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Raise your Decision-Making Tempo

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Most management decisions—particularly at senior levels-- are made on timespans measured in days, weeks, and even months. However, there are many management environments where the normal day-to-day cadence of management decisions is much faster. Think newsrooms, airline operations centers, customer service centers, and hospitals. In these environments, it is not uncommon for highly consequential decisions, involving many people's input, to be made in minutes.

One of the tougher problems that teams can face is when they need to shift their fundamental management cadence. We're at the advent of a new set of enterprise collaboration and productivity tools designed to foster greater agility, but for many organizations, the difference between being making good decisions in minutes-hours-days versus days-weeks-months isn't technology or data, it's about some very basic management practices and mindsets.

"Everybody start doing things faster!"

Although most teams don't have to accelerate to the pace of some of the environments above, even a small change in well-established expectations and routines can be challenging. If all you do is yell "everybody start doing things faster", you're apt to just create chaos. If you just implement a new tool, you'll likely import most of your current norms around communication, roles, and accountability. What follows are a few suggestions about how to begin to shift to a new management tempo. They take some practice and diligence, but after even a few weeks they can start to become normative.

Getting to Rapid Tempo Management

1. Communicate that the pace is changing, why the pace needs to change, and give people a strong mental model for what a faster decision-making environment would be like.
2. End vague communications.
3. Tighten up meetings.
4. Start to recalibrate how deadlines are set.
5. Define the appropriate routing, roles, decision-making process, and end-products for common management situations.
6. Ensure you're available to your team and vice-versa.
7. Make sure information that's foundational to the team's work is located in easy-to-access places.

1. Communicate that the pace is changing, why the pace needs to change, and give people a strong mental model for what a faster decision-making environment would be like.

When organizations successfully change pace, there's usually been a real story and reason behind the need for change. Many teams believe they're operating at the fastest clip that's possible or advisable given the nature of their work. Talking about some specific examples of organizations that successfully operate at a fast cadence and do complex, consequential work will help bolster confidence that change is possible.

2. End vague communications.

Vague communications can drag down performance like nothing else, and often transcend whatever technologies your team uses to collaborate and communicate. When you pass along a "to do" to someone in your team, do you take the few extra minutes to clarify what outcome you'd like? To set a deadline? To be explicit about where this item fits in the priority stack?

The difference between an e-mail that reads "Jane, can you take a look at the e-mail below and see what we can do about it?" versus an e-mail that reads "Jane, can you take a quick pause in presentation you're building this morning, meet with Susan to understand the implications of what they're asking for, and send me your thoughts by 4pm?" can make an enormous difference in how quickly and efficiently Jane handles the ball.

3. Tighten up meetings.

Become a stickler about how meetings are run, and you won't have to do it forever. In relatively short order, you'll be able to lighten up as better behaviors become the norm. Ensure meetings are related to a clear, specific decision. Call out lack of preparation, and call out when individuals do an excellent job preparing for and running a meeting. Require the right people be present, and ensure that action items are summarized, that each action item has an owner and a deadline. Make 15 and 30 minute meetings the norm.

4. Start to recalibrate how deadlines are set.

Management decisions often require a series of steps (e.g., some data gathering, consultation with specific colleagues, etc.) that in total constitute a couple hours of work. However, many teams default to a week or two-week deadline for any assignment, regardless of the amount of work that's actually required. Initially, your team may be surprised if you start setting deadlines of a day or two, but as long as you're realistic about it, you'll start to recalibrate that instinct to pad in large amounts of unnecessary time.

5. Define the appropriate routing, roles, decision-making process, and end-products for common management situations.

Rapid-tempo organizations tend to have well-defined standard operating procedures. But not having a thick binder of SOPs doesn't mean you can't raise the tempo. Often, when I'm called in to help an organization, they're already under so much pressure to raise management tempo that the last thing they can do is stop the presses to create a raft of new procedures.

Fortunately, you can usually get the lion's share of the benefit of well-defined SOPs with just a 1-2 well-facilitated meetings to better clarify "the basics" in terms of how common types of management issues should be routed, the roles people should and shouldn't play, how a decision will be made, and what constitutes a solution.

6. Ensure you're available to your team and vice-versa.

In rapid-tempo organizations, people make themselves easy-to-reach. An "open door" policy is great, but going even further and starting the practice of roaming and doing informal checkins even for 10 minutes each morning and afternoon can have a tremendous impact and is practical even for the heavily-calendared executive. Also, take one of your next team's meetings and set some new standards for intra-team communication.

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Most organizations have few if any established norms for responsiveness for basic modes of communication (like e-mail), and even fewer for more advanced workplace collaboration tools. You can raise your collective management tempo only to the degree that you can rely on each other's availability and responsiveness. Define a specific expectation for how and how quickly you'll mutually respond communications received across the various channels you use (both during and outside the workday). Most collaboration tools have a variety of ways to flag or categorize communications, but most teams don't bother to define consistent ways to use them. Even with plain vanilla e-mail, you can set a number of useful ground rules within your teams that will enable your team to collaborate better and with more predictable timing. For example, you might set ground rules that general e-mails get read in 24 hours, e-mails with the recipient's name in the subject line get a response by end-of-day, and anything with "Urgent" gets a response in 3 hours and can't be copied to more than one person. Whatever ground rules you set, make them specific and stick to them.

7. Make sure information that's foundational to the team's work is located in easy-to-access places.

Rapid-tempo organizations are often big users of visual management systems. Putting information in easy-to-access places sounds obvious, but I'm amazed how many organizations struggle to effectively share basic, up-to-date management information—like the current list of projects the team is working on, who is assigned to what projects, or upcoming deadlines. Take one of your upcoming team meetings and re-clarify your most critical common, need-to-know information, who maintains it, and where it's located.



Raising the decision-making tempo of your organization doesn't happen overnight, but you can usually achieve significant gains by addressing mindsets and committing to (or recommitting to) some basic practices.



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Tim helps executives and Boards of corporations and public institutions including Fortune 100 companies, universities, governments, private equity firms, not-for-profits, and successful early-stage companies to create strategies and build operational capabilities. He has worked in a wide range of industries including airlines, business services, electronics, consumer products, and manufacturing.

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