



From Strategy to Results: The Operating Model Needs Relationships

Organizations invest heavily in strategy and operating model design. Yet something persistently gets in the way — the gap between what strategy promises and what the organization actually delivers. Business Relationship Management (BRM) is the discipline that closes it. When embedded at the heart of an operating model and built with intention, it transforms that gap from a chronic frustration into a competitive advantage.

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Leadership Coaching and Education

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Introduction

Most organizations are reasonably good at strategy. Leadership teams align on priorities, define ambitions, and build plans. Most are also skilled at designing operating models: structures, accountabilities, processes, and governance.

And yet a persistent gap remains between what strategy intends and what the organization delivers. Initiatives stall. Functions work at cross-purposes. Decisions drag. The energy invested in planning doesn't translate into promised results.

The cause is rarely the strategy or the operating model that exists on paper. It's what happens between the parts, or more precisely, what doesn't happen; this is the gap nobody talks about. The relationships that the operating model depends on to function as a system are underdeveloped, unmanaged, and invisible in most organizational designs.

This is where business relationship management (BRM) comes in, not as a function or a technology tool, but as an organizational capability focused on building and managing the relationships that enable strategy to translate into results.

Strategy, Operating Models, and the Invisible Challenge of Collaboration

Strategy: The Why and the What

Every organization starts with fundamental choices. Why do we exist? What are we trying to achieve? Who do we serve, and how do we create value?

Strategy is about making those choices with intention. It defines direction and priorities, and equally, what you will not do. Strategy answers the why and the what; it sets the destination.

The Operating Model: How Strategy Becomes Reality

The operating model answers how to arrive at your destination. It's the way an organization is designed to deliver on its strategy: how work gets done, decisions are made, resources are organized, and value reaches the people it's meant to serve.

There is no single definition. McKinsey, BCG, Deloitte, Gartner, MIT CISR, and TOGAF each have a framework that presents a different angle, but they all address the same question: how does an organization need to be designed to deliver on its strategy? What they share matters more than their differences: an operating model comprised of multiple interdependent components, structure, governance, processes, people, and technology, and no single element delivers the strategy alone.

Where the Gap Between Strategy and Execution Lives

Most strategies fail not because the thinking was wrong, but because the organization couldn't execute them. McKinsey's recent research¹ shows that only 1 in 5 executives believes their strategies hold up against rigorous standards. The biggest gap between high performers and the rest occurs during mobilization, the critical phase where strategic choices must translate into organizational readiness. Execution doesn't fail at planning. It fails when organizations are asked to act.



The operating model is what closes that gap. When it is well-designed and aligned to strategy, work progresses, decisions get made, and results follow. When it's not, or when accountability is unclear, processes create friction, governance is slow, and strategy loses momentum.

The Invisible Problem: Relationships

The reason operating models fail is almost always the same: the relationships between the parts are not working.

Effective execution depends on collaboration across boundaries, business units working with support groups, functions understanding the strategic context they serve, and leaders aligning with other leaders in real time. None of that shows up in an org chart or process map. These are relationships and largely invisible in how most organizations design their operating models.

A capable technology team that doesn't truly understand the business will build the wrong things. A well-funded initiative that lacks genuine partnership with the people it affects will face resistance at every step.

The operating model defines what needs to happen and who is responsible for getting it done. But it's relationships that determine whether it happens, and how well.

This is where BRM comes in. It's the capability that turns a collection of parts into a functioning system, making the invisible visible by purposefully building and managing the relationships that hold the operating model together.

Strategy defines direction and priorities. The **operating** model defines what needs to happen to achieve organizational goals and who is responsible for achieving these goals. But it is **relationships** that determine whether this happens, and how well.



**Business
Relationship
Management**

Results



BRM shows up in three distinct ways in an organization: leadership capability, dedicated role, and distributed responsibility. The table below maps the key differences at a glance, and the sections that follow explore each in depth.

	Leadership Capability	Dedicated Role	Distributed Responsibility
Who carries BRM	Every leader across the organization	A designated full-time business relationship manager	Leaders and managers alongside their primary roles
When BRM applies	Always; it's the baseline for any organization	When a relationship is strategic, complex, and consistently underserved	When dedicated roles are not yet warranted but structure is still needed
Primary focus	Building the skills to manage relationships that create value	Sustained attention on one or more critical partnerships	Ensuring key relationships are owned, visible, and not left to chance
What BRM looks like	Strategic awareness, stakeholder navigation, influence without authority, value thinking	Deep partnership development, value tracking, strategic alignment between two parties	Relationship reviews, cross-functional forums, clear accountability for outcomes
Key risk if BRM is absent	Collaboration depends on individual chemistry rather than organizational intent	Critical relationships receive insufficient attention and underdeliver	Relationship management is reactive, inconsistent, and invisible
What makes BRM work	Built into leadership frameworks, competency models, and how performance is recognized	Clear mandate, access to senior stakeholders on both sides, defined measures of success	Explicit ownership, regular structured reviews, incentives that reward cross-functional collaboration

