

RAPID Decision Making

What It Is, Why We Like It, and How to Get
the Most Out of It

By Jon Huggett & Caitrin Moran

Without consulting any of the people who will actually have to do the work, an executive director promises an old friend that his organization will take on a complex project, leaving his staff feeling out of the loop and slightly disgruntled.

Twelve busy staff members spend multiple hours discussing a fairly minor issue—whether the organization should hire a summer intern—but no one is clear who has the final say, and every meeting ends without a decision.

Several organizations are working together to support a single initiative, but none of the partners fully understand where their responsibilities begin and end. When they disagree, who gets to decide?

Do any of these situations resonate? If so, you are far from alone. Decision making can be difficult for reasons ranging from vague reporting structures to the complexities that naturally arise when an organization is growing and more people have seats at the leadership table.

The result is often wasted time, confusion, and frustration. Individually, everyone's intentions are good, yet the whole performs poorly. And in the worst cases, decision-making difficulties can create a climate of mistrust, and even undermine an organization's mission.

What can be done? One way to address the issue is to diagnose the source of the problem by mapping out how difficult decisions are being made. Another is to map out how key decisions should be made going forward. There are a variety of tools available to facilitate these processes. Among them, we have found a tool called RAPID® to be highly effective, and also easily adaptable to different situations, team sizes and types of organizations.¹

RAPID untangles the decision-making process—existing or upcoming—by identifying all of the various activities that must occur for a decision to be made well. The name is an acronym, with each letter standing for an activity associated

¹ RAPID® was developed at Bain & Company, Inc. and is a registered trademark of that firm. It is also discussed in the January 2006 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, in: "Who Has the D? How Clear Decision Roles Enhance Organizational Performance" by Paul Rogers and Marcia Blenko.

with decision making. At the outset, for example, someone must recommend that a decision be made. Input will likely be required to inform the decision. Often, more than one person must approve the final call, but ultimately someone must have the authority to decide. Then, after a decision is made, it must be carried out, or performed. (For a more detailed description of the activities, please see the appendix, [RAPID Essentials](#).)

The name, RAPID, does not suggest the order in which these activities occur; the reality is iterative, and “R-A-P-I-D” happens to be the easiest way to remember the activities. Additionally, in practice, the people involved may be assigned more than one letter and may also share responsibility for some activities. The person recommending the decision, for example, may also be among those who will “perform” once the decision is made. Similarly, authority for the “D” may reside with a single person, or with a group of people who vote on the issue, as is often the case with decision making at the board level.

The Benefits of RAPID

RAPID can help people be more thoughtful about how decisions should be made. In doing so, the tool helps give real accountability to the right people, allowing power to be shared, but also setting useful boundaries. In turn, involving the right people, while taking others out of the loop or minimizing their involvement, saves time.

Greater clarity around who is involved in a decision and who is not can also generate greater buy-in. As Joyce McGee, executive director of The Justice Project, an advocacy nonprofit, put it, “Even though there are people who aren’t involved, they’re ecstatic just to know who is involved, and what the decision-making process entails. They feel more engaged just from understanding something that had been opaque to them before.”

This clarity can also lead to benefits that are not directly related to the decisions at hand, or even on the horizon. As John Fitzpatrick, executive director of the Texas High School Project noted, “We were able to hire higher quality people for key senior management positions as a result of using RAPID. I was able to sit down with top-tier candidates and demonstrate the clear lines of authority and responsibility they would have, and it allayed concerns about the chain of command and their scope of decision making working with me.”

Finally, involving the right people in decision making can drive better decisions, which means more impact. RAPID helps organizations achieve their goals—more efficiently and more effectively.

Most organizations can benefit from RAPID. The keys are: understanding how the tool works, figuring out what your organization needs from RAPID, and assessing whether the timing is right to introduce it. In the next section of this article, we’ll explore what the side effects and trade-offs of using RAPID can be. Then we’ll

use the experiences of Aspire Public Schools, a California-based charter-school developer, to illustrate how the tool works. Finally, we'll step back and consider how to tell if your organization is ready for RAPID and discuss some of the ideal pre-conditions for getting the most out of it.

