

Fresh approaches to old challenges

'If you always do what you've always done, you always get what you've always gotten'. In this edition of the Right Lane Review we discuss how to break away from formulaic approaches to strategy and planning and explore powerful new approaches to tackling long-standing challenges.

Organisations that are experienced in strategy and planning can be prone to repeating the same approach ad nauseam. When this happens, executives 'switch-off', organisational biases become entrenched and strategic impact vanishes. In our first article we discuss five approaches to take your next strategy and planning process 'off autopilot' and bring back the strategic impact.

A good strategy should involve hard choices that put a sharp focus on the things that matter. As you read the second article of this Review we encourage you to consider not only what your organisation must achieve, but also what you are willing to give up to reach this aspiration.

Collaboration doesn't always occur naturally and, without intervention, friction between teams is likely to increase rather than to abate over time. In our third article we discuss how to build a collaboration strategy that can break through counterproductive ways of working and unlock mutual value for both sides of a collaboration.

The actions of the leadership team typically direct the organisation's development 'at one remove'. In our fourth article we take a closer look at how actions taken at the executive level propagate across their internal organisational network. Examining change mechanisms through the lens of organisational network analysis can be a powerful tool for affecting cultural change, elevate cross functional collaboration and alleviate communication bottlenecks.

In the final article of this Review we discuss a challenge that many of our clients contend with, namely, spending far too much time in meetings. We present five steps to help reclaim those precious hours.

We hope that these articles get you thinking about how you can disrupt deeply engrained processes, break through entrenched behaviours and drive strategic impact within your organisation. We would love to hear from you regarding any of the articles that resonate with you and explore these ideas in more detail.

In this issue

1. Strategic impact: five ways to disrupt your strategic planning process

Over the years, strategy processes can become formulaic and tedious. In this article we suggest five ways to disrupt your next strategic planning process, and bring back the strategic impact.



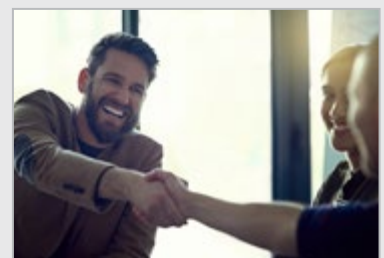
2. Strategy means sacrifice: what are you willing to give up?

In this article we explore the link between strategy and sacrifice and challenge you to consider not just what your organisation will do, but also what it won't do, in order to maintain a sharp focus on the things that really matter.



3. Building a collaboration strategy: your key to unlocking collaborative advantage

A collaboration strategy is a powerful tool for building alignment and enabling cooperation. At Right Lane we've seen this technique produce dramatic and enduring results both within organisations and with external partners.



4. Three levers for enhancing your organisational network

In our work, we often witness leaders affecting remarkable changes within their organisations. We take a closer look at the underlying networks that enable these organisations to thrive and examine three different levers through which leaders can leverage these networks to affect change.



5. Liberate resources by running meetings more effectively

The benefits of meeting effectiveness can be tangible and significant. In one organisation we worked with recently, the executive successfully recovered ~44% of the time they spent in meetings.



strategic impact

five ways to disrupt your strategic planning process

by dr marc levy



One of the main functions of strategy teams is to choreograph the strategic planning process. This is the typically triennial or quinquennial process of strategic thinking and planning that culminates in the minting of a new strategic plan. Over the years, these processes can become formulaic and tedious – neutralised by disparate stakeholder demands, dominated by the sometimes heavy work of planning and budgeting, cascading and aligning.

Sound familiar? In this article we suggest five ways to disrupt your next strategic planning process, and bring back the strategic impact.

1. Try one or more different frameworks

When Canadian academic Jeanne Liedtka said that strategic planning should be freed from the unilateral imposition of frameworks and techniques (Liedtka 1998), she struck a chord with us at Right Lane. Some organisations become captive to one framework or another – for example, Playing to Win (Lafley & Martin 2012) or Kaplan & Norton's strategy maps and scorecards (Kaplan & Norton 2008). These are excellent frameworks; but managers should draw on a 'rich repertoire' of techniques as the choice of a singular approach surely contains thinking.

In this article we suggest five ways to disrupt your next strategic planning process, and bring back the strategic impact.

2. Test your strategy with strategic questions or tests

We often ask clients Roger Martin's classic strategic questions – What's your galvanising aspiration? Where will you compete? How will you win? What capabilities do you need to build? What management systems do you need to put in place? We have our own longer list that draws on Martin's work with A.G. Lafley (Lafley & Martin 2012). Please refer to sidebar.

At the start of a new strategy process we sometimes ask clients to read through the list of questions and identify those that they don't believe they can answer to their own satisfaction. Any blank stares and we know we're onto something that might extend the client during their strategic planning process.

Sydney-based McKinsey partner Chris Bradley and colleagues developed 'ten tests' of a good strategy (Bradley et al. 2011). The tests give pause for reflection. Does your organisation's current strategy pass all of them? Will your intended strategic planning process enable all of them to be answered? If not, any failings you identify may help give focus to your efforts to disrupt your next strategic planning process.

