

**CHALLENGES FACED BY SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL STRATEGIC PLANS: A CASE OF MATHIRA SUB-COUNTY, NYERI COUNTY**

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**ABSTRACT**

A strategic plan is a management tool that charts the course of direction a school intends to take to enhance productivity and increase efficiency. To achieve the desired results, a strategic plan must be implemented. However, some researchers have noted that organizations fail to implement up to 70% of their strategic plans and this is due to several challenges that have to be addressed. This study sought to investigate the challenges faced by principals in the implementation of strategic plans in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County in Nyeri County. The variables examined were: school's structure, school's culture, availability of resources, and the principal's management skills. Descriptive research design was used in this study. The target population comprised of 40 principals, 520 members of Board of Management and 320 Heads of Departments. A sample of 12 principals, 12 chairpersons of Board of Management and 96 heads of departments was selected through both simple random sampling and purposive sampling methods. The researcher collected data by administering questionnaires to the principals and Heads of Departments, and an interview schedule for the chairpersons of the Board of Management. A pilot study was carried out prior to the main study in order to test the reliability and validity of the instruments. The data collected was quantitative and qualitative in nature. It was analyzed using descriptive statistics and by organizing it into appropriate categories or themes, accordingly. The analyzed data was presented in frequency tables, pie charts, bar graphs and in prose form. The study established that public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County had formulated strategic plans but had failed to implement them as planned. The study also established that the school structure was not flexible and the culture was not aligned to the implementation of strategic plans. Besides, schools lacked adequate resources and all these factors posed a challenge to the implementation of strategic plans. The study also established that most of the implementation process was done by the top level managers. Based on these findings, it was concluded that structure, culture, availability of resources and management skills affect the implementations of strategic plans. The study recommends that the structure of the schools be made flexible and the school culture be aligned to the implementation of strategic plans. The government should also channel more funds to schools and offer capacity building courses for education managers. Finally all managers should be involved in the implementation process.

**Background of the Study**

The ever rising demand for quality results in the education sector informed the ministerial directive for all education institutions to develop strategic plans (MOE, 2005). A school strategic plan is an

outline of the major goals of a school and strategies for attaining those goals (Hill, 2009). It acts as a road map showing where a school aspires to be within a stipulated time. Besides, a strategic plan is a tool for a desired change but which will only be realized upon its successful implementation. Strategic plan implementation is the action of moving an institution along the identified road map in order to fulfill its mission and hence, achieve its vision (MacLennan, 2012). Though extensive studies have been carried out on formulation and implementation of strategic plans in various institutions, few have been carried out on the challenges that secondary school principals face as they implement the plans. Besides, there are apparent challenges in the implementation of strategic plans to which little attention has been drawn. Moreover, Kefa (2014) recommends that since her study findings were only based on public secondary schools in Limuru District, Kenya, further study be carried out in order to cover a wider scope and enhance generalization. There was, therefore, a great need to investigate the challenges faced by principals in the implementation of plans in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County. Besides, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no similar study has been carried out in the Sub- County.

Such a study would increase an awareness of the hurdles and traps that create road blocks in the implementation process and thus help principals learn how to adapt their approach and develop tools to assist them in successfully implementing strategic plans in order to realize the school's vision. This study thus aimed at investigating the challenges faced by secondary school principals in the implementation of strategic plans in Mathira sub-County, Nyeri County.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The implementation of strategic plans determines the success of an institution as it leads to achievement of set goals. Unfortunately a common complaint of organizations about strategic planning is that it produces a document that more often than not ends up collecting dust on the office shelves. In Kenya, in spite of schools developing strategic plans, the performance of Kenyan secondary schools in national examinations has been deteriorating. For instance, in 2016, there was a public outcry due to poor performance in K.C.S.E, while only 141 students scored an "A" grade, 33,000 candidates scored a mean grade of an "E". While research studies have been carried out on strategic planning and factors hindering implementation of the same, there still remains a gap because few studies have examined the challenges that principals face and yet the principals are the nerve centres of the school. Besides, there is little research on challenges of implementation of strategic plans in public secondary schools. This study on the challenges that principals face as they implement strategic plans is intended to supplement the limited research in the field. Moreover, by identifying the challenges, it is hoped that the public secondary schools will be able to break down these obstacles and hence make the strategic plans implementable.