Side Effects and Trade-offs

There is no getting away from the fact that implementing RAPID can be messy. In the short term, it *will* test the resilience of the management team, particularly if it exposes an existing process that is convoluted or sorely imbalanced, or reveals a complete lack of process. And some of its potential side effects and trade-offs can make people uncomfortable. For example:

- Implementing RAPID can mean trading a highly participatory decision-making culture for a faster and more efficient one. Whether the trade-off is appropriate depends on the nature of the decision. The fact is that most decisions in most organizations are best made quickly and efficiently, using one “D” and very few “As.” For example, a case manager has to be able to make the right decisions for her clients quickly. And an executive director may need to be able to select and hire key staff members at his or her discretion. Sometimes, though, a decision is better made by consensus (where everyone has an “A”), or even by voting (such as requiring 51 percent of the board for a “D”). Taking that approach ensures that everyone’s point of view is considered, which can make for great buy-in. But it also makes the decision arrive later and necessarily involves more investment of each individual’s time.
- Using RAPID entails mapping how decisions are, and will be, made. In doing so, it essentially exposes the way in which power flows through the organization. As a result, RAPID can reveal when what has been touted as a highly participatory decision-making culture is in fact more show than substance.
- Making power explicit in this way can cause discomfort, particularly in organizations long accustomed to functioning with their original founder and a familial set of relationships. RAPID makes relationships more “professional,” and for some organizations, this is a difficult step to take.
- Using RAPID means trading ambiguity for transparency. Some organizations’ leaders prefer to leave control of certain issues a little bit ambiguous. For example, what constitutes a *strategic* change that needs to go to the board, versus a *tactical* decision that is within the purview of the executive director? In reality, of course, each decision requires some sort of judgment call. Someone must choose whether or not to move a decision into the RAPID process—even if he or she is not officially an “R”! But once RAPID is introduced, ambiguity is no longer an option.

RAPID in Practice: Aspire Public Schools

Organizations can use RAPID in different ways. Some implement it fully. Others adopt aspects of the tool. Still others use it to inspire and inform the creation of their own decision-making process.

Aspire Public Schools, an organization that opens and operates public charter schools in California, initially used RAPID as a diagnostic tool, and then began to use it to plan future decision making. As such, Aspire's experience provides a good look at how RAPID works in practice.

Founded in 1998, Aspire opened its first school in 1999 and grew quickly; by 2006, it was operating 17 schools across California, primarily serving low-income students. One of the hallmarks of Aspire's culture was the belief that everyone in the organization was accountable for the schools' performance—teachers, principals, staff at the national level—with no exceptions.

As Aspire grew, however, its leadership team—Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Don Shalvey, Chief Academic Officer (CAO) Elise Darwish, Chief Operating Officer (COO) Gloria Lee, Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Mike Barr, and Vice President (VP) of Secondary Education Linda Frost—came to realize that just because everyone felt a sense of accountability did not mean that it was clear who was responsible for certain decisions and processes.

The team felt the effects of this confusion most acutely when it came to making decisions about Aspire's high schools. Aspire had originally focused on elementary and middle schools, and had achieved much success in those venues using a specific, outcomes-based and process-driven academic model. The organization had expanded into high schools as more of its middle-school students approached high-school age. But producing top-tier educational outcomes at the high-school level presented a whole new set of challenges. For example, high schools require curricula for many more subjects. And Aspire's high-school students had more issues in their lives influencing their academic performance.

