Speed

By Robert T. Whipple MBA CPLP

Tom Peters produced a video tape, years ago, entitled *Speed is Life*.[5] It focused on the speed revolution that took place in the late 80s and 90s and is continuing still. Tom recognized that time is the variable that separates the winners from losers in business, just as in a sailboat race. Trying to do projects in unprecedented time can also turn on a team and produce excellent results. Most organizations have invented bureaucratic processes to "protect" them from making blunders. This protection often leads to glacial processes that reduce organizational competitiveness.

The next time you have a team that believes they are working at peak efficiency and speed, take a look at how a pit crew at a professional automobile race operates. The members of the crew are successful because they have an integrated and supportive environment of trust. They work to shave hundredths of a second off their time by studying images of their movements. They celebrate the success as a team but each member recognizes his own contribution to the effort. Here are a couple stories from my own experience to illustrate the potential for incredible speed within a team environment.

On September 19th, 1988, I was called into a corporate vice president's office for a command performance. He said, "Bob, we have a lot of faith in your abilities, and we want to put you to the test. We have a product (it was a new kind of floppy disk drive with 10 times the capacity of competing models at the time) that has been languishing in the project phase. Here is the challenge: we want you to take over the project team and get the drives out on the market. Sounds simple, right? Here's the catch. The current team has been working for the past two years trying to get the system to work. There is a problem with it that is unknown. We need to have the drives on the market by the end of this year. That gives you 13 weeks to not only fix the problem, but do the full battery of reliability testing on the product." I accepted the position.

Reliability testing takes four weeks minimum since the drives need to perform a certain number of cycles before you can sell them. That means we had only nine weeks to fix the problems. Compounding the problem was that the drives were made in Upstate New York, the special floppy disks were made in San Diego, and the heads (the most critical component) were made in Singapore.

I decided to invest the first two days with the new team in a conference room trying to figure out why the drives did not work and establish a project timeline that would meet the goal. The team wanted to redesign the drive and start over. That seemed impossible with the timeline until we discussed it in depth. Trying to put Band-Aids® on the current set of issues is what the team had been doing for two years without success. They figured that by taking what they had learned already and the current tooling, they could come up with a configuration that worked in just a couple weeks. I decided to let them try this zero-based approach, since the current one was not working.

It became apparent that the head would need a redesign that was rather complex. We called Singapore and discussed the head design. They said they could have a new design for us in six weeks with the first prototype parts available in three more months. I told them we would have a technical team on a plane the next day. By the time out team got to Singapore, the design needed to be completed, and they had to be ready to make parts immediately. The team returned the following week with parts in hand and a steady stream of parts delivered behind the prototypes. The urgency was conveyed by having the team get on a plane "tomorrow."

We ran into numerous problems in manufacturing other parts to the new specifications. Luckily for me, we had a big Russian bear of a guy named Ivan as the manufacturing engineer. Any time someone would give a time estimate for parts redesign of 2-3 months he would bellow something like. "No, you don't understand. I will be back in *three hours*, and I need to have the design done and ready to make."

In early November, we ran into a compatibility problem between the drives and the media. Late one afternoon we got on a conference call to San Diego and I was hearing a lot of "we – they" language. The media people thought it was a drive problem and the drive people thought it was a media problem. I told the media group we would get the team on a plane in the morning and be there by the following noon. By getting both groups together, we had a resolution to the problem by 4 p.m. If we had not gotten together physically, the name calling and spinning our wheels would have gone on for months. The reason was that both groups were using their energy trying to show that it was the other group's fault rather than trying to solve the problem. When they got together, all the political problems were set aside and they quickly resolved the issue.

I could go on with other stories of how we cut months of time into hours, but you get the idea. We started testing the drives just after Thanksgiving and tested through the holidays. Each day the equipment needed to be reset and data recorded. I remember going into work on Christmas morning to reset the drives. One of our Engineers was trying to get into the plant, but everything was locked, so he climbed over the 8-foot fence in order to get *into* work (He got in trouble with security, but I loved his spirit.)

On New Year's Eve while the rest of the company was having lunch parties, a small group of us were packing boxes at the plant. It was the first shipment of accredited and functional drives. We had made the deadline, exhausted, but exhilarated. I'll never forget that project. It was the most fun I have ever had.

The next story about speed was associated with the Olympics. On a Tuesday morning in 1992, one of the product planners got a call from a customer in Albertville, France. The 1992 Winter Olympics was starting to wind down and this customer from Sports Illustrated had a strange request. He noticed that there were colored Olympic rings embedded in the ice of the figure skating venue. His idea was to climb up into the rafters and take images looking directly down on the skaters in the Woman's Singles Finals on Saturday night with the rings in the background. He needed some special equipment in a format we did not sell. The accelerated cycle time to get a new product like that to the market was 9-12 months in order to develop the process, get the hardware approved, establish the specs, create the packaging, etc. The problem was that we had to ship the product on Friday morning to be sure it would get to Albertville on time. That meant we had to get everything done in 2 ½ days rather than a year. Talk about a scramble!

The team assigned the task of getting this product out had a blast breaking all kinds of rules in order to make the impossible deadline. In the end, the customer had what he needed, and the next issue of Sports illustrated had an image of Kristie Yamaguchi winning the Gold Medal while she was literally flying over the Olympic rings embedded in the ice.

The Business Unit was so thrilled that they presented the Department with a framed copy of the image signed by Kristie Yamaguchi. When the business unit came to the factory to deliver a personally signed copy of the image, it was an electric moment for the workers. That framed picture hung in a place of honor to remind the team that the impossible is really possible if the will is there. It is truly amazing what a turned-on team of workers can accomplish.

During the time of challenge and afterward, you never saw a more excited and proud bunch of people. They were truly loving it. An impossible mission is a great way to get a team turned on, but I also have seen examples where an impossible mission turns people off. It is all in how leaders handle the situation. Here are eight tips for success when trying to get a team to achieve an impossible goal:

1. Make the goal totally audacious. It should be way beyond a reasonable extension of what has been done before. If it seems impossible, you have a good goal.
2. Listen to the ideas of people and catch their imagination.
3. Stay out of the way and let people make the miracle happen. They need to break the mold. Let them do it!

4. Reinforce the progress along the way. Let the reinforcement be as audacious as the project itself.
5. Be willing to accept risk. There will be some failures. That is the nature of greatness. Embrace the failures, learn from them, and quickly move on to a success.
6. Enhance the spirit of teamwork and fully support the team. They get the tools they need, promptly.
7. Provide cover for the group. They will be driving the bureaucrats crazy by seeming to break every rule in the book. That is exactly what you want them to do. Tell the bureaucrats to take a sedative.
8. Celebrate the win.

Using time wisely in any organization is a prerequisite for excellence. In culture of trust where candor is reinforced, people are free to challenge the improper use of time.

The preceding information was adapted from the book, ***The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals,*** *by Robert Whipple. It is available on* www.leadergrow.com.

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The TRUST Ambassador