainty by referring to strategy as a roadmap:

*“I think if you can align it [the strategy]. I think everyone needs to know why we are doing something and if you can align and having that strategy outlined for us, which is a good and a bad thing but I think if you are working towards a project and working towards some sort of endeavour and you can tie it back to what [Company Name] is trying to achieve as a group and frame it in that sense then it shows people the benefit of what we are trying to achieve.” (Respondent 2, 2019)*

A key learning here is that in order to create certainty by tying it to the strategy, reportees must see the benefit to them of pursuing the new strategy. A further contribution by Respondent 2 reinforced the view that illustrating the benefit of a new strategy to reportees helped to create certainty for them:

*“If we do this, this is what the benefit is and this is how it aligns to what this group is trying to do and moving it forward, and that it is actually making a difference then you can people to pay attention. If you do not land that message and you just doing something and it feels like you are just doing it for sake of doing something, then you are not going to get people motivated or excited about doing it.” (Respondent 2, 2019)*

Understanding the root cause of problems, and correctly diagnosing the type and magnitude of the problem that the strategy sought to solve, was also very important for creating certainty by tying correct problem diagnoses with a strategy that can resolve the problem faced:

*“Often enough, there isn’t that true self-reflection of what the root cause of the problem is. It’s often poor execution. Of course, that may be the case, but if you don’t know what the real root cause of the problem is, anything that you execute, you actually may be executing something*

*that won't solve the problem that you have. Unfortunately, when you've figured that out, it may be too late.” (Respondent 4, 2019)*

Clarity of how the strategy will benefit the organisation and its individual members was another aspect of creating certainty for others in the implementation of strategy. Respondent 4 argued that:

*“Your ability to ask what you're trying to achieve, what the end goal is, how do we deliver that message, and what do we want out of this meeting as for the next steps that needs to happen is important. To do those kind of things is so difficult, but it provides you with the clarity. As an example, we have so many things that have competing priorities at [Company Name] because of the number of priorities we have. I spend a lot of time with my team and even in my role now, we provide clarity to the organisation on what really matters.” (Respondent 4, 2019)*

A large part of the senior executive's role was to provide clarity on the sometimes competing organisational objectives that reportees follow. At a deeper level, it was not only tying personal benefits to strategy that helped to create certainty for members of the organisation, but also providing clarity on which goals were important to follow.

An important aspect of how uncertainty was managed was around the notion of the organisation's capabilities. What the organisation is capable of, and how this tied into the strategic choices that senior executives were making, was a key mechanism to manage uncertainty. This was achieved by senior executives having faith that they, and the organisation, have the pre-existing sets of capabilities that will allow them to compete effectively in the future. Respondent 7 clearly explained this faith in the current set of capabilities which will allow the organisation to compete effectively into the future:

*“I think like most fast-moving consumer goods companies, we like to track where we think the consumer is going to go next, but that doesn't mean we always get it right. I think the things that keep me chewing and engaged related to innovation are the kinds of opposition, products, and brands that consumers will look for going forward, the extent to which they are informed by macro forces and trends. I guess we're fortunate that we work in a business that has deep insight and*



*knowledge based on the work we do in the market, but you can never tell where consumers are going to go next and I guess the tension is trying to make sure that you get there with them at the very least, if not ahead of them.” (Respondent 7, 2019)*

The above quote clearly illustrated that relying on the pre-existing set of capabilities was a source of certainty generation for the organisation. In this case, it was this company’s deep insights and knowledge of the market that was the key capability that would allow the organisation to compete effectively in the future, even if the strategy were to change.

Restructuring the organisation was another key mechanism by which uncertainty was simultaneously created and resolved for the organisation. Respondent 3 gave an excellent explanation of the inevitability of uncertainty in their organisation, and how the ability to restructure the organisation in order to be agile (a capability) was necessary to ensure that the organisation was able to keep up with changes in the market – creating some longer term certainty (in terms of sustainable competitive advantage) for the organisation:

*“Uncertainty is inherent in any business and anything you are trying to do that is new but we do not run. We are running a business in a changing environment and a changing business so there is uncertainty of roles, structures and [Company Name] in the three or four years has been restructuring on a yearly basis because we are adapting to the market.” (Respondent 3, 2019)*

While restructuring was an important element in allowing organisations to be strategically agile, it nevertheless created much uncertainty and discomfort for employees, and was a source of great anxiety. This dynamic is beautifully captured in the below quote from Respondent 5 and Respondent 8, who tapped into the people aspect of restructuring that creates and resolves uncertainty:

*“People struggle [with the uncertainty created by restructuring]. But this is the thing that I think we as an organisation try to do, and I think more importantly the people need to try to do. They need to get away from the things around roles. We actually have to start talking in the concept of capabilities, and we have to talk in the concept of products and services.” (Respondent 5, 2019)*

*“A lot of those positions have been let go, and they’re hiring new people with the new sets of skills around where the strategy is going. So that is the biggest challenge I’ve seen since I’ve been here. I think because it’s a constantly changing environment. The reorganisation has had to happen almost every financial year. So, it’s happening almost every financial year, to a point where you now have a staff compliment that gets worried at the end of the financial year because people don’t know whether their positions are still going to exist in the new financial year. I think from a strategy management perspective, that’s one of the biggest areas we could have managed better, but we constantly try to manage.” (Respondent 8, 2019)*

Uncertainty was not only internal to the organisation, and senior executives gave many examples of uncertainty created from without. Uncertainty around managing external stakeholders was one such instance. Respondent 8 reflected on the experience of managing external stakeholders:

*“...one of the biggest things in my portfolio is external stakeholder interface and management. The biggest uncertainty is exactly that, it comes with managing external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders are always easier to manage because, ultimately, they are accountable to the company. You’ve got a set of objectives, key performance areas, and projects that you drive. Everybody integrates around achievement of those, because ultimately that is how you all get a reward. It’s by achieving those internal targets. That lessens uncertainty and it creates a space where you know you’re working towards one direction.” (Respondent 8, 2019)*

Managing external stakeholders was outside of the control of the organisations, and certainly had an impact on how organisations implemented their strategy. From an environmental perspective, market and political uncertainty was also a cause for concern in implementing strategy effectively. Respondent 10 similarly suggested that while strategy and organisational performance were somewhat within the senior executive’s ambit of control, given that employees are accountable to the organisation’s goals, externally created uncertainty was a cause for concern:

*“So, from a more strategic level we have a fairly sound strategy and of course we will get to this and I don’t want to speak it too much as a lot of this comes from London and we discuss it here. I think there is a lot of external environment uncertainty at the moment which has a massive impact on us. There is obviously the political situation, there is a US and China Trade war situation. You really don’t know what is going to happen next. As a result of all of this we have seen a massive drive of funds coming into South Africa which has made it quite difficult for us and we just don’t know when the next big deal is going to happen. So, to summarise is, I think it would definitely be from an external environment perspective, political, economic, safety – all of these things are having a massive impact and no one really know if [President Cyril] Ramaphosa is going to be president in the next two months, what will they the Hawks or NPA uncover? All of these are affecting our business massively.” (Respondent 10, 2019)*

This quote clearly reveals that uncertainty that exists in the environment is top of mind of for senior executives, and a thorough consideration of the context in which strategy is implemented must be performed. Large portions of a senior executive’s time was dedicated to reflecting and attempting to understand the organisational and environmental context in which strategy was implemented.

## **5.6 Understanding the Context of Strategy Implementation**

Understanding the organisational context in which strategy was implemented was a large element of the senior executive’s role. What was considered was the executive’s leadership style – the manner in which they lead strategy implementation – that was the key to understanding how to implement strategy most effectively. Respondent 2 had the following to say on the matter or the intersection of the importance of effective leadership and effective strategy implementation:

*“I suppose we’re all a victim of our environment [organisational context], and in an environment like ours where it is a very big organisation, and it is an organisation that has specific requirements and demands, execution is very important, and deep understanding of details and analytics, and all of those things are key parts of this job, and most jobs*

*at our organisation. So, when you look at that from a leadership style perspective, I think my natural leadership has had to morph or alter to be able to execute at the pace that the company demands.”*  
(Respondent 2, 2019)

This quote illustrated that being able to be an adaptable leader was key to implementing strategy effectively in a changing organisational context. Senior executives growing their adaptable leadership competency was a key success factor in being able to implement strategy effectively.

Another important intersection in the senior executive’s role in effective strategy implementation was to understand the intersection between business planning and the adaptive leadership style. Organisational planning was the mechanism by which senior executives decided which human, financial and other resources would be divided and dedicated to the various divisions and departments of the business, to ensure that the chosen strategy was effectively implemented. It was effective adaptive leadership which would allow the resource allocation to occur in a way that maximised the gains of implementing the strategy in a sustainable manner for the organisation. The below quote illustrates how important planning was in effectively implementing strategy, and how adaptive leadership guided effective planning:

*“Yes, I think, having been at [Company Name] for fifteen and a half years, it’s amazing, because at the moment it’s the largest company by market cap. And it’s an organisation that is extremely flat at the same time. So, when you think about it, we’ll spend a few hours a day where we’re planning what we’re going to do. Right now we just [at the end of the] financial year, and you think about the planning that you’re doing. A lot of it is driven by execution, so I find that we are an extremely execution-driven organisation. We’re getting better at reflecting on how we’re doing under our new leader.”* (Respondent 4, 2019)

The next section moves on to the sometimes competing interests within organisations that senior executives have to make decisions about in terms of how strategy is designed and translated into actionable goals for the organisation.

## **5.7 How do senior managers resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival?**

Strategic interests were sometimes in competition with each other. Senior executives needed to make trade-offs between the future and the current, among which resources should be used, and how they should be deployed to maximise financial and sustainability returns for their companies in both the short and long term – this proved to be the key role of the senior executive. Navigating trade-offs and decision making was the most difficult process for senior executives to be involved in. Respondent 7 reflected on this dilemma:

*“I think any manager’s dilemma is how do you keep growing the business of today, but anticipate tomorrow? I think it’s particularly prevalent in innovation related roles where you’re trying to grow what you have and keep that current and exciting with renewal and refreshment work behind that.” (Respondent 7, 2019)*

Reflecting on the challenges of making trade-off decisions revealed that these tensions were inherent in the strategy design, translation and implementation phases of strategy processes. One important strategic trade-off was expressed by Respondent 6, who suggested that there was a tension between short-term financial sustainability, and long-term strategic innovation:

*“I mean people always make the mistake, especially in senior management, they think that leadership is about themselves and if you realise what you are building is not your own career or position, you are building an organisation for the future and that is the same with anything else in the organisation, you want [to] leave something that is going to be much better in the future. So often people change strategies without a long-term end game and they want to make money in a shorter period and quite often implementing a new strategy, especially innovation the rewards might come long after you are gone. Politicians always think in terms of ‘will I get re-elected and being judged on my period?’. As a leader of a major organisation, you need to think about long after I have retired if the organisation will keep going.” (Respondent 6)*

While short-term and long-term trade-offs were important for senior executives in strategy implementation process, trade-offs about resource allocation (financial and people resources) involved even more difficult decisions, and that these decisions were rarely once off – they required ongoing reflection on how resources were allocated, and how they ought to be reallocated in order to drive success for the organisation. Respondent 1 reflected on resource allocation:

*“And the trade-off. It’s all about the trade-offs. If we’re not putting the resources there then where are we putting the resources? And do we believe that is the best investment of those resources given our objectives? Yeah, it’s that. It’s just constant reflection on your trade-offs, essentially.” (Respondent 1, 2019)*

From a human resources perspective, allocation and reallocation of people resources also revealed that there were tensions in this trade-off process for senior executives:

*“It’s hard. It’s hard because I genuinely feel most time that there just aren’t enough resources to balance the reality. I’ve just come out of a one-on-one with one of my staff members. I divide my team up, so how do I do it? It’s stressful, it’s annoying, why? Because life is disruptive, things are disruptive. I have a very good people plan for the year.” (Respondent 6, 2019)*

Making trade-offs about how people were to be allocated to different projects especially when strategy was being implemented was a very difficult, disruptive task for senior executives, especially given the fact that this created uncertainty and discomfort for the organisation, and the organisation members themselves being reallocated.