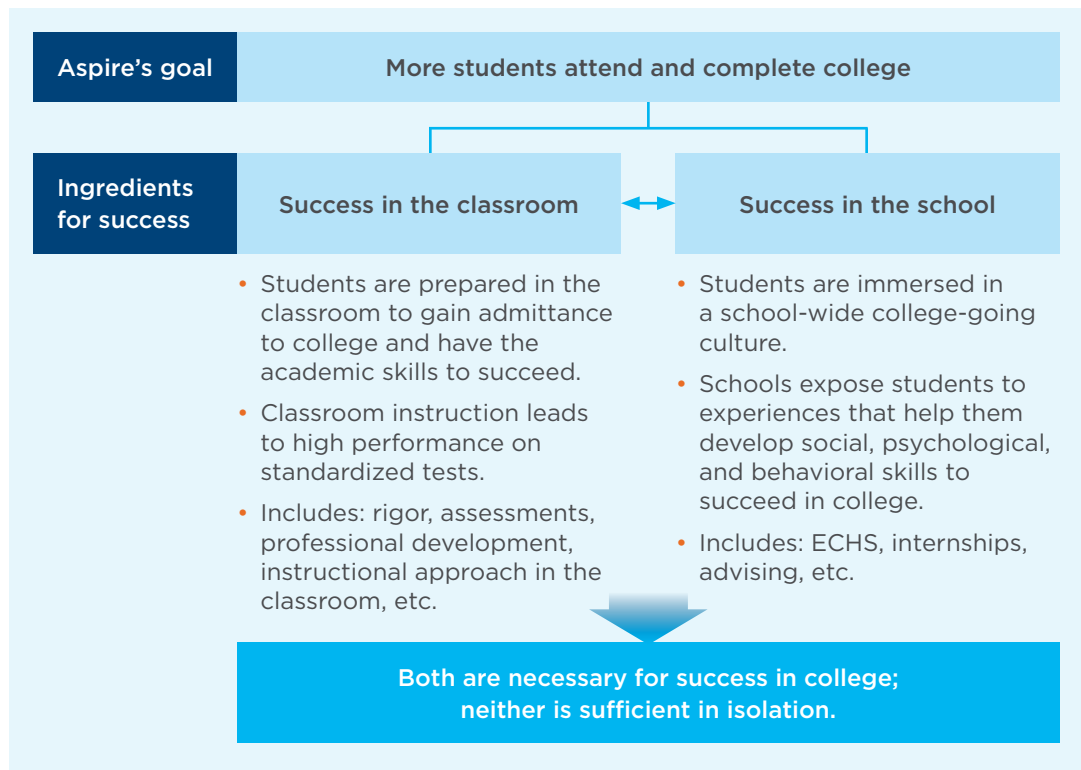
Frost's position, vice president of secondary education, had been created to guide the holistic development of the high schools. But the addition of a new person to the leadership team blurred the boundaries (already informal) that existed around decision making. For example, CAO Darwish, who had created Aspire's successful K-8 academic model and process, believed that a similar classroom model and process could work well at the high-school level. However, it was unclear whether it was her role to run the classroom model at the high-school level. Frost, for her part, agreed about the value of the model, but found herself swamped with school-level issues and responsibilities, such as establishing a college-going culture, building relationships with local community colleges and businesses, and developing a standard model for the administration of the high schools in Aspire's portfolio. Both Darwish and Frost felt responsible for the high schools; both were working extremely hard. But in fact, neither felt as though there was enough focus on the academic model; their jobs overlapped

in some areas, and left gaps in others. As a result, high-school outcomes were improving at a slower rate than K-8 performance.

The leadership team felt that RAPID could help them clarify the roles and responsibilities of the CAO and VP of secondary education positions. More broadly, they felt that RAPID could help them create an organization-wide decision-making process that would serve them well going forward, as Aspire continued to grow. And so, along with other members of Aspire’s steering committee, they embarked upon a process to, in CEO Shalvey’s words, “decide how to decide.”

The process began with the CEO, the COO, and the CAO engaging in multiple, high-level conversations about what makes high schools successful. These initial conversations resulted in a strategic context for Aspire’s organizational processes, as shown in Exhibit A. It became clear that, for Aspire, there were two different levels of success. There was success in the classroom, which included course materials, teaching methods, clear outcomes, and a process of testing and adaptation. And there was success across a school, which included the school’s culture and operations.

Exhibit A: Aspire is unified in its vision for secondary school success



Subsequently, the COO, the CAO, and the VP of secondary education engaged in additional discussions to sort out the CAO and VP roles at a more granular level. They realized that being responsible for and making decisions about these two different spheres—in the classroom versus across the school—required two different skill sets, and that these two different skill sets naturally fit the CAO and the VP of secondary education.

