a chapter from

The Change Handbook

The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems
Improving methods increase effectiveness and create operational efficiencies in such areas as cycle time, waste, productivity, and relationships. Basic assumptions of how the organization works often stay the same, while breakthroughs are achieved in processes, relationships, individual behaviors, knowledge, and distributive leadership.
Two Stories

Accelerating Company Growth

In 2002, Avery Dennison’s CEO, Philip Neal, and the company’s president, Dean Scarborough, were searching for new ways to accelerate organizational growth. With revenues of just over $4 billion and more than 20,000 employees around the world, this maker of adhesive materials enjoyed enviable profitability levels, but had grown less than 10 percent over the past two years. Plus, the company’s pipeline of new initiatives was mainly long-term, with payoffs at least two to three years out.

Neal and Scarborough decided that they had to find ways of growing more quickly using products and technology that the company already possessed. Three divisions in the Cleveland, Ohio, area were selected for a pilot experiment using the Rapid Results approach. In the pilot, the divisional managers identified 14 growth opportunities and assigned each one to a cross-functional team. Each team was then given the challenge of achieving a measurable new business result within 100 days—with the prospect that the innovation might offer much larger gains in the future.

The results achieved in this 100-day period were remarkable. One team designed and developed a product solution previously considered “impossible”—and got customer approval at a very good price. Another team closed within 50 days on a sales target that had been scheduled to come in over the course of 12 to 15 months. A third team not only developed certain automotive components that they would supply, but also started acting as a kind of coordinating broker—integrating the contributions of a number of other suppliers for a critical product line.
for one key customer. The customer solved an urgent problem, and the team more than doubled sales of Avery Dennison components in that customer’s product line.

Late in 2002, the company’s top managers traveled from California to Ohio to hear teams report on their 100-day experiences. In addition to the impressive results, team members talked enthusiastically about how much they had learned—and the exhilaration of generating a real success. CEO Neal later described the meeting as one of the best days in his career.

Neal and Scarborough immediately decided to expand the process across the company. Using the Rapid Results approach, $50 million in additional revenue was realized in the first full year from dozens of projects that utilized existing products, technologies, or customer relationships. From 14 initial U.S.-based projects, the program quickly grew to 500 projects worldwide, involving thousands of employees, generating more than $150 million in less than two years.

**Rapid Results in International Development**

In 2003, with the scourge of HIV/AIDS sweeping across Africa, Dr. Saleh Meky, minister of health for the tiny country of Eritrea, knew he was racing against the clock to prevent a health disaster in his country of 4.5 million citizens. Although a five-year plan was in place to prevent the spread of the disease, Dr. Meky was not satisfied that the pace was sufficient.

Based on advice from the World Bank, Dr. Meky worked with a consultant to launch six Rapid Results teams in the central region of Eritrea. Each team set a truly ambitious goal—a result that would achieve a significant and measurable gain on one priority HIV/AIDS prevention theme in the five-year plan. However, instead of five years, each project goal needed to be achieved in 100 days or less.

Projects touched various components of the five-year plan, including school-based education, home care, and engagement with critical groups such as commercial sex workers and truck drivers. For example, one of the projects focused on one region aimed to increase the use of voluntary counseling and testing services (VCT) by 25 percent and achieving an 80 percent positive satisfaction rating from users, all within 100 days.

By project end, the weekly number of clients visiting VCT facilities in Asmara had leapt by 80 percent and the trend continued to rise. User exit questionnaires developed as part of the Rapid Results Initiative also showed a consistent 95 percent level of satisfaction with the quality of the VCT service.

To achieve the result, the team tried innovations such as opening three new VCT sites, training five additional counselors, distributing Rapid Test kits, procuring some new equipment and furniture (videos for waiting rooms, for example), and putting in place a systematic tracking and monitoring system. The team noted that these developments—and the result—were accomplishments they would never have thought possible before the rapid cycle project.