Respondent 7 had the following to say on restructuring people resources in the organisation in order to implement a chosen strategy:

*“...the ambidextrous piece of this is the future may hold very different things for beverages, but it requires work of today and so as it relates to managing that, your challenge is how you deploy your resources to manage today but get ready for tomorrow. I think the biggest hits-based challenge around that is that people are concrete creatures, for want of a better way to describe it, which is if I can see what the resources are*

*delivering, it gives me a great deal of comfort that they're being well utilised. When you're in the situation where there are resources deployed to tomorrow, and those are very hypothetical because it's a hypothesis that you're testing, they're very tangible in terms of work they do, because when it comes to partition in three, four, or five years, it creates different tension in the organisation.” (Respondent 7, 2019)*

Senior executives had, however, developed several mechanisms to overcome some of the trade-offs apparent in strategy by developing and embracing various forms of ambidexterity, including collaboration to bridge the gap between exploiting current operations and exploring the new with implementing strategy in order to make progress in sustaining the success of their organisations. Respondent 3 reflected on a story in which collaboration was the key to resolving the trade-off tension inside of the organisation, and this was achieved on a project basis:

*“We had to go to legal to try and align those areas to say are we violating any areas. We had to go to corp [corporate] to say, ‘This is what we want to do, could we do this?’ There was a number of steps we had to take and we managed to, it was a really good example of strong collaboration between lots of different team members, lots of moving parts to get going. But we had a lot in common: we had an idea, we had an idea of what success would look like, we had a good list of criteria of the blockers we needed to overcome so we created clarity in terms of what we needed to do and then we were able to tackle one at a time.” (Respondent 3, 2019)*

The section below explores the mechanisms and mechanics of different forms of ambidexterity utilised by senior executives to overcome some of the strategic paradoxes and trade-offs that had to be made in their organisations.

## **5.8 Ambidexterities**

Senior executives in the sample exhibited many different ways of balancing resource and effort allocation in terms of ambidexterity – that is, running the current operations of the business effectively on the one hand (exploiting), and implementing strategy on the other hand in order to explore new business opportunities and innovations (exploring). For the most part, it was reflected that exploiting and exploring cannot

occur at the same time or in the same place within an organisation. The implication of this is that senior executive needed to develop several different mechanisms to either balance these competing imperatives, or find ways to bridge the gap between exploitation and exploration. Respondent 7's approach to managing competing imperatives was to split people resources into different teams to manage exploitation and exploration separately:

*“The guys counting, making profits and building the business are as important as the guys innovating who might not show profit for a long time and the other way around. The two need to have input, it's very difficult to commercialise clever ideas if the guys running the business do not have buy-in in that so you have to make sure there is a collaboration between the two. There is no point innovating and coming up with clever ideas when your clients will never buy into that or there is no new market and the guys in the business side will do that. For me, it is that and it is a culture change because the guys on the business side always need to understand. Almost all businesses fail when sustaining innovation eventually runs out. When you keep on focusing on doing the same better and better, you have to do something completely different in future. I have found that in financial services you have to separate the two.” (Respondent 7, 2019).*

In order for the organisation to grow, and to implement a strategy effectively, it was critical to have some collaboration, where the implementation of innovation or newness could become commercialised and incorporated into the 'normal' operating logic of the business. To clarify this process, it was necessary to separate out exploit and explore activities, provide resources for each, and keep these activities separate so that the explore activities would not be subsumed by the exploit activities prematurely. Once new ideas and innovations were well developed enough in the explore realm, these could be exploited by incorporating them into the pre-existing operating logic of the organisation. The mechanism by which exploration was incorporated into exploitation was collaboration between the two teams. This phenomenon was experienced by Respondent 2 in a different company:

*“I do not think you can survive in any sort of aspect of industry within a business just doing what works, you need to look elsewhere. It is about portioning the right amount of time and the right people as well. I have*



*got a friend who works in [Company Name] and he is part of the digital space, and they explore. His department is purely explore. He says that once an exploration piece is found, they got sign off to it, they pass it on to another team and then they go explore something else. I think that is amazing but we do not really have that in my space at the moment.” (Respondent 2, 2019)*

It became clear that a culture supporting ambidextrous apportioning of time and resources was an essential driver of the ‘right kinds of behaviour’, for the most part, collaboration between exploit and explore in order to bridge the gap between the two seamlessly.

The importance of leadership too cannot be underestimated in terms of attaining a balance between exploitation and exploration and ensuring that bridging between the two could occur in organisations. Respondent 6 suggested that it was incumbent on leaders to ensure that this balance is well struck:

*“...one of the biggest things of a leader is to try and get an equilibrium between maintaining brand and innovation and I truly believe in all my experience it only works well when you have a separation of resources and capabilities etc. you make sure that the balance between the two happens from a leader point of view, each side needs to understand the importance of what they do.” (Respondent 6, 2019)*

Another important role of leaders in organisations was to emphasise to teams responsible for exploitation and exploration activities in strategy implementation the importance of each of their contributions to the overall success of the business. It made sense for Respondent 9 to separate out different teams and resources in order to balance competing strategic imperatives:

*“It makes sense for me to have two separate teams and separate resources. The innovation team will try quickly, learn quickly and fail quickly or pass into another team that is going to do the trying and the innovating but keep each other informed about what is happening because you could want to tweak an idea that is not quite working and innovate on that.” (Respondent 9, 2019)*

This notion was reinforced by Respondent 3 who gave the following reflection on the role of leadership teams on ensuring a balance was effectively struck between exploit and explore activities:

*“That is probably where the right leadership team comes in because you need strong finance, you need all the different aspects of business and they have got to be in the right balance and they only work if there is trust between them as well. Key learning is that no leader can be everything and this defines thus new world is that we used to measure productivity as how well a person does at their job, how good are they at their job, can they produce something’s, how good is their productivity? In today’s world, your productivity is measured in terms of how well you perform as a team, how well you collaborate, how well you orchestrate because no one can achieve something anymore, it needs to be a team effort.” (Respondent 3, 2019)*

Respondent 7 beautifully captured the intersection between strategy implementation and competing organisational imperatives:

*“Operations are incredibly focussed on today, as they should be, but there needs to be anticipation and line of sight created for them on the things that are coming down the pipe, so they can get ready both from a capability, capacity, and certainly from an investment perspective. I think you’re always going to have that tension between today and tomorrow, but I think the ones that get it right are the ones that are able to move fluidly between the two spaces but with enough distinction between how those resources are applied and leveraged.” (Respondent 7, 2019)*

For Respondent 7, balancing competing strategic imperatives took place over time, rather than being spatially separated. Rather than a spatial separation of exploit and explore activities, the separation between the two was based on different mindsets which allowed the organisation to prepare for the future by lining up new capacities, capabilities and resources for the future on the one hand, and run the operations of the business effectively, on the other. Currently, the focus of the organisation should be on operational effectiveness, that is, running a business very well today. However, deep reflection and effort must be given to how the organisation should prepare itself

for the competitive landscape of tomorrow. Being able to oscillate between the two mindsets rapidly was the balancing mechanism that bridged the gap between exploitation and exploration and was the hallmark explaining how strategy was designed and implemented in that organisation.

The scale at which the competing imperatives of exploit and explore occurred was also important. Respondent 2 reflected on the benefits of being the leader of a small team, and how this allowed collaboration to occur which enabled rapid oscillation between exploitation and exploration:

*“Our team is a very small team, so I think we are six or seven people and in that team we are all very supportive of each other. I think it is a fantastic unit to be a part of and it is probably one of the best teams I have been a part of. If you need help or resource or whatever the case, everyone galvanises and gets together.” (Respondent 2, 2019)*

It was clear that in this case, a smaller, rather than larger team allowed greater agility to occur between exploit and explore in order to execute on each more effectively. Being a member of a smaller team arguably allows the organisation to realise value in seeking and exploiting business opportunities more rapidly than would have been the case in larger, more bureaucratic organisational structures.

Another form of ambidexterity revealed in the data was based around senior executives attempting to externalising explore activities outside of the organisational boundaries, while maintaining exploit activities within the organisation. Value was realised when bridging occurred across the organisational boundary, as was expressed by Respondent 8:

*“...value realisation becomes very important to ensure that there is a journey you are embarking on with those external stakeholders. It’s a combination of all of those issues, the external and the internal ones, and how you bring harmony in terms of moving those forward. I think, ultimately, that gives people confidence that you know what you’re doing, and you will meet the targets that need to be met at the right time.” (Respondent 8, 2019)*

Value was thus created in managing stakeholder interests well and bringing harmony between the needs of external stakeholders by understanding and investigating those needs effectively (exploring with stakeholders) and building solutions for

stakeholders with the resources and capabilities of the organisation (exploiting the current set and configuration of internal resources). The role of the senior executives was thus to bridge the gap between what external stakeholder's needs are, and well how the organisation can deliver on those needs. The better the organisation could deliver on the needs of stakeholders, it appeared, the greater was the value that could be generated for stakeholders and the organisation.

## 5.9 Designing and Translating Strategy

The last form of ambidexterity to be explained in this chapter is between the explore activity of strategy design and the exploit activity of strategy implementation itself, where translating the strategy into actionable, executable goals was the bridge between the competing imperatives of strategy design and strategy implementation.

In order to understand strategy design as exploration, senior executives were asked to define strategy design in terms of their own understanding of this activity, and what their role in strategy design processes were. The responses to this question varied greatly. This difference in understanding strategy design owed to the fact that some of the organisations in which the senior executives worked were multinational corporations, headquartered in the US and Europe, and so senior executives in the south African operation were not charged with designing strategy, but rather translating the strategy to local organisational and environmental conditions and implementing it effectively. Some senior executives conflated translating strategy into actionable goals and measures for the organisation with strategy design itself. Contestation around what strategy design meant was primarily definitional. Simply put, Respondent 1 reflected on their definition of strategy design:

*“The trick, strategically, is figuring out that if you’re in 2019 and you’ve got eleven years to get there, how you break the steps down into bite-size chunks every year to achieve that mission, vision or aspiration. Having worked in strategy for most of my life, I think that’s probably the piece that is the toughest. Being able to articulate what that looks like and staying the course and getting it done systematically year-in-year-out. It’s a journey and if it’s not an annual deliverable, it’s something that works towards that kind of aspiration destination. It’s a little less tangible. But I think that’s the DNA of all things strategy. Create the plan and then work the plan.” (Respondent 7, 2019)*

While the above definition was based around strategy design being a way of exploring the future, creating a plan, and executing on the plan, perhaps a more compelling definition of strategy was provided by Respondent 3 below:

*“It is consistent [the strategy] and I think that we are very fortunately at [Company Name] that the mission resonates with a lot of people and it is quite strong in the organisation. The strategy is very consistent, maybe it is a personal thing, but for me it is important to buy into the objectives and the mission of the organisation, I am not in it just for the salary or the job.” (Respondent 3, 2019)*

The above quote understands the strategy design process as being about uncovering the purpose and mission of the organisation as being the real exploratory activity for the organisation. In order for senior executives to begin to bridge the gap between strategy as exploration and strategy implementation as exploitation, senior executives had to find ways to communicate the strategy into the organisation, and translate the strategy into achievable goals and objectives, in order to exploit the strategy. Respondent 3 explained well the process of translating strategy:

*“If you are thinking long term and more purposeful in terms of your objective or mission, extends beyond your current financial year, then it forces you to be more explorative to say: ‘I have a mission that transcends this year’s metrics, transcends this year’s number and the bottom line’, and if that mission transcends that, it is going to force people to say: ‘how do I align what I drive with my teams to align back to that mission.’” (Respondent 3, 2019)*

Respondent 1 explained the strategy translation in a slightly different manner:

*“I think it also goes back to how you’re defining strategy. Because if strategy’s is this big overarching plan that systemically shifts your business in a direction, then that has a far more enduring lead time. If we talking about tactical plans to shift things then it’s quite interchangeable with your... than if they were operational executional stuff, sits like this. I don’t see them as competing as, I think you aren’t going to shift your strategy unless you do it in your daily operational.” (Respondent 1, 2019)*

Critically, Respondent 1 did not see the strategy design and strategy implementation being at odds with each other. Rather, they were part of the same process of exploring for the future and exploiting in the present. The gap between exploration and exploitation was bridged by senior executives making strategy a part of the day to day operations of the organisation.

The key mechanism by which the gap between strategy design and strategy implementation was bridged was setting up clear communication structures in the organisation, clear communication about what the strategy was all about, and how it was to be achieved. This helped senior executives embed an achievable strategy into the roles, responsibilities and interests of the rank-and-file of the organisation. Respondent 4 reflected deeply on the importance of communication in translating strategy into actionable goals:

*“You need to simplify it for and you must never assume people know exactly what you are talking about. The simpler the language, the more you are going to get out of them, the more response you get out them as well. I need to balance business as usual, putting out the fires, going to the exco meetings, etc., getting the team on board with the strategy but also wanting to get this business as usual stuff closer to the strategy and it is a lot that one has to do. I try and focus on the aspects that will have the most impact. A lot of it is stuff that keeps us busy but at the end of the day you look back and think, ‘I was busy the whole day but I have not achieved anything.’” (Respondent 9, 2019)*

The above quote reflected the importance of communication in bridging the gap between explore and exploit in strategy, but also highlighted the danger of the senior executive being over-involved with the operations of the organisation and feeling like they had not achieved much as a result.