This realization led the larger team to articulate an overall “accountability chain.” They didn’t want to lose the idea that everyone was accountable in their own way for *something* (and so could “own” Aspire’s success). But they knew that they needed to set up some boundaries. This accountability chain, expressed in a chart, gave teachers responsibility for what happened in their classrooms, principals responsibility for what happened within their schools, the CAO responsibility for what happened within the classrooms across the whole network, and the VP of secondary education responsibility for what happened outside the classrooms in the high schools. It also clarified the responsibilities and boundaries that would accompany a planned new layer of positions—regional vice presidents (RVPs)—going forward.

At this point, it was actually relatively easy for the CAO and the VP of secondary education to begin using RAPID to make decisions. It was now possible to assign RAPID roles easily, because it was now easier to locate the decisions themselves (See Exhibit B). A few areas, such as the professional development of teachers, remained gray. These required using RAPID to drill down further in order to clarify what was needed to make a decision and why. But for the most part, decisions seemed to fit naturally into either the CAO or VP’s court.

Exhibit B: Key decisions regarding promoting success in the classroom and in schools

Category	Decisions	Home Office					Region		School		
		Board	CEO	CAO	VP Sec ED	Dir PD	COO	RVP	Coach	Principal	Lead Teacher
Classroom	Select course materials		I	D				I	I	I	I
	Define instructional guidelines		I	D				I	I	I	I
	Decide on approach to assessment		I	D				I	I	I	I
	Determine format for report cards			D	I					I	
	Decide on PD approach for teachers			D		R		I	I	I	I
	Other?										
School-wide culture and management	Develop ECHS policies and procedures re: entering into partnerships with universities	A	D	I	R, P		I	I		I	
	Decide on course selection and sequencing (secondary)			I	D			I	I	R	
	Develop SAT/ACT prep program			I	D			I		I	
	Determine grading policy (secondary)		A		D			I		I	I
	Select best practices for school-wide culture		I		I			R		D	
	Develop master schedule (secondary)				A			I		D	I
	Decide on approach to summer school			I	R			A		D	
	Other?										

- R Recommend
- A Agree
- P Perform
- I Input
- D Decide

In general, as CEO Shalvey sees it, RAPID helped Aspire at a critical inflection point in its growth: “This tool was pretty important to us at the time because we were moving from having only a few senior staff who had worked together for a while to becoming a bigger organization with a matrix structure and more senior staff.”

Shalvey explained that at a small size, Aspire could function as a team where “everybody was doing everybody’s function, there was little clarity on whose responsibility something was, it was based more on who had bandwidth at that moment, it was ‘bullpen by committee.’” That approach wasn’t sustainable as the organization grew, and in particular, as it expanded into a new area (high schools), which required new expertise. Now due to RAPID, Shalvey explained, “We have much greater clarity on roles. We feel we are much more transparent and accountable. If we were not using that tool today, we would be scrambling.”

Is This the Right Time and Place for Your Organization to Use RAPID?

Is your organization ready to use RAPID? To find out, you can ask yourself the following questions. But even if it turns out that RAPID is not the right choice for your organization at this time, the process of figuring that out—using the *possibility* of RAPID as a diagnostic—will likely add value by providing some clarity about how your organization functions.

- *Is there is a shared sense of frustration with decision making across the organization?* When people across an organization feel that decisions take too long or that the wrong people are involved, RAPID can be a useful tool. If this concern isn’t shared, introducing RAPID can generate more heat than light. Those who feel that decision making is fine will not see why RAPID is relevant. And even those who see that there are some problems in the decision-making process, but also understand how things work, may see the process as scary and threatening, or even just a waste of time. Against that backdrop, we’ve heard lots of objections to RAPID: “the letters are in the wrong order”; “it feels like you’re trying to speed us up, but we are a thoughtful group”; or even “it is another consultant thing.”
- *Is decision making the real problem?* If the leadership and management team are good, but frustrated with how decisions get made, then RAPID can likely help. But if the real problem is the organization’s leadership, or dissonance around values, or even lack of alignment on the mission, then RAPID will not help. It might also be the wrong time for RAPID if the organization is in flux. The leadership team of one organization with which we’re familiar was in the midst of a massive overhaul, forming teams of people who had never worked together and who weren’t even clear as to what exactly was in their purview. Quickly realizing that they were not ready to lay out the important tasks that needed to be discussed, the organization’s leaders stopped attempting to use RAPID and focused instead on continuing to build and strengthen a foundation that would allow them to use RAPID successfully in the future.