The other five initial projects had similarly positive results. At a two-day workshop held at the end of the 100-day project cycle, Dr. Meky was so impressed by the results and enthusiasm of those involved that the projects were scaled up and expanded to tackle additional challenges, and dozens of additional projects were launched in other parts of the country. Since 2003, more than
10,000 people have been involved in Rapid Results projects to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS in Eritrea—helping the country limit increases in the infection rate.

**The Basics About Rapid Results**

The Rapid Results approach is a powerful way to “jump-start” major change efforts. It enables change leaders to achieve ambitious goals by stimulating action, experimentation, and learning in the pursuit of dramatic results in critical focus areas. Rapid Results projects are used as the essential building blocks for large scale and long term transformation.

Rapid Results projects can be undertaken singly or in combination, according to the scale of the overall change effort. Such projects have clear attributes—they are:

- **Results oriented**—work is focused on achieving tangible, measurable, bottom-line results (instead of activities, preparations, or recommendations)
- **Fast**—project duration is 100 days or less
- **Exciting and experimental**—fosters innovation and learning
- **Stimulating**—participants gain new insights on implementation challenges and risks
- **Empowered**—teams set their own goal, and are expected to actively pursue it with considerable latitude
- **Cross-functional**—teams draw together people who have frontline knowledge of the challenge at hand
- **Visible**—projects are actively supported and valued by an explicit sponsor commission

**When Rapid Results Should Be Used**

The Rapid Results approach should be used when change efforts need to be unstuck, accelerated, and injected with a sense of urgency—and where it is necessary to engage and empower various stakeholders in the process. Since the Rapid Results approach is modular, it can be used either project by project or, by launching many projects simultaneously, as a vehicle for large scale change.

Rapid Results should not be used when there is a “preordained” solution to the challenge at hand, since this dissipates the characteristic empowerment and excitement mentioned above.

**Probable Outcomes**

Rapid Results projects have a dual focus on achieving results and generating learning and insights into the process and dynamics of change in the organization. Each project is designed as a mini–organizational development effort, both for individual and for team learning about change.

Teams typically meet or exceed their Rapid Result goals. In those instances where teams are
not fully successful in achieving their goal, the team’s experience is treated as a rich source of learning and insight, enabling future teams to focus in more productive areas.

**How Does It Work?**

The life cycle of a single Rapid Results project is shown in figure 1. Rapid Results projects follow a similar rhythm regardless of their duration. First, there is a short period in which change leaders, project sponsors, and facilitators work together to define areas for focused effort. This could conceivably spring from earlier strategy development work using methods such as Open Space (chapter 9), WorkOut (chapter 58), or Future Search (chapter 33), or be based on urgent and compelling priorities facing the organization. Sponsors define an executable challenge for each team, providing guidance as to where a result is needed, and helpful intuition regarding the territory for discovery.

A major insurance business faced last quarter results well below plan. The CEO challenged seven senior managers to each launch a Rapid Results initiative that would deliver an extra surge of profitable growth by year-end—and lay a foundation for stronger performance in the next year. Each manager commissioned a team to deliver a measurable result within 60 to 100 days.

The sponsors, team leader, and team members are brought together at a formal launch event, usually lasting one day, at which they carve out their own goal and shape a work plan for

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![Figure 1. Phases of Rapid Results Cycle](image)
achieving the result. The critical distinction here is that the team *sets its own goal* at a level that is challenging enough to stimulate innovation and experimentation. We use the “gut test”: The goal should create a slight feeling of anxiety as to how it will be accomplished. If the team is relaxed and confident that the goal is readily achievable using the current system, then it is not enough of a stretch. By encouraging the team to *push itself* into its own discomfort zone, ownership of the challenge and commitment to change is located with the team.

In one line of business, the sponsor called together a team in one office, to find a way to reduce non-value-adding administrative work and significantly increase the amount of business being quoted. Having laid out the challenge, he left the room. The team of underwriters, technicians, and support staff spent four hours deciding how to simplify the work flow, and quantifying how much more business they would aim to handle as a result. A facilitator encouraged them to aim high. At the end of the day, they reviewed the goal with their sponsor, calibrating their own perceptions against his, but ultimately basing their goal of increasing quotations by 30 percent on their own instinct about the challenge ahead.