Leadership was the final mechanism that was found to have a critical role in translating strategy design into an actionable and effective implementation process. A democratic and supportive leadership style, rather than an autocratic one, was found by Respondent 6 to be the most effective means of achieving buy-in to the strategy at different levels of the organisation, leading to an enhanced ability to translate the strategy effectively, and bridge the gap between exploration and exploitation:

*“...you cannot implement a strategy and people will never believe in you if you are a dictator and say ‘do as I say’. You also have different buy-ins from different level. Quite often you may find that people are not equipped for these new strategic roles that you have given them and then you need to bring in training and provide guidance.” (Respondent 6, 2019)*

The next section of this findings chapter moves onto the dynamics of strategy implementation itself, focussing on the goals and measures that senior executives help to craft to allow others to implement strategy effectively, as well as the importance of managing and developing others in order to achieve effective implementation.

## **5.9 How do senior executives enable other managers and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy?**

This portion of the chapter deals with goal setting and measurement in strategy implementation and dealing with change and failure. The chapter therefore looks at the different approaches that senior executives in the sample had for setting these goals and measures, and how these ought to link with the strategy, and lead to its implementation. An important element of setting goals and measures was to set these for employees, and to seek ways to enable them to achieve the goals and measures by managing and developing them. Since the implementation of strategy entails change, senior executives developed several mechanisms to ensure that change was dealt with effectively, and several important criteria to help themselves, and others understand and diagnose failure in the implementation process.

The following quote from Respondent 3 captures very well the dynamics at play of a senior executive enabling others to implement a strategy, bearing in mind short- and long-term objectives:

*“If we have so much we can exploit now, why do we need to explore anything else? Are we at risk or is there a threat? Is there so much potential in our current activities that we can just accelerate and explore it? Do we even need to explore anything else or are we at risk of being disrupted? Are we in a legacy position? Are we threatened in which case we need to accelerate on our exploring? The balance comes in in*

*terms of it could be as simple as how people are measured and also what drives them because, for example, you could say it is a short versus long term. If you are in it for the short term, you are going to be exploitative. If you are thinking long term and more purposeful in terms of your objective or mission, extends beyond your current financial year, then it forces you to be more explorative.” (Respondent 3, 2019)*

In the above quote, it was clear that the term of strategy implementation was a very important factor in determining the different types of behaviours that could be expected by employees involved in strategy implementation. If the implementation was to take place over a short term, more self-interested behaviours could be expected, while in the longer term, behaviours that contributed to the sustainability and wellness of the organisation are expected. The behaviours to be expected from employees was also determined by how they were measured.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, another important perspective on exploitation and exploration is explained here, based on the short-term versus long-term time spans of strategy implementation. The short-term span of implementation was understood to be more exploitative, while the longer-term span was characterised as explorative. It was thus understood that there could be tension due to competing strategic imperatives in the long and short term. It was not clearly defined what the prospects were for developing ambidexterity between short-term and long-term spans of strategy implementation.

## **5.10 Goal Setting and Measurement in Strategy Implementation**

Goal setting and measurement of goals in strategy implementation was mostly viewed as a collaborative activity by senior executives in the sample. The tension between strategic planning (strategy design) and implementation was partially bridged through consultation between the senior executive and employees. Respondent 9, reflecting on the processes of setting goals and measurement of those goals, said that consultation and collaboration were critical success factors to ensure that the strategy was implemented:

*“I will always sit and say, ‘Guys, this is the plan, this what I want to achieve, what do you think of the plan? Any ideas and how are we*



*going to achieve them?’ In there I will throw is a few questions about that they think of it. Then we set out how we are going to do it and monitor it and track it, at least once a month we have a sit down and revisited if our plans are working, do we ramp up etc. It is all written down and I always tell them to not rest on their laurels and do the same thing over and over again and really just aim to be average, always push yourself and try and do things differently.” (Respondent 9, 2019)*

Similarly, Respondent 1 provided good insight into the bottom up process of setting goals and measuring performance in their organisation:

*“In that business particularly, [Company Name], it used to happen based on bottom-up feedback, lots of data sources and the board would go away, do a business planning strategy and there would be a business plan, an annual business plan. And I do not lie when I say that business plan would be articulated in a very particular way, it would have: this is what we’re trying to achieve, this is how it will be measured. Goals were very smart, so you would have objectives, you’d have quality outcomes or quality measures and then you would have quality requirements and you would have scorecards.” (Respondent 1, 2019)*

The above quotes reflect the collaborative and inclusive way in which successful implementation of strategy could occur, by bridging the gap between strategy design and implementation by effectively translating the strategy across a team or organisation. The mechanics, therefore, of translating a strategy was in the creation of goals that the organisation wanted to achieve, and the setting up of measures to assess whether the goals were being achieved or not. The development of the goals and measures, and the collaborative way in which this was done reflects that collaborative leadership and the ability of a senior executive to be thoroughly consultative with the rank and file were core leadership competencies that enabled effective strategy implementation.

## **5.11 Managing and Developing Others**

Another core product of the strategy implementation processes within organisations was that senior executives believed that they had a critical role to play in helping to develop employee’s skills and talents, using the strategy implementation process as

a platform for personal and professional development. An important aspect of this developmental process was encouraging employees to take individual responsibility for their actions, behaviour and for their role in the implementation process. Respondent 1 made a key contribution to our understanding that developing others and simultaneously holding them accountable was a key driver for implementation success, as was selecting the right team to implement, which had the right set of skills and personality types so that the team “gelled: well together:

*“I find you can achieve more with a diverse team that, so you do not have to have great people to achieve greatness, you can achieve great things with ordinary normal people. You can go along a path to say, ‘I am going to hire the best I find for this or the best I find of that’, and you end up with a lot of people that are incredible achievers individually but maybe your team is not gelling as well as it could be. You need to make some compromises to say: ‘This is going to bring the right mix and this going gel well in terms of the other team and you build a great with which you can achieve great things.” (Respondent 1, 2019)*

The above quote reflected the senior executive’s experience of bringing a team together in order to perform. A trade-off was made between having individual high performers versus having a team that gelled well, where perhaps some of the individuals of the team were not the best performers. The trade-off was made in favour of having a team that performed well together in the strategy implementation process, rather than having a set of great individual performers. This was developmental, because it allowed for some of the weaker members of the implementation team to be developed and grown by the stronger team members.

Respondent 7 reflected on the importance of individual leadership on his team, and how understanding team members on an individual level was a critical management competency in order to get the best possible performance from each individual member of the implementation team:

*“I believe in individual leadership, in understanding every person in your team on an individual level, and understanding what will make them successful, and how you help them do what is required. It’s not a one-size-fits-all. I’m a huge enthusiast of learning and I think people with a strong learning spirit and who appreciate that this can be a wonderful*

*journey, are people that I gravitate towards, and vice versa. I think people-centric is probably the one word I would choose to describe me and my management style.” (Respondent 7, 2019)*

This senior executive described their management style as people-centric, which was an indicator of their preference to develop people. Respondent 9 went further than this, and believed that it was his responsibility to equip and develop other members of his team to be able to step into his role should he leave the organisation:

*“I do purposefully because if I get bust tomorrow, I want one of my team members to slot into my seat automatically. I look at stretching the team, but that said I will look at the numbers on a daily basis and ask the guys the questions and what the trend is. Pull the figures for me, I have an idea what they are and ask them if they are comfortable with the figures or not. I think they also know that when I ask that question they know that I have picked something up but then I will also coach them and say look, look for the trends and look at this dip that looks odd so ask questions around that. I tell them to go and find out what that is and report back to me.” (Respondent 9, 2019)*

The above quote clearly illustrates that senior executives took care to develop their team members, and to coach them in order to get the best out of them to ensure that a strategy was implemented effectively. The usage of goals and measures was thus just as important to help to develop others as it was to implement the strategy, and sought to help bridge the gap between strategy design and strategy implementation by setting up an effective strategy translation process within organisations.

## **5.12 Managing Change and Failure**

How senior executives managed change and how failure was understood was a key component in the strategy implementation process. Senior executives reflected on the multiple ways that they managed the changes that implementing strategy creates within organisations. A large component of managing change was how failure was understood and dealt with in organisations. There were differences in how failure was defined and in terms of how consequences of failure were dealt with. Change in organisations brought about by implementing strategy sometimes created anxiety for senior executives and employees, and senior executives sought a multitude of ways

to manage their own anxieties around change, and the anxieties of others. Respondent 2 reflected on how changes brought about by having to implement a strategy generated anxiety for him, particularly around the fear of failure:

*“Yes, it does [create anxiety for me]. I think it is a combination because it is excitement as well. You are excited about these concepts of this new way of looking at things, this new methodology or new operating model but then there is anxiety in terms of adoption and if it will work. Because you are applying time and you are involving other people so that is their time as well and their buy-in. If it does not work then there is egg on your face or it might be a waste of time or negative impact. However, I think it needs to be weighed up in terms of if you had not tried, you would have stayed the same and then there is not benefit or learning. I think it is excitement and there is definitely anxiety and fear. When you are exploring and playing outside of your comfort zone and then there is just that natural fear of if it does not work.” (Respondent 2, 2019)*

Another executive reflected a similar dynamic in terms of having to implement a strategy that he had not designed himself, and felt disempowered by the changes brought about by restructuring the organisation:

*“Lots of things keep me up at night. Lack of empowerment, it happens a lot in big organisations, decisions get made centrally and you are impacted and you have no choice. There are certain times of the year that it happens a lot, we have just had big structural changes at [Company Name]. It is irrespective of performance, of how well you perform but a person can be impacted. Your best person in your best role can be affected because of change of strategy that has happened globally and it filters down to you.” (Respondent 3, 2019)*

The above dynamics illustrated that anxiety around change not only affected the senior executive themselves but could also create anxiety for those working under them. Respondent 7, however, gave a more positive reflection on the notion that the anxiety created by change could be used as a tool to bring about meaningful and positive change to the organisation:

*“Innovation is not a cheap exercise; it requires a lot of investment and you’re not always going to get it right. You’re certainly going to learn every step along the way, but I think anxiety is around the ability to deliver something that will be meaningful for the enterprise in the future, and in a way that creates competitive advantage for your particular enterprise.” (Respondent 7, 2019)*

What this quote shows is that it was possible for senior executives to elevate their thinking about the anxiety created around change and turn around their thinking about change to lead to positive outcomes for the organisation. This required the senior executive to think about change not just in terms of themselves, but in terms of how the organisation would transform the anxiety around change into useful and impactful outputs to drive the creation of greater competitive advantage, sustainability and innovation for the organisation.

Linked to the notion of how change was managed in organisations was how failure was defined and treated by senior executives. As much as there was anxiety created around change initiatives in the organisation, a fear of failure was the most common trend identified by the respondents in the sample. Senior executives treated failure differently in the organisations, with some organisations being more tolerant of failure than others.

Respondent 4 gave good insight into how failure was defined and treated in their organisation:

*“Did we ask other people for their input on the failure? Because sometimes when you ask people, they may be blinded by their own judgement. They might not think that they failed, they may have thought that the market was just bad. I’ve had instances when I took over the role where everyone told me I had to get rid of a certain person. No, rather dock reward. This person had the skills, the knowledge, the details. Again, this isn’t easy. You have to invest the time as a leader and if you’re passionate about people, you make the time. If you’re passionate about just making numbers and success, you won’t. You’ll move that person on as quickly as possible and get the next person in.” (Respondent 4, 2019)*

It was important for senior executives to define and set the parameters for failure. Since it could be suggested that failure is sometimes an inevitable outcome of a change effort, including change in the organisation brought about by implementing strategy, it was incumbent on senior executives to make others aware that they had in fact failed to execute the job at hand, and that there should be consequences for failure. How failure was treated in the organisation, as well as how change was understood was a function of the culture of the organisation. Over and above the senior executive's important role in defining failure, and meting out consequence, the organisation set cultural mores around failure. Respondent 6 explained just how powerful culture was in his company in terms of how failure was treated:

*"It is definitely a cultural thing, the organisation perceives individual points and how people judge others. You can change that through different protocols and where you have processes where failure is recognised if it is for the right reason, but in general culture and particularly in financial services it is cultural thing, people just do not accept failure." (Respondent 6, 2019)*

In a similar vein, Respondent 6 suggested that while organisational culture was an important determinant as to how failure was treated, failure was accepted in his company to the extent that it could provide the basis for learning and improving individuals and teams:

*"It [failure] is accepted. Our global CEO never talks about culture without talking about failing fast and learning from that. We even have something that we call transforming whilst you perform, or you performing whilst you transform. And all of those narratives really speaks to an acceptance that with the changing company, we're moving to a new area. There are new experiences for a whole lot of people, and there are a lot of unknowns. So, it's always important to take stock of what is unknown. Think about it, before you implement something, think about the implication it might have, and then move forward. That's what I encourage my team to do and that is why I think failure is accepted." (Respondent 8, 2019)*

Failure and learning from failing was cited by Respondent 8 as particularly useful in implementing strategy, as it allowed organisations and employees to adapt

themselves to changing environmental and organisational dynamics in real time, as the strategy was being implemented.