Table 1: Different options for BRM in the operating model



BRM as a Leadership Capability

A Capability, Not Just a Title

BRM is often associated with a specific job title. But before it is a role, it is a capability—a set of skills and behaviours that any leader, in any part of the organization, can and should develop. This section focuses on that foundation. The following sections explore how it is structured as a dedicated or distributed responsibility.

What Relationship Management Capability Actually Means

At its core, it's about building and maintaining relationships that create value for your team, your function, your organization, and the people you serve. In practice, this requires a specific set of skills that don't develop by accident:

- **Strategic awareness:** connecting your team's work to the broader strategic direction and understanding where the organization is going and why.
- **Stakeholder navigation:** knowing who the important relationships are, what each stakeholder needs, and engaging in a way that builds trust. Not politics, intentionality.
- **Value thinking:** shifting focus from activity to outcomes. What does the other side need? What does success look like for them? What can we create together that neither could deliver alone?
- **Influence without authority:** the ability to align people around shared goals without relying on hierarchy. Essential in matrixed organizations where formal authority rarely matches the scope of what needs to get done.
- **Co-creation and collaboration:** bringing different parts of the organization together around a shared problem and working through it collectively, not sequentially.

These are not soft skills. They are strategic skills, and when distributed across the leadership of an organization, they fundamentally change how the operating model performs.

What BRM Looks Like in Practice

Consider a senior Finance leader. Technically, their job is financial reporting, planning, and control. But their effectiveness depends entirely on relationships with business unit leaders, technology, HR, and the executive team. Transactional relationships, limited to outputs on request, make Finance a back-office function. Genuine partnerships built on trust and understanding make it a strategic contributor.

The same applies to every function. Technical capability sets the ceiling, but the quality of your relationships determines whether you reach it. When leaders consistently apply relationship management, decisions get made faster, conflicts surface earlier, initiatives land better, and strategy becomes a shared direction rather than a document.



Strategic awareness, stakeholder navigation, value thinking, influence without authority, and collaboration are not soft skills. They are the essential skills that determine whether a leadership team can execute its strategy.

BRM as a Full-Time Dedicated Role

When Capability Needs a Home

BRM as a leadership capability is the foundation, but when the relationships most critical to strategy execution are complex, high-stakes, or consistently under-served, a capability distributed across leaders is insufficient. Some relationships are too important to be managed on the side; they need a dedicated home.

That means appointing a business relationship manager, someone whose full-time responsibility is to manage and develop those relationships. This isn't about adding headcount; it's about giving critical partnerships the sustained attention they need to deliver.

What a Dedicated BRM Actually Does

A business relationship manager is not a project manager, account manager, or business analyst. Those roles focus on delivery. The business relationship manager focuses on the relationship itself: understanding the strategic needs of the people they serve, building trust over time, and ensuring the right conversations happen between the right people.

In practice, a dedicated business relationship manager:

- Develops a deep understanding of the business areas they partner with, their priorities, pressures, and definition of success. This requires sustained attention most leaders, carrying their own responsibilities, simply can't give.
- Acts as a bridge, identifying misalignment, gaps in communication, and where relationships need to be strengthened.
- Manages value, tracking whether the partnership is delivering results, keeping focus on outcomes rather than activity, and ensuring value is visible on both sides.
- Works at the level of strategy, not just operations, in the room when priorities are set, not just when tasks are assigned.



Placement and Mandate

A dedicated business relationship manager is a deliberate design choice, placed where the most critical relationships need active, sustained management. This is typically between a major business unit and enabling functions, at the intersection of two parts of the business that consistently struggle to collaborate, or managing a strategic external partnership.

Specific placement matters less than the mandate. A business relationship manager without substantive access to senior stakeholders on both sides will be limited to managing operational issues rather than strategic alignment, regardless of their title. Effectiveness depends on access, trust, and a clear brief.

Measuring the Impact

BRM value can be hard to measure in traditional ways². The business relationship manager doesn't own a product, manage a budget, or deliver a project. But the impact is measurable. The right measures focus on outcomes: Is the partnership delivering on its strategic intent? Are decisions being made faster? Is there a shared understanding of priorities on both sides? Has trust increased over time?