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study were:

- a) To assess how the school's organizational structure affects implementation of strategic plans.
- b) To analyze the effect of availability of resources on implementation of strategic plans.
- c) To establish the effect of the school's culture on implementation of strategic plans.
- d) To assess the effect of management skills on the implementation of strategic plans.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on the systems theory of management. The Systems theory of management was developed by biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy Littlejohn (1951). This theory defines a

system as a set of objects that interact with one another to form a whole. Systems theory is concerned with relationships of structures and their interdependence. In this theory an organization is viewed as a social system of individuals who operate within a formal framework.

### **Implementation of Strategic Plan**

Implementing a strategic plan entails converting the strategic plan into action and results. It is a task that involves the whole management team of an institution as it affects every part of it. In the implementation, all managers become implementers and all employees' participants. Implementation is the most difficult part of the strategic planning process because it involves achieving the objectives set out in the strategic plan while remaining alert and flexible to new opportunities as they unfold. For successful implementation of a strategic plan, it must be robust. Although developing a strategic plan is challenging, implementing it is more challenging, because it is operation-driven, time consuming, action-oriented and therefore, involves all members of the institution (Hrebiniak, 2006). It is a process that presents managerial challenges and options to weigh and choose whether it is going to be successful. Moreover, it demands people-management skills and lots of perseverance in getting initiatives to move. Furthermore, it involves integrating efforts across groups in the institution and this is not easy (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). The leader of an institution must be actively involved in the implementation process for it to be successful. Research reviews indicate that most strategic plans do not get implemented. Allio (2005), after conducting an economic survey of 276 senior operating executives confirms this observation. From the study, it turned out that 57% of the firms were unsuccessful at the stage of executing their strategies.

### **Challenges Faced in Strategic Plan Implementation**

From the research findings of Kaplan & Norton (2008), approximately, 70% of failure in strategic plan implementation is as a result of bad implementation. These researchers identify four main barriers to effective strategic plan implementation. One of the cited barriers is lack of vision. According to them only 20-40% of the companies they studied had set targets and only less than 10% of the employees understood the strategic plans.

A study by Jones (2008) reveals two more challenges to strategic plan implementation: understanding people and failing to get the strategic plan out to the people. If the managers assume that employees are not interested in strategic plan implementation and yet take no initiative to change that assumption that in itself becomes a challenge to its implementation. Additionally, if the manager assumes that employees do not care about the institution and therefore, fails to effectively communicate the strategic plan, implementation plan and the integration of the daily work towards implementation with the employees a problem is bound to arise (Jones, 2008). From the preceding paragraphs the challenges faced in the implementation of strategic plans are varied. Due to the constraints of time and finances, the study will concentrate on four of the most cited challenges. These are challenges related to the school structure, school's culture, availability of resources and managerial skills.

### **School Structure and Implementation of Strategic Plans.**

Structure is the design, whether formal or informal, through which an institution's enterprise is administered (Chandler, 1962). The design includes lines of authority and communication between various departments. It also includes the information and data flow through the given lines of communication and authority. Structure is a means of holding an institution together in order to

enable it to achieve its destiny (Burns & Stalker. 1961). Additionally, it involves decision relating to division of tasks, authority and a set of coordination mechanisms (Parthasarathy & Sethi, 1992).

An advantage of centralized structures is that lines of communication and responsibility are relatively clear and the route to top management for approval can be travelled quickly. Furthermore, implementation of strategic plans tends to be straight forward once a decision is made. However, in big institutions, decentralized structures are preferred as the environments are more complex and the senior executives are not able to process all decisions that influence the implementation of strategic plans. As such decision making authority and power is decentralized within the institution (Olsen, 2005). Research also indicates that strategic plans are most successfully implemented in institutions that have clear hierarchical style and bureaucratic structure. In these kinds of organizations decisions are made by the top level managers because power rests with them. For successful implementation of strategic plans, the top managers do not only direct and involve, but also communicate their decisions with the middle level managers in order to win their support (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990).