### **5.13 What Management Styles and Attitudes Assist Senior Managers to Implement Strategy More Effectively?**

The final portion of this chapter deals with some of the management styles, attitudes and beliefs that assisted senior to implement strategy more effectively. This section then moves on to cap off the findings of the research by providing a short exegesis on senior executive general reflections on the strategy implementation process. It was found that reflecting on personal values, attitudes and beliefs by senior executives in the research interview process allowed the respondents to tap into the highly personal drivers of behaviour that had a real impact on strategy implementation outcomes, and helped senior executives overcome and balance the sometime competing imperatives in the strategy implementation process.

### **5.14 Personal Values in Strategy Implementation**

In the level of motivation and its impact on overcoming strategy implementation challenges and developing people and the organisation, Respondent 4 summed up what the experience of bringing people together to overcome these challenges felt like:

*“What motivates me are the challenges, learning new things, trying to solve problems, and also bringing people along and seeing people develop. There’s no greater pleasure for me than seeing someone that says, ‘you have no idea what impact you’ve had on my career. By taking that division that was broken, the impact you had in fixing it, the way you did it by tracking me along, I’m now here because in some way you played a role’. For me that means far more than, ‘can we achieve that number?’ and, ‘we’ve built a division’. That became a consequence of that. That’s what really motivates me.” (Respondent 4, 2019)*

Senior executives in the sample seemed to relish taking on large challenges. Taking on challenges was motivating for the respondents, rather than being a demotivator. Arguably, taking on challenges inadvertently exposed senior executives to greater exploration of new challenges in organisations, and of exploring new ways to

overcome the challenges of organisational life by way of developing people, and then encouraging members of the organisation to collaborate to be successful. Overcoming challenges by solving the identified challenges then subsumed these challenges into normal organisational routines, as the challenges were exploited. Another important personal value that was important for implementing strategy effectively was creativity. Respondent 2 had the following to say on how he enjoyed the fact that his job changed all the time and that it was not repetitive:

*“What gets me up in the morning is the fact that there is no repetition in my day and the things that I am involved in, they require a lot of information and a lot of time but they are also really interesting. I think if it was not for those components where there is variety and that variety is interesting, I do not think I would be enjoying this at all.” (Respondent 2, 2019)*

Senior executives took enjoyment in the variety of experiences that their jobs exposed them to. Having a routine job would have stifled their creativity, and arguably limited their ability to contribute creatively and innovatively to strategy implementation in their organisations. The second last value that was identified in the research sample was that of autonomy. Senior executives enjoyed their role and the challenges that they had to face in terms of implementing strategy when they felt that they had autonomy, and latitude to be flexible in their roles:

*“This role offers me lots of autonomy, which is very important to me at this point in my career. A lot of flexibility, which is also important to me at this particular point in time. And an opportunity to learn, not only locally but globally and cross-functionally.” (Respondent 1, 2019)*

Latitude in role flexibility and autonomy was linked to taking on combined functional roles in organisations which allowed senior executives to implement strategy more effectively. The final personal value that senior executives believed was important in strategy implementation was an understanding of what their purpose was, both as a human being, as well as defining and refining their purpose in the organisation. When senior executives felt like they had discovered their purpose, strategy implementation was made more effective and positively impactful on the organisation. Respondent 4 explained purpose beautifully here:



*“I think so, yes. I think it come down the fundamental question of, ‘What are we here for, why we are here?’ and that goes from work to as a human being. You need to have purpose and leaning to ones’ strengths is definitely, it is a multifaceted thing and you need to understand that you do has purpose and there needs to be a line to what you believe, then you are ‘A for away’. Otherwise there is a misalignment there and you can fool yourself into believing that you can, because I believe that almost anyone can do anything and you can fool yourself into that, but if you are not passionate about it you are not really going to get into it.”*  
(Respondent 4, 2019)

Tapping into purpose was a key driver of passion – passion for the work that the senior executive was doing in the organisation, and passion to energise and give life to the strategy implementation effort in organisations.

## **5.15 Reflections on Strategy Implementation**

Reflecting on the strategy implementation process for senior executives encouraged them to attempt to understand their behaviour, thoughts actions and beliefs about their role in the organisation. The below quote from Respondent 2 helps explain that the actions taken to enhance strategy implementation are not based explicitly on past experience, but rather unconsciously relying on past decisions and understandings to inform current and future actions. It was the interview process itself that helped senior executives to become conscious of how they rely on their experience and tacit knowledge to get the implementation work done. Respondent 2 offered the following reflection on the strategy implementation process, informed by their experience and tacit knowledge:

*“Once I understand what I am trying to achieve and I can then articulate that to my team and get them involved and then you can see if we did do this: what would the benefit be. We then try to sell that benefit than opposed to it not happening and us continuing the same way. I think it is about being clear about what the end game is and then having a clear path on how to get there and you take people along on that journey and show them the benefit. If there is not benefit to be derived it is very difficult to sell anything.”* (Respondent 2, 2019)

Clearly, senior executive experiences in “selling the benefits” of implementation to the organisation made implementation easier, as if there was no realisable benefit that could be ‘sold’ to the organisation, then implementation would not occur effectively. Respondent 9 reflected that he would like to leave an imprint on the organisation, leave behind a legacy of building up a business unit, and impart his knowledge on to others so that they could step into his role if he decided to leave the organisation:

*“My goal is to turn the high advice channel around and make it the most profitable channel within [Company Name] and on that day I will say I am moving on, but I should feel it. I will get to a point where I want to grow and achieve more elsewhere and when that time comes you want to walk away with your head held up high and that you mad a difference. I mentioned the people aspect so I want to walk away and left me that much more knowledgeable and capable. If I step out, I want one of them to be able to step into that chair and be able to the job just as well.” (Respondent 9, 2019)*

Reflecting on the responsibility for developing others and maintaining their employment through periods of organisational restructuring, Respondent 8 highlighted the importance of looking after staff in order to keep them within the organisation. Continuity of organisational members certainly enhanced the organisation’s ability to implement strategy effectively, and was at the same time a challenge to overcome in terms of restructuring the organisation while at the same time keeping people’s jobs:

*“At the local level, I can proudly say that from this financial year we are able to make sure that we mapped a lot of those resources whose traditional jobs have been taken out of the blueprint of the company into new set of skills aligning them with the new jobs that are being created so that at an individual employee perspective, the biggest negative impact you will find is losing your old job, but the positive is that you’re gaining a new one. And we’ll always try to make sure that you don’t lose by way of rewards, you don’t end up in a more disadvantaged position. So, I think that has been the biggest internal challenge around implementing that strategy.” (Respondent 8, 2019)*

## 5.16 Summary of Findings

The summary of findings that the data reveals is captured below. While the findings on senior executive lived experiences of strategy implementation are diverse, a pattern can be identified in how senior executives managed the strategy implementation process, and how they reflected on this. The combination of functional roles at a senior level allowed some of the respondents to gain a bird's eye view of different operational areas of the business and ensure that strategic alignment of different competencies occurred, though this created tension within the senior executive as to how much time and effort to dedicate to the different roles. Similarly, the transition from specialist to more generalist roles also assisted senior executives to get the strategy implementation work done. Ironically, senior executives with more general roles were better placed to understand the organisation strategically, and understand how each operational area of the organisation could contribute to the implementation of the strategy.

Senior executives were intent on disrupting the status quo within organisations, and were responsible for creating uncertainty and risk in this regard. Disrupting the status quo, however, brought with it the opportunity for the organisation to attain new talent, skills and competencies that could help the organisation to be more successful. Other mechanisms that senior executives employed to help to generate certainty for themselves and others appeared in different ways. One way of creating certainty was by referring the change and anxiety of reportees to the actual strategy itself, explaining the benefits of the new strategy to them, and that the change and anxiety that the reportees felt was in fact part of the strategy, and that everything was going to plan. Consultation, collaboration and transparency was the other major aspect of how some certainty was created for the organisation in implementing strategy. Providing clarity on some strategic objectives, and how they were sometimes in competition with each other was found to be a key mechanism by which senior executives created some certainty for subordinates by referring to the set of capabilities the organisation already had which would allow it to overcome the paradoxes presented in implementing the strategy.

Adaptable leadership approaches were key in ensuring that strategy was implemented effectively. Senior executives felt that if they were able to really understand the external and organisational context in which the strategy was being implemented, then they would be better equipped to drive strategy implementation

successfully. On the one hand, organisational planning was an important aspect to understand what resources the senior executive had at their disposal, and agility and adaptability about how those resources could be deployed, redeployed, adjusted and used in new ways very rapidly was characterised as being the epitome of successful strategy implementation.

One key way in which senior executives managed the strategic tensions in the organisation was to accept that there were contradictions within the strategy, and that by being transparent about these tensions, making the trade-offs that they felt they had to make, and being transparent about the paradoxes, they could navigate the paradoxes and implement strategy without having to necessarily resolve the paradoxes. Bridging the gap between competing strategic imperatives was still important though. Collaboration with other senior executives, and collaboration between cross functional teams was a key way in which strategic paradoxes were effectively managed, and organisational alignment to implement the strategy effectively occurred.

Multiple different forms of ambidexterity existed within organisations and senior executives sought to acknowledge their existence and find ways to effectively bridge the gap between exploring and exploiting. While on the one hand, spatial and temporal cycling of ambidexterity was employed by senior executives to manage ambidexterity. Adaptive, agile leadership approaches were found as the most commonly employed and most effective mechanisms by which senior executives bridged the gap between explore and exploit imperatives in organisations as far as strategy implementation was concerned. Helping teams and reportees to understand how their efforts assisted with the implementation of the strategy helped the implementation process tremendously.

Goal setting and measurement, and the development of collaborative metrics, were found as the most effective manner to energise the strategy implementation processes within organisations. Implementation goals were tied to a strong impulse by senior executives to have the strategy implementation process be developmental for reportees. It was of critical importance that senior executives developed the pre-existing skills, talents and abilities of reportees, to ensure that while the strategy was being implemented, the long-term growth of reportees and the sustainability of the organisation could also occur.

How senior executives treated failure and managed change was varied. Sometimes failure was seen as an effective way to learn, and to take on new skills that would make strategy implementation more effective in the future, but sometimes, failure was not tolerated. This depended more on the industry in which the senior executive was placed, than how senior executives themselves meted out punishment and reward for failure. A similar approach to managing change was also found in the data. Bringing reportees on the change journey and communicating effectively how change might help reportees was a key mechanism that allowed senior executives to bring about change effectively, and ensure that the strategy was implemented effectively.

Senior executives relished the opportunity to take on large challenges, and found meaning in this – that they were doing their bit to ensure the long-term survival of the organisation by being simultaneously responsible and innovative. Autonomy in their roles was another value highly-esteemed by senior executives, and they connected autonomy with favourable strategy implementation outcomes. Selling the benefits of implementation was a key reflection by senior executives explaining how they achieved effective implementation. Taking responsibility for developing others was lastly an important value that senior executives held which in their own words was a key mechanism by which their organisations could implement strategy most effectively.

## Chapter 6: Discussion of Results

### 6.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on developing themes, that is, the relationship between different constructs that emerged from the data collected in the field, and then comparing these findings to the theoretical base that was developed in the literature review. The objective of this exercise, therefore, was to help build an argument about the descriptive and explanatory power of incumbent theory and literature to make meaning of observations in the field. Conversely, it was imaginable that theory would need to be adapted, revised and otherwise challenged if it was not able to conceptually explain the field observations.

