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Meet the MasterMinds: Robert Schaffer Gets Rapid Results

MCNews welcomes back consultant and author Robert H. Schaffer to talk about his new book, [Rapid Results! How 100-Day Projects Build the Capacity for Large-Scale Change](#). He's the founder of Robert H. Schaffer & Associates, and he helped start the journal, *Consulting to Management*. His previous books include [High-Impact Consulting](#) and [The Breakthrough Strategy](#).

We asked Schaffer how we can help clients succeed with large-scale change using the Rapid Results method.

MCNews: Would you explain the Rapid Results approach?

Schaffer: Too often, in companies that are trying to make big changes—mergers, going into new businesses, or opening up new plants or new markets—a few people at the top dream stuff up, create elaborate plans, and then expect everybody else in the organization to carry out those plans.

But they don't have the capacity. They haven't learned how. And many large-scale changes flounder because of that.

With the Rapid Results approach, we take clients' big objectives and tackle them on a small scale to achieve measurable results in a short period of time. We use 100 days because it's a nice, round number, but a project can take more or less than that. We help clients learn from the 100-day process and apply that knowledge to other initiatives.

In addition to achieving short-term results and teaching people how to work together, the Rapid Results way creates the grassroots capacity to carry out large-scale, complicated changes. Once people learn how to take the initiative in small ways, they can deal with larger and larger change projects.

MCNews: With so many companies attempting change programs, why is there a lack of capacity to execute on those initiatives?

Schaffer: Because you have little or no ability to implement change unless you've worked on it, learned from it, and experienced it a number of times. Often, people come up with all the things that a company ought to do but they struggle with implementation.

“In addition to achieving short-term results and teaching people how to work together, the Rapid Results way creates the grassroots capacity to carry out large-scale, complicated changes.”

At one company, a team spent eight or nine months studying how to improve specific quality issues. Then, they had a three-hour presentation about what needed to be done, including significant capital investment by senior management. But they had not actually *done* anything.

If you start with Rapid Results, at the end of a couple of months you've accomplished something concrete *and* you've learned.

MCNews: Could you give an example of how you've used the Rapid Results approach?

“Often, people come up with all the things that a company ought to do but they struggle with implementation. “

Schaffer: Sure. Banorte, a large Mexican bank, had roughly 2500 ATMs that were out of service more than they wanted. They had been working very hard to improve the reliability of their ATMs, but they weren't making enough progress.

Our team said, let's go after a few of them in one place and see what it takes to improve reliability. So we started with one neighborhood in Mexico City that had forty-four ATMs. We formed a cross-functional team and helped them learn how to work together to diagnose the problem and implement a solution. Within a few weeks, the team cut the ATM down time by half.

The client saw the Rapid Results approach work. They got it. They immediately picked other neighborhoods and eventually expanded the improvement program across the country.

MCNews: When you think about it, breaking a problem down into smaller pieces to achieve a larger goal is logical. But it seems completely opposite to the way most companies operate.

Schaffer: We've been writing about this for many years and have had many successes. But I think that many managers get impatient and they look for the big fix. And, of course, the large consulting firms are not interested in working on a smaller scale because then clients don't need huge teams of consultants.

MCNews: Is that because with this approach you're building organizational capability for change?

Schaffer: Right. We build capacity by using small-scale projects to get immediate payoff. People learn how to take initiative and how to develop and execute a work plan.

Many companies begin improvement projects by asking for things like extra training, new equipment, additional capital, and more people. The Rapid Results methodology focuses on getting started and accomplishing more with what you already have. So it's also a productivity enhancer.

MCNews I'm paraphrasing, but you talk about beginning with results, not preparation. You're probably not saying you shouldn't plan, but what do you mean by that?

Schaffer: Let's say, for instance, that within 100 days you want to increase sales or open a new market. If you say, well, in the next 100 days we're going to train all the salespeople who are going to open up that market. That's not a result—it's preparation.

By contrast, if you say that by the end of 100 days we're going to have ten new customers in this region, that's a result. Of course, it's fine to conduct training as part of that. Whatever else happens, the imperative of getting a measurable result changes the whole nature of what you do.

Many consultants fall into this trap: when clients want better results, they say, okay, we're going to get this new equipment, we need a new system, and we're going to train people. Those are preparations, but you can do that forever and never make progress.

MCNews: There does seem to be a lot of that in large organizations—let's get ready to get ready.

Schaffer: Well, of course, nobody is really put on the spot that way. Everybody is busy and reports great successes: we've got the new system or program; we're ready to go. But making a commitment to an actual result changes everything.

Banorte bank had people from multiple functions trying to improve the performance of their ATMs, and they were all having success. They were delivering cash better and they were keeping the machines functioning better.

But the actual number of breakdowns wasn't changing. Once they made the goal to quickly and significantly reduce the amount of down time for the machines, they really made change happen.

MCNews: Do you find on a Rapid Results project that the people who are making change happen are more motivated and get more satisfaction from their work?

Schaffer: Yes. One of the things that got us started down this path many years ago is the observation that when organizations face a crisis or a must-do situation, people suddenly mobilize themselves to get things done that they never would have attempted previously.

The classic case is Apollo 13, the moon mission that went bad. To save the astronauts and bring them back to Earth, the people at Mission Control had to write new software. They created those new programs in three days. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken three months.

My point is that when there's a must-do and you have to produce a result, people respond. What makes those situations different? Well, there's a real consequence, and it's very clear whether you're succeeding or not. It's not fuzzy.

MCNews: If an organization uses the standard project approach, how do you shift the mindset to Rapid Results?

Schaffer: We tell people how it's worked in the past and suggest they try it. The risk is low and they don't have to make much of an investment. They might ask, "How do we know it's going to work?" The answer: "Let's pick a few areas and try it."

For example, one client wanted to grow faster. They had tried various ways to accelerate growth and felt they were not getting where they wanted to go. We suggested that they try Rapid Results, so they picked three divisions and each division picked a couple of pilot growth projects.

The idea was not to just go off and do market research and report back at the end of 100 days. The goal was to get new sales. The pilots worked. The client was quite excited and expanded the program. By the end of the first year, they had generated \$50 million in new sales.

MCNews: Does that kind of success change your approach to future projects based on what you've learned?

Schaffer: Yes. At the end of 100 days, teams want to know: How can we keep whatever we've learned? How can we build it into the ongoing way the organization works? What are the next steps that we ought to take—what are some of the next things we can do? How can we use these successful new methods to expand the effort?

MCNews: One last question: What one piece of advice would you give consultants to move their clients in the Rapid Results direction?

Schaffer: Look at your client's most important goals and carve out one result that can be accomplished in a few months. Form a team to experiment with how to get to that result, see what you learn, and then take it from there.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

Find out more about Robert Schaffer, his books, and services at <http://www.rhsa.com>.