



EXECUTIVE DIGEST

The rapid results package: Better performance/stronger managers



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Abstract With the rapid changes taking place in today's world, the new capabilities required of managers are outpacing the capacity of most organizations to respond. Traditional management development has proved incapable of effecting needed changes. The Rapid Results approach, a performance process, has demonstrated that it can play a critical role in responding to this challenge. When crises and 'must-do' situations occur in organizations, managers almost always rise to the occasion and achieve well beyond their regular levels of performance. The Rapid Results approach is designed to generate the same zest by getting teams to strive for and achieve almost impossible goals. They are helped to innovate and to exploit new approaches. And when teams succeed, the fun of evolving new approaches and the reinforcement of success produce managers who are in turn more ready to try their hands at additional, even tougher goals. Thus, management development and heightened achievement are blended into a single process.

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1. Introduction

For at least 20 years organizational leaders have recognized that times are changing, that the old command and control approach is obsolete, and that more flexible and adaptable modes of work are essential to surviving and thriving. Little progress has been made in actually implementing those shifts, however, even as the world has evolved and made them increasingly urgent. Thus, leaders now face a challenge of huge proportions: to develop—at all levels—the skills and mindsets necessary to support this new way of operating. This is a

challenge that traditional management development programs have not proven capable of meeting.

In recent years the Rapid Results approach, which was developed mainly as a performance improvement method, has demonstrated that it could be a key to responding to this challenge. The approach requires managers and frontline staff to work in small teams to accomplish major steps up in performance within very tight deadlines. While this approach consistently yields significant performance gains, it also generates two kinds of management development that are essential to achieving the transformation just described:

1. Team members learn a wide variety of *skills* needed to achieve their goals quickly. They learn how to construct sharp assignments with clear

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accountability. They learn how to conduct low-risk experiments to quickly test possible solutions and discover what works. They learn to spontaneously form effective collaborations—sometimes formal, sometimes informal. They learn how to divide work amongst themselves and move around in their organization to get vital information and to mobilize necessary resources.

2. Team members gain new *confidence* that enables personal and organizational transformation. As they push through to new levels of performance, they discover that dramatically better performance can be realized, not by stress and strain, but by creative innovation. Even when people seem overwhelmed with work and when everyone claims they are already doing their best, a hidden reserve of potential is waiting to be tapped through people's ingenuity. After some successes, employees begin to be less threatened by impossible-sounding demands. This psychological learning encourages them to raise the bar of what they consider possible.

In our experience, these developmental advances can occur only in the cauldron of tough performance improvement successes. It is only by experiencing these new achievements that managers gain the confidence such achievement is possible. Thus, while participating in Rapid Results projects, managers develop the skills needed to achieve their goal. This is the opposite of the usual management development paradigm, whereby skills are taught and then 'parked' until some later date when they might be needed.

And so, without diminishing attention to the performance improvement aim of the Rapid Results approach, a number of professionals—us included—began placing increased emphasis on exploiting its developmental possibilities. Thus, what began as a performance improvement method with modest developmental side benefits is now as much a management and organization development process as a productivity program. In this article, we outline the special circumstances that enable rapid development of these specific skills required to operate a nimble, adaptive organization and detail an approach that can be used to methodically create these circumstances in any organization.

2. 'Must-do' situations: Circumstances that enable rapid growth and learning

The Rapid Results approach is based on the same dynamics that enable companies confronted with

emergencies or urgent, must-do situations to rise to the occasion and deliver the needed results, sometimes in breathtaking ways. Famous examples include programmers rewriting software in several days—rather than the typical several months—enabling Apollo XIII's return from its moon mission; the rescue of Chilean miners in just half the time estimated as a best case scenario by experts; and Johnson & Johnson developing safety packaging in weeks—rather than years—after some Tylenol capsules were laced with poison.

In such situations, the challenge to participants to create and implement a workable solution in the face of a compelling challenge creates a strong sense of personal responsibility. This zest enables the actors to break through the forces of inertia that limit progress in most organizations. Conventionally structured organization improvement efforts planned by senior management rarely have any of this spirit.

Rapid Results projects recreate the dynamics of these must-do events by focusing on the achievement of very tough, critical goals in a short amount of time. Teams have to achieve a specific goal—increasing sales, reducing costs, accelerating the introduction of a new product—using resources and tools already in place or through innovations they create on the move. These projects have been successful in many different kinds of improvement situations in mobilizing energy and achieving results.

In such situations, the nature of the challenge requires fast, dramatic learning. They are experiences in which the results cannot be achieved by doing more of the same; they require innovation, fresh solutions, and development of new skills and confidence. Fortunately, they not only require this development but also enable it.

The power of these experiences is that they propel managers out of their everyday rhythms and patterns of work. This is necessary for adult learning. Leaders can be exposed to tons of leadership development activity, but there is no evidence that they will change as a result. They need to be pushed outside their comfort zones and stretched in order to test new behavior modes.

Leadership development professionals have appreciated this reality for years and have encouraged stretch assignments, case studies, and simulations in place of formal training. But there are limits to the number of career-changing assignments that can be given. And simulations and case studies lack the adrenaline-boosting charge that comes from dealing with real, live experiences in the workplace. Without the reinforcement of delivering important bottom-line benefit to the organization, managers don't get much impact from such experiences.

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