3. Entertain heretical thinkers

Most organisations have them: often gnarly, deep thinkers who harbour different views about what they think your organisation should be doing but isn't. We've met many dissenters over the years who've challenged whether a board and management team had the right capabilities for the future, or how the organisation approaches strategic decision making, or the organisation's 'where to compete' choices. Seek out these heretics. Create safe spaces for them to share their dissenting views. They might extend or challenge the dominant thinking.

4. Do a more thorough diagnostic review

We work primarily for mid-sized organisations. Some are reluctant to invest in deep diagnostic reviews – covering,

for example, a perspective on future market structure, trends in technology and consumer behaviour, and financial benchmarking – that might unearth new insights.

We sometimes encounter the view that managerial judgement trumps analysis and the attendant insight; but over hundreds of strategy engagements, we've found that the former is usually substantially strengthened by the latter.

5. Start from a different source

Most executives and directors have seen strategic planning processes up close. They frequently have a preferred 'entry point' or way of approaching strategy. We've seen lots of different entry points – industry analysis, a CEO's unwavering aspiration, a long term actuarial forecast, a set of questions that need answering, and so on. We encourage clients to view their strategy through more than one of these lenses, as oftentimes – at the risk of torturing the metaphor – a different lens can bring the landscape into sharper focus.

Seeking out different perspectives is the consistent theme of the five ideas presented in this article. Jeanne Liedtka again: 'Concepts, frameworks, techniques – all provide us with new windows that help us to escape the limitations imposed by our own inevitably narrow ways of seeing our world'. If you want to disrupt your next strategic planning process, extend your viewpoint.

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Ten strategic questions you need to ask

1. Why do we do what we do? What's the problem or opportunity in the world with which we are engaging?
2. Who are our primary customers?
3. What do we want to be famous for?
4. Where will we compete, specifically?
5. What is our winning move/s?
6. How will we add value to our stakeholders?
7. How does our strategy rest on insight that only we have?
8. How does our strategy put us ahead of the market?
9. What capabilities do we need to be successful in the future?
10. What could a competitor do to hurt us?

This is an extract from the Right Lane Review June 2014 article [Ten strategic questions you need to ask](#). For full article including references visit www.rightlane.com.au

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strategy means sacrifice

what are you willing to give up?

by dr james mills

Right thinking

Resourcing constraints and the need to make strategic trade-offs limit what an organisation can do. The heart of strategy is selecting from among the vast number of possible activities an organisation could pursue, a select few which strongly reinforce one another. This requires leaders to define not just what their organisation will do, but also what it won't do, to ensure sharp focus on the things that matter.

Strategy is often reputed to require an uncommon skillset, distinct from the considerations of everyday life and demanding exceptional mental acuity. Traditionally it has been the preserve of generals with decades of military experience; political leaders supported by teams of analysts and advisors; and the brightest business minds, selected for their perceptivity and sound judgement.

It is true that, given the great many factors that must be weighed when setting an organisation's strategy, such as emerging industry trends, new regulatory developments, evolving customer and employee preferences, changing competitive forces and shifting political influences, determining the best course of action for any organisation is a significant challenge. However, strategic decision

making is in fact more commonplace than is often recognised.

A strategy is simply a course of action intended to achieve a desired outcome. As individuals, we make strategic decisions all the time. For example, when deciding whether to pursue a full time qualification or enter the workforce, when choosing a job that offers greater development opportunities over one that offers a higher salary or when deciding whether to rent or buy property.

What makes these decisions *strategic* is that they all involve an element of sacrifice. Pursuing the qualification means sacrificing industry experience, accepting the better development opportunity means sacrificing the higher salary and investing in property means sacrificing financial liquidity.

Distinctive leaders find their niche

In general, executives are highly practiced at making strategic decisions at the personal level. In advancing to the C-suite most executives make myriad sacrifices, such as declining lucrative job offers that were not aligned with their career objectives, forgoing interesting development opportunities to focus on core development goals and often working longer and harder than their peers to deliver exceptional results.

As competition for advancement intensifies with greater seniority, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to excel on multiple fronts simultaneously. Recognising this, many personal development experts encourage aspiring leaders to build their own 'personal brand', becoming distinctive within a particular domain (Ashkenas 2010, Corkindale 2008).

By focussing their personal development energy on areas of natural ability, aspiring leaders can develop exceptional competency in a specific areas of expertise (Drucker 2005, Saunders 2013). In doing so, these leaders of tomorrow are adopting a differentiation strategy hoping to outshine their peers.

Distinctive organisations make sacrifices

Despite this proven ability to make strategic sacrifices at the personal level, we often find that executive teams struggle to make sacrifices at the organisational level. It is possible that this incongruity arises because when selecting the activities they will, or will not, personally be involved in, individuals can take comfort in knowing that capable colleagues will step in and take these on.

Nevertheless, just as successful individuals must often forgo tempting opportunities if they wish to develop a reputation for being truly distinctive in a certain area, so too organisations must make sacrifices to achieve differentiation. It is not enough to simply say 'we want to deliver exceptional customer service'.

If this is truly what matters for your organisation, strong leaders must ask, 'what are we willing to give up to make this so?'



What are you willing to give up?

As you work to develop or refine your organisation's strategy, we encourage you to consider, not only where your organisation will be distinctive, but also the areas in which it is acceptable to simply 'meet the market'. This is the core of strategy. Strong leadership means avoiding the temptation of proclaiming excellence on all fronts.