As thematic analysis was taken as the primary method of analysing the data, themes were developed out of the interview transcripts, whereby open coding was performed to find points of similarity and points of difference in senior executive's experiences. Once open coding was completed, the codes were arranged into code groups. From the code groups, common concepts and conceptualisations arose, and relationships between concepts began to emerge. The table below links together the research questions that were developed in the problem formulation chapter, to the concepts and their relationships that emerged from the data, to the development of themes that guided the thematic analysis of data, and its interplay with theory that this chapter is constructed upon.

**Table 4: Research questions, and related concepts and themes.**

Research Questions	Relationship of Concepts	Themes
<b>Question 1: How do senior executives deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?</b>	How senior executives created uncertainty, and how they resolved uncertainty in the strategy implementation process.	Theme 1a: Implementation of strategy created uncertainty for the organisation and its members and senior executives developed several mechanisms to generate certainty for the organisation and its members.
	How senior executives used interpersonal and management methods to deal with uncertainty from outside of the organisation.	Theme 1b: Senior executives developed and employed a range of interpersonal and management methods for dealing with uncertainty from without the organisation.
	How senior executives understood the context of implementation, and	Theme 1c: Understanding the organisational context in which the strategy was being implemented and leveraging off

	the impact of this on implementation.	this context enabled senior executives to implement strategy more effectively.
<b>Question 2: How do senior executives resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival?</b>	What trade-offs senior executives had to make, and how they made these trade-offs impacted on how strategy was implemented.	Theme 2a: Senior executives were forced to make a range of decision trade-offs, given limited resources, on an ongoing basis, in order to ensure the effective implementation of strategy.
	Senior executives employed methods to balance competing strategic imperatives, making strategy implementation more effective.	Theme 2b: Senior executives developed a range of methods to balance and oscillate effectively between competing strategic imperatives within the organisations, leading to an enhanced ability to implement strategy most effectively.
	Ambidexterity allowed senior executives to implement strategy more effectively.	Theme 2c: An organisational culture of ambidexterity, coupled with ambidextrous leadership approaches enabled successful strategy design, translation and implementation to occur.
	Building a bridge between strategy design and implementation through translation allowed for more effective strategy implementation.	Theme 2d: Translating strategy effectively allowed senior executives to 'bridge the gap' between the competing interests of strategy design and strategy implementation.
<b>Question 3: How do senior executives enable other executives and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy?</b>	When senior executives focussed on building people's skills, strategy implementation was made more effective.	Theme 3a: Senior executive's focus on developing the skills and competencies of their reportees lead to strategy being implemented more effectively.
	How senior executives used managing change and managing failure to positively impact people, and thus the strategy implementation process.	Theme 3b: The manner in which senior executives managed change and defined failure impacted greatly on strategy implementation processes and outcomes.
<b>Question 4: What management styles and attitudes assist senior executives to implement strategy more effectively?</b>	Combining functional roles was one mechanism that allowed senior executives to implement strategy more effectively.	Theme 4a: Combining functional roles, though fraught with tension, helped senior executives to implement strategy effectively.
	When senior executives experienced a transition from functional to more general roles, strategy implementation was enhanced.	Theme 4b: Transitioning from specialist to generalist roles allowed senior executives to drive strategy implementation more effectively.
	When senior executives leveraged their personal values at work, strategy implementation was made more effective.	Theme 4c: Accepting challenges, creativity and agility were valorised by senior executives as core personal values that assisted in the

		effective implementation of strategy.
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The twelve themes that appear in the table above are the primary means of structuring the chapter along with the research questions. Each research question, and the themes linked to it are discussed in turn. Summarised data (findings) are presented under each theme, and literature is cited which helps to explain the findings under each theme. After the exposition of theory on each theme, a conclusion is reached on whether the findings either support, extend or contradict the literature.

## 6.2 Discussion of Findings for Research Question 1

*Question 1: How do senior executives deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?*

### 6.2.1 Theme 1a

*Implementation of strategy created uncertainty for the organisation and its members and senior executives developed several mechanisms to generate certainty for the organisation and its members.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 1a:**

Senior executives who were responsible for implementing strategy believed that they were responsible for disrupting the organisational status quo, that is, the organisational routines and incumbent operations. In disrupting the status quo by implementing innovation, restructuring the organisation, attaining greater diversity in the workforce (race, gender and age representation) and onboarding new organisational capabilities such as agility, uncertainty was created for the organisation, and the organisation was exposed to elevated risk. This uncertainty was experienced by the organisational members that reported into the senior executive and down the management line and was interpreted as fear and anxiety by employees. Importantly, senior executives cited that creating uncertainty was vital to ensure that strategy could be implemented, and that the organisation would not slip back into its incumbent organisational routines, subsuming the newly implemented strategy.



Senior executives successfully managed to generate some certainty for others in the organisation which alleviated some of the anxiety and fears of organisational members and created some comfort for them. The mechanisms to create certainty were multifarious, and included referring to the strategy with clarity as the roadmap to success and sustainability, extensive consultations with the affected parties, enhancing the quantity and quality of communications within the organisations about the strategy, and being transparent with all stakeholders affected by the implementation of strategy, and illustrating the benefits of the strategy to individuals. All of these mechanisms enhanced the senior executive's ability to implement strategy more effectively.

### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 1a:**

Dameron and Torset (2014) noted that three subjectively constituted tensions (paradoxes) existed for the strategist, namely, social tension, focus tension and cognitive tension in the strategy formulation process. Smith (2014), on the other hand, suggested that leaders managed these paradoxes by either accepting that paradoxes exist, accommodating paradoxes or finding ways to integrate them. Smith (2014) went on to suggest that a further area for research, that was not well understood, was how leaders could engage and communicate an inconsistent, paradoxical strategy to subordinates who craved consistency. As far as resolving uncertainty and ambivalence in strategy implementation was concerned, Ashforth et al. (2014) argued that senior executives could either avoid ambivalence by evading it; use domination, favouring one choice over another; compromising by seeking to find a middle road between the choices; or lastly, by employing holism, whereby opposing choices were consciously embraced and accommodated uncompromisingly.

### **Conclusion of Theme 1a:**

The findings confirm the theoretical propositions put forward by Dameron and Torset (2014) (senior executives face all three tensions), Smith (2014) (senior executives found ways to accommodate the paradoxes) and Ashforth et al. (2014) (senior executives employed holism to resolve uncertainty). Smith's (2014) theory is expanded upon in that senior executives used transparency, communication and collaboration to create consistency and certainty in strategy implementation for organisational members.

### **6.2.2 Theme 1b**

*Senior executives developed and employed a range of interpersonal and management methods for dealing with uncertainty from without the organisation.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 1b:**

Uncertainty that was created for the organisation from without was readily identified by senior executives. The main sources of uncertainty emanated from external stakeholders such as clients who were outside of the control of the senior executive, as well as economic and political uncertainty and instability. Internal stakeholders were considered easier to manage, and sometimes senior executives felt disempowered by economic and political uncertainty that affected the organisation.

The management methods for trying to create certainty was to carefully and clearly explain the strategy implementation – what the organisation was trying to achieve – and the benefit of these changes to the stakeholders that created some certainty within the organisation. For economic and political uncertainty, senior executives employed different environmental scanning techniques, including scenario planning to try and better understand the risks and uncertainties of the environment. Talking about organisational agility and trying to promote this through implementing an agile strategy was also an attempt to be able to create some certainty by making the organisation more ready to adapt to changes in the environment.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 1b:**

Similar to Theme 1a, Smith (2014), suggested that leaders managed strategic paradoxes by either accepting that paradoxes exist, accommodated paradoxes or found ways to integrate them. Ashforth et al. (2014), on the other hand, argued that senior executives could either avoid ambivalence by evading it; use domination, favouring one choice over another; or compromise by seeking to find a middle road between the choices; or lastly, by employing holism, whereby opposing choices were consciously embraced.

#### **Conclusion of Theme 1b:**

The research findings confirm Smith's (2014) proposition that senior executives found ways to accommodate strategic paradoxes that were presented to external stakeholders by communicating the benefits of implementing a strategy to external stakeholders. The findings confirmed Ashforth's et al. (2014) holism tactic to resolve

uncertainty. Senior executives used scenario planning and other forms of environmental scanning was a method by which to create some certainty in the choices to be made in an unpredictable economic and political environment.

### **6.2.3 Theme 1c**

*Understanding the organisational context in which the strategy was being implemented and leveraging off this context enables senior executives to implement strategy more effectively.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 1c:**

Senior executives dedicated a great deal of time and effort in trying to understand the organisational context in which strategy was being implemented. Understanding the context came from long tenure and experience in working in the organisation, as well as having conversations and discussions with organisational members about the culture, history and the organisational memory of the firm. This gave senior executives the ability read the mood of the organisation, and the appetite and sometimes possible sources of resistance to strategic change.

Senior executives were able to leverage off the organisational context to make strategy implementation more effective by combining organisational (business) planning with adaptive leadership postures. What this meant was that senior executives were able to decide how to divide and allocate financial, human and other organisational resources in order to implement the strategy most effectively. Senior executives were also able to adapt their leadership style to reallocate and reassign resources wherever this was needed, based on the organisational context (the mood, appetite for change) and how this changed.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 1c:**

Raffaelli et al. (2019) suggested that it was the cognitive and emotional frames of senior executive teams and individuals that were of chief importance in the innovation processes (analogous to the strategy processes observed in this research project), particularly when it came to dealing with strategic paradoxes. Raffaelli et al. (2019) defined cognitive frames as the mental templates used by those to make sense of environmental information, while emotional frames were those templates used to process feelings about the information being perceived and how these were aligned

by the team or individual actor's aspirations, passions, desires and fears. Mintzberg and Waters (1985) suggested that the leader's ability to accurately read the 'mood' of an organisation impacted on the strategic choices that organisations made to attain success.

### **Conclusion of Theme 1c:**

The findings confirm Raffaelli's et al. (2019) assertion that the cognitive and emotional frames were important in strategy implementation. Senior executives made use of different cognitive frames to understand the organisational context, and emotional frames to mobilise others around the strategy implementation. Knowing when and where to implement which emotional frames to elicit action and buy into the strategic choices relied on the senior executive's ability to read the 'mood' of the organisation effectively.

## **6.3 Discussion of Findings for Research Question 2**

*Question 2: How do senior executives resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival?*

### **6.3.1 Theme 2a**

*Senior executives were forced to make a range of decision trade-offs, given limited resources, on an ongoing basis, in order to ensure the effective implementation of strategy.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 2a:**

Senior executives were keenly aware of the strategic imperatives that were in competition with each other, and realised the resource constraints that they faced, preventing them from pursuing all strategic imperatives – they had to choose. Some of the competing strategic imperatives included the following trade-offs: short-term financial stability versus long-term strategic innovation; making conflicting decisions about where the allocation of financial resources would best allow the organisation to achieve its strategic goals; and where talented individuals and teams should be allocated to best meet the organisation's strategic objectives.

Many of these competing strategic imperatives were solved by senior executives through a multitude of ambidextrous behaviours and perspectives that sometimes avoided trade-off ('or' type) decisions about how to allocate time, effort and resources. Firstly, senior executives spent a great deal of time reflecting on the trade-off decisions to be made, and tried to find ways to bridge the gap between competing strategic imperatives. Secondly, collaboration between themselves and other executives, as well as between themselves, teams and individual managers helped senior executives to generate new decision paths beyond simple option A versus option B decisions. This collaboration required an adaptive, collaborative leadership style to open up conversations and compromises about possible alternatives to an/or decisions.

### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 2a:**

Eisenhardt and Bingham (2017) suggested that it was executives who were responsible for taking action and adapting themselves to be able to take advantage of the opportunities revealed in the strategy processes. They went on to suggest that competitive advantage is short lived and unpredictable, so executives had to be able to constantly adapt themselves and take new actions to capture value in the market. Zacher and Rosing (2015) characterised leadership (or executive) ambidexterity as a form of ambidexterity that occurred at the level of the individual leader and was characterised by leaders promoting closing and opening behaviours for themselves and their followership that sought to guide and strike a balance between exploration-based behaviours and exploitation-based behaviours.

### **Conclusion of Theme 2a:**

The findings of the research agree with Eisenhardt's and Bingham's (2017) assertion that executives must adapt themselves to take advantage of opportunities revealed in the strategy process. This meant that senior executives needed to make decisions about which strategic opportunities were to be pursued, given limited resources. Moving between strategic opportunities in an ambidextrous manner was achieved by senior executives exhibiting opening behaviours (collaboration) to explore strategy implementation opportunities effectively. As per Zacher's and Rosing's (2015) assertion, senior executives then exhibited closing behaviours (exploitation) by subsuming the newly discovered opportunities to the organisational routines of the organisation to capture value.

