

The #1 roadblock stopping organizational breakthroughs (and how to remove it).

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Organizational breakthroughs by their very nature are elusive. The pathway to them is veiled, hard to see across cloudy unfamiliar territory. The terrain is daunting. Breakthroughs test leadership teams, requiring them to achieve something they don't currently know how to do.

To make matters worse, many obstacles present themselves on the way to attaining organizational breakthroughs. Some of the barriers that interfere with breakthrough pursuits include:

- Lack of clarity on what (and why) we are trying to achieve together
- Low breakthrough intelligence
- Multifaceted resistance to change
- Ineffective communication



- Scarcity of the right talent
- Inability to tap a collective's ingenuity
- Misalignment in the coordination of effort
- Team behavioral dynamics
- Insufficient discipline and accountability

Each of these challenges (and others) has been cited, researched and written

about. But one barrier, often trivialized in practice, obstructs most. Without intentional focus, it can slow or even stop the flow of breakthrough progress

The #1 Roadblock

What does it mean to be the number one roadblock? Three things. First the roadblock is practical. It is tangible and is generally immediately actionable. Second it rises to the top because its occurrence is common in virtually all organizations and teams. Finally, it's often the most important to address. Attending to it is highly beneficial for activating a breakthrough future.

Holding on is the number one roadblock. Its remedy is releasing. Holding on is about maintaining, continuing and protecting. Holding on is an under the radar passive decision, but a decision, nonetheless. Releasing is about letting go, eliminating, unplugging, discontinuing, stopping, saying no. Releasing is a learned behavior. It's an intentional discipline.

Holding on has an enormous cost. It will stifle a team's hope for a breakthrough. It distracts focus, consumes scarce resources and makes it difficult to bring forth the sustained ingenuity required to manifest new winning realities. When viewed through the lens of their desired future, most organizations and teams



are steeped in things that should no longer exist. Holding on tightly will sacrifice a preferred future. Releasing can often tilt the odds of success in a team's favor.

I have never seen a leadership team, or an organization be naturally good at proactively releasing. Most hold on. Many avoid or delay the conversations that enable teams to let go of lesser things. Or at best teams passively tinker with it, stopping trivial things to achieve a few easy early wins.

