

The Acceleration Trap

- How much change is too much?



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Discussion Objectives

The discussion today will:

- Consider the concept of the 'acceleration trap'
- Briefly assess your culture for signs of acceleration
- Discuss implications for management action

REFERENCE: April 2010 – Harvard Business Review - Heike Bruch and Jochen I. Menges



The Acceleration Trap

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“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 cycles, and introduce new management technologies or organizational systems...

...then try to make this furious pace the new normal... and fall into the acceleration trap

...the acceleration trap can harm the company on many levels - over-accelerated firms fare worse than their peers on performance, efficiency, employee productivity, and retention, among other measures...”



Implications of being “Trapped”

April 2010 – Harvard Business Review - Heike Bruch and Jochen I. Menges

- *60% of employees at "fully trapped" companies agree they lacked sufficient resources to get their work done; only 2% of employees at nontrapped companies agree;*
- *80% of employees at "fully trapped" companies agree they work under constantly elevated time pressure; only 4% of employees at nontrapped companies agree;*
- *75% of employees at "fully trapped" companies agree their company's priorities frequently change; only 1% of employees at nontrapped companies agree;*
- *83% of employees at "fully trapped" companies disagree that they saw a light at the end of the tunnel of intense working periods; only 3% of employees at nontrapped companies disagree;*
- *86% of employees at "fully trapped" companies disagree they regularly got a chance to regenerate; only 6% of employees at nontrapped companies disagree.*



Patterns of Destructive Activity

April 2010 – Harvard Business Review - Heike Bruch and Jochen I. Menges

3 Patterns of destructive activity:

- ***Overloading:*** employees are asked to perform too many activities (lack the time and resources to do their job; CPQ implications)
- ***Multiloading:*** employees are asked to do too many kinds of activities; react to too many changes all at the same time (unfocused; misaligned activities)
- ***Perpetual loading:*** constant change does not allow employees to recharge and retool (no periods of calm, always reacting to new expectations; new structures)



Acceleration Culture? - assessment

April 2010 – Harvard Business Review - Heike Bruch and Jochen I. Menges

Culture Self - Assessment:

- Are activities started too quickly?
- Is it hard to get the most important things done because too many other activities diffuse focus?
- Is ending activities considered a sign of weakness?
- Are projects carried out pro-forma because people fear ending them publicly?
- Is there a tendency to continually drive the organization to the limits of its capacity?
- Is it impossible for employees to see the light at the end of the tunnel?
- Does the company value attendance at work and meetings more than goal achievement?
- Does it value visibly hard effort over tangible results?
- Are employees made to feel guilty if they leave work early?
- Do employees talk a lot about how big their workload is?
- Is busyness valued?
- Are managers expected to act as role models by being involved in multiple projects?
- Is “no” a taboo word, even for people who have already taken on too many projects?
- Is there an expectation in the organization that people must respond to e-mails within minutes?
- Do countless people routinely get copied on e-mails because employees are trying to protect themselves?
- In their free time, do employees keep their cell phones or messaging devices on because they feel they always need to be reachable?



Breaking Free...

April 2010 – Harvard Business Review - Heike Bruch and Jochen I. Menges

How to Break Free (avoid) from trap:

- ***Stop the Action (spring cleaning)**: asking the employee what to terminate (in addition to innovation ideas); get managers in the habit of culling initiatives*
- ***Be Clear about Strategy (cap annual goals)**: ensuring only a FEW clear, meaningful and consistent goals across business; aligning action with specific strategy*
- ***Decide how to make Decisions (filter new projects)**: articulating a systematic way to make hard choices; limit new projects, resource allocation; model the right behaviors*
- ***Declare Turmoil Over (recognize pain of end projects)**: define the timeline for major change activity; allow morning of stopped projects; celebrate major milestones; give the organization time for recuperation*



Management Action!

- *Stop the Action (spring cleaning):*
- *Be Clear about Strategy (cap annual goals):*
- *Decide how to make Decisions (filter new projects):*
- *Declare Turmoil Over (recognize pain of end projects):*

