

What Should the COO Own When the Levers Sit Across the C-Suite?

The modern COO is increasingly accountable for outcomes produced by decisions that sit across Finance, Technology, HR, Commercial, Procurement, and other functions. The answer is not to pull every lever into Operations. It is to make ownership, decision rights, and execution unmistakably clear.

Executive Operations Insights | Saša Cibula

There was a time when the senior operations leader could directly control most of the assets, people, processes, and policies that determined operational performance. That model is disappearing. A modern operation may depend on capital controlled with Finance, systems owned by Technology, talent mechanisms designed with HR, demand shaped by Commercial, supplier choices led by Procurement, and risk constraints influenced by Legal, Security, or Regulatory functions. Yet when service fails, productivity stalls, a transformation misses its target, or a major operating investment underperforms, the COO is still expected to explain the outcome.

This creates a leadership problem that cannot be solved by expanding the COO's span of control. The more interdependent the enterprise becomes, the less realistic it is for one executive to own every lever. McKinsey's 2026 research on the evolving COO role makes the shift explicit: many of the decisions that determine cost, speed, resilience, and customer experience are now made or materially influenced outside the COO's formal remit. Operational excellence increasingly depends on sustained alignment across capital, technology, talent, and demand.

The executive question is therefore not, **How do we give the COO more control?** It is, **What should the COO actually own when performance depends on decisions distributed across the C-suite?** The answer requires separating ownership of the operating outcome from ownership of every functional input that produces it.

The Problem With Functional Ownership

Organizations are usually designed by function because specialization creates value. Finance develops capital discipline. Technology creates architecture and data capability. HR builds talent systems. Commercial functions understand customers and demand. Procurement develops supplier leverage and market knowledge. Operations integrates these inputs into the delivery system. The difficulty begins when a business outcome crosses those functional boundaries but accountability does not.

Consider an automation program intended to increase throughput and reduce unit cost across a distribution network. Operations understands the workflow and owns the performance target. Technology owns architecture, cybersecurity, and integration. Finance controls capital governance. HR owns workforce policies and may lead reskilling. Procurement negotiates vendors. Commercial leaders may determine service requirements that materially affect the design. Each function can perform its role correctly and the program can still fail because no one owns the integrated decision.

The usual response is more coordination: steering committees, additional meetings, shared scorecards, and consensus requirements. Those mechanisms can help, but they also create a familiar failure mode. Everyone is involved, so no one is clearly accountable. A decision is discussed repeatedly because each function believes another executive can reopen it. Execution slows while organizational energy is consumed managing interfaces rather than producing the outcome.

The executive task is not to eliminate functional specialization. It is to design decision rights across the specialization. That is where an established decision framework becomes useful.

RAPID: Clarify the Decision Before Debating the Org Chart

Bain & Company's RAPID framework distinguishes five roles in a decision: **Recommend, Input, Agree, Decide, and Perform**. The important principle is not the acronym itself. It is that participation in a decision is different from final authority over it. Many people can provide input. Formal agreement should be used sparingly. One person or group develops the recommendation. One person or group has the final decision. Others execute once the decision is made.

That distinction is particularly valuable at C-suite level because senior executives often confuse influence with ownership. A CFO may have decisive input into the economics of a network investment without owning the operating design. A CIO may own technology architecture without owning the customer promise the system must support. A CHRO may own enterprise talent policy while the COO remains accountable for whether the workforce model can actually deliver throughput and quality.

RAPID does not solve strategy. It does something more basic and often more valuable: it makes explicit who is responsible for moving a critical decision from analysis to commitment to execution. Bain's decision research emphasizes that organizations should focus this level of discipline on the decisions with meaningful value at stake rather than adding formality to every routine choice.

RAPID DECISION RIGHTS FOR CROSS-C-SUITE OPERATING DECISIONS

Clarify who shapes the decision, who has final authority, and who is accountable for execution.

