Why Bosses Should Tell Employees to Slow Down More Often; Every company wants to do things as quickly as possible. But there are times when you ought to hit the brakes.

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FULL TEXT

Faster, faster, faster.

What manager hasn't heard—and repeated—that mantra? What employee hasn't heard that the goal is to move quickly and maybe even break things, that companies saddled with rules and red tape are bound to be lapped by more-nimble competitors?

In this hypercompetitive world, the prize, we're often told, goes to the fastest. You snooze, you lose.

Well, not so fast.

Don't get us wrong: We certainly understand the high price that companies pay when leaders gum up the works; we've researched it for years, with the goal of helping leaders identify and remove obstacles that stall progress and infuriate employees and customers. It's a major theme of our book, "The Friction Project: How Smart Leaders Make the Right Things Easier and the Wrong Things Harder."

Yet in the course of our research, we also learned that the opposite lesson is just as important: The best bosses don't strive to build entirely frictionless organizations. Instead, they know when and how to help their charges to slow down. In effect, they know what every race-car driver knows: If you want to win, tapping the brakes at the right times is as important as pushing the pedal to the metal.

Hitting the brakes gives employees time to identify big and small issues that undermine the mission, and to figure out where to focus their efforts. We all know the feeling of rushing into fix something before we even know what's going on. And we know what happens: We not only don't fix anything, but we make the problem worse.

The trick, of course, is to know when to tap (or slam on) the brakes and when to step on the gas. To that end, our research has uncovered eight occasions when smart bosses urge people to slow down. These are times when it makes sense to encourage employees (and ourselves) to pause to think and develop a deeper understanding, which enables us to make better decisions, and do better—and often faster—work later. It can even allow us to take a few moments to enjoy the good things in life.

1. Making irreversible big decisions

Jeff Bezos, Amazon.com's founder and former CEO, says leaders should ask themselves whether decisions are "one way" or "two way" doors. As he wrote to Amazon shareholders in 2015, one-way doors are "consequential and irreversible or nearly irreversible"—things where "if you walk through and don't like what you see on the other side, you can't get back to where you were before." These one-way decisions "must be made methodically, carefully, slowly, with great deliberation and consultation," Bezos wrote.

In contrast, two-way doors require less consideration because "they are changeable, reversible," allowing you to "reopen the door and go back through."

Bezos argued that big companies that apply cumbersome decision processes to two-way doors are doomed to invent less because they move too slowly. And small companies that use less-rigorous decision processes for one-way doors risk becoming "extinct before they get large."

For a recent, vivid illustration of the dangers of racing through a one-way door, consider the fiasco at OpenAI where the board voted, rashly and with poor preparation, to fire CEO Sam Altman. The board fired Altman without consulting Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, even though Microsoft owns 49% of the company.

Speed wasn't a friend of the board, which clearly didn't do its homework. Directors apparently didn't grasp how much power Microsoft's leaders or OpenAI's employees wielded. Within five days, Altman was reinstated as OpenAI's CEO and all but one of the board members had resigned. In contrast to the board's expectations, firing Altman resulted in irreversible damage to them, but was a two-way door for their (briefly) deposed CEO.

2. Solving complicated problems

Many business leaders and academic researchers believe that smarter people make faster decisions. Indeed, some research backs that up. But a 2023 study by Petra Ritter and her colleagues at Charité-University Medicine Berlin and Berlin Institute of Health suggests past studies hadn't considered a wide enough range of tasks.

The Charité study explored data from the Human Connectome Project where participants were given a series of increasingly difficult pattern-matching tasks. The data included the speed with which participants solved problems as well as their brain images. The researchers found that people with higher scores in general intelligence and deep-thinking ability did solve easy tasks faster. But they also found that these people solved difficult problems more slowly—and, significantly, with greater accuracy. The reason for the greater accuracy, they discovered, was that the longer decision times prevented them from prematurely leaping to flawed conclusions.

This study provides a nice analogy for how smart leaders tackle complicated problems. Take the effort led by Civilla , a small nonprofit in Detroit that is dedicated to improving government services. CEO and co-founder Michael Brennan was dismayed by the long benefits form completed by about 2.5 million Michigan residents each year who applied for financial support, food and health insurance from the state. It ran 42 pages and asked 1,000 questions—many of them unnecessary, such as for the date their child was conceived.

"We all understood that implementing a quick solution into a complex organization can often lead to well-placed intentions stumbling, failing, and often costing more," Brennan says.

Civilla's team knew that simplifying that form would require many steps and deep thinking. The team conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with residents, civil servants and government leaders about revamping the form. They tested six prototypes of the new form to get to the final solution. They then engaged 500 community leaders and other stakeholders—walking them through an immersive exhibit over an eight-week period—before implementation to ensure collective readiness.

In the end, the form was 80% shorter. Thanks to the go-slow approach, Civilla massively reduced the bureaucratic burden on 2.5 million residents. The new form also reduced processing time for field staffers by 42%.

"While all of that took more time," Brennan says, "it ensured that everyone could see their own fingerprints on the solution and could stand behind the effort."