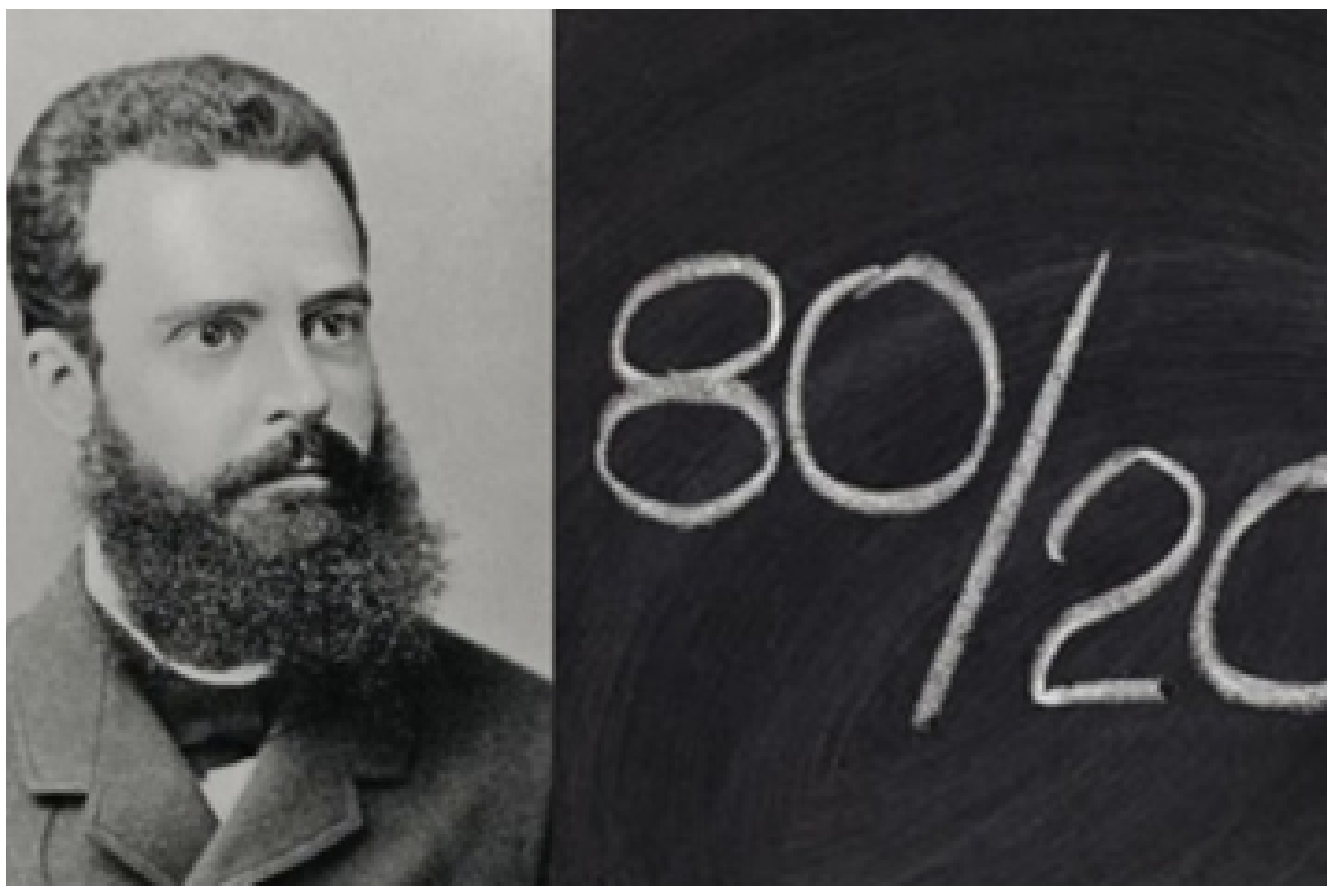
This is not a new observation. In 1906 economist Vilfredo Pareto introduced his 80-20 principle, observing that 80% of outcomes tend to come from 20% of their causes (the vital few). [1]

This insight suggests that for most breakthrough campaigns there is an unequal relationship between the results we achieve and the variety of activities that contribute to them. Some things we give energy to have a far greater impact on our results than others.

In 1996 Michael Porter wrote, “The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.” [2] But in practice, strategizing attention on most teams is way over indexed on choosing and resourcing what to do. Most organizations do strategy as if it’s an

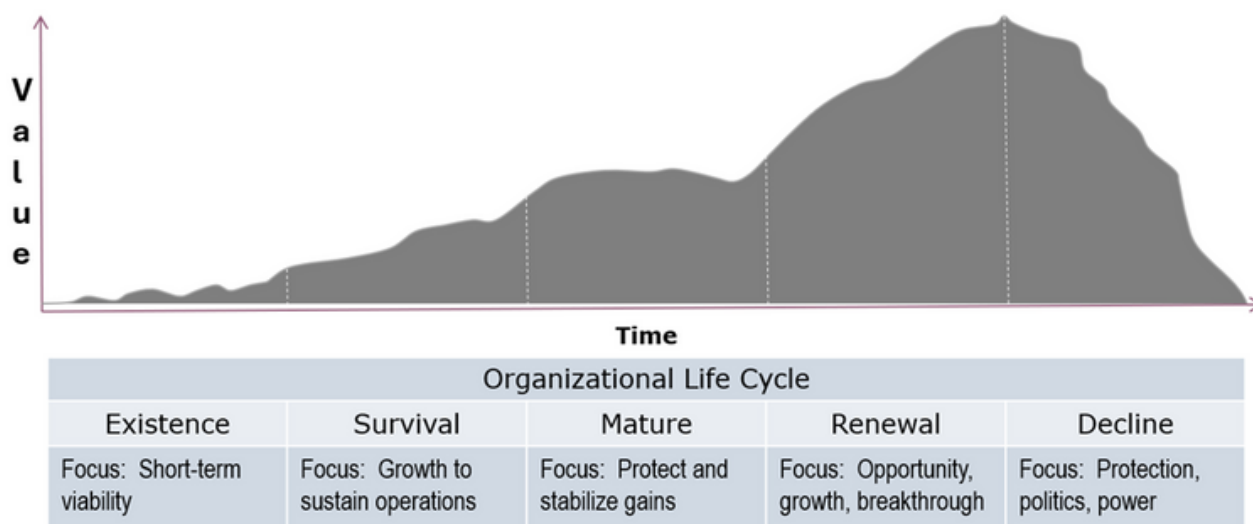
additive campaign.