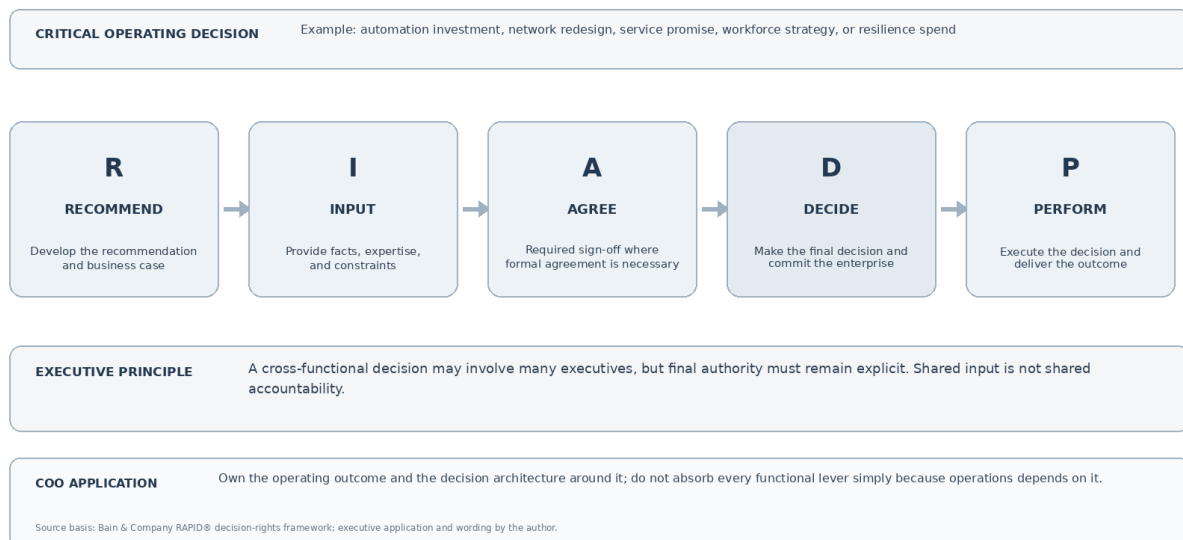


Figure 1. RAPID decision rights applied to cross-C-suite operating decisions.

The COO Should Own Outcomes Before Levers

The most important distinction is between **owning an outcome** and **owning every mechanism that contributes to it**. The COO should normally own the operating outcomes that translate business strategy into execution: reliability, service delivery, productivity, capacity, operational risk, and the performance of the operating system as a whole. But those outcomes increasingly depend on functional capabilities that should remain where the enterprise has placed the expertise and governance to manage them.

Pulling those functions into Operations simply to create clearer accountability can produce the opposite result. Technology can become too tactical. Finance can lose independence in capital challenge. HR can fragment into local workforce administration. Procurement can become captive to short-term operating priorities. The organization gains nominal control while weakening the capabilities that make the enterprise work.

The stronger model is explicit interdependence. The COO owns the operating objective, makes sure the critical cross-functional decisions have clear owners, and creates the cadence through which those decisions are converted into

execution. The COO does not need to own the CIO's architecture, the CFO's capital discipline, or the CHRO's enterprise talent systems. The COO does need to ensure those capabilities collectively produce the operating outcome the company has committed to deliver.

This is consistent with Galbraith's organization-design logic. Structure determines where decision power sits, but structure alone is not enough. Processes must carry information across boundaries, rewards must reinforce enterprise rather than local optimization, and people must have the capability to exercise the authority they receive. Cross-C-suite performance therefore cannot be fixed only by changing reporting lines. The decision system around the structure has to work.

When Should the COO Have the Final Decision?

Not every decision affecting operations should have the COO as the final decision maker. That would create a bottleneck and eventually turn the COO into the organization's chief escalation officer. The better question is whether the decision primarily determines an operating outcome for which the COO is accountable and whether the consequences can be integrated without compromising another executive's formal governance obligations.

A network capacity allocation, major operating-model choice, or enterprise service-recovery decision may reasonably sit with the COO because the dominant tradeoffs are operational and the execution burden sits in Operations. A cybersecurity control should not move to the COO merely because a cyber failure can stop production. A financing decision should not move to Operations because capital availability affects the network. Employment policy should not shift wholesale because labor availability constrains throughput.

Where several executive accountabilities intersect, the decision may need to be decomposed. An automation program is not one decision. The enterprise may separately decide the business case, technology architecture, workforce transition, vendor choice, deployment sequence, and operational acceptance criteria. Different executives can hold the final authority for different decisions while one integrated governance process keeps them aligned to the same business outcome.

