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Virtual teams delivering real-world results: Introducing the vRRI

COVID-19 has changed the way we work – definitely in the near-term. Possibly forever. In a matter of days (or in some cases even within hours) organizations’ teams were dispersed and set about working remotely. Depending on the organization and the industry, this sudden switch happened with widely varying degrees of success.

It’s a new reality. And it’s forcing us to come up with creative ways to adapt.

Events shifted to online. We’re raising glasses at virtual happy hours. Video conferencing has become a regular occurrence.

So, here’s a new adaptation: Bringing Rapid Results Initiatives (RRI) online. I’m calling them Virtual RRIs or vRRIs. A few years ago, I wrote a piece called *It’s All About the Pace*, which introduced how AXA XL’s North America Construction team has successfully used RRIs to achieve extraordinary results in a short period of time.

The RRI structure is designed for use in face-to-face groups. Now, with teams working remotely for the foreseeable future, we’re faced with the need to adapt this essential business tool for the world of virtual/remote teams. So, here we go.

But wait. Let’s back up a minute. What exactly is an RRI?

Rapid Results Initiatives (RRIs) are team-based, problem-solving, change-driving machines, which were originally developed by Schaffer Consulting using a defined process called the Rapid Results approach. Typically, an RRI will run for only 90 days in real life (IRL). Because it’s a sprint, the RRI (or vRRI) team needs a tightly focused, result-oriented goal to keep them on track. We’ve been using them for a long time at AXA XL. I stopped counting at 500 separate RRIs. We do them because they work.

Let’s look adapting this established concept to remote use.

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Why would you use a vRRI?

In short, high performing organizations will use Rapid Results approach because they work and you get to see results quickly. When used correctly, applying Rapid Results provides a set of highly effective low risk leadership tools for generating tangible results in only 90 days. And the approach works with any size organization. These short-term projects will help you stimulate progress toward executing strategic, financial and operational plans.

The most critical components for success are sponsorship and management buy-in; the latter may be easier to secure in smaller organizations with fewer bureaucratic layers. But I've found that organizational receptivity to Rapid Results is more attributed to culture than size. Remote application will add another cultural variable to consider.

Organizations with a more established remote working culture will likely find it easier to adopt vRRIs. Organizations that are still trying to find their virtual footing may face greater challenges, ranging from comfort levels with remote technology to employee effectiveness working in a remote setting. If that's the case for your organization, it's OK. You'll get them. People are very adaptable; just give them some time.

You can implement a vRRI to accomplish most any organizational goal. For example, you could launch a vRRI to focus on:

Growth

- Develop a strategy for entering a new market
- Grow sales within an existing market
- Build teamwork across businesses
- Profitability
- Improve selection of new more profitable business
- Create new or revised products with improved margin
- Expense Management
- Improve efficiency of an existing process

Talent

- Demonstrate effective sponsorship skills
- Develop Skills through team leader, facilitator and team member roles
- Build teamwork among team members
- Practice decision making, project management and communications skills

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How do you help ensure vRRI success?

As I already said, it's critical that you secure management buy-in to ensure success. Without it, any vRRI effort could be doomed to fail, especially one that spans the organization involving team members from different businesses and functional areas. I've found through my previous experience with in-person RRI, they are easier to run when you control all of the resources needed for a team, but that rarely is the case. This is the same for the vRRI. Make sure you get that buy-in first!

Management buy-in includes making sure that the individuals in charge of the needed resources understand and support what your vRRI is about. It's vital they know both the strengths and limitations of a vRRI. You can use information in this article to help develop your own pitch to management, so they know what's expected of them, the organization and the vRRI team. When making your pitch, be prepared to talk about your sponsorship statement in detail (more on that later), the team you have in mind for the vRRI and what you expect the organization to be able to gain from the vRRI's outcome.

You also need to be sure that your vRRI team members will be given the necessary time needed to participate in it fully. Getting cooperation from supervisors is, of course, a lot easier to get when you have upper management buy-in.

In addition, you need the technology piece to ensure the vRRI will succeed. Whether your organization uses Teams, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts, Zoom – you need a platform for virtual engagement and collaboration. Ideally, you will also have the means to share access to needed assets like documents and spreadsheets. This could be SharePoint, a proprietary intranet, or a cloud service like Dropbox.

Philosophy behind the vRRI?

The big operational advantage to the vRRI is its short time frame. An IRL RRI is typically 90 days, no more. Virtual RRIs can be shorter, if your team agrees. But they shouldn't be any shorter than 60 days because you risk running short of the time you need to achieve the goal. In any event, the sponsorship statement (see below) must consider any changes in the 90-day timeframe.