### **6.3.2 Theme 2b:**

*Senior executives developed a range of methods to balance and oscillate effectively between competing strategic imperatives within the organisations, leading to an enhanced ability to implement strategy most effectively.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 2b:**

Senior executives almost exclusively reported that exploration and exploitation could not occur at the same time, and at the same location within the organisation. Aside from location and timing of explore and exploit activities, the size and scale of the teams responsible for exploit and explore activities also impacted the prospects for ambidexterity. Senior executives insisted, however, that there needed to be collaboration between the explorative and exploitative elements within the organisation in order to bridge the gap between these sometimes competing strategic activities. The role of the senior executive was therefore to encourage different forms of collaboration to ensure a balance between explore and exploit and help to build organisational and leadership agility to be able to oscillate between exploration and exploitation. If senior executives were able to promote collaboration and agility between strategic imperatives, then strategy implementation was made more effective.

Developing a 'culture of ambidexterity' for the organisation was reported as a key responsibility for senior executives, and driving this culture that would promote the right kinds of behaviour would allow for effective strategy implementation by overcoming competition between strategic imperatives. When explore and exploit activities were separated, a key role for senior executives was also help individual teams and individuals to understand the importance of each of their explore and exploit contributions to the overall success of the organisation.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 2b:**

Ambidexterity was achieved by organisations when explore and exploit initiatives occurred either at different times, or in structurally separate locations in organisations (Lavie et al., 2010; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Simsek et al. (2009) went further and defined the 'how' of organisational ambidexterity in terms of a temporal continuum between sequential and simultaneous ambidexterity. The 'where' of organisational ambidexterity referred to its location, which is characterised as a continuum between

independent business units (or divisions) and interdependencies between business units (or divisions) (Simsek et al., 2009). Tuan Luu (2017) suggested that when leaders balance ambidextrous behaviours well, followers were more likely to exhibit greater entrepreneurial orientation (EO). EO, in turn, was defined by the following behavioural characteristics: an elevated appetite for innovation; proactive behaviour; and acceptable risk taking. EO was also linked to enhanced operational effectiveness for firms.

### **Conclusion of Theme 2b:**

The findings of the research confirmed the above theoretical propositions that explore and exploit initiatives in strategy implementation were sometimes spatially separated, and sometimes temporally discrete. The important point here is that senior executives exhibiting leadership ambidexterity were able to balance sometimes competing strategic imperatives with agility. The findings further confirm that the entrepreneurial orientation promulgated by senior executives helped to bridge the gap between explore and exploit by elevating reportees' appetite for innovation, proactive behaviour and acceptable risk taking.

### **6.3.3 Theme 2c**

*An organisational culture of ambidexterity, coupled with ambidextrous leadership approaches enabled successful strategy design, translation and implementation to occur.*

### **Summary of Data for Theme 2c:**

Senior executives in the sample understood the process of strategy design to be primarily explorative in nature. Strategy design therefore created vision and purpose around what the organisation could be in the future. Strategy implementation, on the other hand, was characterised as an exploitative activity, in which the hoped-for organisational outcomes of the strategy design could be realised and incorporated into the normal operating routines of the organisation. While in some of the studied organisations, strategy designs were formulated at foreign headquarters with the South Africa based office being responsible for implementation locally, most strategy designs were generated at the highest levels of the organisation, often by senior executives themselves, and signed off by the company board.

Interestingly, some of the respondents did not understand strategy design and implementation processes as individuated, separated activities, but more like an iterative cycle oscillating rapidly between design and implementation. On the whole, though, senior executives identified the translation of the strategy design, that is, creating easily understandable, actionable and measurable goals was the linchpin connecting discrete design and implementation phases.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 2c:**

Zacher and Rosing (2015) characterised leadership (or executive) ambidexterity as a form of ambidexterity that occurred at the level of the individual leader and was characterised by leaders promoting closing and opening behaviours for themselves and their followership that sought to guide and strike a balance between exploration-based behaviours and exploitation-based behaviours. Hrebiniak (2008) suggested that although strategy implementation follows design, the two processes are interdependent, and part of a planning, executing and adapting process where senior executives are responsible for both the design and implementation processes. The strategy is thus constituted on the interplay and blending of design and implementation processes (Whittington, 2006).

#### **Conclusion of Theme 2c:**

The findings of the research agree with Hrebiniak (2008) that strategy plays out in organisations as a practice, emerging from the interplay of design and implementation. Senior executives made use of leadership ambidexterity – opening and closing behaviours – such as goal setting (opening) and goal measurement (closing) – as the mechanism to translate a strategy design to implementation.

#### **6.3.4 Theme 2d**

*Translating strategy effectively allowed senior executives to ‘bridge the gap’ between the competing interests of strategy design and strategy implementation.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 2d:**

Senior executives defined successful translation as the ability to successfully move between strategy design and strategy implementation. Translation was all about goal creation and goal measurement. An important element of goal creation and



measurement was senior executives clearly communicating what the organisation was trying to achieve through the strategy, and democratic, collaborative leadership postures, in which goals and measures were co-created with individuals and functional teams as the key to successful ambidexterity between strategy design and implementation. Rather than seeing strategy design as competing with strategy execution, senior executives were at pains to create strategy designs that were actually implementable by the organisation, rather than being too high level and challenging to implement.

In organisational contexts where companies were charged with implementing a global strategy locally, senior executives used understanding the local context, local market conditions and local political and economic idiosyncrasies as key mechanisms to translate the strategy from the design phase into implementation.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 2d:**

Zacher and Rosing (2015) understood leadership (or executive) ambidexterity as a form of ambidexterity that occurred at the level of the individual leader and was characterised by leaders promoting closing and opening behaviours for themselves and their followership that sought to guide and strike a balance between exploration based behaviours and exploitation based behaviours. Hrebiniak (2008) suggested that although strategy implementation follows design, the two processes are interdependent, and part of a planning, executing and adapting process. For Jarzabkowski (2004), strategy as practice was a recursive process, meaning that the job of defining, implementing and refining strategy was never finished. Strategy as practice was therefore iterative in nature.

#### **Conclusion of Theme 2d:**

The findings agree with the literature in that strategy translation is the base upon which strategy as a practice was constituted within organisations. Senior executives made use of leadership ambidexterity to ensure that the strategy was translating in a manner where there was an iterative interplay between design and implementation, which made implementation more successful, as adaptations to the goals and measures could be made to the strategy and its implementation based on senior executives reflecting on it, and implementing the adaptations.

## **6.4 Discussion of Findings for Research Question 3**

*Question 3: How do senior executives enable other executives and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy?*

### **6.4.1 Theme 3a**

*Senior executive's focus on developing the skills and competencies of their reportees led to strategy being implemented more effectively.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 3a:**

Senior executives believed that developing the skills and competencies of others through training and mentorship, and exposing them to new experiences in running the business, was critical for strategy implementation to occur effectively. Senior executives used strategy implementation processes as a platform to develop others. An important element of using strategy implementation as a platform for personal growth and development was that senior executives could hold individuals accountable for delivering on the strategy outcomes that they had committed to, as well as support them, through developing them in the strategy process, to achieve successful implementation.

Selecting the 'right' team, with the 'right' individual skill sets and personality types was critical for senior executives to ensure effective implementation of the strategy. Senior executives were more than prepared to have a team that worked well together to implement, rather than having an assembly of individual high performers. In this way, members of teams that were in need of more development, growth and experience could be mentored by the already experienced high performers in teams.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 3a:**

Barrick et al. (2015) suggested that collective organisational engagement was an organisational capability that could bring about competitive advantage for organisations if developed and wielded properly. According to these authors, the antecedents for collective engagement ought to be in place. These were, namely, motivating work designs, engagement inducing human resources practices, and transformational leadership behaviours (Barrick et al., 2015). Strategy

implementation played a moderating role in bringing these antecedents to bear on the organisation in the form of collective organisational engagement.

### **Conclusion of Theme 3a:**

The findings of the research agree with Barrick's et al. (2015) assertion that collective organisational engagement can bring about competitive advantage for organisations. When senior executives marshalled the human resource into teams with specific blends of skill and experience, strategy implementation was enhanced, contributing to the development in competitive advantage for the organisation, and greater collective organisational engagement – developing people and their purpose.

### **6.4.2 Theme 3b**

*The manner in which senior executives managed change and defined failure impacted greatly on strategy implementation processes and outcomes.*

### **Summary of Data for Theme 3b:**

Senior executives in the sample cited that the change brought about by implementing strategy in their organisations often created anxiety, uncertainty and discomfort for organisational members, as well as for senior executives themselves. Fear of change was coupled with fear of failure, and it was fear of failure that was often the greatest source of discomfort for senior executives in implementing strategy, that is, fear of the consequences of not implementing the strategy effectively, leading to a failure of the entire organisation itself.

Respondents offered differing views on how change was managed and how failure was defined and treated in their organisations, and this was primarily determined by the organisation's culture. In organisations with high levels of trust, change was understood to be an opportunity for the organisation to innovate and transform itself. Senior executives in high trust environments emphasised to reportees the individual benefits that could accrue to themselves as a result of the changes. In these same organisations, failures were generally understood to be an opportunity for senior executives and their reportees and teams to learn from that failure. Learning from failure was understood as developmental and a key component to strengthen strategy implementation processes and outcomes.

### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 3b:**

Raffaelli et al. (2019) defined cognitive frames as the mental templates used by those to make sense of environmental information, while emotional frames were those templates used to process feelings about the information being perceived and how these were aligned by the team or individual actor's aspirations, passions, desires and fears. The cognitive and emotional frames of the senior executive became especially important when it came to consistently communicating through the organisation about strategy paradoxes that generated certainty for subordinates.

### **Conclusion of Theme 3b**

The findings of the research support Raffaelli's et al. (2019) claim that senior executives make use of different cognitive and emotional frames to navigate uncertainty and change. Senior executives were most able to navigate change and fear of failure in others and in themselves that inevitably came about in the strategy implementation process. They achieved that by reframing fear as an opportunity to learn (changing cognitive frames) and change as the creation of opportunities to benefit individuals (changing emotional frames).

## **6.5 Discussion of Findings for Research Question 4**

*Question 4: What management styles and attitudes assist senior executives to implement strategy more effectively?*

### **6.5.1 Theme 4a**

*Combining functional roles, though fraught with tension, helped senior executives to implement strategy effectively.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 4a:**

Senior executives reflected that combining functional roles allowed them to implement strategy more effectively, as having more than one executive role allowed them to attain a 'bird's eye view' perspective of the organisation from different operational areas. Having these different functional responsibilities allowed senior executives to attain best practice in one functional area and apply it in another functional area. This was particularly important in strategy implementation, where in one functional area where strategy was being implemented effectively, this best

practice could be imported into another functional area where implementation was less effective.

Straddling and combining functional roles was not an easy process for senior executives. There were often competing demands on the senior executive's time and effort in servicing the leadership needs of different functional areas. An adaptable leadership approach and the ability to rapidly oscillate between functional areas was cited as a key mechanism by which tension could be partially resolved.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 4a:**

According to Barrick et al. (2015), the antecedents for collective engagement were, namely, motivating work designs, engagement inducing human resources practices, and transformational leadership behaviours. Strategy implementation played a moderating role in bringing these antecedents to bear on the organisation in the form of collective organisational engagement. Ambidexterity, on the other hand, was achieved by organisations when explore and exploit initiatives occurred either at different times, or in structurally separate locations in organisations (Lavie et al., 2010; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

#### **Conclusion of Theme 4a:**

The research findings agree with the Barrick's et al. (2015) assertion that collective organisational engagement could be driven by certain collective-creating antecedents. Combining roles was a source of anxiety for senior executives, but ultimately made them more engaged in their jobs as the benefits of combined roles overcame the drawbacks. Structural ambidexterity meant that learning from one role could be implemented in another role. That is to suggest, where exploitation as best practice in strategy implementation was found in one functional area, this could be explored (emergent practice) and then exploited in another functional area by combining roles.

### **6.5.2 Theme 4b**

*Transitioning from specialist to generalist roles allowed senior executives to drive strategy implementation more effectively.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 4b:**

Senior executives in the sample had transitioned from more technical roles to generalist roles in their organisations. While this transition was not considered easy, because senior executives had to 'let go' of technical specialisation and embrace a more holistic and strategic view of the entire organisation, the transition was considered worthwhile. Because senior executives now operated at a more strategic level, they could influence strategy design, making use of the global view of the organisation, and put in place translation mechanisms (goal setting and measurement) that would make strategy more effective.