#### **Availability of resources as a challenge to implementation of strategic plan.**

According to Rumelt (2011), resources are a major prop in strategic plan implementation as they dictate what an organization intends to do and how to do it. There is thus a close connection between strategic plan implementation and the available resources. Various scholars have classified resources in various categories. According to Fry et. al (2004) ,resources include physical materials, financial assets, technologies, people and information. Lee (2009) on the other hand classified resources into six types which included human, administrative, physical, financial, reputation and political resources.

A study carried out in Kirinyiga Central by Kiprop & Kanyiri (2012) on the challenges facing public secondary schools in Kenya in the adoption of strategic planning revealed that 91% of the respondents agreed that poor time management and inadequate funds are a challenge into the adoption of strategic planning in schools. Inyanga (2013) from her study discovered that lack of funds was a major road block to strategic plan implementation in private secondary schools. Mucaiet. al on their study on walking the talk in strategy implementation from a survey of secondary schools in Meru district also found out that financial resources have a strong impact on strategic plan implementation.

#### **School culture as a challenge to implementation of strategic plans**

Hill et al (2009) defines culture as the specific collection of values, beliefs and attitudes that are shared by people and groups in an institution. Additionally, the institutions culture controls the way members interact with each other and with stakeholders within and without an institution. Culture is one of the strongest elements of control in an institution and it enhances integration, as well as, coordination within the institution. Culture does not only give institutional members ability to develop a collective identity but also guides them in relationships, communication, decision making and in their daily relationships (Buul, 2010). Additionally, strong cultures encourage successful implementation of strategic plans while weak cultures are a stumbling block. Strong cultures support shared beliefs in norms, practices and virtues within an institution that help strengthen everyone's resolve to carry out their different roles in strategic plan implementation.

### **Managerial skills and implementation of strategic plans**

According to Robbins & Coulter (2003) managers are people who work through other people to coordinate their activities in order to accomplish their organizational goals. To effectively coordinate these activities and realize effective implementation of a strategic plan a manager needs technical skills, human skills and conceptual skills. Technical skills refer to the knowledge and proficiency in trade. These are the skills that a manager needs in order to accomplish a specific task. In this study, technical skills refer to the skills that a principal needs in order to implement a strategic plan. They refer to the “how to” skill set that allows a manager to complete a particular job. These skills are a combination of formal education, training and on-the-job experience. Most employees expect that their managers have technical skills that set them above their own so that they can refer to them when need be. In order to effectively spear head strategic plan implementation, the top level management needs technical skills (Pagon, et al. 2008).

### **Research Design**

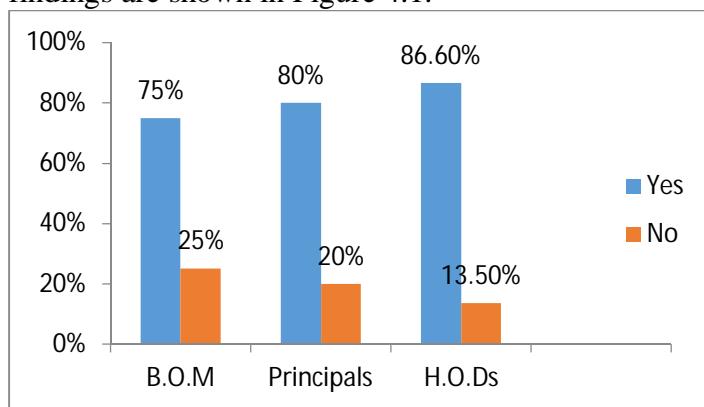
By definition, a research design is a presentation of the plan of investigation aimed at answering set research questions (Shuttleworth, 2008; Lesage, 2009). It is a detailed plan on how the research will be conducted, the glue that holds all the elements of the research project together (Donald, 2006). This research adopted a descriptive research design which according to Gay (1973) is a research process that involves collecting data in order to test hypotheses or questions concerning the current status of the subject in the study.

In this study, the researcher was interested in getting facts about challenges to strategic plan implementation by asking respondents about their individual perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and values.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

#### **Implementation of Strategic Plan**

The study sought to establish the time frame of the strategic plans. From the findings, 90% of the school's strategic plans had a life span of five years. The remaining 10% had a life span of 6-10years. The researcher also sought to know whether the schools had an implementation plan. The findings are shown in Figure 4.1.