An organization that can't answer these questions doesn't have a measurement problem; it has a clarity problem about what the role is there to do.

A dedicated business relationship manager without substantive access to senior stakeholders on both sides of the relationship will be limited to managing operational issues rather than strategic alignment, regardless of their title.





BRM as a Part-Time or Distributed Responsibility

The Reality for Most Organizations

A dedicated BRM role is not where most organizations begin, and not every important relationship requires one. For most, relationship management responsibility is distributed, carried by leaders and managers alongside their primary roles.

This is not a lesser version of BRM. Done intentionally, it's a practical and effective model. The risk isn't in distributing the responsibility. The risk is doing it without structure or deliberate intent.

The Work Is Already Happening

In most organizations, relationship management is already being done; it just isn't recognized or structured as such. Senior managers coordinating between business units and support functions, functional leads investing time to understand the teams they serve, chiefs of staff managing relationships across the executive team, business partners in HR, Finance, or Technology who go beyond transactional service delivery; all of them are doing this work.

The difference between organizations that do it well and those that don't is rarely the people. It's whether the organization is intentional about it. Left informal and unstructured, results depend entirely on individual initiative; some leaders naturally invest in relationships, while others don't, and the operating model suffers for it.

The Risks of an Unstructured Approach

- Relationships fall through the gaps. No explicit ownership means reactive management. Issues become problems before they're addressed.
- Competing priorities win. Under pressure, leaders default to their primary role. Relationship management waits for time that rarely arrives.
- Value stays invisible. Without structure, it's difficult to track whether relationships are delivering. Progress is anecdotal; problems are hard to spot early.
- Trust erodes slowly. Relationships not actively maintained become transactional, and rebuilding them is costly, rarely visible until it's already high.

Making BRM Work with Intention

Start with clarity: which relationships are critical to the strategy? Who is responsible for each? What does good look like, and how will the organization know if it's not working?

Add structure: regular relationship reviews, cross-functional forums, shared planning processes, and explicit accountability for outcomes; all of these make relationship management visible and manageable within existing roles.

And recognize it: organizations reward delivery within a function far more than collaboration across them. If leaders are expected to carry the responsibility for relationship management, that expectation needs to show up in how they're assessed. Behaviour follows incentives.



From Distributed to Dedicated

Distributed relationship management builds the awareness and foundation from which more structured approaches emerge. Organizations typically move toward dedicated BRM roles once they've seen the value of strong relationship management in practice and felt the cost of weak relationship management, such as when a critical partnership under-delivers, a collaboration consistently breaks down, or the same misalignment keeps resurfacing.

The direction of travel is consistent: from informal to intentional, from distributed to structured, and, where the stakes are high enough, from part-time to dedicated.

Between organizations that manage relationships well and those that do not it's rarely the people who make the difference. It is whether or not the organization is intentional about managing its relationships.





Designing BRM into Your Operating Model

Start With the Relationships That Matter Most

The question for any organization is not whether to invest in BRM; it is which combination of the three models (Leadership's capability, full time, part time) is the best fit, and how to incorporate BRM within the design with intention. BRM does not embed itself. Left to chance, some relationships will be managed well, while others will not, depending entirely on the individuals involved at any given time.

Not all relationships carry equal weight. Some are operational; important to keep functioning but not directly tied to strategic outcomes. Others are genuinely strategic, and their quality has a direct and significant impact on whether the organization executes its most important priorities.

The main question revolving around design is for each relationship that matters most, what level of investment is appropriate? This is a strategic conversation, not an HR exercise, and it requires honesty about where critical relationships are working well, where they are fragile, and where they are actively creating problems.

Matching the Model to the Relationship

Once critical relationships are identified, each one points toward a different model:

- **Important but manageable within existing roles:** invest in leadership capability and create the conditions for it to be applied consistently.
- **Complex, high-stakes, and consistently under-served:** this should be a dedicated BRM role with a clear mandate, access to senior stakeholders on both sides, and defined measures of success.
- **Multiple owners across functions:** this model needs distributed responsibility with explicit ownership, structured forums, and accountability for outcomes.

For most organizations, the answer is a combination: a small number of dedicated BRMs on the most critical partnerships, supported by a leadership population applying relationship management capability across their own domains.

Making BRM Visible in the Operating Model

Relationships are invisible in most operating model designs. Making relationship management visible means going beyond practice. It needs to be reflected in how the operating model is described, governed, and measured.

Include relationship ownership in role descriptions and leadership frameworks. Create governance mechanisms that explicitly address the health of critical relationships, not just the delivery of outputs. Track relationship outcomes alongside operational and financial performance.