After the launch meeting, the team is in the driver’s seat during the implementation phase that lasts 30–100 days. There are at least two major review points where the teams report on progress and results. Halfway through the projects, the teams meet for a midpoint review to check for traction against goals and team learning. At project completion, teams have a final review to report and celebrate final results, share the team’s learnings, and share their ideas to sustain results over time.

The Rapid Results team held monthly review sessions with the sponsor and facilitator, reporting out on progress in streamlining the work flow, occasionally asking for help, and tracking the production volume that was now being achieved. By the end of the project, they had transformed their work flow and exceeded their goal by another 50 percent.

Once the team’s work is done, sponsors and change leaders consider the scale-up opportunities, taking into account the team’s insights. This can include turning fresh attention to a related challenge or a new issue thrown up by the team, extending the experiment to other locations or customer segments, or “snowballing” the best practice insights to other work groups for adoption or further development and discovery. Frequently, Rapid Results projects also reveal crosscutting or supporting activities (such as training or system enhancements) that are needed across locations, which are commissioned as part of the overall portfolio of system changes.

Major organizations and communities have built large transformations on a foundation of many Rapid Results projects, spun out of large group events such as WorkOuts, knitted together in waves or as an inverted pyramid where one project spawns multiples.

The Rapid Results team formally reported their innovations and results, sharing the new forms and checklists they had created. Other offices immediately started to
adopt some of the changes. A few months later, the sponsor coordinated calls between all the offices to encourage uptake and further improvement. By year-end, most of the innovations had been scaled up, and all offices were sharing their improved results monthly.

**Table of Uses**

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<th>Setting/Challenge</th>
<th>Example of Initial Project</th>
<th>Large Scale Impact</th>
<th>Number of Participants/Length of Project</th>
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| *Avery Dennison* U.S. producer of pressure-sensitive materials; office products; and various tickets, tags, labels, and other products  
• Increase revenue growth from existing products | Launched 14 Rapid Results projects across 3 divisions. | Impressive early results led to global use of Rapid Results teams generating $50 million of new sales in the first year with $150 million in the second year. | Grew from 14 to 500 projects involving 2,000 employees within 2 years. |
| *Eritrean Ministry of Health, Africa*  
• Combat the spread of HIV/AIDS | 6 initial projects in central region of Eritrea included teams focused on: increased use of voluntary counseling and testing centers (VCT), increasing use of female condoms among commercial sex workers (CSWs), school-based HIV/AIDS prevention program. | Annual goal of 12,000 VCT in the central region of Eritrea, considered ambitious in March, was shifted upward to 15,000 in June after the first round of Rapid Results initiatives (RRIs). The end-of-year results fell just short of 20,000 users after 3 rounds of RRIs. | Projects in Eritrea have involved about 10,000 people over 2 years. |
| *Grupo Industrial Saltillo* Large Mexican conglomerate of automotive, industrial, and consumer products  
• Change Acceleration Process (CAP+) to improve manufacturing performance | Reduce cost of top 4 common materials (safety supplies, pallets, packing materials, chemicals) by 25%. | Realized cost synergies of $2 million in the first year from this corporate procurement project. Other projects undertaken in 4 other areas resulted in faster sales growth, new products introduced earlier, quicker start-up of new facilities, and significant cost savings. | This corporate-wide effort took place over a year with more than 250 people involved in teams and steering committees. Also created and trained an internal consulting group of 12 to sustain and expand the CAP+ process to other operational areas. |
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<td><strong>MeadWestvaco</strong></td>
<td>In 1999, Westvaco announced the first of several acquisitions to expand and transform their business. Used Rapid Results teams as a means to quickly integrate and achieve desired synergies.</td>
<td>A succession of smaller acquisitions knitted into the larger corporation with Rapid Results projects enabled swift execution during Westvaco’s merger with Mead in 2002.</td>
<td>In the course of 4 acquisitions and the merger of MeadWestvaco, dozens of teams worked on integration planning and execution that produced hundreds of millions of dollars (more than $325M in the merger alone) in cost reductions and revenue growth. The integration teams over a period of 3 years engaged hundreds of people in carrying out the work.</td>
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<td><strong>Zurich/Eagle Star</strong></td>
<td>In the first year, more than 30 WorkOut sessions launched more than 100 Rapid Results projects that produced measurable savings in excess of US$10 million.</td>
<td>Rapid Results projects facilitated rapid and successful integration of Zurich and Eagle Star’s different cultures. The project’s accountability and results-focus has strengthened the company’s monthly and quarterly business reviews and built a sustained focus on achieving short- and long-term financial success. Company actuaries verified savings from the projects to be in excess of $100 million over four years with overall company performance shifting from significant losses to strong and sustained profits. UK CEO Patrick O’Sullivan has successfully “exported” the program to other parts of the Zurich organization with significant results.</td>
<td>Over the first year—hundreds of staff were involved, as well as dozens of internal facilitators. By year 4, more than 3,000 staff members were involved in at least one of these sessions. 300 people were trained as internal facilitators, and another 50+ more as skills designers of these efforts.</td>
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Getting Started—The Fundamentals

