



# Embedding “Fast and Flexible”

by Mike Hawkins  
[mike@alpinelink.com](mailto:mike@alpinelink.com)



Why does it take weeks or months for some companies to do what others do in days? Why do so many big companies get out sold and out smarted by small companies? Is it possible for a large company to be as agile and fast as their more nimble competitors? How do some small companies do so much with so few resources?

In my career I've owned small businesses, worked for medium size businesses, and worked fifteen years for a large global company. I've experienced firsthand the good and bad of all sizes of companies. There is good reason that large companies are stereotyped as slow, inflexible, and difficult to do business with. Small companies too are known for their lack of resources, inability to take on large scale projects, and unsophisticated business processes.

Of course there are small companies who have partnerships that enable scale and some have advanced systems and processes that facilitate an enviable quality of execution. There are also large companies that have committed people who lead their departments as entrepreneurs enabling swift execution that consistently exceeds customer expectations.

With exceptions aside, the stereotypical differences between small companies and large companies are deserved. Most small companies are significantly more responsive and agile than their large competitors. On the other hand, large companies are more able to meet the needs of their market over the longer term as they have more resources and more staying power.

The differences are most obvious when an organization experiences growth. As companies grow they experience the tension between maintaining the speed and agility that made their growth possible and the need to operate with more consistency and manageability. The way they operated with a few people doesn't work very well with a lot of people. They discover that coordinating, managing, and executing on a larger scale requires more structure, and therefore more overhead.

But does adding structure to a business have to stifle its creativity, reduce its responsiveness, or curtail its agility? Not at all. With a focus on speed and flexibility, a large company can maintain the good qualities of a small company. So can a small company embed the good qualities of a larger company.

Here are nine principles, regardless of company size, to maintaining speed and agility without sacrificing excellence in execution:

- 1. Don't let the numbers and measurements replace the passion** – Metrics are necessary, but secondary to having an intrinsic passion to pursuing a vision or goal. Don't let measurements replace what is right, fun, and meaningful. Stay focused on your mission, vision, and values. It is the people who find meaning in their work and execute well on the basics that are most successful.
- 2. Remember that your business depends on profitable customers and sales** – When your focus becomes internal, you've probably lost your way. Find opportunities to add value from your customer's perspective. Place your highest priority on customer facing tasks. Be quick to respond to customers no matter what else you're doing. If you find yourself in the business of producing PowerPoint charts for internal audiences, step back and reconsider how you might better impact profits through customer acquisition and retention.
- 3. Embrace change** – Almost changing is like almost winning. Not a good habit. Many people give up on making improvements to themselves or their organizations just when they are about to achieve their goal. Persist. There will be tough times that may require some rethinking of strategy or cost cutting, but they don't justify giving up. There is always a way. Use obstacles to refine your skills and offerings rather than make excuses for them. Consider change the opportunity for growth it truly is.



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4. **Partner** – Scale and capability don’t have to come from within the perimeter of your own organizational boundaries. Do you make all of your own electricity, paper, equipment, or raw material? Neither do you need to rely on your organization for anything else. With few exceptions, you can augment your capability with the staff and resources of others. Of course there are important details to pay attention to, but it can be done with great success. Don’t be constrained by the “not invented here” trap that thinks “nobody can do it as well as I can”.
5. **Get organized** – Regardless of size, being organized improves operational execution. When designed properly, systems and processes can enable speed, flexibility, and consistency. They don’t have to suppress them. It is when systems and processes are defined parochially that they stifle creativity and agility. Maintain the “one touch” principle so that your correspondence, approvals, customer service, and overall execution move quickly.
6. **Impart ownership**– Take responsibility. If you are a manager, empower, incent, and enable people to take ownership. People who feel ownership and that they are making a difference see to it that the work gets done. Empower and involve everyone at every level in meaningful and challenging work. Give them direction, but with the flexibility to use their own talents and resources.
7. **Focus on principles, not policies** – Don’t stifle creativity, initiative, and enthusiasm with policies that address a few exceptions, yet inconvenience many. Don’t fall into the habit of creating policies at the expense of promoting responsibility and utilization of core operating principles. If you are a manager, put your energy into coaching and motivating, not writing policy manuals. Emphasize organizational values and core operating principles through your own example. Find opportunities to reinforce them frequently.
8. **Maintain broad responsibilities** – With few exceptions, eliminate “that isn’t my job” from your vocabulary. You gain speed, competence, confidence, and efficiency when you help others and do work that might normally be outside of your area of responsibility. Just don’t do something that is at odds with what others would do without having prior agreement. People need “default” responsibilities, not “inflexible” ones. Promote a climate of collaboration and shared responsibility that operates with a sense of urgency.
9. **Expect more** – Don’t settle for mediocrity. Mediocrity in any position is unacceptable. It brings the entire team down. Don’t perpetuate anything that doesn’t meet expectations. Strive for a team of all “A” players. Help move your “B” players up or out. Make self-development a top priority. Don’t even consider maintaining any “C” players on your roster. They create more problems than they fix. Move them out or into a role to which they are better suited.

Follow these principles and you’ll experience the best of both small companies and large ones. Size doesn’t have to dictate scale, quality, speed, or creativity. You do.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.activatingyourambition.com](http://www.activatingyourambition.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corporation ([www.alpinelink.com](http://www.alpinelink.com)), a consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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