It also means having honest conversations at the leadership level about which relationships are strong, which are fragile, and which are preventing execution. An operating model review that addresses structure, governance, and process, but not relationships, is only solving part of the problem.



Common Pitfalls

- **Treating BRM as a title rather than a capability:** A role without the broader organizational capability around it produces a well-intentioned individual without the mandate or support to be effective.
- **Placing BRM too low in the organization:** Relationship management operates at the strategy level. Without access to senior decision-makers on both sides, the work stays operational.
- **Failing to define success:** Undefined value is always the first casualty when budgets are under pressure.
- **Treating it as a one-time design decision:** The relationships most critical to the strategy will change as the strategy evolves. The approach must evolve with it.

BRM Maturity: Where Are You Now?

Most organizations start informally and build over time. The framework below maps three stages of maturity and connects each to the BRM models introduced in the previous sections. The stages are Informal, Intentional, and Intrinsic.

BRM Maturity	Stage 1: Informal	Stage 2: Intentional	Stage 3: Intrinsic
How BRM shows up	Ad hoc, driven by individual initiative and personal style.	Structured, critical relationships are identified and ownership is assigned.	Systemic, built into how the organization designs, leads, and governs.
What's in place	No shared language, no explicit ownership, no governance structure.	BRM capability is being developed; some governance and review forums exist; progress is tracked imperfectly.	Relationship ownership is in role profiles; outcomes are measured alongside operational performance.
BRM models active	None formally; capability relies on whoever happens to be in the role.	This mainly starts with the dedicated BRM role. The capability starts developing, with some distributed responsibility where needed.	All three models are active: Capability is built into leadership development; The BRM role exists where stakes warrant; Distributed responsibility structured across the organization.
Key signal	Relationship quality varies widely across teams and functions, and nobody quite owns it.	The organization talks about relationships deliberately; some people own specific relationships.	Relationships are treated as an organizational asset: managed, measured, and invested in.

Most organizations sit between Stage 1 and Stage 2. The goal is not to reach Stage 3: Intrinsic, overnight. It is to move deliberately in that direction, while knowing why it matters and what the next step looks like.



A common mistake is appointing a dedicated BRM role before the organizational capability exists to support it. Without the leadership capability and the structural foundations of distributed responsibility, even the best-placed BRM will struggle to succeed. All three areas need to be built together; the role alone is not the answer.

Why BRM is Non-Negotiable for Strategy Execution

The Investment Case

In the previous sections we have described what BRM is, how it operates across three models, and how to design it into an operating model deliberately. But the most important question is also the simplest one: what happens if organizations ignore BRM? If relationship management is treated as a serious strategic concern rather than something that just happens in the background, what does an organization stand to gain—and what could it lose?

What Breaks Without It

The symptoms are familiar. Priorities conflict across functions because the people involved don't have strong enough relationships to surface tension early and resolve it quickly. Decisions stall because alignment must be built from scratch every time rather than drawn from existing trust. Initiatives lose momentum not because the plan was wrong, but because the teams responsible for delivering them were never genuinely connected to the people they were delivering for.

These failures have a compounding quality. Weak relationships slow the organization down at exactly the moments when speed matters most, when strategy needs to translate into action, when circumstances change, and the organization needs to adapt, when a problem surfaces, and a cross-functional response is required.

The cost is rarely captured in a single line on a performance report. It shows up diffusely: in duplicated effort, in decisions made with incomplete information, in talented people leaving an environment where collaboration is harder than it should be. Individually, these are manageable. Collectively, they're a significant drag on performance.

Agility Runs on Relationships

Organizational agility, the ability to respond quickly to change, reallocate resources, and pivot when circumstances shift, is widely understood as a strategic necessity. What is less often acknowledged is that agility depends directly on the quality of relationships across the operating model.

Speed of response is not primarily a structural question; it is a relational one. Organizations move quickly when leaders already have the trust and shared understanding needed to act together without



lengthy alignment cycles. They slow down when every significant decision requires rebuilding context across functions that don't genuinely know each other's priorities.

This is where the investment in BRM pays back most visibly. The capability distributed across leadership, concentrated where stakes are highest, and structured where ownership would otherwise be unclear, is what allows an organization to move as a coherent whole rather than as a collection of parts.

The Compounding Value of Sustained Relationships

One of the underappreciated qualities of strong relationship management is that its value compounds over time. A leadership population that has developed genuine BRM capability creates a baseline of trust and shared language that makes every subsequent collaboration faster and easier. Dedicated business relationship managers who remain in their roles build progressively deeper knowledge of both sides of a partnership, knowledge that cannot be replicated by someone new to the relationship. Structured distributed responsibility ensures that relationship quality doesn't reset every time someone changes roles or leaves the organization.