Drawing on the Pareto principle, if a few vital activities cause most of a result, what percentage of your team’s strategizing energy is focused on letting go and saying no? How much time, energy and budget are locked up in holding on, that could be redistributed to fuel your breakthrough future? Why do organizations too often continue holding on to the many activities that are being done but are contributing least? I’ll answer this question next.



Organizational Stages

Holding on occurs at every stage of an organization's development. Throughout its lifecycle letting go is essential to unlock what's next. But as organizations develop and grow a powerful new dynamic settles in, which was not apparent earlier.



Early in their existence organizations are trying to craft and prove their business model to secure customers. The mode and culture is described as entrepreneurial and market oriented. There are lots of possibilities and distractions. Staying focused by saying no (often more than letting go) is a key capability.

As an organization develops, its prospects for survival improve. Stacking customer wins and building operations to enable scale takes precedent. Some structures, roles and policies are established to manage and promote growth. Depending on its future vision and market prospects, saying no and letting go both hold real power to fuel continuing progress.

But by the time organizations become more mature and established, considerable energy is being given to protection. Protecting is a new orientation that brings a powerful dynamic. In addition to the historic growth orientation from earlier stages, mature organizations seek to protect market gains by institutionalizing operational ways. The mode and culture is often described as conservative, predictable and smooth. Sophistication in planning, structures and the prevalence of process-centric roles has emerged. These are based on historical ways of meeting market needs.

Mature organizations are still ambitious. The pace is fast and the work to be done is enormous. They ..

deal with a constant shortage of time and resources. But unlike earlier points in their history, the collective energy of the mature organization has become diffused between growing and protecting. Moreover, if they have not been alert and disciplined, they are doing a preponderance of things due to saying yes, instead of saying no. Now many activities and requirements exist, which are not part of Pareto twenty percent. A senior leader from a high growth organization, newly in the mature stage explained that “We don’t stop things. Things just get added on. Everything is a priority.”

Protecting is a form of institutional holding on, which will grow stronger without regular diligence. One executive I interviewed about this dynamic observed “At the beginning everything is allowed, except what is specifically disallowed. Near the end nothing is allowed, except what is specifically allowed.” The structures and practices of protection are a ripe source of things to rationalize and potentially release.



Inevitably, there are also a variety of activities and pathways that leaders can release, because they contribute little to achieving what’s next. What lower goals, complex systems and busy tasks are we attached to? Which of these consume energy but contribute relatively little to our breakthrough future? Doing deeper work (screened by your bold future) to weed out and simplify is vital to unlocking progress. Inevitably, organizations face times when the ability / inability to let go is catalytic in whether organizational renewal (a breakthrough) or decline happens.

Releasing - A Case Example

Earlier in my career I engaged a brand-name privately held international company in the mature stage. The organization was performing, but this performance had more to do with the strength and global resonance of its brand(s). The company lacked robust prioritization abilities; therefore, executives held on to ways of working and had habits of saying “yes” to ideas. The company culture had become undisciplined, resulting in an overrun of creative or departmental projects, questionable hiring, anecdotal decision-making, etc.

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The CEO suspected the organization was doing too many inconsequential things. With his support, we launched a team charged with making an inventory of the activities departments and teams were working on. We identified nearly 170 discretionary / under the radar projects taking place.