**Figure 4.1 Availability of Implementation Plan**

Figure 4.1 show that 80% of the schools have an implementation plan while 20% did not have it. However, majority of them did not follow the implementation plans due to challenges encountered during the implementation process.

**Table 4.1: Adherence to Implementation Plan**

	Principals responses		H.O.Ds Responses		Chairperson's Responses	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
<b>Responses</b>						
Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0
No	10	100	75	100	8	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>

From the findings, all the schools (100%) had not implemented the strategic plans as planned. These findings presuppose that the schools must have encountered challenges in implementing the strategic plans. According to Kaplan & Norton's study (2005), 90% of the organizations fail to implement their strategic plans effectively. Hrebiniaik (2005), on the other hand argues that one of the challenges to implementation of strategic plans is the implementation process taking longer time than had been planned.

The study also sought to establish the factors that had hindered the implementation process. From the results, 90% of the respondents cited lack of finances as the main hindrance to implementation process. These results are in agreement with the views of Verspoor (2008) that most schools in Sub-Saharan Africa operate with inadequate resources, one of which is inadequate finances.

**Effect of School Structure on the Implementation of Strategic Plans.**

	SA f	SA %	A f	A %	U f	U %	D f	D %	SD f	SD %
Centralized structure	16	18.2	52	61.3	5	6.5	5	5.3	7	8.6
Enhances implementation	16	19.4	48	55.9	4	4.3	12	13.9	5	6.5
Clear lines of authority	12	14	58	67.7	7	8.6	8	9.67	0	0
Does not hinder free flow of information	17	20.4	44	51.6	11	12.9	7	8.6	5	6.5
Allows flexibility	6	7.5	12	13.9	11	12.9	40	47.3	16	18.3
Allows stakeholders participation	24	27.9	36	41.9	7	8.6	7	8.6	11	12.9
Has clear rules procedures and responsibilities	7	8.6	45	52.9	16	18.3	7	8.6	10	11.8
Right people for the right tasks	3	3.2	28	33.3	13	15.1	35	40.8	6	7.5
Allows independence	5	6.5	22	25.8	8	9.7	39	46.2	10	11.8
Balanced tasks	8	9.7	46	53.8	8	9.7	13	15.1	10	11.8

From the study findings, 79.5% of the participants indicated that the school structure is centralized, 13.9% disagreed and 6.5% were undecided. A centralized school structure enhances implementation of strategic plans as it allows for clear lines of communication and responsibility. According to the study findings 75.3% agreed that the school structure enhanced implementation, 20.4% disagreed while 4.3% were undecided. These responses imply that the school structure did not pose a challenge to the strategic plan implementation process. Besides 81.7% of the participants agreed that the structure had clear lines of authority, 8.6 % were undecided while 9.67% disagreed. Having clear lines of authority enhances implementation as it enhances efficiency and reduces conflicts. Moreover, according to the study findings, 72 % of the respondents, the school structure did not hinder free flow of information, 12.9% were undecided, while 15.1% disagreed. Allowing free flow of information enhances implementation of strategic plans as it enhances communication which is critical for the success of the implementation process (Mazzola & Kellermanns, 2010). Furthermore, 61.2% of the participants agreed that the school structure had clear procedures, rules and responsibilities that guided in strategic plan implementation. However, 20.4% disagreed with this assertion, while 18.3% were undecided. Having clear procedures, rules and responsibilities enhances the implementation of strategic plans. This is because it increases efficiency and decreases cost of coordination, hence, lowering administrative costs.

### **Effects of Availability of Resources on Implementation of Strategic Plans**

From the results in Table 4.2, 80.7% of the respondents agreed that lack of personnel with appropriate skills had hindered implementation of strategic plans. A minority of the respondents, (11.8%) disagreed that lack of personnel with appropriate skills had hindered implementation of strategic plans while 6.45% were undecided. According to Hrebinia (2005) one of the obstacles to effective implementation of strategic plans is lack of training on the part of the managers. Training equips a manager with the skills necessary for the implementation process. It also increases efficiency and effectiveness. Training also equips a manager with technical, human and conceptual competencies which are a necessity in effective implementation of strategic plans.