Combining the transition from technical specialist to generalist with collapsing functional roles together elevated the senior executive's ability to implement strategy effectively by partially breaking down some of the functional silos within their organisations.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 4b:**

Raffaelli et al. (2019) understood cognitive frames as the mental templates used by those to make sense of environmental information, while emotional frames were those templates used to process feelings about the information being perceived and how these were aligned by the team or individual actor's aspirations, passions, desires and fears are instructive here. Changing cognitive and emotional frames was a requirement of senior executives making a shift from a technical specialist role to a generalist role in organisations.

#### **Conclusion of Theme 4b:**

The findings of the research agree with Raffaelli's et al. (2009) assertion that both cognitive and emotional frames existed inside of senior executives. What this illustrates is that cognitive frames changed from technical excellence to global organisational thinking in the transition from specialist to generalist, and emotional frames were altered from operational excellence (cool calculation) to assuaging fear and uncertainty for others, and illustrating the benefits of change for individuals. Being placed in generalist positions in the organisation assisted senior executives to alter cognitive and emotional frames in ways that enhanced the ability of organisational members to implement strategy more effectively.

### **6.5.3 Theme 4c**

*Accepting challenges, creativity and agility were valorised by senior executives as core personal values that assisted in the effective implementation of strategy.*

#### **Summary of Data for Theme 4c:**

Certain personality traits and attitudes were considered as a useful means for senior executives to implement strategy effectively. Most senior executives relished taking on large challenges, such as the organisational transformation that strategy implementation implied. Taking on large challenges inadvertently forced senior executives to explore how the challenges would be resolved and find ways to incorporate the resolved challenges into the organisational routines of the organisations (exploit them). Creativity and autonomy were also cited as important elements in effective strategy implementation. Senior executives believed that if the organisation trusted their judgement, that it would give them the autonomy to implement strategy in creative ways that unlocked value for the organisation.

Lastly, senior executives believed that the work that they were doing in the organisation, that is, to enhance the performance and sustainability of the organisation in the long term, was linked to their personal purpose. The result of linking personal purpose to organisational purpose was formative to ensure that senior executives would 'stay the course' and find ways to implement the strategy no matter what.

#### **Existing theory relevant to Theme 4c:**

Tuan Luu (2017) suggested that under instances where leaders balance ambidextrous behaviours well, followers were more likely to exhibit greater entrepreneurial orientation (EO). EO, in turn, was defined by the following behaviour characteristics: an elevated appetite for innovation; proactive behaviour; and acceptable risk taking. Collective organisational engagement was brought about by generating motivating work designs, engagement inducing human resources practices, and transformational leadership behaviours (Barrick et al., 2015).

#### **Conclusion of Theme 4c:**

The findings of the research agree with both Tuan Luu (2017) and Barrick et al. (2015) in that the personality traits that promoted leadership ambidexterity and entrepreneurial orientation (innovation, proactive behaviour, risk taking) are

analogous with the findings of this research. Senior executives valorised creativity, autonomy and purpose, and risk taking in strategy implementation, and used adaptable leadership style to apply these orientations in an ambidextrous manner.

## **6.6 Overall Conclusion**

The findings of this research project agree wholeheartedly with the literature cited in the literature review. The perspective of the lived experience of the senior executive making use of different forms of ambidexterity to enhance the effectiveness of strategy implementation, driving collective organisational engagement, managing strategic paradoxes, and developing strategy as an organisational practice was missing from the literature. The novel contribution of this research project is the unit of analysis, the individual senior executive, and their lived experience that was missing in the cannon of knowledge concerning strategy implementation. This perspective identified that the lived experience was critical to understand in strategy implementation, thereby extending the literature.



## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The following chapter is structured to round off the research project and open up further areas for enquiry. The principle findings of the research are restated in this chapter as a check to see if the four research questions proposed in the research project were answered sufficiently by combining theory and findings. Implications of the research findings for managers is then discussed, as are limitations of the research, and suggestions for further areas of enquiry.

### **7.2 Principal Findings**

The principle findings of the research are arranged as per the research questions developed in chapter three of the research project. Each research question is restated, and the supporting findings and theoretical positioning is argued as a response to the research questions that were developed. Responses to the research questions then informed how the research topic was explored.

#### **7.2.1 Principal Findings for Research Question 1**

*Question 1: How do senior executives deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?*

The findings confirm the theoretical propositions put forward by Dameron and Torset (2014) that senior executives faced different kinds of tensions, that created uncertainty. These uncertainties were characterised as strategic paradoxes. Smith (2014) suggested that senior executives found ways to accommodate the paradoxes and Ashforth et al. (2014) then suggested that senior executives employed the tactic of holism to resolve uncertainty.

The research findings confirm Smith's (2014) proposition that senior executives found ways to accommodate strategic paradoxes that were presented to external stakeholders by communicating the benefits of implementing a strategy to external stakeholders. The findings confirmed Ashforth's et al. (2014) holism tactic to resolve uncertainty. Senior executives used scenario planning and other forms of environmental scanning as a method by which to create some certainty in the choices

to be made in an unpredictable economic and political environment. Smith's (2014) theory is expanded upon in that senior executives used transparency, communicativeness and collaboration to create consistency and certainty in strategy implementation for organisational members.

Raffaelli's et al. (2019) assertion that the cognitive and emotional frames were important in strategy implementation was illustrated in the findings too. Senior executives made use of different cognitive frames to understand the organisational context, and emotional frames to mobilise others around the strategy implementation. Knowing when and where to implement which emotional frames to elicit action and buy into the strategic choices relied on the senior executive's ability to read the 'mood' of the organisation effectively.

### **7.2.2 Principal Findings for Research Question 2**

*Question 2: How do senior executives resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival?*

The findings of the research agree with Eisenhardt's and Bingham's (2017) assertion that executives must adapt themselves to take advantage of opportunities revealed in the strategy process. This meant that senior executives needed to make decisions about which strategic opportunities were to be pursued, given limited resources. Moving between strategic opportunities in an ambidextrous manner was achieved by senior executives exhibiting opening behaviours (collaboration) to explore strategy implementation opportunities effectively. As per Zacher's and Rosing's (2015) assertion, senior executives then exhibited closing behaviours (exploitation) by subsuming the newly discovered opportunities to the organisational routines of the organisation to capture value. The important point here is that senior executives exhibiting leadership ambidexterity were able to balance sometimes competing strategic imperatives with agility. The findings further confirm that the entrepreneurial orientation promulgated by senior executives helped to bridge the gap between explore and exploit by elevating reportees' appetite for innovation, proactive behaviour and acceptable risk taking.

The findings of the research also agree with Hrebiniak (2008) in that strategy plays out in organisations as a practice, emerging from the interplay of design and implementation. Senior executives made use of leadership ambidexterity – opening

and closing behaviours – such as goal setting (opening) and goal measurement (closing) – as the mechanism to translate a strategy design to implementation. Senior executives also made use of leadership ambidexterity to ensure that the strategy was translating in a manner where there was an iterative interplay between design and implementation, which made implementation more successful, as adaptations to the goals and measures could be made to the strategy and its implementation based on senior executives reflecting on it, and implementing the adaptations.

### **7.2.3 Principal Findings for Research Question 3**

*Question 3: How do senior executives enable other executives and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy?*

The findings of the research agree with Barrick's et al. (2015) assertion that collective organisational engagement can bring about competitive advantage for organisations. When senior executives marshalled the human resource into teams with specific blends of skill and experience, strategy implementation was enhanced, contributing to the development in competitive advantage for the organisation, and greater collective organisational engagement – developing people and their purpose. The findings of the research support Raffaelli's et al. (2019) claim that senior executives make use of different cognitive and emotional frames to navigate uncertainty and change. Senior executives were most able to navigate change and fear of failure in others and in themselves that inevitably came about in the strategy implementation process. They achieved that by reframing fear as an opportunity to learn (changing cognitive frames) and change as the creation of opportunities to benefit individuals (changing emotional frames).

### **7.2.4 Principal Findings for Research Question 4**

*Question 4: What management styles and attitudes assist senior executives to implement strategy more effectively?*

Combining roles was a source of anxiety for senior executives, but ultimately made them more engaged in their jobs as the benefits of combined roles overcame the drawbacks. Structural ambidexterity meant that learning from one role could be implemented in another role. That is to suggest, where exploitation as best practice in strategy implementation was found in one functional area, this could be explored

(emergent practice) and then exploited in another functional area by combining roles. The findings of the research agree with Raffaelli's et al. (2009) assertion that both cognitive and emotional frames existed inside of senior executives. What this illustrates is that cognitive frames changed from technical excellence to global organisational thinking in the transition from specialist to generalist, and emotional frames were altered from operational excellence (cool calculation) to assuaging fear and uncertainty for others, and illustrating the benefits of change for individuals. Being placed in generalist positions in the organisation assisted senior executives to alter cognitive and emotional frames in ways that enhanced the ability of organisational members to implement strategy more effectively.

Tuan Luu (2017) suggested that under instances where leaders balance ambidextrous behaviours well, followers were more likely to exhibit greater entrepreneurial orientation (EO). EO, in turn, was defined by the following behaviour characteristics: an elevated appetite for innovation; proactive behaviour; and acceptable risk taking. Collective organisational engagement was brought about by generating motivating work designs, engagement inducing human resources practices, and transformational leadership behaviours (Barrick et al., 2015). The combination of the leadership ambidexterity, and entrepreneurial orientation based behaviours and collective organisational engagement were leadership attitudes that assisted organisations to implement strategy most effectively.

### **7.3 Implications for Management and Other Relevant Stakeholders**

The implications of the research findings for management are fourfold. Firstly, because different forms of ambidexterity (and in particular leadership ambidexterity) were identified as key enablers to effective strategy implementation, organisational stewards, business owners and senior executives must discover ways to enhance leadership ambidexterity and cultivate strategy as a practice within organisations.

Secondly, it was found that combining senior executive roles was useful to attain a bird's eye view of the organisation and import best practice in strategy implementation from one business unit, functional area or division into others. Senior executives must explore mechanisms to combine roles to ensure that strategy implementation takes place more effectively, especially given the difficulties with implementing strategy cited in the literature review

Thirdly, it was discovered that when senior executives drove collective organisational engagement, strategy implementation was made more effective in that the skill and competency development of reportees and teams was placed at the centre of building an effective strategy implementation system that could allow the organisation to capitalise on its short-term strategic goals, and promote the long-term sustainability of the organisation. Collective organisational engagement should be coupled with strategy implementation in organisations to drive more optimal short and long-term organisational goals.

Fourthly, the lived experience of senior executives is a critical perspective that is missing in management practice. By capturing the lived experiences, stories and anecdotes of senior executives, nascent senior executives might learn from their peers how to implement strategy more effectively.

#### **7.4 Limitations of the Research**

This research project was qualitative in nature and sought to tap into senior executive's lived experiences of implementing strategy. The findings, therefore, are not statistically generalisable to the broader populace of senior executives in any given context.

#### **7.5 Suggestions for future research**

Suggestions for future research would be taking the findings of this research project and developing quantitative, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that seek to extend and test the findings of this research project across a much larger sample size, and over time in the case of a longitudinal design. Using the narrative enquiry method to understand strategy implementation from the perspective of junior executives, managers and employees would deepen our understanding of the lived experience of strategy implementation, not to mention assisting with building more effective strategy support systems for organisations. Making use of narrative enquiry as a method for understanding individual's lived experience could also be extended from strategy implementation research into other areas of organisational research.

Another suggestion for future research would be to investigate if the findings of this research project apply to senior executives and managers in small and medium

enterprises, and if the dynamics of implementing strategy converge or diverge with the propositions put forth in this research project.

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## Appendix 1 – Ethical Clearance Letter

**Gordon  
Institute  
of Business  
Science**  
University  
of Pretoria

02 July 2019

Nathan Oliver

Dear Oliver

*Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.*

*You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.*

*Please note that approval is granted based on the methodology and research instruments provided in the application. If there is any deviation change or addition to the research method or tools, a supplementary application for approval must be obtained*

*We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.*

*Kind Regards*

GIBS MBA Research Ethical Clearance Committee

## Appendix 2 – Sample Informed Consent Letter

Informed Consent – Respondent Number: 1 (Talent Director, Global Ad Agency)

*I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA. I am conducting research on strategy implementation, and am trying to find out more about senior manager's lived experience of implementing strategy in large corporates. Our interview is expected to last about an hour, and will help us understand more about senior manager's lived experience of implementing strategy. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. All data will be reported without identifiers. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.*

Researcher name: Oliver Nathan

Research Supervisor Signature:

Email: 16390874@mygibs.co.za

Email: myresk@gibs.co.za

Phone: +27 74 765 3079

Phone: +27 11 771 4000

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 04/07/2019

Signature of researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 04/07/2019

## **Appendix 3 – Interview Guide**

### **1. Introduction**

- Please introduce yourself and your role.
- Researcher to take some time to introduce the purpose of study, explain the method of capturing the data and how the data will be analysed.
- Attain informed consent of the respondent, explain confidentiality and that their anonymity and the anonymity of the company they work for will be maintained.
- Explain that the interview will take 45 minutes to an hour to complete, and that they may benefit from the process by gaining an enhanced understanding of themselves.

