

Rapid Results



Nowadays, organizations are being challenged to break free of the constraints of what they »know for sure« – rules, disciplines, assumptions and repeatable processes. Even if these certainties are valid for a moment in time, the world changes so quickly that they are soon overturned or overtaken by a new reality. Even worse: these disciplines become a burden that inhibits performance in a VUCA environment. by Patrice Murphy and Markus Spiegel, Schaffer Consulting

Consider the experience of ocean yacht racing. Years ago, after a blisteringly fast transatlantic crossing, the crew stepped off the boat looking fresh as daisies, claiming: »We were not at sea long enough to get really tired.« A veteran sailor observed the paradoxical benefits to boat and crew: »The faster you go, the less time it takes and the less time there is for fatigue of the boat and crew,« as Robin Knox-Johnston explains in an article in the February 2002 issue of the magazine »Yachting World.«

Just as sailors know that speed can actually minimize some major risks, executives and entrepreneurs now recognize the importance of a light load, tight focus, minimal investment and smart, fast experimentation. This was shown in an analysis of the beneficial impact of speed on four types of risk, first published by Catherine Paul-Chowdhury and Patrice Murphy in an article in the July/August 2005 issue of »Executive Decision« magazine. Organizing for speed is within reach even in long-established organizations, using the Rapid Results Approach to create 100-day execution cycles in complex and ambiguous environments.

This forced pace helps to minimize four types of risk that often derail change efforts:

Fatigue

Just as the yacht crew had not been at sea long enough to get tired, participants in a shorter, faster organizational change effort have lower personal risk of fatigue, remaining fresh, motivated and creative. Instead of being frustrated by long-winded change initiatives with limited impact, participants in 100-day sprints are asked to devote increased attention and energy for a short period and see the results of that effort immediately. Teams that quickly cycle through formation, action, reflection and close-out are also permitted to rest sooner, re-energizing and recruiting new members before moving on to the next phase.

Stress on organizational processes and structures

Like wear and tear on a boat at sea, process risk results when changes to processes or systems compromise an organization's ability to maintain the quality and timeliness of its operations. Rapid change demands focus, ensuring that the organization does not try to change everything at once. Effects can be ob-

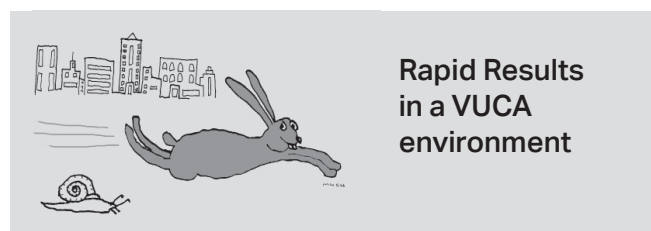
served and managed, without overwhelming the system's inherent stability.

Resources

Just as more weight slows down a boat, a big up-front investment in technology, training and consultants is typical of many large change initiatives. Faster implementation can reduce both the size of the up-front investment, and the risk that it will not yield the desired results. Speed demands that activities without a clear link to results be dropped, and some of the time- and resource-intensive work (e.g. training, major IT investment) be slimmed down or delayed to when their relevance and value is more certain.

Vulnerability to changing conditions

The longer a boat is at sea, the more likely its original course is no longer appropriate due to changes in weather. The chance that a change effort is rendered obsolete by changes in the competitive, economic or technological context is the environmental risk associated with organizational change. Implementing rapid change reduces this risk by ensuring that the change is completed and its benefits realized while the original conditions still apply. This also allows more nimble course correction if conditions do actually change while the organization is in transition.



Much as a relay is won through fast sprints that hand off seamlessly, you can turn any change effort into a series of rapid-result initiatives of 100 days or less. Here's how:

Identify the key challenges you need to solve

First, leaders clearly articulate the priority to be addressed: the problem to be solved, opportunity to be leveraged, or business result to be accomplished. This does not mean tasking a team to implement a pre-conceived solution. Instead, it is about scoping an »executable challenge,« whereby the team can get its

arms around the issues, innovate, experiment and deliver progress against the priority in their own way.

Assemble a small cross-functional team

The next step is to assemble a small team that covers all functions necessary to go after the challenge in a holistic way. Cross-functionality gives them a broader problem-solving spectrum. Keeping the team small, ideally three to six people, allows them to keep up good communications, align and move fast.

Unify the team behind a 100-day stretch goal

The executable challenge aligns the team with the organizational priority. Within that, the team must set its own goal to orient and focus its commitment. Instead of leadership imposing a solution, the team sets its own goal – a measurable result that they own, are excited by, and collectively commit to achieve. Later, their stretch goal will also function as »selection criteria« when choosing between alternative ideas and actions amid time and resource constraints. The team is enabled by one simple rule: choose the option that best moves them towards the goal – no more, no less.

Insist that the team experiment and learn fast

Old thinking and old ways equals old results. By making the goal an audacious stretch, the team is forced to innovate with new ideas and new ways of working. However, not all new ideas will work and not all assumptions will be correct. In a 100-day sprint, the team must quickly test assumptions and conduct fast, low-cost experiments to validate tactical changes. This critical capability was neglected for decades by organizations pre-occupied with development and execution of detailed multi-year plans. In a VUCA world, rapid experimentation, iteration and learning are essential not only for innovation and fast results, but to fuel the adaptive processes by which the organization can evolve into the future.

Originally developed by Schaffer Consulting, the Rapid Results Approach uses focus, temporary team structure and a self-determined stretch results goal to enable speed, agility, experimentation, learning and results – in 100 days or less. Teams take on complex and ambiguous challenges – moving fast with minimal resources and build momentum and confidence for »adaptive change« designed for today's VUCA world. ●



For decades, Schaffer Consulting, a U.S. based management consulting firm, has worked side by side with the world's leading companies and non-profit organizations to accelerate strategy execution via innovation, simplification, and integration. Schaffer Consulting is a global partner of ICG.

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Patrice Murphy develops high-engagement approaches that help her clients unlock innovation and breakthrough performance. She brings clarity, courage and humor to her work in finance, pharmaceuticals, technology and government.



Markus Spiegel is passionate about Schaffer Consulting's »Results Orientation« and helps clients transform their businesses with tangible and sustainable results. His professional experience includes working in the automotive and financial service industry.



Recommended Reading

More about »executable challenge«:
Stop Solving Your Business Problems,
Keith E. Michaelson, Markus Spiegel,
Leader to Leader (Spring 2010)