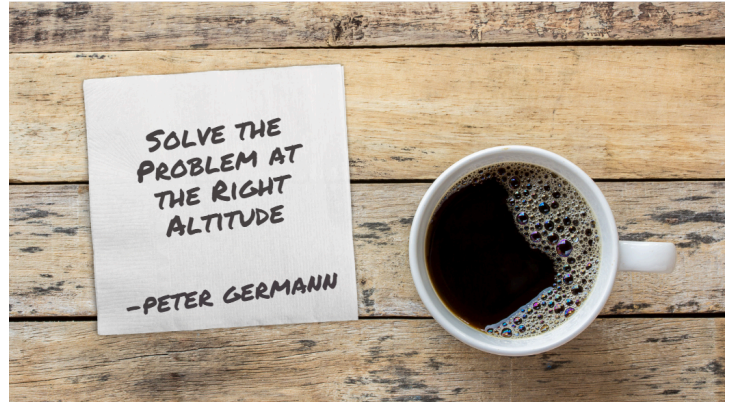


Solve the Problem at the Right Altitude

Peter Germann, Executive Coach

When results fall short, leaders often push harder on execution. They tighten deadlines, request more updates, or ask for greater accountability.



Sometimes that is exactly what is needed. But the altitude where a problem becomes visible may be different from the altitude where it begins.

A missed deadline is visible at ground level. Its source might be competing priorities, unclear ownership, or a decision that no one has made. Asking people to move faster will have limited value until that issue is resolved.

I developed my altitude framework to help leaders recognize these differences. Within my PRFCTLY alignment model, seven connected levels provide a way to understand where attention is needed.

50,000 feet—Purpose: Why the organization exists and why its work matters.

40,000 feet—Principles: The values and guiding beliefs that shape decisions and behavior.

30,000 feet—Focus: The strategy, priorities, and direction that deserve attention.

20,000 feet—Commitment: What people choose to own, support, and deliver.

10,000 feet—Tempo: The recurring rhythms and routines that keep important work moving.

5,000 feet—Lanes: The ongoing work streams and weekly activities that carry commitments forward.

Ground level—Actions: The daily decisions and specific steps that produce results.

Each altitude offers a different explanation for what may be getting in the way.

Consider a leader frustrated by slow progress across several initiatives. She asks for tighter deadlines, but her executives disagree about which initiative comes first. Each protects the

resources needed for their own priorities. The problem appears to be execution; the conversation needed is about Focus.

Other problems require attention elsewhere. A team may agree on a priority without anyone committing to own it. People may own the work but lack a reliable rhythm for making decisions and resolving obstacles. An individual may simply need a clearer next step.

Leading at the right altitude requires movement among the levels. Higher is not automatically better. There are times to step back and examine direction, and times to enter the details. Explaining the reason for that involvement helps people connect it to the larger goal.

The framework gives leaders a question to consider before responding: **At what altitude does this problem need to be solved?**

That pause can prevent considerable effort from being spent on a solution that never reaches the source of the problem.

Find the altitude before you choose the action.