The company then adopted a strategic screening approach to rationalize these, reducing the number to under 20. That is 150 misaligned things stifling breakthrough progress. To reference economist Milton Freedman, in organizations, “useless work drives out useful work”. [3] Saying “no” 150 or more times is not simply an accounting exercise in efficiency. It’s a progressive, life-giving discipline that kindles hope, by unlocking significant new capacity to achieve breakthrough.

How to Let Go and Get to No.

Organizations are busy places. There are projects to complete. Customers to serve. Meetings to lead. Deliverables that are due. Relationships to cultivate. Amid all this, how can leaders collectively make sense of organizational activities to close the gap on important breakthroughs? Here is a summary of practices to move past holding on.

Commit to a Breakthrough Future:

Casting a compelling future is an indispensable element, recognized by a variety of researchers for its practical ability to ignite strategic breakthrough. [4] [5] [6] Think ahead. What is your highest aspiration for your organization / team? Tap your collective imagination. How is this breakthrough future different from your current situation? What is the central aspiration - the breakthrough achievement / impact? Use this inspiration to converge on and commit to a breakthrough future.

Adopt a Releasing Mindset: Normalize this mindset. It equips you and others for the breakthrough journey. Releasing and saying no should not be an occasional, trivial part of strategizing in mature organizations. There is deep and continuing work to do here. Eliminating is crucial. Only a few things you are doing now are vehicles for your breakthrough future. This perspective is fundamental to focusing on and achieving your desired progress. Releasing needs to be a main strategy that regularly occupies time on the leadership agenda.



Filter From the Future: There will always be more activities and pursuits than available energy. In organizations, only a vital few activities, ideas or pathways are the winning ones. Recognizing the winners and freeing capacity for them is the challenge. So put the breakthrough future you've articulated to work as a screen. It's your most powerful tool. Think seriously and repeatedly on it. Use it to filter out things that should no longer exist and to find the few paths that lead to breakthrough. Your breakthrough goal empowers you to constantly question activities and requirements, both in your current activities and in your future steps. Filter from that future, not from your current situation.

Elevate your Dialogue Skills: Dialogue is a foundation skill for collective decisions and actions. Your collective needs mastery of this skill. In fact, holding on is often exacerbated by underdeveloped dialogue skills because teams become polarized and uncomfortable with conflict. The three practices above rest on the quality of dialogue your team can sustain.

In the context of breakthroughs, dialogue involves authentic conversations about the future, its possibilities and our progress. It is a slower mode of conversation that uses active listening, questions and reflection. Practicing dialogue enables people to remain open to different perspectives, promoting deeper mutual understanding, especially on contentious topics. From a posture of curiosity, respect and courage, dialogue permits explicit discussion about real opportunities and obstacles. It enables people to ask, hear and say tough but necessary things. It facilitates letting go and saying no, helping teams unite on their highest priorities and actions.

An organization's strategy process and regular leadership team meetings present rich opportunities to practice and coach the development of dialogue skills. The mixture of dialogue together with the prompts in the **Releasing Application Guide** (below) will help your team develop habits to get past the holding on roadblock.



RELEASING APPLICATION GUIDE

Breakthrough Future: Pick a meaningful time frame (quarter, year, 3 years, etc.). What is your highest aspiration for your organization / team? How is this breakthrough future different from your current situation? What is the central aspiration - the breakthrough achievement / impact? Are you committed to reaching this new reality?

Reflect on the breakthrough future. What are we currently doing that will not get us there? What are we currently doing that should not exist?

What do we currently believe but is no longer a belief in our breakthrough future? What mindsets / assumptions do we need to release?

What "lower goals" or "lesser paths" can we let go of to optimize our highest breakthrough future?

What are we holding on to (ways of working, offerings, projects, channels, people, systems, etc.)? What are we protecting? What is slowing / weighing us down? List at least 3 things.

Where do we have too much complexity? What current structures and processes constrain our breakthrough future? Where can we simplify?

What have we recently eliminated? What have we recently said "no" to? List at least 3 things.

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