When working with new clients, we often see the aftermath of such 'strategies': resources get spread too thinly across dozens of strategic initiatives with predictably poor results. Ultimately, failing to embrace sacrifice as an essential element of your strategy, means sacrificing your strategy.

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Sacrifices protect your market position

In his seminal work 'What is strategy?', Michael Porter argues that 'trade-offs are essential to strategy. They create a need for choice and purposefully limit what a company offers' (Porter 1996). Just as individuals must make sacrifices in some areas to outshine their peers in others, to achieve a truly distinctive position, organisations must make sacrifices by leaning into trade-offs.

It is the sacrifices made when an organisation embraces trade-offs, that protect its market position from would be emulators. For example, a manufacturing company whose strategic focus is centred on customisation, may choose to structure its operations in a way that allows the customer to make choices on every design element. In doing so, the company likely sacrifices the custom of a price sensitive customer cohort to meet the needs of a segment for whom customisation is important. Because of this sacrifice, they have little to fear from a low-cost competitor who would be unable to deliver the same level of customisation without giving up its low-cost position.

As you work to develop or refine your organisation's strategy, we encourage you to consider, not only where your organisation will be distinctive, but also the areas in which it is acceptable to simply 'meet the market'.

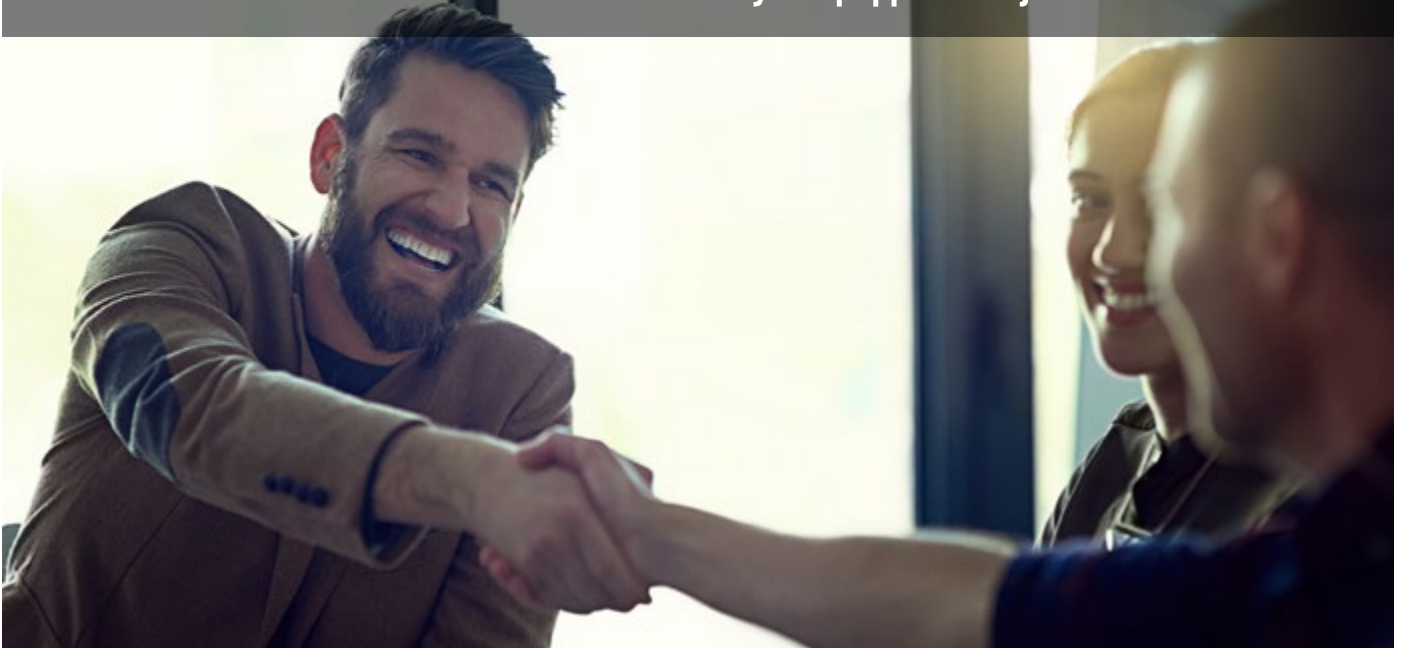
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Building a collaboration strategy: your key to unlocking collaborative advantage

by zoe pappas & dr james mills



Right thinking

Effective collaboration is one of the most valuable sources of competitive advantage. Unfortunately, as insular team priorities can often work against the joint goals of an alliance, spontaneous collaboration is rare.

A collaboration strategy is an effective tool for building alignment and enabling cooperation. At Right Lane we've seen this technique produce dramatic and enduring results both when employed within an organisation, to remove friction between different functional units, and externally, to forge lasting alliances with external partners.

Today's business models are increasingly dependent on collaboration, both internally, between different business units and functional teams, and with external partners and stakeholders. In recent years, we have seen an increasing appetite for forging strategic alliances rather than maintaining purely transactional relationships. And for good reason: when healthy collaboration flourishes, strategic partnerships can unlock mutual value that far exceeds the benefits delivered through a simple outsourcing arrangement.

In this article we outline the three phases of Right Lane's approach to building powerful collaborations and highlight the impact this approach has delivered for a client.