This is a more mature form of executive ownership than simply asking who 'owns the project.' It acknowledges that complex transformations contain multiple decisions with different risk owners, expertise requirements, and legal responsibilities. What matters is that the boundaries are explicit and the decisions reconnect at the enterprise level.

A Practical Example: A Network Transformation Across Five Executives

Imagine a company planning to redesign a multi-site distribution network while introducing greater automation. The business case promises lower unit cost, faster service, and more flexible capacity. The COO is accountable for the operating result, but the critical levers are distributed. The CFO controls capital thresholds and return expectations. The CIO controls architecture and integration standards. The CHRO owns enterprise workforce policy and major reskilling mechanisms. The commercial leader owns the customer proposition and the demand assumptions embedded in the design.

Without explicit decision rights, the program can spend months in apparent alignment while fundamental questions remain unresolved. Operations assumes the service promise can change. Commercial assumes it cannot. Technology designs for an enterprise platform while sites request local exceptions. Finance evaluates a capital case based on labor savings that HR and Operations have not agreed can actually be captured. Each function is rational. The combined system is not.

A decision-rights approach forces the leadership team to separate the major choices. Operations may recommend the target operating model and hold the final decision on network execution within approved strategic and financial boundaries. Finance may have required agreement on capital commitments and hold the final decision on funding mechanisms. Technology decides architecture within the enterprise technology mandate. Commercial provides critical input on the customer proposition and may decide changes to that proposition. HR owns enterprise employment policy while performing the workforce transition with Operations.

The exact assignment will vary by company. The value comes from making the assignment explicit before execution pressure rises. The economic benefit is not merely faster meetings. Clearer decisions reduce rework, duplicated

analysis, delayed benefits, inconsistent local implementation, and capital committed to designs that later have to be renegotiated. They also prevent a subtler cost: senior executives repeatedly spending scarce attention on the same unresolved question.

The Counterargument: Cross-Functional Ownership Can Become Bureaucracy

There is a legitimate risk in formalizing decision rights. A leadership team can turn a useful framework into a governance industry: matrices for every decision, excessive sign-offs, new committees, and process layered on top of process. Bain explicitly warns against applying RAPID where the value of the decision does not justify the formality. That warning matters.

Senior teams should use explicit decision architecture for a relatively small number of choices where value at stake, interdependence, conflict, or execution risk is high. Routine decisions should move as low in the organization as capability and risk allow. The purpose of defining decision rights is to reduce friction, not institutionalize it.

There is also a leadership dimension no framework can substitute for. A COO can have perfectly defined rights and still fail if peer relationships are weak. McKinsey's recent work describes the modern COO as a 'bridge builder' because operational performance increasingly depends on the ability to work through other leaders whose priorities are legitimate and sometimes conflicting. Decision rights create clarity; trust makes the clarity usable.

Ownership in the Modern COO Role

The modern COO should not be measured by how many functions report into Operations. Span of control is an increasingly poor proxy for operating authority. What matters is whether the COO can translate strategy into operating outcomes across an enterprise whose critical capabilities are intentionally distributed.

That requires three forms of ownership. The COO must own the **operating outcome** the enterprise has committed to deliver. The COO must own or ensure the **decision architecture** around the most consequential cross-functional operating choices. And the COO must own the **integration and execution cadence** that turns those decisions into coordinated action. None of those requirements implies owning every functional lever.

The distinction is important because the wrong answer to cross-functional complexity is often centralization. Pulling more decisions upward or moving more functions under one executive can create temporary clarity, but it can also concentrate bottlenecks and weaken specialized capabilities. The better organization makes interdependence explicit, decides where final authority belongs, and then holds each executive accountable for the part of the system only they can lead.

The COO's role is therefore becoming less about controlling operations and more about **making the enterprise operable**. When capital, technology, talent, demand, and supply are governed across the C-suite, the COO creates value by ensuring those separate accountabilities converge into one executable operating system.

That is the answer to the title question. The COO should own the operating outcome, the critical decisions that only Operations can legitimately make, and the integration required to connect decisions owned elsewhere. The levers do not all need to sit in one hand. **But the enterprise cannot afford ambiguity about who pulls each one, who has the final say, and who is accountable when the result reaches the customer.**

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