By contrast, the cost of weak relationship management also compounds. Relationships that are not actively maintained become transactional. Transactional relationships become adversarial under pressure. The operating model that looked functional in calm conditions reveals its fragility precisely when the organization most needs it to hold.

Strategy Is Carried by People

Strategy doesn't execute itself. The operating model defines the structure, and plans define the direction. But neither delivers results on its own. People do, and people work through relationships.

The quality of those relationships determines how well information flows, how quickly decisions get made, how effectively resources are deployed, and how consistently the organization moves in the direction the strategy intends. BRM is the organizational capability that makes all this possible, not as a concept, but as a practical discipline embedded into how leaders are developed, how roles are designed, and how performance is governed.

An organization that invests in BRM is not investing in a management theory; it is investing directly in its own ability to execute. And in the end, that is what everything else depends on.

**Strong relationship management accrues value over time.
Weak relationship management accrues fragility. The
operating model that looks functional in calm conditions
will reveal its gaps precisely when the organization most
needs it to hold.**



Conclusion

The Honest Assessment

This article has covered a lot of ground: the invisible gap at the heart of most operating models, the three ways BRM shows up in practice, how it gets deliberately incorporated into the design, and why the investment is non-negotiable. The thread running through all of it is the same: organizations that intentionally manage their most important relationships will outperform those that don't.

The right starting point is not a framework or a job description. It is an honest assessment: are the relationships our operating model depends on being actively managed, or are we leaving them to chance? For most organizations, that question will highlight both strengths and weaknesses. Some relationships will be working well, while others will be fragile. Some will be quietly costing more than the organization has acknowledged.

That assessment is not the end of something. It is the beginning, a deliberate decision to treat relationships as an organizational asset and invest in managing them accordingly.

Where Most Organizations Are, and Where to Go Next

As the maturity framework table reflects, most organizations are operating at the Informal or Intentional stage. Relationship management happens, but it is uneven, dependent on individuals, and rarely visible in how the organization governs or measures performance.

Moving forward does not require a transformation program. It requires a shift in how the organization thinks about what makes the operating model work. The BRM capability framework offers a starting point for leadership development. The design choices offer a practical path for making relationship management explicit and accountable. The investment case provides the rationale for sustaining that commitment over time.

The models on how to approach BRM in the operating model are not prescriptive. They are options, and the right combination will differ for every organization depending on its strategy, its structure, and where its most critical relationships currently stand. What matters is making a deliberate choice rather than leaving it to chance.

A Final Thought

The organizations that execute their strategies well are not always the ones with the best plans. They are the ones where the right people are talking to each other, trust has been built over time, and collaboration across boundaries is the norm rather than the exception.

That does not happen by accident. It is the result of treating relationships as something worth designing, developing, and protecting.

An operating model without relationship management is a structure built for simplicity in a world that isn't simple. Add relationship management, and the parts will start to work as a whole.



Author

Peter Lijnse, MBRM, is an experienced business relationship management (BRM) leadership coach, speaker, author, and facilitator. He supports organizations in building and maturing their BRM capabilities, while coaching leaders to maximize the value those capabilities deliver. Peter's work is rooted in a core belief that relationship management is not a background concern but a strategic necessity—one that determines whether an organization's operating model functions as a structure alone, or as a coherent, connected whole.

Together with Elka Schrijver, Peter has co-authored multiple books exploring BRM, leadership, and organizational complexity, including a business novel that follows a BRM navigating real-world challenges. Drawing on experience across multiple industries, Peter is a sought-after keynote speaker and workshop facilitator on the topics of BRM, leadership, and the power of relationships to drive results.

Explore the Lead and Succeed book series here, or copy and paste the link into your browser: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CK7ZHXS8>

About Lead the Pack Consulting

We specialize in Business Relationship Management (BRM) leadership development, helping organizations build strong, value-driven relationship capabilities. With decades of combined experience in leadership and management coaching, we support leadership teams with relationship management in overcoming challenges, developing strategic skills, and delivering measurable results.

We are also published authors, having written three books that provide practical insights and tools to advance BRM capabilities:

- *Leading with Impact* (2023) – Introducing the Impact Canvas as a tool to demonstrate organizational value and results.
- *Leading with BRM* (2024) – A practical guide to embedding BRM as a leadership discipline.
- *The Hexagon Effect* (2025) – A business novel exploring the journey of a Business Relationship Manager and the transformative power of collaboration.

Our work combines proven frameworks, hands-on tools, and real-world experience to help organizations embed BRM as a core capability that drives collaboration, trust, and strategic results.

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