### **2. Senior management experience and background**

- History of what brings them to this point in their career.
- Their education and family background.
- Ask them how they would describe themselves.
- Ask them about their drivers and motivations as a senior manager. What do they hope to achieve in their current role?

### **3. Managing uncertainty**

- Ask how they experience uncertainty in their current role.
- Balancing uncertainty and what strategies do they use to manage uncertainty in their role.
- Take time to explain temporal, spatial and leadership ambidexterity and ask what best applies to them.
- Prompt respondent to tell a story of the latest strategy implementation project they have been involved in and whether this created uncertainty for them. How did they manage this, if so?
- As whether the implementation they were involved in was successful.
- What have they learned about themselves in implementing a strategy process?
- Ask about involvement in strategy design processes, if any.

### **4. Managing competing strategic imperatives**

- Ask them whether they feel like they have to choose between running the business as it currently is or implementing the strategy. If so, how does this make them feel (anxiety, hope, fear)?
- What does successful implementation look like to them?
- Does their leadership style help or hinder implementation – are they more operationally or strategically oriented?

### **5. Management style and attitude**

- Ask them how they would describe their management style – is this conducive to implementing strategy? (Authoritarian, collaborative, servant, transactional.)
- How do they help to create some certainty for subordinates?
- Ask if they consider the strategy to be inconsistent with the current business operations.
- If they consider it to be inconsistent, how do they create a consistent message for subordinates.

- How do they report successes and failures to their senior managers/leaders?
- Ask if they accept failure from subordinates, and what kind of failures are accepted in the organisation.

## **6. Further comments or questions**

## Appendix 4 – Codes Developed in Atlas.TI Software

Code
0/Career History
0/Career Progression - Corporate to Consulting
0/Career Progression - Entrepreneur to Corporate
0/Career Progression - Long Tenure
0/Career Progression - Specialist to Generalist
0/Career Progression as Aspiration
0/Career Progression as Combining roles
0/Career Progression as Overcoming Challenges
0/Current Role
0/Description of Job
0/Education Background
0/Professional Association
0/Professional Background
1/Aligning People to Strategy
1/Managing People Resources to execute strategy
1/Measuring and Adjusting Goals as One Goes
1/Measuring goals - Long Term View
1/Measuring Goals After Strat Translated
1/Measuring Goals as Critical To Successful Strat Implementation
1/Measuring Goals Based on Non Traditional Objectives
1/Measuring Goals by Holding Others to Account
1/Measuring Goals by Referring to Clearly Set Goals
1/Measuring Goals by Tracking Over Time
1/Measuring Goals in Each Level of The Strat Cascade
1/Measuring Goals That Are Easy to Achieve
1/Measuring Goals That Take Human Beings at the Centre
1/Measuring Goals with Balanced Scorecard
1/Reflecting on Challenges of Strat Execution
1/Reflecting on Failed Strategy Implementation
1/Reflecting on Impact of Strat Implementation
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation - Adaptable Leadership
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation - Clarity, Energy and Delivery Success
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation - Digital vs Traditional Customisation
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation - Failure of Autocratic Leaders
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation - Leaders Making Hard Decisions
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation - Leaders Referring to Higher goal/Objective
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation - Leading with TEAMS
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation - Org execution bias
1/Reflecting on Leading Strat Implementation by using leadership principles
1/Reflecting on Learning in Strat Implementation
1/Reflecting on People Aspect of Strat Implementation
1/Reflecting On Resistance to Strat Implementation
1/Reflecting on Strat Implementation Impact on Business Success

1/Reflecting on Strat Implementation Over Multi Business Units
1/Reflecting on Strat Implementation Over Time
1/Reflecting on Strat Implementation Processes
1/Reflecting on Strategy Implementation
1/Reflecting on Strategy Implementation - Leading by Thinking Futuristically
1/Reflecting on the Interview Process
1/Reflecting on trusting self in Strat Implementation
1/Setting Goals
1/Strategy Implementation
2/Adjusting Strategic Objectives
2/Capabilities
2/Deliberate Strategic Choice
2/Good Strategy
2/Operational vs Strategic Thinking
2/Policy Governing Strat Design
2/Response to Theory
2/Scenario Planning
2/Strategy Design and Business Needs
2/Strategy Design and Defining Strategy
2/Strategy Design and Innovation
2/Strategy Design and Planning
2/Strategy Design and Understanding Context
2/Strategy Design as Purpose
2/Strategy Design moving to Translation
2/Strategy Plan vs Business Reality - Assumption of Cut and Paste Strategy
2/Strategy plan vs Business Reality - Failed Implementation as a Lesson
2/Strategy Plan vs Business Reality - Lack of Due Diligence
2/Strategy Plan vs Business Reality - People as Key to Translation
2/Strategy Plan vs Business Reality - Reality Doesn't Fit Plan
2/Strategy Plan vs Business Reality - Short Term vs Long Term View
2/Strategy Plan vs Business Reality - Too Much Emphasis on Execution
2/Strategy Plan vs Business Reality - Translating Strategy to Local Context
2/Strategy Process
2/Translating Strategy as an Evolution
2/Translating Strategy by Communicating
2/Translating strategy by Contextualising it
2/Translating Strategy by Localising it - Making it Real for People
2/Translating Strategy by Performing Competitor Analysis
2/Translating Strategy by Selling Strat Ideas Internally to Org
2/Translating Strategy Into Divisions and Team Goals
2/Translating Strategy Locally by Negotiating with Local Stakeholders
2/Translating Strategy to Individual Goals
2/Translating Strategy to Local Market Conditions
3/All Types of Ambedexterity
3/Challenge to Balance Competing Things
3/Enjoys Complexity
3/Exploring and Exploiting as Breakthrough vs Sustaining Innovation



3/Exploring and Exploiting as Leadership Decision Making
3/Exploring and Exploiting by Being Agile
3/Exploring and Exploiting by Combining Roles
3/Exploring and Exploiting to Manage Risk
3/Exploring and Exploring and Org politics
3/Exploring and Exploring by Clear Goal Setting
3/Exploring and Exploiting by Carving Up Resources
3/Exploring Limited by Business Realities
3/Flexible in Role
3/Increasing Complexity
3/Making Decisions
3/Making Trade-offs - Let Go of One Opportunity to Pursue Another
3/Making Trade-offs About resource allocation
3/Making Trade-offs About Resource Allocation - People
3/Managing People Resources into Explore/Exploit
3/Managing Resources Generic
3/Reflecting on Trade-Offs to be Made
4/Being Comfortable with Uncertainty
4/Disrupting the Status Quo
4/How Uncertainty is Talked About
4/Managing Uncertainty for Others by Upskilling Them
4/Managing Uncertainty by Being Pragmatic
4/Managing Uncertainty by Being Transparent About Risks
4/Managing Uncertainty by Being transparent and Clear About Objectives
4/Managing Uncertainty by Being Transparent to Generate Trust
4/Managing Uncertainty by Combining Roles
4/Managing Uncertainty by Reflecting on Org Capabilities
4/Managing Uncertainty by Restructuring
4/Managing Uncertainty by Talking About It
4/Managing Uncertainty by Thinking Through it
4/Managing Uncertainty by Tying it to Strategy
4/Managing Uncertainty Effectively
4/Managing Uncertainty for Others by Supporting Them
4/Managing Uncertainty in Projects
4/Managing Uncertainty through discretionary effort
5/Anxiety Around Change
5/Business Restructuring
5/Change in Resourcing
5/Defining Failure
5/Feelings About Change
5/Holding Others to Account
5/Managing Anxiety for Others
5/Managing Uncertainty by Overcoming Resistance to Change
5/Treating Failure - Too Much Focus on Failure Not Lesson
5/Treating Failure as a Form of Agility
5/Treating Failure as a Means to Discover New Things
5/Treating Failure as a Way to Change Direction

5/Treating Failure as Creativity
5/Treating Failure as Failed Idea Not Failed Business
5/Treating Failure with Honesty
6/Aspires to Help with Transformation
6/Business Challenges
6/Business Context
6/Business Development
6/Business Planning
6/Can Impact Transformation Agenda
6/Implication of Losing Business
6/Implication of Securing Business
6/Increasing Commercial Responsibility
6/Industry Struggles w/Diversity
6/Organisation Challenge w/ Diversity
6/Responsible for Overall Business
6/Room for Improving Transformation
6/Transformation Objective
7/Developing Others
7/Developing others - succession planning
7/Empathy for Others
7/Interaction Style Direct
7/Managing Others by Building Meaningful Working Relationships
7/Managing Others by Building Relationships With Teams
7/Managing People Resources
7/Managing People Resources by Measuring Performance
7/Managing People Resources Through Building Relationships
7/Managing People Resources Through Effective Leadership
7/Managing People Resources to Achieve Business Objectives
7/Not Enough Skills
7/On the Job Learning
7/People Oriented
7/Recruiting the Right People
7/Responsible for Others
7/Satisfaction with Effort
8/Cross Functional Learning
8/Enjoys Corporate Role
8/Enjoys Creative Role
8/Learning Globally
8/Length of Tenure
8/Motivation for Job
8/Moving to Exco Level
8/Personal Description of Self
8/Personal Objective at Work
8/Personality Type Extrovert
8/Purpose of Work
8/Responsibility Taken for Actions
8/Responsible for Craft

8/Taking Job to Learn
8/Values Driven
8/Values Genuiness
8/Values Justice

## Appendix 5 – Consistency Matrix

Research Questions	Sections in Literature Review	Data Collection Tools	Analysis Technique
How do senior managers deal with uncertainty around how to implement effectively?	Leadership Ambidexterity, Contextual Ambidexterity, Extant Research	In depth, semi-structured interview	Thematic Analysis, Literature Review
How do senior managers resolve competing strategic interests around exploiting incumbent innovation and exploring new innovations for firm survival?	Strategy Implementation, Strategic Paradox, Ambidexterity, Entrepreneurial Orientation	In depth, semi-structured interview	Thematic Analysis, Literature Review
How do senior managers enable other managers and employees to act in accordance with a newly implemented strategy?	Leadership Ambidexterity, Opening and Closing Behaviours	In depth, semi-structured interview	Thematic Analysis, Literature Review
What management styles and attitudes assist senior managers to implement strategy more effectively?	Opening and Closing Behaviours, Leadership Ambidexterity	In depth, semi-structured interview	Thematic Analysis, Literature Review

## Appendix 6 – Completed Non-disclosure agreement (editor)

### CONFIDENTIALLY AND NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

It is a condition of engagement that students shall aid in preserving all confidential information, ideas and plans; any confidential information or any information in respect of any data gathered in respect of their research work. The parties under this agreement agree to the following:

1. The parties of this agreement shall use its best endeavours to keep any information confidential which it has acquired or may acquire pursuant to the research initiative. For the purposes of this clause, confidential information excludes information which:
  - 1.1 is publicly available or becomes publicly available through no act or default of any Party;
  - 1.2 was in the possession of a Party prior to its disclosure otherwise than as a result of a breach by any party of any obligation of confidentiality to which it is subject;
  - 1.3 is disclosed to the student by a person which did not acquire the information under an obligation of confidentiality; and
  - 1.4 is independently acquired by a student and as a result of work carried out by a person to whom no disclosure of such information has been made;
2. No party shall use or disclose confidential information except with the prior written consent of GIBS or in accordance with an order of a court of competent jurisdiction or in order to comply with any law or governmental regulations by which any Party concerned is bound or as may be lawfully requested in writing by any governmental authority.
3. The party undertakes to permanently delete any electronic copies of confidential information received and destroy any confidential printed documentation or similar material in their possession promptly once they are no longer required on completion of the contracted service by the student.
4. On completion of the contracted service by the student, the party is to confirm to the student that they are not in possession of any confidential information.

Signed at Randburg on this 31<sup>st</sup> day of October 2019.

On behalf of:

Wordsmiths SA

Name: Aimee Clarke

Signature: 

duly authorised and warranting such authority

Witness:

