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The Need for Speed

By James Brown, PhD

There is nothing wrong with speed when a system is designed for it. I had a harrowing taxi ride in Germany on the autobahn. The ride was uncomfortable not because of the very high speed, but the condition of the dilapidated taxi I was riding in. It is not a good feeling when you know you are going too fast. It is uncomfortable. That taxi was not ready for high speed.

If you have ever ridden in a car that you felt was going too fast because of the car, driver or conditions, you are aware of that uneasy feeling associated with the experience. It can cause you to try to mash an imaginary brake when you are sitting in the passenger seat. That same uneasy feeling can overtake you as a project manager if things are going too fast. The bad news is projects are a lot longer than a ride in a car.

Odds are high that your organization is obsessed with speed

Your organization should be obsessed with speed. Speed is necessary for success in today's market. The question for you and your organization is "Do you know what truly enables speed?" When speed is required you should focus on two things. 1. Insight. 2. Braking. Consider the following quote by the famous soccer player Johan Crujff:

Speed is often confused with insight.**When I start running earlier than the others, I appear faster**

Insight means leadership and effective planning allows you to start earlier. It allows you to start without having to restart three weeks or three months later. How many of you have been assigned a project with a tight deadline when your leadership could have made the schedule more achievable had "they" made more timely decisions? Or shortly after project initiation "they" decide to change the direction of the project. Good leadership and planning increase the speed of delivery more than everyone on the project team constantly rushing, squeezing in one more meeting and working 60 plus hours per week. Too often you, me and organizations mistake fast action or a lot of action for speed.

Fast action and the appearance of speed does not equate to progress

One of the dangers of speed is that if you have never gone that fast before you can only estimate what it takes to stop. During part of my NASA career, early in the Space Shuttle program, I worked in developing training systems for the astronauts. A Space

Shuttle commander commented at the time that “the one thing they did not have good training for was a feel for stopping the Shuttle after touchdown during landing.” Brake too fast and you can blow a tire, too slow and... This underscores an important aspect of speed and that is the ability to stop. To go fast safely you must have good brakes. You must have good tires. You must have the sense and wherewithal to step on the brakes. You must understand that braking too fast can endanger the system. *When traveling at a high rate of speed the entire system must be prepared to stop.*

**So if you are in an organization that prides itself on speed
you should be equally proud of your braking system**

When some people look at sports cars they focus on the acceleration, the 0 to 60 speed. Equally important as acceleration is stopping distance.

- Does your organization have processes in place to detect when projects are out of control?
- Does your organization terminate projects gone bad before they become a money pit or embarrassment?
- Does your leadership or customer(s) get advanced notice of the problems that exist in projects before there are only one or two options left to resolve them?
- Are you more in control of the circumstances than the circumstances are in control of you?

If you answered no to any of these questions odds are high you need a better braking system or need to slow the system down.

As I write this it all seems simple and basic but in the real world I sometimes encounter organizations whose actions essentially say “*We are too busy working to slow down, too busy to make sure we are heading in the right direction and too busy to verify everything is okay.*” They mouth the right words but their actions don’t line up with what they say.

“We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us” Walt Kelly

I heard an organizational leader say “We can never get our leaders to sit down more than an hour to perform strategic planning, there are just too many important meetings.” Meanwhile their organizational strategy and goals are over a decade old and project managers and team members at the working level do not know how to make decisions effectively because they are not sure of organizational direction. The consequences of this are that they have spent millions on some projects that never resulted in a deliverable actually used by the customer. Millions! **They have time for important meetings to talk about these problems. They just don’t have time to prevent them; they are going too fast for that.**

About the Author:***James Brown, PhD****Author*

Dr. James T. Brown, president of SEBA[®] Solutions Inc., a Registered Education Provider for the Project Management Institute, has provided training and consulting services for dozens of companies nationally and internationally. SEBA[®] Solutions also provides OnePdu.com <http://OnePdu.com> for online project management training. A recognized authority in project management, Dr. Brown is a frequently invited speaker on project management areas of interest. He is the author of ***The Handbook of Program Management*** published by McGraw Hill and is a member of the Project Management Institute, the National Speakers Association and the National Association of Corporate Directors. Dr. Brown has a patent for a project scheduling methodology, and has received numerous awards including "Engineer of the Year" from the Cape Canaveral Technical Societies and is a recipient of the "NASA Public Service Medal" for exceptional contributions to NASA's mission. He has a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering from the University of Central Florida, a MS in Engineering Management from Florida Institute of Technology and a BS in Electrical Engineering from Tennessee State University. He is a licensed Professional Engineer (PE), a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and a certified speaking professional (CSP). To learn more about SEBA[®] visit www.SebaSolutions.com. You can contact James directly at jtbrown@sebasolutions.com.