Sometimes a boss has to slow things down to keep employees from doing things that slow things down even more.
PHOTO: Miriam Martincic

3. Doing creative work

Skilled leaders know that "efficient creativity" can sometimes be an oxymoron. Yes, they encourage people to generate many new ideas quickly, and to test ideas rather than argue endlessly about their value.

But there is no quick and easy path to creativity. Teresa Amabile, a psychologist and professor at Harvard Business School who has studied creativity for more than 40 years, argues that if you want to kill creativity , insist that people spend as little time as possible on every task and have as few failures as possible. People do poor creative work when forced to be fast, efficient and avoid mistakes, she says.

Ed Catmull, who was president of Pixar for its first 32 years, has seen that firsthand. Under his leadership, Pixar produced a parade of hit movies including "Toy Story" and "The Incredibles" and their sequels. Catmull says that if Pixar had emphasized speed and efficiency during these years, it wouldn't have been nearly as successful. As he told us: "The goal isn't efficiency, it is to make something good, or even great. We iterate seven to nine times, with friction in the process."

4. Encouraging ethical actions

Convincing people to slow down and fix things—rather than move fast and break things—reduces the odds they will engage in unethical acts.

That's what research by London Business School's Dana Kanze and her colleagues found. By examining corporate mission statements, they were able to compare managers who were urged to rush ahead versus managers encouraged to slow down and evaluate actions. They tracked Equal Employment Opportunity Commission violations over 10 years by 559 U.S. franchises.

Their conclusion: When participants "read a mission statement that emphasized urgent action over thoughtful consideration," it nearly quadrupled their odds of committing unethical acts, such as age discrimination.

5. Mitigating biases and stereotypes

Jennifer Eberhardt, a professor at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, has documented how pausing to answer questions can stem racist stereotypes and behavior.

Eberhardt's team worked with Nextdoor, a community social-networking service with about 85 million users that enables neighbors to share information, give and get help, and connect with local residents and businesses.

Unfortunately, when a Black person was spotted in predominantly white neighborhoods, users sometimes assumed they were up to no good, even in the absence of suspicious behavior.

Nextdoor reached out to Eberhardt, who advised that by adding friction, Nextdoor could reduce racial profiling. Nextdoor redesigned its app so that before users could report a person, they had to answer questions including, "What was this person doing that made him suspicious?" Nextdoor provided a definition of racial profiling, and urged users, "If you see something suspicious, say something specific." After such friction was injected to slow Nextdoor users, their racial profiling dropped by 75%.

Since then, Nextdoor says it has introduced several other products—including a feature that detects potentially racist content, and prompts neighbors to reconsider and edit before posting.

6. Reducing destructive friction

Sometimes you have to slow things down to keep employees from doing things that slow things down even more. The way to do that is to make people pause, think and jump through annoying hoops before they can heap additional burdens on others.

Paul Leonardi, a professor of technology management at UC Santa Barbara, says that in many workplaces, managers and IT staffers can use their corporate credit cards to buy any moderately priced software tool they fancy—forcing colleagues (and customers) to use an ever-expanding list of tools.

In one company Leonardi worked with, the chief technology officer was dismayed to discover that more than 50 tools were used—including many for the same tasks. He also learned that the company was paying for multiple subscriptions to several tools (including four Slack subscriptions) when they only needed to buy one.

The chief technology officer imposed some good friction: Any time an employee bought a new software app or renewed an existing one on the company card, the purchaser first had to provide a written explanation for why the tool was needed. Then the chief technology officer had to approve the request. Leonardi says that within about a year, the number of software tools used by the company dropped from over 50 to about 20.

A little bureaucratic hassle saved a lot of redundancy, and a lot of money.

7. Connecting with customers

For many customer-facing employees, speed is a two-edged sword: They want to handle as many customers as possible, but speed isn't always compatible with a great customer experience.

The best leaders recognize that inherent conflict, and they know when it's smart to slow things down for the customers. That's what leaders at the Jumbo supermarket chain in the Netherlands did. They learned that many older customers enjoyed their conversations with cashiers, and some found such encounters were too brief. And, with more Dutch stores using self-service counters where customers scan their purchases, grocery shopping can entail no interaction with clerks at all.

As part of the Dutch government's "One Against Loneliness Campaign" for seniors, Jumbo experimented with a

"chatter checkout" lane for customers at one store. These are for customers who aren't in a rush and want a longer conversation with a friendly cashier. This experiment was so successful that Jumbo stores had "slow lanes" operating in about 200 stores by the end of 2023.

8. Enjoying the good things in life

Sometimes, asking your employees to slow down isn't just good for the company and the bottom line. It's also good for them.

Fred Bryant, a professor of psychology at Loyola University Chicago, has studied "savoring" for decades. His work shows that slowing down to extend, enjoy and "swish around" positive experiences in your mind is linked to better relationships, mental and physical health, and creative problem-solving.

Leaders can promote savoring in their teams by having them make what Gretchen Rubin, author of "The Happiness Project," calls a "ta-da list." Instead of writing a to-do list, leaders can suggest they pause and list their accomplishments—tasks they completed, people they helped and inspired, and ways the team is exceeding expectations.

Then leaders can ask the employees to take a few minutes to bask in their accomplishments. They will feel proud and energized to tackle the challenges ahead. And they'll just feel good.

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