The ability to calibrate the change effort to organizational appetite (starting small, scaling up from demonstrated success) is one of the greatest strengths of the Rapid Results approach. If the readiness for change is small, start with local efforts based on a few projects that demonstrate the potential for change. The tangible, valuable result—plus the enthusiasm and energy that emanates from successful teams—become the fuel for scaling up into a larger effort. Stoking the fire in this way offers better payoff than trying to negotiate up front for the big commitment of resources, emotional energy, and organizational time needed to launch a huge change effort.

Paradoxically, this works so well because the Rapid Results approach leverages the stability of whole systems to create cells for experimentation and innovation, below the radar screen and without the risks associated with shifting the entire system simultaneously. Once Rapid Results experiments have proven their worth, change can be scaled-up across the whole system from a position of demonstrated value, rather than from a position of faith and guesswork.

Guiding Principles

There are nine guiding principles that underpin both the Rapid Results approach and individual projects:

1. Focus on a transformational challenge
2. Carve out a stretch goal
3. Organize around short-term time horizons
4. Pinpoint clear accountability for results
5. Drive experimentation and discovery
6. Execute in a planned and disciplined fashion
7. Assess learning throughout
8. Design methods for the next round
9. Scale-up

Design Models

Typically, Rapid Results projects adopt one of five designs (table 1).
Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships

The key roles and responsibilities are shown in figure 2.

Sponsorship needs to come from a senior-level manager who is prepared to place a “demand” upon a team—a challenge to achieve improved organizational results. This should always be captured in a written sponsor statement.

In large scale change, a senior-level manager can sponsor a portfolio of Rapid Results projects—with other senior managers acting as champions for individual project teams. The sponsor works with the champions to decide how the overarching business challenge or strategic plan can be carved up into a portfolio of Rapid Results projects. Again, the sponsor communicates the context, the challenge, and the expectations for results in writing, to ensure that a consistent message is cascaded to teams by champions.
We have worked in organizations where one sponsor is from management, the other from a labor union. This works when there is joint commitment to results from both management and labor.

Facilitators working with Rapid Results teams need to be focused on results, support innovation and learning, foster execution, communicate effectively, influence appropriately, and be able to demonstrate adaptability.

**Conditions for Success**

**Why Rapid Results Works**

Rapid Results projects work because they:

- Begin with action and results, not preparations
- Strengthen grassroots implementation capability, building capacity and confidence
• Test large scale change in low-risk ways
• Drive accountability lower in the organization—so that someone beyond management is lying awake at night thinking about what it will take to accomplish the result, and how to bring all the necessary elements together
• Are designed to replicate, in a calm and systematic way, dynamics that naturally arise during crisis—such as clear sense of purpose, sense of urgency, collaboration across boundaries, and freedom to experiment. We call these the “zest” factors.