This short duration accomplishes a couple of things. First, it makes participation manageable for all team members, and their supervisors/departments. Second, it helps position the team to deliver a quantifiable result. People, regardless of function or level, tend to have a hidden reserve of capacity that they can draw upon, when needed. This is especially true when stress is present, i.e. a short 90-day deadline.

When projects have long or indefinite time frames, a natural human tendency is to procrastinate or lose focus. Because of vRRI's condensed format, there is zero room for either. Another critical aspect of the Rapid Results process is the presence of what are called "Zest Factors."

What in the world is a Zest Factor?

Your vRRI is a Must-Do project and the participants have a short time frame to bring forth the expected result. As a result, the team members feel:

- Challenged and empowered
- A sense of urgency
- Excited, like taking part in a game
- Driven, stakes are high
- Success is near and clear
- Sense of accomplishment

In addition, the Zest Factors inspire the vRRI team members to:

- Work as a cohesive team
- Look for innovative ways to collaborate
- Experiment with new technology
- Ignore red tape
- Question assumptions
- Challenge potential outcomes
- Experiment to quickly determine what works (and what doesn't)
- Transcend functional and hierarchical boundaries

And what's the ultimate result of all of this? The RRI drives change at a rapid pace.

How do you set up a virtual RRI?

As the sponsor of the vRRI, you have some things you need to do:

1. Craft the Sponsorship Statement.
2. Assemble the team.
3. Get out of the way.

That final point is important. Let the team do their work. But make sure the team knows your role is to support their efforts and help clear paths, get access to resources and answer questions—the vRRI team needs to know the Sponsor has their collective backs. It's mission critical that the Sponsor follows through on whatever he or she commits to do. If it simply can't be done, the Sponsor must provide the team with an explanation why. And quickly. The better the Sponsor supports the vRRI team, the greater the odds of success and the easier it will be to recruit vRRI teams in the future. The success of a vRRI is contagious and, as a result, others will want to participate on a future team.

Now let's put first things first. Before you can assemble your team, you need a clearly articulated Sponsorship Statement. If you didn't write a Sponsor Statement to sell the vRRI to your organization's leadership, you'll definitely need to do it before you assemble the vRRI team.

Crafting the Sponsorship Statement

The Sponsorship Statement is a 2- to 3-slide deck where the sponsor clearly outlines what the team should address in the vRRI. Create your Sponsorship Statement in PowerPoint so it can be easily read via screenshare.

- **Slide 1.** Articulate exactly what the sponsor sees as the facts, issues and possible opportunities for the team to explore during the vRRI.
- **Slide 2.** Challenge the team to help the sponsor determine the best solution to address this opportunity.
- **Slide 3.** This is the most important piece of the Statement – ask the team to generate a real and meaningful result in less than 90 days.

Picking the Team

vRRI teams should not be too large; 5-9 members is about right. Your goal selecting the team is to learn something from them in less than 90 days, as they focus on generating a result. You need the right people with the right skills, knowledge and experience. Your well-written Sponsor Statement will serve as a guide when you get down to the task of selecting your team members.

If you can, and if appropriate for the vRRI, include high potential, high performing colleagues within your organization. A vRRI is a perfect place to help them develop their leadership skills and gain broader exposure to various levels of your organization's leadership and management.

You also need to make sure that at least 2-3 of your vRRI team members are experts with the virtual conferencing technology your company uses. Resist the urge to designate one person in the role of “Help Desk.” Solving problems with technology will be easier if you have multiple tech resources. Don’t have any resident experts? The vRRI offers a perfect opportunity to allow team members to develop an essential set of skills.

Team responsibilities

As previously mentioned, the vRRI team needs a Team Leader and a Facilitator, both of whom also participate as regular members of the team.

Team leader

Just like it sounds, this person provides internal leadership and guidance for the team. The Team Leader’s key responsibility is to keep the team on task, following the agreed upon work plan, to meet the 90-day (or 60-day) deadline. The Team Leader is also the liaison between the team and the Sponsor. This is a great role to use to develop your high potential people.

Team facilitator

This person is the team operations coordinator and project manager. He or she assists the Team Leader with logistics; like scheduling meetings, printing documents, arranging conference

calls, encouraging participation from all team members, locating additional resources and so forth. This person **MUST** be an expert in the use of all of your virtual tools.

The Facilitator’s most important tasks are:

- Understanding the basic vRRI process and framework.
- Helping the team establish the results-focused goal and execute on the project plan.
- Ensuring team members are comfortable with the use of the virtual tools.