- *Are the organization's leaders personally ready for RAPID?* If the people in power are uncomfortable making that power explicit, they should not attempt RAPID, however difficult decision making may be. RAPID in this context will only make things worse. Small, growing organizations need nurturing. Many function well with the original founder and a familial set of relationships. Mapping how the power flows in the “family” will make the relationships more “professional.” If the organization isn't ready for that, then wait.
- *Can you allow enough time to decide how to decide?* Changing how decisions are made strikes at the heart of most organizations. It means making power explicit, which at best makes people nervous. It might mean empowering some people, and taking others out of the loop, if only for a particular decision. People whose roles are thrust into the spotlight often have strong points of view and feelings. Hearing these out, and working through to the right solution takes time. While the acronym ‘RAPID’ captures a key benefit of the tool—the ability to make decisions more swiftly—it can also suggest to people that this is a process to be rushed. It is not.

Getting the Most Out of RAPID

What follows are some of lessons we've learned through our own experiences using RAPID and also from our observation and study of other organizations that have worked with the tool.

Make the case for the tool before you introduce it. Act like an “R.” Tell the organization what you want to do and why. Share your view that the current team can make decisions more effectively and efficiently. Lay out the process and tell people where they will or will not be involved. Make sure that everyone understands the tool.

Carve off a few key decisions to start. Picking a handful of decisions that are causing the most pain can be a great way to start. You'll get support to relieve the pain.

Don't put more than a dozen such decisions on the list at the outset, or the process will stall. Your organization won't miss the irony if the exercise to improve decision making suffers analysis paralysis. But if you can fix the critical decisions, then everyone will know that you can fix others too. If your team finds the process useful, they will incorporate it into how they work. It will become part of their toolkit for running their parts of the organization.

Make a plan, and pace yourself and your organization. Implementation of this tool is worth getting right, so lay out a formal work plan for the process. Since doing this goes to the core of how you work, it will be important to invite key points of view as you create the plan. RAPID-guided decisions that result in big changes will need managing, so you need to know when you will be making key decisions and putting them into action.

Understand that many people will need to adjust to the roles they are assigned in the RAPID process, and anticipate anxiety. The process of assigning roles (“R,” “I,” and so forth) is best done iteratively and expeditiously. However, without firm leadership, this phase of decision making can be interminable and explosive. Managing inclusion can be tricky, not least because people can feel excluded or alienated if they are no longer going to be involved in decisions in the way they had thought they were. Others can be vulnerable because their power is exposed.

As one ED told us, at the beginning, when people realized what role they were now expected to play, they would express anxiety, asking, “So I am responsible for this myself?” And even when reassured that this would in fact be their decision, staff members would still show up in her office asking, “You’re sure you are OK with me making this decision?”

Understand that RAPID is not a communication tool. It is a simple way to diagnose and prescribe how to make decisions. It does not tell you how to communicate those decisions once they are made. At one Justice Project staff meeting, someone asked: “So which of these people [those with an “R,” “A,” “P,” “I,” or “D”] is responsible for communicating the decision to those of us who aren’t involved in the decision making but need to know?” The ED of the Justice Project was quick to clarify that none of these roles explicitly had this responsibility, and that this was something that needed to be determined outside of the RAPID process.

Once RAPID is being used, step back and review the whole. Take the time to get some distance and see if it all fits together. Does the new way of making key decisions make sense? Do responsibilities and accountabilities match roles? Does the work balance fairly? Do you have buy-in from the key leaders? How does it feel? Are you looking forward to 8:30 tomorrow morning?