Collaborative advantage

Alliances are prolific in nature. A classic example of this is the symbiotic relationship between the sea anemone and the hermit crab. The crab actively recruits anemones which attach to its shell and ward off would be predators. In return, the anemone, ordinarily incapable

of independent movement, is carried far across the ocean floor and feeds upon the crab's leftovers.

Similarly, organisations with complementary capabilities can forge strong alliances that deliver mutual value for both parties. This is particularly effective when alliances enable allied partners to deliver an integrated service that any individual competitor would be unable to match, thus establishing a 'collaborative advantage' (Kanter 1994). A collaboration strategy is a powerful framework for formalising these alliances, ensuring they continue to deliver the mutual value they were created to unlock.

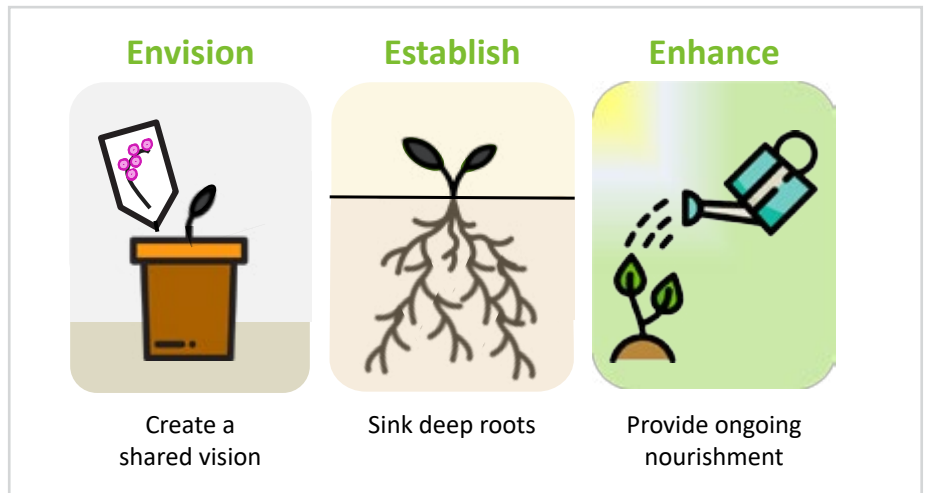
Collaborative advantage can not only be developed through external relationships. Most large organisations incorporate semi-autonomous functional teams with common stakeholder groups. By formalising the alliance between these teams, organisations can unlock a valuable internal source of collaborative advantage.

Collaboration must be cultivated

When collaboration does not flourish organically, leaders must actively cultivate it. Our approach to building alignment between partners involves three steps. First, we assist teams to articulate a shared vision for the collaboration. Next, we establish a strategic framework to support the collaboration, clearly specifying the individual and joint objectives and the processes, values and behaviours required to achieve them. Finally, we work with our clients to agree mechanisms for monitoring, reviewing and enhancing the collaboration.



Approach to building alignment between partners



Envision

Imagine being given a seedling along with instructions for its care but having no conception of how the plant will look when in bloom. It is likely that you would feel little motivation to care for your new companion. For this reason, seedlings are usually sold with a photo of the mature plant.

Similarly, creating a shared vision for the collaboration is an important first step in developing alignment between teams. This joint aspiration serves as a pervasive reminder of what the collaboration is working to achieve. It is the focal point around which teams can build their collaboration strategy.

Establish

Collaboration exists to unlock sources of value that neither party could realise independently. Understanding these sources of value is essential for the collaboration to sink the deep roots required to reach them. There are various ways of framing this discussion. One approach we often take draws upon the work of Robert Kaplan, David Norton and Bjarne Rugelsjoen (2010).

The first step in this approach is to understand what each party stands to gain individually from the collaboration. In our client work we've seen that a lack of common understanding of each parties' individual wins can be a major source of friction. For example, one alliance we recently worked with had deteriorated because, for one party, it was failing to deliver enough scale in new business to produce a net economic gain. We were able to get this alliance back on track by providing clarity around what each

party needed from the collaboration and agreeing a way forward that delivers mutual value for both parties.

Once the benefits for each party are well understood we move on to consider the common goals of the collaboration. These are the customer or end-user focussed outcomes the collaboration is working to achieve. We then ask, 'What joint initiatives and internal processes do we need to deliver these outcomes?' and, 'What values and behaviours are required for the collaboration to function effectively?'. We assist our clients to 'bottom out' these discussions and capture their outcomes in a collaboration strategy, or 'compact'.

Enhance

Effective collaboration requires two forms of ongoing nourishment, a formal monitoring and review process and an ongoing commitment to building a shared culture. Like water and sunlight, both are required for the collaboration to thrive.

In addition to monitoring end-user outcomes, formal measurement, monitoring and review systems should be established to track adherence to the processes, values and behaviours articulated in the collaboration strategy. The key to making this work is establishing clear expectations and explicit accountability.

The second form of nourishment involves building a shared culture across the collaboration. There are several mechanisms for building team unity. In our experience, the most successful approaches regularly bring teams together in both social and professional contexts: for example through regular joint team meetings, social gatherings and staff secondments.