What’s the ROI of Rapid Results?

The return on investment (ROI) of Rapid Results projects is twofold: financial and developmental. Projects typically yield confidence-building payoffs, process innovations, and the learning and development that expand everyone’s capacity to manage change. These outcomes set the stage for expansion and acceleration of progress. As each project is completed, it serves as a building block for larger-scale change. In most organizations, the results achieved in the first few Rapid Results projects more than pay for the investment in the entire effort. In fact, this rapid payoff has spurred some management development units that use the approach to consider themselves as profit instead of cost centers.

Theoretical Basis

The Rapid Results approach draws on diverse theoretical foundations:

• Kurt Lewin taught us that the best way to change a system is to actually try tweaking it.
• Robert H. Schaffer has shown that adults learn best when actively engaged in the experience, consistent with David Kolb’s adult learning theory. We learn best by actually experiencing what it feels like to touch, see, smell, and live a small piece of the big result we are trying to achieve.
• Goal-setting theory explains the power of a sharp, clearly defined goal.
• Social identity theory illuminates how creating collective ownership among team members increases the odds of success, even of an ad hoc effort.

The insights of the Rapid Results approach are also born out by the empirical research of many scholar/practitioners, such as John Kotter and Dan Cohen, and Michael Beer and coauthors.

Rapid Results Approach Challenges the Conventional Wisdom

The Rapid Results approach challenges conventional wisdom in three ways. First, we believe that involvement for involvement’s sake isn’t enough. We say that change in organizations is strongest when built on a combination of cultural changes and actual results. Second, the Rapid
Results approach turns the “begin with preparations and wait patiently for results” paradigm upside down and begins at once with results. Managers do not need to wait for the final consulting report, or the full analytical market study. They can begin with actions that often yield more learning than any report or study. Finally, we don’t believe that a large scale change effort must involve the whole organization in a lock-step system transformation. Consistency is the enemy of creativity and social discovery. Conventional wisdom often holds that short term is “bad.” We say that short-term successes, built on local, small-scale, rapid-cycle efforts, can be the fuel for learning and large scale change.

**History of Creation**

The Rapid Results approach was originated by Robert H. Schaffer and the firm he founded (RHS&A) in the early 1960s. It has been documented in hundreds of articles and more than a dozen books. Over four decades, the approach has been validated by an international practice community including major corporations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and development agencies.

**Sustaining the Results**

The results and learning from a portfolio of Rapid Results projects are embedded in an organization through attention to three dynamics: sustainability, expansion, and scale-up.

*Sustainability* refers to the capacity to maintain the particular result achieved during a rapid-cycle project, in that area. As each project progresses, the team is asked to recommend any shifts that will be needed to lock in its result for the longer term. It might require training, systems changes, formal process redesign, or targeted communication. For example, a Rapid Results team in a hospital operating room (OR) that has reduced the average time to prepare the room between patients by 20 minutes would ask itself what is needed to maintain that standard after the intense effort of the rapid-cycle project is ended.

*Expansion* refers to a team’s capacity to take the learnings from one project and leverage these into a bigger or related effort in the same domain. Examples include a team agreeing to take another crack at an even better result on the same issue, or picking a related issue that could not be fully addressed in the previous project. In the case of the hospital OR team, this could mean trying to reduce turnaround time by another ten minutes, by targeting administrative errors or doctor delays.

*Scale-up* refers to the capacity to take the result achieved by a particular team and replicate it more broadly across the organization. A result in one unit, segment, or region or with one customer is used to stimulate similar results elsewhere. In our hospital example, this could mean taking what was learned in one OR and trying to replicate the result on every shift and in every OR across the hospital system. This requires a careful balance between constantly reinventing the wheel and simply rolling out a solution in a command-and-control manner. The ownership of the goal and the opportunity for innovation remain core dynamics of change,
even when a work team is being asked to adopt and build upon the ideas and learnings from a Rapid Results team.

