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The Acceleration Trap

Faced with intense market pressures, corporations often take on more than they can handle: They increase the number and speed of their activities, raise performance goals, shorten innovation goals, and introduce new management technologies or organizational systems. For a while they succeeded brilliantly, but too often the CEO tries to make this furious pace the new normal. What began as an exceptional burst of achievement becomes chronic overloading, with dire consequences.

This phenomenon is known as the acceleration trap. It harms the company on many levels – over accelerated firms fare worse than their peers on performance, efficiency, employee productivity, and retention among other measures.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that it’s possible to escape the acceleration trap. Companies can sustain high performance over the long term without overtaxing their employees.

The Habit of Constant Change

Over-accelerated companies exhibit at least one of three patterns of destructive activity.

The first is, simply, that employees are overloaded with too many activities. They don’t have the time or the resources required to do their jobs.

The second is what we call multi loading. Companies ask employees to do too many kinds of activities. This leaves employees and the company as a whole unfocussed, and activities are misaligned.

Finally companies get into the habit of constant change or perpetual loading. This pattern deprives workers of any hope of retreat for recharging their energy. To compensate, they hold back their efforts whenever they can, even if doing so hampers the company.
**How to Break Free**

If your company is caught in the acceleration trap, you have several ways to break free.

1. **Stop the action**: Instead of asking employees to suggest new initiatives to improve the company, why not turn the question around? Ask employees for ideas about what to terminate.

2. **Be clear about strategy**: Asking “what should we stop doing?” and then terminating nonessential tasks requires CEO fortitude. Ultimately, the choice to keep or cut loose hinges on whether an activity directly supports the company’s strategy—so that the strategy must be clearly understood throughout the entire firm.

3. **Decide how to make decisions**: Not every project that supports the company’s strategy is of major importance. So companies need a systematic way to make hard choices.

4. **Declare the turmoil over**: If the acceleration trap consists not of a plethora of projects but of ceaseless turmoil, the CEO can extricate the company by calling an end to the current round of changes.

**Don’t Get Trapped Again**

Just as important as breaking free is preventing future entrapment. To do that, following are some of the ways

1. **Institute spring cleaning**: A period devoted to a good sweeping gets manager into the habit of culling initiatives. Some companies establish a schedule of housecleaning; others simply decide that they will clean whenever tasks and activities seem overwhelming or before starting a new change process.

2. **Cap annual goals**: Placing a cap on the number of goals set each year is crucial to preventing an explosion of activities. To help make goal-reduction stick, a visible commitment from the CEO is necessary—especially in companies used to following a management-by-objectives approach. Leaders must help managers understand the purpose and value of refocusing on just a few goals and assist them in applying the new rules.

3. **Filter new projects**: At too many firms, the CEO implicitly or explicitly encourages the people running project management systems to get caught up in new-project euphoria and to be liberal with go-aheads. Instead CEOs should require that project management systems be used as much to filter and prioritize as to manage projects.

**Don’t Get Trapped Again**

- Institute spring cleaning
- Cap annual goals
- Filter new projects
- “Burying” culture
4. **Introduce a “burying” culture**: Terminating a project can cause serious pain not only to its sponsors but also to the lower-level people who have been toiling on it. One solution is to foster a culture that encourages managers or project heads to halt lesser projects. Managers should thank employees for their dedication and emphasize the projects good points.

**Changing a Culture of Acceleration**

Preventing the growth of new activities is only one aspect of avoiding the acceleration trap. Making changes in the company’s hurry-up culture is another crucial component.

1. **Focus on one thing only for a limited time**: Companies can put on blinders for a specified time period to pursue strategically important projects without distractions.

2. **Institute time outs**: Time outs are periods that allow for creativity and exploration. They prepare workers mentally and emotionally for the next phase of high performance, thereby increasing the company’s productivity.

3. **Slow down to speed up**: If time-outs represent too radical a change, companies can systematically insert periods of calm, regeneration, and incremental change amid high-energy phases.

4. **Indulge in successes**: Most companies do not celebrate ends. They think the completion of a project is a reward in itself. It isn’t. Achievements and outstanding effort deserve acknowledgement. Take a moment to reflect and feel proud of accomplishments.

5. **Model better behavior**: Executives should serve as role models for effectively renewing energy and commitment. Bill Gates used to retreat to a cottage for a “think week” every spring and fall, taking with him ideas submitted by Microsoft employees. Doing so allowed him to focus exclusively on a crucial business task.

6. **Use feedback systems**: Feedback can help change a culture of acceleration. This could be done through workers receiving monthly feedback from managers about (among other things) whether they are taking adequate measures to rest and recharge. Workers could also fill out a monthly self-assessment on the same issues.

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