Kicking off the vRRI

A formal vRRI launch session is important. Be sure to select and brief the Team Leader and Facilitator well in advance of the launch session. The Team Leader is responsible for the results of the vRRI. The Facilitator is responsible for ensuring that the vRRI team stays on task, collaborates, continues to make progress aligned with the objective and to escalate any obstacles to the Team Leader and/or Sponsor.

You should figure on the initial meeting taking from 4-6 hours, which is broken into a Sprint Agenda (including breaks). Below is a table containing some important aspects of the meeting.

Time	Who	Purpose
30	Sponsor	The team has to know who the sponsor is and understand his/her role (especially how the sponsor will help the team). It is at the RRI kick off meeting when the sponsor creates the sense of urgency & explains related zest factors.
60	Team Leader	Devote an hour to explaining the RRI concept before you do anything else at the kick-off. Not everyone will have participated in an RRI and all team members need to have a clear and consistent understanding of what an RRI is (and isn’t) before diving in. Thoroughly explain the RRI goal setting funnel (figure 1) so the team can efficiently narrow the scope of their collective results focused goal for the RRI .
20	All	Take a Break. Check emails, stretch, get more caffeine.
Allow at least 2 hours for the team to discuss the Sponsorship Statement and brainstorm possibilities. Plan on an additional hour for the team to Structure this big chunk of time as below		
30	Team Leader	Review and discuss the Sponsorship Statement
60	All	Brainstorm using the Brainstorm Burst technique (see sidebar)
20	All	Take a Break. Check emails, stretch, play with the dog.
60	All	Use the goal setting funnel to narrow down their result-focused goal, using the funnel. The goal should be a stretch, not a slam dunk. It should be something the team can sink their teeth into.
20	All	Take a Break. Check emails, stretch, grab a snack.
60	All	Once the Goal is agreed upon, the team must develop their initial work plan. This will allow them to take immediate actions toward achieving the RRI goal.
30	All	Before the end of the meeting, agree on the date the team is to deliver its final report. This should be done as close to 90 days from the kick-off meeting as possible. As the sponsor, you should ensure that any required attendees know the general timeframe for the report in advance with tentative holds on their calendars. The facilitator will have less of a challenge getting those key people booked.



The team should schedule recurring vRRI status meetings either weekly or semi-monthly (as appropriate) to ensure consistent progress is being made on the plan itself and any specific action items.

The breaks are essential in a vRRI. Resist the temptation to skip breaks in favor of wrapping up quicker. People need some time to refresh and shift focus. But at the same time, don't let the breaks drift past their scheduled end time. The Facilitator is in charge of ensuring people are back at the end of the break. Some ideas to make that happen:

- Set a countdown timer visible to all participants.
- Send a group text to participants (include a 2-minute warning).
- Use your organization's IM tool to get their attention.

At the conclusion of the launch session, the team should be positioned to report out the vRRI goal to the Sponsor.

The team should schedule recurring vRRI status meetings either weekly or semi-monthly (as appropriate) to ensure consistent progress is being made on the plan itself and any specific action items. These status meetings should last no more than 30 minutes.

When the vRRI concludes, the team will present its results to the Sponsor and anyone the Sponsor thinks should hear the final report firsthand. For example, if the team's report suggests ongoing support from IT will be needed, then you'll definitely want a representative from IT at the final report. And this is why your team should plan one or two interim reports. That way the Sponsor can help clear the way for the right participants in the final report session.

Wrapping up the vRRI

When the vRRI team completes its work, the last big piece is the report meeting. The Sponsor should ensure the availability of any key management when the vRRI is launched. But the Team Facilitator will handle the rest of the logistics.

It's the Facilitator's job to set up the virtual report meeting. He or she should confirm that all team members have made virtual presentations on your platform. If not, practice time should be allocated so everyone is comfortable with the process. This is a big opportunity for the team to shine as they report their results and lessons learned to senior leadership.

The Sponsor should definitely attend the report meeting. But your role is limited to introducing the team and thanking them for their work; then immediately turn the meeting over to them so they can have the spotlight. After the team delivers the final report, share their successes and lessons learned with the rest of your organization. Depending on your company's structure and size you can do this at an all-employee meeting, in an email or even in an internal blog post. This kind of visibility serves two basic purposes:

- It helps to reward and recognize the vRRI team.
- It teaches other members of your team about vRRIs.

When your teams get attention and credit for their efforts, you won't have to twist arms quite as hard when recruiting for future vRRIs.

Lastly, have a party. If feasible, have a party in person. It doesn't have to be a big or expensive party but celebrate with the team in some way to recognize the RRI result. You can even have a virtual happy hour so everyone can participate. Seriously, this part is important.