Furthermore, 72% of the respondents agreed that lack of finances had hindered implementation of strategic plans, 19.3% disagreed, while 6.45% were undecided. These findings are in agreement with the results of a study carried out by Kamau (2012) on the challenges faced by managers in the implementation of strategic plans in secondary schools in Gatundu North in Kiambu County. According to Kamau's (2012) study, lack of finances was one of the major hindrances in implementation of strategic plans in secondary schools.

**Table 4.2: Effect of Availability of Resources on Implementation of the Strategic Plans**

Structure	SA		A		U		D		SD	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Lack of personnel with appropriate skills has hindered implementation	16	17.7	54	63	5	6.45	5	6.45	5	5.37
Lack of finances has hindered implementation	22	25.8	39	46.2	5	6.45	10	11.8	6	7.5

The school has well trained human resource to support the implementation process	11	12.9	12	13.9	5	6.45	48	56.9	7	8.6
The school has adopted information technology in its day to day operations	7	8.6	12	13.9	4	4.3	55	64.5	7	8.6
Heads of departments have undergone courses on strategic planning	0	0	10	11.8	21	22.5	54	63.4	6	7.5
Availability of resources has helped promote trust, security and morale of workers	7	8.6	18	21.5	6	7.5	44	51.6	9	10.7

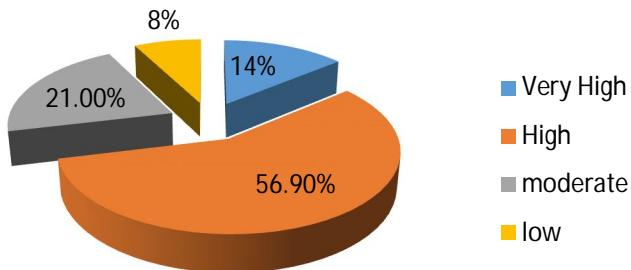
11.8% of the respondents agreed that the H.O.Ds had undergone courses on strategic planning, while 70.9% disagreed with this proposition. A minority of 22.5% were undecided. Moreover, 21.5% of the respondents agreed that there was a champion for the implementation process in the schools. However, 71.9% of the respondents disagreed with this and 6.45% were undecided. Besides, 22.5% of the respondents agreed that the schools had adopted information technology in their day to day operations, 4.3% were undecided and 73.1% disagreed.

**Table 4.3: Effect of Lack of Resources on Implementation of the Strategic Plan**

Effects	f	%
Slowed down the implementation process	90	96.7
Hindered provision of capacity building	57	61.2
Courses for teachers		
Hindered use of information technology	75	80.6
Delay in implementation of projects	68	73.1
Led to stalling of projects	50	53.7

The respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which school resources contributed to the achievement of the school's strategic objectives. From Figure 4.8,

70.9 % indicated that availability of resources had a major effect on the implementation of strategic plans. 21% of the respondents indicated that resources had a moderate effect and 8% rated the effect as low.

**Figure 4.2 Effects of Availability of Resources on Implementation of the Strategic Plans****Effects of School Culture on Implementation of Strategic Plans**

From the responses, all schools (100%) that participated in the study had vision and mission statements. This meant that the schools had a specific collection of values, beliefs and attitudes that were shared by the employees (Hill et.al. 2010). Vision and mission statements relate to an institutions purpose and they communicate that purpose to the stakeholders. A school strategic plan emanates from the schools vision and mission.

For successful implementation of the strategic plan, the management needs to align the schools culture with the strategic plan. Majority of the respondents, 77.9% agreed that the vision and mission statements were widely shared, while 8.6% were undecided and 7.5% disagreed. When the vision and mission of the school is widely shared, chances of the stakeholders embracing it are higher. Besides, it is easier to align the goals and objectives of the school to the vision and mission statement when they are widely shared. Implementation of strategic plans is enhanced, henceforth.