Building collaboration in practice

We've seen this approach deliver dramatic changes, both when used internally to foster alignment across teams, and externally, to forge strong alliances that deliver mutual value. We recently ran a team alignment check-up after running a collaboration process for a dysfunctional internal collaboration. An anonymous poll delivered one year later revealed that 92% of staff believed collaboration between the two teams had improved. Of these, 91% agreed that this improvement had resulted in greater end-user outcomes.

The process of developing a collaboration strategy is in itself a powerful tool for building team alignment. However, as staff members move in and out of the teams the

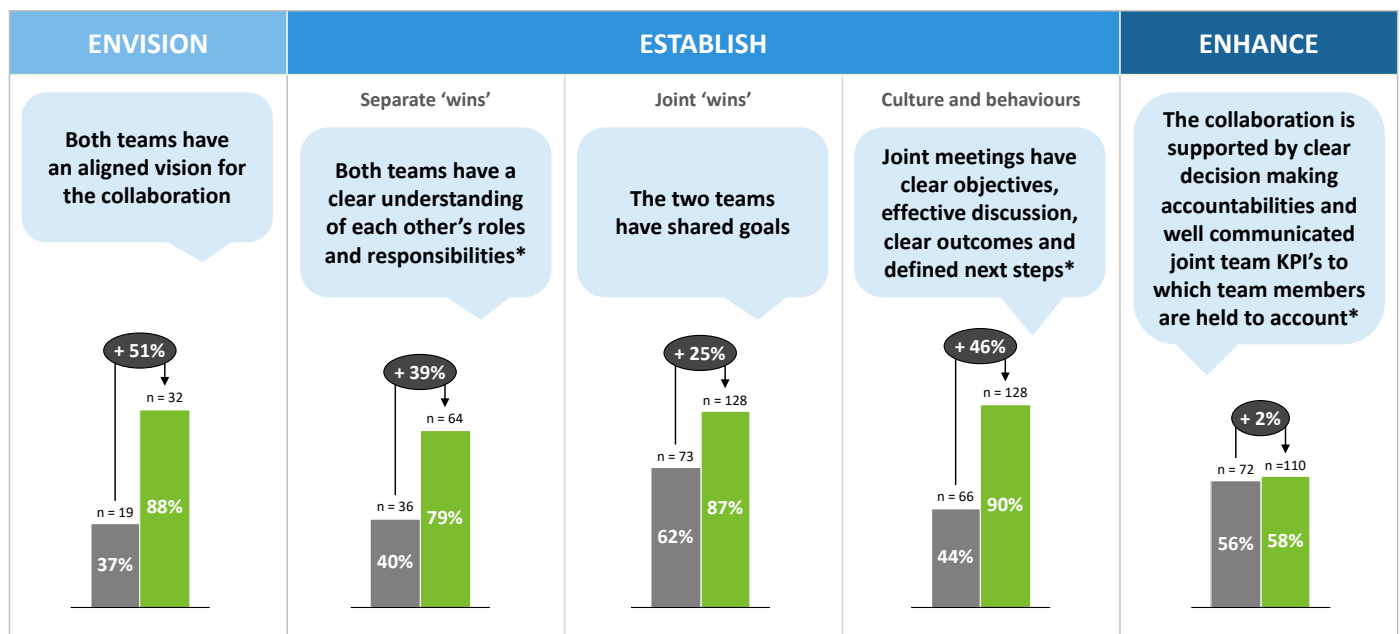
alignment built during any one-off process is likely to erode. Building a collaboration strategy provides a framework for onboarding new team members so that every new colleague strengthens the collaboration. The check-up we recently administered for one client revealed that, one year on, collaboration had dramatically improved despite the joint team having almost doubled in size (See Exhibit 1).

It is all too easy to accept friction between teams to be the natural state, unavoidable, or simply too hard to address. However, in our experience, by putting the spotlight on collaboration, teams can dramatically reduce friction, and by doing so unlock their collaborative advantage.

One year later ...
92% of staff believed collaboration between the two teams had improved.

Of these, 91% agreed that this improvement had resulted in greater end-user outcomes.

Exhibit 1: Proportion of respondents that agreed with statements posed before and one year after the team alignment process



* This chart displays aggregated responses from multiple questions relating to these themes. Source: Right Lane Consulting 2019, Client team alignment survey

■ Before ■ One year after

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Three levers for enhancing your organisational network

by dr james mills & linda deng



Right thinking

Organisations can be considered as networks of individuals connected through an intricate web of reporting lines, functional links and interpersonal relationships. At the most fundamental level, it is the optimality of this network that determines an organisation's ability to deliver on its strategy, to out-operate the competition and, ultimately, to win in the market.

In our work helping organisations to develop and execute winning strategies, we often witness the dramatic changes that leaders can affect within their organisational network through a combination of three different levers:

1. Reconfiguring the macroscopic structure
2. Enhancing connections
3. Enabling self-regulation.

Something is not quite right. Your leadership team has aligned on an ambitious strategy and your organisation boasts some of the most sought after talent in the industry. You have the proven capabilities required to deliver on your strategy and yet something is holding you back.

When faced with this situation, a natural response is to ask whether your organisational structure, ways of working and/or culture are fit for purpose. But how can you identify the peccant element? If this is a question you've been pondering recently, then perhaps it's time to take a closer look at your organisational network. Organisational network analysis is a powerful tool that can help leaders identify structural conflicts and uncover opportunities to develop more effective ways of working and enhance cross-functional collaboration.

