

Rapid Alignment: Bringing Speed to Strategy

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Organizations reap enormous rewards when they implement strategy faster, especially in times of economic uncertainty. However, many organizations have difficulty affecting change quickly, so change is slow—and slow is expensive.

An emerging discipline called Rapid Alignment is bringing speed to strategy implementation and accelerating change management. By focusing on middle managers—where strategic initiatives are often untracked, and execution is slow—Rapid Alignment can help the organization uncover new ways to work and develop high-performing leaders to grow the business.

Rapid Alignment helps to ensure that an organization’s strategy and business initiatives are carried out in a rapid and aligned way. It involves a two-pronged approach:

1. A diagnostic/assessment phase determines what key activities or imperatives need to occur to provide the foundation for Rapid Alignment. This phase integrates the business, organizational, and individual priorities that map to the strategy.
2. A personalized coaching approach helps leaders be proactive instead of reactive, to focus heavily on strategy execution, to have better control in their daily lives as leaders, and to improve their decision-making ability. Coaching achieves this by introducing new perspectives, behaviors, and skills to inspire “moments of leadership.”

Leading from the Middle

Traditionally, one of the biggest barriers to implementing strategy has been the failure to engage middle managers. The middle is where we execute and institutionalize change and strategy—yet this layer and the subsequent layer often lack the understanding and the rationale for strategic change. Leaders here can fail to see what change means for them and the employees they manage, leading them to continue to do their work in the same way. As a result, the commitment to change and the specifics of how to change are left undefined.

At a high level, this isn’t surprising. While top executives may be looking outward at a sputtering economy or a changing market, mid-level managers look inward at the same day-to-day issues they always have. They don’t overtly resist change, or try to impede strategy, they just haven’t had the opportunity to lead from the middle. Mid-level managers need to understand how strategy changes affect their operations, to learn new skills to help them lead that change, and to adopt new behaviors to accelerate strategy implementation.

If the hundreds or thousands of middle managers learn rapidly, the organization changes faster, and the promise of the new strategy is quickly realized.

Rapid Alignment helps middle managers see where they have the control and the potential to impact business priorities, creating a clear line of sight to increase their self-awareness and their ability to collaborate among teams. We refer to this as “Leadership Performance.”

Individual coaching has always been a highly-applicable, convenient, and efficient form of development. Often, an individual can get more value out of 30 minutes of personal coaching than a full day in a classroom. The downside is that individual coaching often does not tie the learnings directly to the organization’s strategic imperatives or the leader’s business priorities.

With individual coaching, success is hard to measure, and delivery can be inconsistent. The Rapid Alignment process addresses these shortcomings by creating a specific link between the organization's strategic direction and the coached behaviors across it.

Delivering Coaching to Large Numbers of Middle Managers

Rapid Alignment encompasses four components.

1. Context

To contextualize the learning, we begin with a deep understanding of the strategic and business context within which the leader is performing. We do this through one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders, supplemented by an in-depth document review. Next, we identify specific change management strategies or alignment processes to accelerate the process and create clarity in the organization. We assess the organizational dynamics that influence leadership—such as structure, culture, and performance—then determine how the individual's personality affects his or her leadership effectiveness and impact on the team.

2. Contract

Once we have context, we establish a scorecard for the leader and demonstrate how his or her role connects to the organization's strategic imperatives, function and department, and regular team. We use this scorecard to create a three-way coaching contract between the leader, coach, and the leader's immediate boss.

3. Coaching

In Rapid Alignment, coaching is not aimed at "fixing problems." Rather it is used to accelerate development to the next level of performance. Coaches provide individual support on a regular (usually biweekly) and "just-in-time" basis, depending on the individual manager's need. Team coaching and group facilitation take place every six weeks to provide an avenue for sharing results on progress toward overall strategic imperatives.

The coaching team not only supports individual managers in leading from the middle, it acts as a coordinating mechanism. The individual coaches, who each support several managers, provide insights to the engagement manager, who coordinates with the project sponsor. These are fed back to the organization to facilitate the necessary adjustments in strategy or approach and become a powerful feature of Rapid Alignment.

In addition, publicizing the achievements that are a direct result of the Rapid Alignment process helps accelerate the shift of mindset within the organization.

4. Evaluation

Throughout the Rapid Alignment process, engagement managers monitor the session documents for all of the coaches to observe organizational patterns, identify high-level issues and opportunities, and address performance and organizational barriers.

The project sponsor receives a progress update every two to three months on how the individual leaders are doing and the overall organization's and team's effectiveness in reaching the strategic imperatives. Key to success in Rapid Alignment is for the whole group of managers to be working on the same imperative at the same time. When everyone is working from the same scorecard, strategy becomes real, and results are magnified.

The Value of Rapid Alignment

With Rapid Alignment, coaches work in a powerful, coordinated way to direct learning. However, the greater value comes from the way this consistent, personalized focus creates a new strategic reality. The value of implementing change in three months as opposed to six months can be significant, but consider the value of people actually recognizing that speed is achievable—and embracing the sense of urgency as they rapidly align.

In addition, Rapid Alignment improves individual leadership skills and increases the number of capable leaders in the organization. Having a greater number of capable leaders means a deeper succession pool, more flexibility in deploying talent, and the ability to take on more projects.

Rapid Alignment supports attraction and retention objectives by helping teams create new ways to work quickly and effectively to meet their objectives. Through targeted coaching, individuals also experience growth opportunities and the satisfaction of working on high-performance teams. This helps broaden their skill sets and creates a stronger employment brand.

Guiding Principles for Success

The following guiding principles can help organizations achieve success in Rapid Alignment.

1. Maintain strong emphasis on leadership performance.
2. Focus on action and accelerated measurable impact.
3. Implement a measurable leadership strategy and make content relevant to roles and priorities.
4. Coach leaders to effectively navigate turbulent times.
5. Ensure that leaders are effective strategists and communicators.
6. Preserve core talent, lure high-potential talent, and recruit new skill sets.
7. Support leaders in balancing managerial control with the need to innovate and collaborate.

For more strategies on Rapid Alignment, contact **Michael McInerney** at **416.542.5681** or **michael.mcinerney@aon.com**.

About Aon Consulting

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