Next steps

Soon after the report meeting, the team should hold another virtual session to document lessons learned. These might be related to the crafting of the sponsorship statement, meeting logistics, technology adaptations, remote challenges, goal setting, internal obstacles, etc. The team should document anything they think might help future vRRI teams be more productive. These lessons learned should be shared with future teams during their kick-off meetings.

It might seem obvious, but the most important thing you can do for the team is to act on their output. Frankly, one of the surest ways to kill the effectiveness of your vRRI is for the organization to do nothing with the team's hard work. Depending on the nature of the work the team does, follow up may include handing off to

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another team, department or rest with the company leadership team. In some cases, one vRRI may spawn ideas or generate the need for follow-on vRRIs. In which case, sponsors need to be identified and teams recruited (following the steps already outlined).

As your organization continues to use vRRIs, be sure to spread team participation around. Tapping the same people to participate in multiple vRRIs, in too close succession, may result in burn-out of those people and diminish the “Zest Factor”. You’ll also risk alienating others in your organization if the vRRIs appear like a closed club. Recruit and empower the right people within your organization, and the rest will take care of itself.

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning of this article, we have demonstrated that RRIs work. There is NO reason why adapting the model to vRRI would be any less effective. All we’re doing is adapting the mode of engagement; the Rapid Results process itself is fully tested and proven to effectively drive rapid organizational change. I know this for a fact, as I have personally sponsored, framed up, led and facilitated more than 500 RRIs over the past 20 years, with impressive results and testimonies.

RRIs are a highly effective way (the best way, in my opinion) to stimulate real progress toward executing strategy and hitting (or exceeding) financial and operational plans. The experimentation-friendly RRI environment helps you be agile in even the most volatile markets. An RRI is a lower risk project, so you can stretch boundaries with far less fear of making a big mistake and/or misusing limited resources.

Your first vRRI will require you taking a leap of faith, blindly embracing and following the vRRI methodology that I detailed? in this article. This is a proven methodology, so it is important? to follow the steps outlined. With each subsequent vRRI, you will fine-tune the process slightly by evaluating what worked well and gaining insight from your own personal lessons learned. Each future vRRI will then bring forth even more impressive results. In fact, I like to launch at least one vRRI in each quarter to build and maintain momentum towards achieving our annual goals.

Trust the process, follow the steps, and drive the change you need to succeed.

This is evolving. Try these ideas. Share what works, what doesn’t. Have a different approach? Share that, too. Email me at gary.kaplan@axaxl.com

Be sure to check out the following Appendix for Virtual Adaptations.

Acknowledgements

I learned about the RRI process from my friends at Schaffer Consultants, located in Stamford, CT. This boutique consulting firm can help anyone learn how to use this powerful change management technique to deliver tangible results, in both the short and long term. For more on Rapid Results, WorkOut and other Schaffer innovations, contact them through their website www.schafferresults.com.

For more inspiration regarding the Rapid Results approach, check out the work of the Rapid Results Institute that is using the concept to create transformative impact on a variety of complex societal issues, including youth homelessness. www.rapidresults.org.

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Virtual Adaptations for RRI

Combine synchronous with asynchronous modes.

Your main meetings have to be synchronous. But other follow up work will, by necessity, be done asynchronously. These terms have long been used to describe modes of online learning. Here's what they mean. There are advantages and disadvantages to each mode.

Synchronous

All participants are online at the same time, doing exercises, listening to a lecture, working together.

Great for...

- Teams within 1- 3 time zones
- Engagement
- Team-building

Not so much for...

- More geographically dispersed teams
- Fitting into crammed calendars

Asynchronous

Participants have a set of established goals (projects, assignments) that they complete on their own time.

Great for...

- Teams with participants located around the world
- Team flexibility

Not so much for...

- Ease of scheduling
- Engagement
- Interactivity
- Team-building

Share the Burden

If your teams are working across different time zones, share the burden of being on calls at odd hours. 11 am eastern is great for most of the US. But it's pushing the end of the day in the UK and Western Europe. Delhi? Sydney? Not so much. The Facilitator should work to balance meeting time, so no team member is unduly burdened with off-hour calls.

Here's an example of sharing the burden. Let's say you have team members in Gurgaon, Dublin and NYC. A good time to set your 4-hour kickoff call would be at 10:30 UTC. That's 10:30am in Dublin, 6:30am in New York and 4:00pm in Gurgaon. To compensate, folks in New York can knock off early that day; the folks in Gurgaon can start work a little later. Your next call, switch it up and let the East Coast people sleep in. You'll be amazed what this does for team building.