Since large organisational networks can be incredibly complex, analysing and interacting with them can seem a daunting task. Inaction, however, can prove costly. Organisational networks evolve over time and, if left untended, often become ineffective or dysfunctional. On the other hand, leaders who truly understand their network can leverage it to align the organisation's operations with its strategy, drive organisational change, and enhance operational effectiveness.

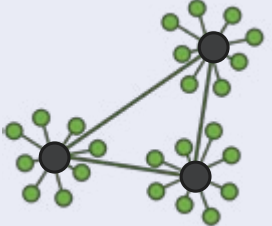
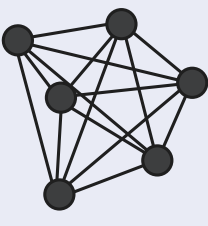
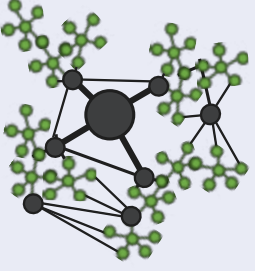
Understanding effective networks

Different networks are suited to different applications. For example, full service airlines operate a 'hub and spoke' network of flights. Their fleets are based in centralised hubs and they offer direct flights to nearby airports while longer distance flights 'connect' through other hubs. This allows services such as end-to-end baggage transfers to be handled efficiently at the hubs. In the 1990's the low fare carrier Southwest Airlines famously disrupted the industry by employing a radically different point-to-point network of flights.

Similarly, an organisational network must be fit for purpose. Naively, one might assume that the ideal organisation would be a maximally connected network in which each pair of individuals share a direct connection; this would resemble a peer-to-peer network in computing.

People however are not like computers. In practice, there is a limit to the number of close connections we can maintain. Recognising this, large organisations have long been divided into smaller collaborative groups. For example, in the Roman army a 'contubernium' of eight men (a precursor to the modern day squad or section) would march, camp and fight together.

Exhibit 1: Different networks are suited to different applications

1. Hub and spoke network	2. Maximally connected network	3. Typical organisational network
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full service airlines • Traditional web servers • Traditional banking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-to-peer computer networks (e.g. blockchain) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporations • Political parties • Military organisations

An effective organisational network need not therefore be maximally connected and in practice, there are diminishing returns from building connectivity between individuals at opposing edges of the network. What matters is how centralised or decentralised the network is, where the most influential nodes are located and the strength of connections between groups within the network.

Affecting change within your organisational network

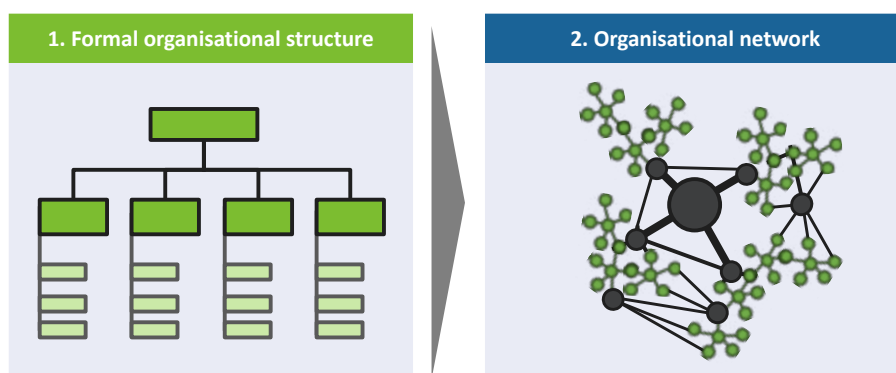
In our work helping organisations to develop and execute winning strategies, we often witness the dramatic changes that leaders can affect within their organisational network through a combination of three different levers:

1. Reconfiguring the macroscopic structure
2. Enhancing connections
3. Enabling self-regulation.

1. Reconfiguring the macroscopic network structure

Leaders do not have perfect knowledge of the complex web of relationships that exist within their organisation. Even at the executive level, the relationships between peers do not appear on an organisational chart. Furthermore, the connections that are captured correspond only to reporting lines and encode no information about the quality of the relationship between individuals; that is, how effectively they communicate, their level of mutual trust, etc. Nevertheless, formal structures such as the 'lines and boxes' on an organisational chart typically determine the macroscopic configuration of the network ¹.

Exhibit 2: The 'lines and boxes' on an organisational chart typically determine the macroscopic configuration of the network



¹ The macroscopic configuration is the high-level structure of the network. Typically this reflects departmental or geographical groupings.

The coordination - collaboration trade off

In his book 'Team of Teams' General Stanley McChrystal highlighted that, in general, a trade-off exists between centralised organisational networks in which power is held at a few key nodes and highly distributed networks in which power is divided between all individuals. The former allows centralised decision-making to result in highly efficient coordinated action across the network whereas the latter allows nimble localised decision-making and greater collaboration. For most organisations a balance between coordination and collaboration (between centralisation and distribution) must be struck.