**Table 4.3: Effect of School Culture on Implementation of the Strategic Plan**

Culture	SA %	A %	U %	D %	SD %
Existence of vision and mission statements	100	0	0	0	0
Vision and mission are widely shared	7.5	70.9	8.6	6.45	1.07
Employees participate in decision making	4.3	51.6	6.45	12.9	24.7
Tolerating risks	6.5	26.9	12.9	19.3	34.4
Embraces new ideas	5.3	23.6	6.5	36.6	27.9
Management relates well with stakeholders	17.2	48.4	2.15	12.9	19.3
Employees are highly motivated	10.7	13.9	11.8	45.1	18.3
Vision and mission statements are clear to all	8.6	33.3	15.1	31.2	11.8

Respondents gave varied responses on whether employees were involved in decision making. A majority of 55.6 % agreed that they were actively involved but 37.6 % disagreed. A minority of 6.45% were undecided. Involvement in decision making affects implementation of strategic plans. When employees participate in decision making process their understanding of the decisions made is improved. They are better placed to implement the strategic plan because they do not only understand it, but also own it. Involvement in decision making increases team work leading to effectiveness and efficiency in the performance of duties.

**Table 4.4: Extent to which School Culture Affects Implementation of the Strategic Plan**

Extent	f	%
Very High	13	15
High	48	57
Moderate	18	21
Low	6	6.31

From the results, majority of the respondents (72%) indicated that school culture affects the implementation of strategic plans to a high extent. For effective implementation, the implementation process should take into account the school culture as it is a powerful aspect of status quo (Bull. 2010).

#### **Effects of Management Skills on Implementation of Strategic Plans**

The fourth objective sought to establish the effect of management skills on implementation of strategic plans. The first question in this section sought to establish the level at which most management and control of strategic plan implementation takes place. For this study the levels of control and management were categorized into three; top level, middle level and functional level. The results are outlined in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.5: Management and Control of Strategic Plan Implementation**

Level	f	%
Top	53	62.3
Middle	9	10.7
Functional	11	12.9
All levels	5	5.3
Impossible to tell	7	8.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100</b>

From the findings, majority of the respondents, 62.3 % indicated that the management and control of the implementation process takes place at the top management level. The other respondents had varied answers with 10.7% indicating that it takes place at middle level, 12.9 % at functional level. Another group of respondents, 8.6 % had no idea who manages and controls the implementation process.

#### **Conclusions**

The structure has clear lines of authority and it does not hinder free flow of information. It also has clear procedures, rules and responsibilities that guide in the implementation process. The school structure, however, poses a challenge to the principals in the implementation of strategic plans because often times it does not have the right people for key positions. The structure is also not flexible and it does not give employees the required independence during the strategic plan implementation. This too poses a challenge to the principals in their endeavour to implement the strategic plans.

The study also concludes that availability of resources greatly affects the implementation of strategic plans. Lack of personnel with appropriate skills is a major challenge to the implementation

process. Besides, most of the human resources are not trained on strategic planning. Lack of finances is another hindrance to the implementation process. Due to these challenges, the implementation process is not completed at the scheduled time. The study revealed that the school culture affects implementation of strategic plans. Schools do not operate in a value-free vacuum. Their operations are governed and directed by the school culture. Implementation of strategic plans triggers a cultural change and whether the implementation process will be successful or not depends on how well the stakeholders are prepared for the change. Most of the schools do not have a well-entrenched culture which is subsequently a challenge to the effective implementation of the strategic plan.

The management and control of the implementation process is done by top level managers and this enhances the implementation process. The strategic objectives are not achieved within the set time plan and this is attributed to management skills related challenges. The most preferred management style is democratic style of management whose utilization was limited. Principals who use other styles of management face challenges in the implementation of strategic plans.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the study recommends that adequate provision of resources for the implementation of strategic plans be availed as the implementation process is an expensive exercise which ought to be deliberately budgeted for. The study also recommends involvement of all stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of strategic plans. Encouraging people to participate and involving them in the formulation and implementation of strategic plans will make them own the process and also reduce resistance to change. This implies a persistent mutual trust. The study recommends that the management of public secondary schools invests time and money in capacity building of all the employees involved in the implementation of the strategic plans in order to expand their skills. Furthermore, there should be effective change management in order to reduce resistance to the change triggered by the implementation of strategic plans. For public schools to improve on strategic plan implementation there is need to align the school culture to the strategic plan. The managers need to look for ways to encourage employees to adjust their values and beliefs towards the school. It is also upon the managers to come up with ways of addressing issues of culture lest they hinder the implementation process as most schools do not have a culture of embracing new ideas. Schools also do not have a culture of risk taking.

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