Icebreaker

Here's a way to make sure everyone joins by video.

- Give team members a topic (construction equipment, animals, famous structures)
- Instruct them to draw something related to that topic:
 - In 45 seconds
 - With their eyes CLOSED
- Go around and have each person show their drawing through their video camera
- Everyone else guesses what the person attempted to draw
- The one with the most guesses wins

Make sure you give a decent prize. A virtual gift card for at least \$25 is good.

Developing virtual skills

I firmly believe that no matter how well you do something, you can always learn different and even better ways of doing that thing. Early in the process, even before the virtual kickoff, encourage team members to share resources for remote working. These could be anything from presenting on camera to recommendations for tech tools. Compile these recommendations and make them available to all vRRI teams as a resource.

If appropriate, you could even identify one of your team members to lead a short skill-developing session before the team starts its work.

Ground rules

Depending on the degree to which your organization embraces remote work, your IT or L&D team might already have developed guidelines for effective remote collaboration. If so, you can certainly use them. However, I recommend allowing the vRRI team to establish these ground rules themselves. Why? Your team will more readily buy into the ground rules and they will also feel more empowered. That's a win-win for a high-performing team.

Brainstorming

When you're on a conference call, there's nothing more frustrating than people talking over one another. Mics cut out. People have to repeat themselves. An otherwise productive session can devolve into a never-ending series of "Sorry. What? You go. No, it's okay, you go ahead. Hey, guys, what'd Alex say?"

After enough of those, you'll be praying for virtual happy hour.

In a brainstorming exercise, that can be fatal. You get into that creative zone and start thinking out loud it's possible to lose the thought. Or that perfect turn of phrase. So, try this instead. I call it Brainstorm Bursts. Try running your brainstorming sessions like this:

Establish time limits for each burst. If you've allocated 60 minutes for brainstorming, you'll need to give each person a time limit for their solo brainstorming. That will give you adequate time for a round robin report out and a final review.

It will flow like this:

Round 1

- 1. Solo.** Start the timer. Each participant then begins their solo brainstorming. They can type into a document, handwrite, use their own whiteboard. Whatever. Give a warning at the half-way mark and with one-minute remaining.
- 2. Report Out.** Start the Report Out promptly when the timer is up or when everyone is finished. Whichever comes first. During the Report Out a few things happen simultaneously:
 - Each participant takes turns reading their ideas
 - Other participants listen and can continue solo brainstorming as they hear others ideas; no comments.
 - Your designated reporter should capture these verbatim. (Another way to capture verbatims is to record your sessions. See below.)
 - Be sure to start the clock before the Report Out begins.

Round 2

- 3. Solo.** This session is shorter. It gives participants a chance to come up with new ideas based on what they heard in the Report Out. Reset the clock and repeat.
- 4. Report Out.** Follow the same steps as you did in Round 1.
- 5. Final Thoughts.** Reset the timer and ask for any final input from the team.

Note Taking

You won't have a meeting room with a flip chart or whiteboard. So, you'll need to do this virtually. Assign someone to take notes for each session. But make sure you pick the right person. People take notes differently and you want to be sure whomever you select will capture enough detail. You can also record your sessions and transcribe them. See below. However, you do it, share your notes with the team as soon as possible. They should reside centrally in a document-sharing environment like SharePoint.

Participation

Unlike large groups, it's hard for vRRI participants to "hide" on calls. Natural temptation is to multitask, which in meetings like a vRRI can lead to distraction and lower participation. Some people are also naturally quiet. The Facilitator must be prepared to ensure team members stay focused and contribute.

Chat is another way for the team to contribute. It could also be the ONLY way, if there is a problem with call-in lines or

other audio problems. The Facilitator or another moderator should monitor questions and comments in chat and ensure they are not only shared with the group, but also memorialized in the meeting notes.

Recording and Transcribing

You should definitely have someone who takes notes for every session that can be shared with participants. This is especially important during the kickoff and brainstorming. But by far the most effective way to capture input is to record each session. Whether you use Teams, Zoom, GoToMeeting, most platforms allow you to record. Make sure everyone knows you're going to record before you do. You may also want to check with legal.

Then when you're done with your session, your note-taker can upload to an online transcription service. While there is a variety to choose from, Sonix.ai is particularly powerful and easy to use. It's also not very expensive. Avoid using the free services. It has a cool editing feature that lets you listen to the recording while you make edits, which makes it very simple to correct errors. Again, because you're using a cloud service, you may want to check with legal.

RRI Goal Setting Funnel