It is common for the fine structure of the network to depart from the organisation's formal hierarchy. However, at the macroscopic level, lack of alignment between the formal organisational structure and the spread of influence across the organisational network can become a significant source of friction. We recently worked with one organisation where the business owner held no formal leadership role and yet commanded significant influence throughout the business. The ensuing conflict of influence obfuscated roles and decision-making rights hamstringing the organisation's productivity.

The primary nodes of the network are the main conduits for information flow between different functional teams. Weak links between these nodes can therefore severely limit internal collaboration. Therefore, for an organisational network to function effectively, in addition to ensuring the 'lines and boxes' on the organisational chart reflect the organisation's operations, it is necessary to get the right names in each box, thereby facilitating collaboration and efficient information sharing across the team.

2. Enhancing connections

In some cases, leaders may wish to take direct action to enhance the strength of network linkages. There are a number of approaches for doing so, many of which we have discussed in detail in previous Right Lane Review articles (Diego 2017, Hardy & Mills 2018, Pappas & Cossens 2018).

One practice that we have observed to be particularly effective for enhancing connections across an entire organisational network is to engage in a refresh of the organisation's core values. Crafting 'aggressively authentic values' (Lencioni 2002) and articulating the specific behaviours that characterise them can act to 'reset the bar' for collaboration and communication across the network.

Reciprocally, leaders can leverage their organisational network to affect cultural change within their organisation. By conducting an organisational network analysis for example, leaders can identify influential nodes within their organisation and appoint 'culture champions' to help articulate and embed these ideas across the organisation (Diego 2017).

Following an organisational network analysis, leaders may also seek to build or enhance connections between specific regions within the network. One-off social events are notoriously poor at building these connections as cliques typically form around established collegial relationships. In contrast, regular social and professional interactions, or better yet, opportunities to collaborate on projects that generate mutual value, can help build strong interpersonal connections.

At Right Lane we therefore think of the linkages within an organisational network as crossing a spectrum from 'coffee' to 'collaborate'. One approach that we advocate for building cross functional connections as you mobilise your strategy is to assemble a 'team of teams' to identify your organisation's 'quarterly best next steps' (Hardy & Mills 2018).

3. Enabling self-regulation

As staff members make new connections, change roles, leave or join the organisation, the network continually evolves. Actively managing this living system is an arduous task. However, once an effective macroscopic structure is established and effective ways of working have been embedded, leaders can take steps to encourage their organisational network to self-regulate.

Establishing parameters that passively reinforce important connections is key to enabling self-regulating behaviour. For example, creating rigorous measurement,



... once an effective macroscopic structure is established and effective ways of working have been embedded, leaders can take steps to encourage their organisational network to self-regulate.

monitoring and review processes reinforces trust along reporting lines. To bolster interdepartmental peer-to-peer connections, one of our clients now regularly holds joint departmental meetings. In another organisation, two departments were co-located to remove barriers to communication that had previously inhibited collaboration.

Our approach to engaging an organisational network

At Right Lane we believe that analysis should always be purpose driven. While a deep organisational network analysis can certainly yield valuable insights about an organisation, a comprehensive network analysis is a significant undertaking and may not always be the most appropriate approach.

We recommend that our clients consider an incremental, three step approach to engaging with their organisational network.

Step 1	Define precisely the insights you are seeking. For example, you may want to highlight opportunities for collaboration, identify information bottlenecks or uncover incongruencies between the formal organisational structure and the de-facto centres of influence within your organisation.
Step 2	Examine the network through a targeted analysis that is specifically designed to deliver the insights you are seeking. For example, you could employ a diagnostic to map communication, collaboration, or trust across your organisation.
Step 3	Apply the learnings to drive the change you want to see within your organisation, for example, by appointing change leaders, shifting resources to alleviate bottlenecks or bringing teams together to kickstart cross-functional collaboration.

Rather than producing vast quantities of technical information, this flexible approach is designed to deliver actionable learnings. For example, leaders can apply this approach to map trust across their organisation, identify a cohort of influential individuals to act as change leaders or highlight opportunities for enhancing collaboration or improve organisational effectiveness.

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Liberate resources by running meetings more effectively



by dr marc levy & dr james mills

Right thinking

In many ways, reclaiming time lost in meetings is like improving physical fitness. The best way to shed the pounds, or in this case reclaim precious hours, is through a strict diet, training and persistence.

In this case the 'diet' involves cutting back the minutes spent in meetings by pruning unnecessary interactions, inviting to participate only those whose input is required and protecting time for independent work. This 'diet' should be accompanied by a training regime designed to enhance meeting effectiveness to deliver meaningful progress during every interaction.

Like all fitness regimes, persistence is the key to making the changes stick. However, once effective disciplines are embraced, meetings can become a place to get 'real work' done together, rather than a distraction.

We frequently hear clients complain about how much time they spend in meetings. Meetings are too long and/or too frequent. The right people aren't in the room. More people are invited to attend than necessary. There is no agenda. Roles are unclear and there is no moderator of the discussion. Outcomes are opaque. The minutes or actions arising are distributed too late or don't get followed up at all. Meetings are a source of pain for many organisations and in recent years we've found that clients are increasingly looking to us for help to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their everyday interactions.