**Impact on an Organization’s Cultural Assumptions**

The cultural shifts that arise from the Rapid Results approach are most noticeable in a few key mantras that play out in the organization:

- *The wisdom for change lies within.* Communities develop stronger capability to drive change when people realize that outside experts are not needed to make major change happen. We have noticed that in communities and countries facing development challenges, traditional “big-fix” programs often stumble because of a lack of grassroots implementation capability. Using rapid-cycle projects, the “target population” ceases to be a target and becomes a driver for change, building its own experience of successful implementation.

- *No more excuses.* Rapid Results projects often smash organizational myths that serve as convenient excuses for lack of improvement. Teams often start with a conviction that a particular cause outside their control (such as a systems issue) lies at the root of their problems. However, the discovery process often uncovers many root causes that the team can control, empowering the team to bring its full creativity and ownership to bear on the challenge. As Avery Dennison’s Dean Scarborough put it: “The 100-day deadline drove an incredible amount of creativity. When people hit obstacles, they did not come to management for help. They . . . did what they had to do to get over the obstacles. They took some risks.”

- *Do it, just do it.* As more rapid-cycle projects are carried out, there is more of a “go for it” feeling throughout the organization. Out of big, amorphous goals, short-term targets are set. Team accountabilities are specified. Work plans are developed. As projects succeed, participants absorb the learning and move on to more ambitious and sophisticated undertakings. Additionally, as implementation capability expands, so does the organization’s capacity to master its strategic direction. The culture of the enterprise begins to shift even though the focus is on tangible results—not cultural change.

- *Make tomorrow start today.* Achieving rapid-cycle results enables organizations to shift to a faster, empirically based approach to strategic direction setting. Again, Scarborough argues that the Rapid Results approach “allows you to test big strategic concepts very quickly and in a very focused way. . . . If you go out and test the idea in a small-scale 100-day way, you have some real solid data. We have been able to implement certain strategies much more quickly this way.”

**Burning Question—Doesn’t This Simply Exploit Low-Hanging Fruit?**

While there is nothing wrong with accomplishing easy goals, the Rapid Results process helps people to carve up difficult, seemingly insurmountable challenges into achievable chunks. Each
Rapid Results project should make a significant contribution toward achieving an urgent, compelling objective. If the Rapid Results goal can be accomplished easily—if it does not need the combined efforts of a team—then it is not worth the investment of the entire team’s time and effort. The collective “gut test” should confirm that the team is aiming for a significant step-up in performance.

Some Final Comments

Key Difference Between Rapid Results and Similar Methods

Teams and task forces are commonplace within most organizations. However, most such teams are held accountable for little more than activities or recommendations. Rapid Results teams are held accountable for achieving results through innovation, and for extracting learning and insights along the way. Taken together, these elements build confidence and capacity to manage further change.

Common Misconceptions and Confusion About This Method

The belief that a short-term focus is always bad. This universally accepted “truth” of organization management is exposed as fiction by the success of Rapid Results. This myth is the legacy of too many panicky, short-term moves that have damaged companies—like cutting R&D or eliminating customer services. We have discovered that short-term thrusts can be powerfully beneficial if they are executed intelligently and if they are designed as stepping-stones toward major strategic gains. Short-term thrusts are bad only if they are poorly conceived or poorly executed.

About the Authors

Patrice Murphy is a senior consultant at the Stamford-based management consulting firm of Robert H. Schaffer & Associates (RHS&A). Celia Kirwan is a consultant and Ron Ashkenas is a managing partner of the same firm. This chapter reflects the beliefs, work, and insights of the authors and their colleagues. RHS&A consultants collaborate with clients from around the world to accomplish dramatic bottom-line improvements and bring about far-reaching change. We developed, practice, and teach the high-impact consulting mode, whereby modest consulting inputs can be leveraged by clients to catalyze significant results. The authors can be reached at info@rhsa.com or through RHS&A’s Web site at www.rhsa.com.

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