Greater Value Over Time

One of the things we like about RAPID is that it can be useful even when it is not used in its entirety. As we noted earlier, some leaders, after introducing the tool, end up using it only to diagnose the problematic issues in their decision-making processes. Others go on to take the ideas behind RAPID and build on them to create their own unique decision-making processes. And some use RAPID simply to map out how decisions are already being made, and stop there, satisfied with that level of clarity for the time being.

Keep in mind, though, that once RAPID is in use, the genie is out of the bottle. Much of its value comes from taking the wraps off how decisions are made. Once all is clear, it is hard to put things back under wraps again. If your first foray with RAPID is a success, then your team will want to use it again. As the organization grows and becomes more complex, it will become more useful to help delegate authority and accountability.

As of this writing, Shalvey, along with the rest of his leadership team, is rolling out the use of RAPID throughout the Aspire organization. The leadership team, which has continued to grow, is being trained in the process; next up are the principals, the teachers, and the specialists. Aspire is also building a database on its intranet of all the decisions that have gone through the RAPID process, so that those who are new to the organization can understand the tool, and also see which decisions they are involved in and how. As Shalvey said, “We think that RAPID has tremendous applicability across each of our schools and regions, as well as at the senior level of the organization.”

Appendix

RAPID Essentials

RAPID is an acronym for the different roles people can have or the activities they take on during a decision-making process. Each letter stands for a specific role or activity; however, people can have more than one letter assigned to them, depending on the nature and context of the decision and the size of the group. The order of the letters is not important. The reality is iterative, and “R-A-P-I-D” happens to be the easiest way to remember the roles. Here, we’ll explain the roles and activities in the order in which they likely will appear during any given decision-making process:

- “R” stands for “recommender”—the person who initiates or drives the process. The “R” is the “go to” person who sticks with the process from start to finish, ensures that others understand what they need to do, and keeps things moving along. In other words, the “R” does most of the work to secure the decision.
- “I” stands for “input.” An “I” must be consulted on a recommendation before a decision is made. Although an “I” has the right to be heard, he or she does not have a vote or a veto. Including someone as an “I” says that the organization values the facts and perspectives he or she brings to the decision.
- “A” stands for an individual who needs to “agree with” or “approve” a recommendation. An “A” is essentially an “I” with more power; an “A” has a stronger voice during the recommendation process. An “A” who raises concerns with a proposal must work with the recommender to develop an alternative or elevate the issue to the person who will decide. Naming someone an “A” means that the organization needs their support. Generally, the more people with an “A,” the more time and effort it takes to make a decision.
- “D” means “decide.” The “D” has final authority and is the only individual who can commit the organization to action—hiring someone, spending money, or making a legally-binding agreement. Things get done only after the “D” gives the OK. Generally, the D is one person. But if, for example, a board of directors has a parliamentary voting structure, then the “D” would mean the group of people who constitute the winning vote. (Occasionally, people with a great deal of power attempt to hide the fact that they are the “D” by saying that the

final authority resides with a committee that they happen to lead. The process of implementing RAPID generally flushes such people out. Ultimately, if the committee head is the true “D,” it’s better to be explicit up front. Everyone knows where the power lies anyway.)

- “P” stands for “perform.” “Ps” are the people who carry out the decision once it has been made. Often, the individuals who are “Ps” are also “Is,” for good reason. You’ve no doubt heard at least one person say something like, “This is a mess. If only they had asked me before they decided. I could have told them...” It’s unlikely that a “P” who is also an “I” will feel the need to say that.

Sharing knowledge and insights from our work is a cornerstone of The Bridgespan Group’s mission. This document, along with our full collection of case studies, articles, and newsletters, is available free of charge at www.bridgespan.org. We also invite your feedback at feedback@bridgespan.org.

BOSTON

535 Boylston St., 10th Fl.
Boston, MA 02116
Tel: 617 572-2833

NEW YORK

112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510
New York, NY 10120
Tel: 646 562-8900

SAN FRANCISCO

465 California St., 11th Fl.
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: 415 627-1100