Improving your organisation's 'meeting fitness' is more than just an exercise in operational hygiene. The benefits to be realised are tangible and significant. We typically conduct a diary analysis at the start and end of 'meeting fitness' programs to gauge their impact. For one organisation we worked with recently, the program allowed the executive team to recover ~44% of the time they spent in meetings (excluding conferences). In addition, heads of department attended 14% fewer meetings and across the whole organisation there was a 26% increase in short, targeted stand-up meetings.

In a tight budgetary climate, when it can be challenging to have executive teams and boards approve new headcount, freeing up capacity to get more done, or new things done, is vital – as is, of course, initiative prioritisation and resource allocation effectiveness, topics canvassed in previous Right Lane Review articles. In this article we present the five stages of a successful 'meeting fitness' regime: **prune, participate, protect, progress, and persist.**

1. Prune

When helping clients to reclaim hours spent in meetings we typically begin with a 'calendar purge', a thorough evaluation of the organisations recurring meetings. In conducting this evaluation, we challenge organisations to consider the following questions for each recurring interaction:

- Does this meeting have a specific purpose (and a clear output)?
- Where the above outputs are communicative, is a meeting the best format for this?
- Is the time allocated for this meeting appropriate?
- Is the format of the meeting (stand up/ sit down/teleconference) appropriate?

2. Participate

Too often, people are invited to attend meetings for which their input is not required on many, or even all, of the agenda items. Trimming down meeting invitations to include only those who need to be there, and where possible to only the parts of the meeting for which they are required, not only frees up their time, but will also lead to crisper, more targeted discussions during meetings. For this to work best, it is important to empower individuals to excuse themselves from meetings when they believe their input is not required.

3. Protect

Most of us are familiar with the 'dead time' caused by awkward intervals between meetings. When managing multiple calendars, this can be difficult to avoid. However, protecting blocks of time can help to consolidate meetings and significantly reduce 'dead-time'. We encourage the organisations we work with to trial practices such as 'No meetings Monday' to protect valuable blocks of time for progressing independent work.

Many individuals in your organisation may already attempt to protect time in

their calendars in a similar way. However, introducing these initiatives at the 'whole of business' level gives staff licence to 'stick to their guns' when under pressure to schedule meetings that encroach on protected time.

4. Progress

Adopting best practice meeting disciplines is the key to ensuring that your team's interactions result in meaningful progress. When these disciplines are lacking, meetings can easily be consumed by tangential discussions and often fail to achieve the necessary outcomes. As a result, meetings overrun or are inconclusive and the same agenda items get tabled again and again.

Having facilitated close to 1000 executive team and board workshops, we understand how to run meetings effectively. Often, as we work with client CEOs and chairs to develop session agendas, we find that they are sceptical about how much ground we intend to cover. 'We've spent hours debating this issue and haven't cracked it yet' and 'there are a lot of strong personalities in this group' we are warned. However, at the end of the workshop, one of the most common reflections we hear is, 'Wow, I can't believe how much we got done!'

Improving meeting effectiveness is the key to making sure that meetings result in meaningful progress. It is a discipline that can yield a very high efficiency dividend. One of our senior clients estimates that he spends 60-80% of his working day in meetings and that 30% of that time is wasted. Improving meeting effectiveness can liberate between 100 and 200 hours per week of top team time, and many hundreds of hours for the 'CEO+2 level' group.

The opportunity is huge; however, like any fitness regime, going it alone can be tough. We help clients improve their meeting effectiveness by observing their meetings, recommending new policies and practices, upskilling their people in the

new approach and helping to embed the required changes.

One practice that we frequently recommend relates to 'the Ps of meeting effectiveness'. There are various lists of between five and eight Ps (see, for example, Schuman 2005) and different lists work in different contexts. Our own Right Lane five Ps are: purpose, product, perspective, people and process. We expect meetings to have an agreed purpose, a clear process and end product, and so on. In consulting we want our people, particularly our analysts and junior consultants, to have a perspective. Participants in our meetings are expected to have a view on the issues to be raised in the meeting and to 'get in the game', which means be heard and have an impact in meetings.

5. Persist

Like any fitness regime, getting (and staying) 'meeting fit' requires persistence. However, once effective disciplines become embedded they can have a strong positive impact on an organisation's ways of working.

One of our most successful clients spends a high proportion of their time in meetings, and they have a different attitude to this investment in time than many of our other clients. They get 'real work done together' in meetings; they don't see meetings as a distraction from their real work or what they have to get done. There are several reasons for this, but one of the most important is that their meetings are well run and the usual frustrations that accompany meetings are largely absent.

Let's fix meetings so that they can be the powerful site of action and collaboration that they should be.

References

Schuman, S (ed) 2005, *The IAF handbook of group facilitation*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

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Prune



Participate



Protect



Progress



Persist

want to know more?

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We employ our distinctive ideas and processes, and our absolute commitment to delivery, to help clients we care about pursue their inspiring missions.

We work alongside clients who do great work within the sectors they operate, and we are excited to be involved in creating outcomes that truly make a difference.

We are an ethical consulting firm with a strong belief in the work we do, and with a passion to give back to the broader community with the skills and expertise available within our walls.

Right Lane was established in 1997 to help private, not for profit and public sector clients to clarify and accelerate their future plans. Over the past 22 years, we have helped the executive teams and boards of over 250 organisations to define and adapt their direction and strategy, identify and clarify their priorities, align their efforts with their aspirations, get their major projects started and finished, and measure and improve their performance.

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