



## How to Deliver Results That Others Never Could

*This article is by Saj-Nicole Joni and Don Arnoudse. Saj-Nicole Joni is chief executive of [Cambridge International Group](#) and coauthor of *The Right Fight*. Don Arnoudse is senior partner of Praemia Group.*



Don Arnoudse.

Have you ever noticed how many important decisions made by business leaders end up very poorly implemented? Consider the story of one restaurant-chain chief executive's campaign to appeal to more health-conscious diners, like those who shop at Whole Foods or eat lunch at Le Pain Quotidien. The CEO's chain was famous for fatty high-calorie delights like burgers, fries, and cheese-stuffed deep-dish pizza. How, he wondered, could his chain become a leader in the fast-growing health food movement?

After much campaigning, he thought he persuaded his management team that upgrading the menu was the thing to do. To show his commitment, he personally took over final decisions on all menu changes. His top managers agreed when he asked them to roll out the healthier cuisine. But behind the scenes, some quietly undercut his decision. Afraid of offending their traditional customers, they framed the menu changes as offering wider choice rather than focusing on health. As a result, the new mixed-fare menu was a masterpiece of brand confusion. Customers seeking healthy foods stayed away, the company underperformed, and the board questioned the CEO's judgment and ability to deliver.



Saj-nicole Joni

That CEO was hardly alone. A July 2005 *Businessweek* article noted that nearly 96% of all innovation attempts fail to meet their return-on-investment targets. That's a paltry 4% success rate, a stunningly low figure, and it's not getting much better. Surprisingly, successful implementation seems largely uncorrelated to the quality of a plan itself. Rather it has everything to do with how those who are responsible for implementation relate to the decision after it has been made.

In his now classic book *Execution, The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, Ram Charan points out that decisions made in the absence of candid, robust dialogue consistently run into dead ends, and he outlines a program for ensuring that talk is followed up by action. I wholeheartedly agree, but more than straight talk and action planning is required. Simply put, a leader's innovation efforts will fail unless people align around the decision.

Alignment is different from agreement. Alignment describes your level of commitment to the implementation of a decision, regardless of whether you agreed with it in the first place. You can agree or disagree that it's a good idea to offer healthy choices on a restaurant menu, but you align only when the decision to offer those menu choices has been made and communicated. In other words, your alignment is

not determined by how much you agree with the decision. It is what you subsequently commit to and do.

The two of us developed a simple scale, from +3 to -3, to describe degrees of alignment among leadership team members. Draw a horizontal line across a piece of paper. Some members of your team will sit above the line; some will fall below it.

The following people sit above the line. They can be counted on to lead the implementation of a decision.

- **Owners (+3).** These visionary team members show that no matter what positions they advocated in the discussions leading up to the decision, they are now committed advocates. They work hard to align others, remove barriers, and work creatively to make things work. With enough owners on the team, there's a very good chance the plan will be well implemented.

- **Buy-inners (+2).** These implementers are personally committed but not enrollers of others. You can count on them to personally do their parts in implementing the plan but not to be active in generating broad support for it across the organization. When the decision is noncontroversial and requires little behavior change on the part of many others in the organization, personal buy-in is sufficient.

- **Compliers (+1).** These implementers are good soldiers who go along with the decision and do what they are told without opposing things. But don't expect a lot of enthusiasm or extra effort from them.

The following people sit below the line and cannot be trusted with implementation.

- **Abstainers (-1).** These people are hands-off. They refuse to take a position either way, remaining neutral and uninvolved.

- **Passive resisters (-2).** These people work in stealth mode to sow uncertainty about the decision through rumormongering and backroom chatter. But they leave no fingerprints. They can't be linked to public resistance.

- **Saboteurs (-3).** These people fight back openly, opposing the plan and doing whatever it takes to kill it before it sees the light of day.

Implementing a plan while relying on people below the line is like trying to defy gravity. It can be done, but only at a great cost in energy, constant monitoring, and force. The moment the force weakens, the effort falls back to earth. Without the fuel of alignment, execution is simply not sustainable.

How do you make sure everyone on your team is in the +2 or +3 realm?

1. Ensure that each leadership team member takes responsibility for getting into high-level alignment. Require each below-the-line member to identify what is missing for them, and resolve that issue to get them to +2 or +3. Hold the standard for alignment high. In the end, if someone can't get into high positive alignment, he or she needs to resign from the team.

2. Once a decision is made, through a legitimate decision-making process, make sure you yourself are an owner. This can be difficult if your personal point of view didn't prevail. Ask yourself questions at the beginning and end of every week such as: What is my own level of alignment? Do I have work to do to get to ownership? Have I committed specifically and publicly to high alignment? Do my actions demonstrate this commitment?

3. Pay close attention to your key players and the team dynamic. Do not tolerate outside-the-room conversations that embody the "yes, but" shoulder-shrugging dynamics of poor alignment. Ask yourself if the others you're counting on have committed to being owners as well. Hold yourself and everyone on team responsible for uncovering any potential obstacles or omissions that will get in the way of successful

implementation. Do so not to back off the decision and lower your goals but to generate a breakthrough path forward.

If you want high-quality, fast-paced execution, especially when the going is tough, you must engage the commitment of your people. Of course strategy and acumen matter greatly, but you can't sustain winning momentum without the hearts and minds of your team. When your people make the team's values and decisions real in their talk and actions, a culture of high positive alignment develops. Get this right, and your organization will race ahead, creating results others would still be just talking about.

---

**Read this article online at:** <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesleadershipforum/2013/02/12/how-to-deliver-results-that-others-never-could/>