

Brief

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Strategic speed: mobilise people, accelerate execution by Davis, Frechette & Boswell – a book about putting people at the heart of ‘speed to value’ delivery

Speed – not about technology or re-engineering, but about mobilising people

This book from Harvard Business Press takes a more rounded view of how to achieve speed to execution than many others. The authors describe the first generation of speed (1980s - 90s) as being about technology, systems and process re-engineering. This book, they say, is about the second generation of speed - when people and teams need to be at the heart of any approach to accelerating execution.

Not speed for its own sake – ‘speed to value’ as the new definition and measure for business

Davis, Frechette and Boswell say that speed, for its own sake, can lead to thoughtless speed, speed without quality, or speed that does not deliver value. The authors define 'strategic speed' as how fast an initiative or new strategy adds value, not just how fast it is executed. They call this "speed to value" and have definitions and tools to measure it. The authors propose that the key metrics are 'Time to Value' and 'Value over Time'. Speeding up should not mean getting from A to B fast. Instead, it means shortening the time it takes for people and initiatives to add value to the enterprise.

Time to value is the time it takes for people or initiatives to climb above the line or point at which they start contributing net value to the system rather than being a net cost or hindrance.

Value over time is the value created as they stay above the line.

The book is a good combination of being:

- evidence-based - thanks to a survey of 343 leaders
- experience-based - with a wide range of case examples
- practical - with some clear tools and frameworks.

The three key factors in organisational speed

The book describes the most important 'people' factors in accelerating speed as:

- **Clarity:** Shared, clear understanding of your situation and direction. The research shows that in faster companies effective leaders spend less time clarifying strategic direction on their own – in the confines of the board room with their team - and more time doing it with their employees - who are closer to the market and have more collective knowledge.

In many organisations there is too much noise in the system - too many initiatives which distract attention. To maintain clarity, leaders need to focus the organisation on a few issues at a time. As one CEO put, his role was to "lower the water in the system so that everyone can see the rocks underneath".

- **Unity:** Wholehearted agreement on the merits of the company's direction and the need to work together to move ahead. In faster companies the key to unity is a number of things: the leadership team being visibly unified; the sharing of both successes and problems across the organisation; and creating a common experience across the organisation.
- **Agility:** Willingness to turn and adapt quickly while keeping strategic goals in mind. But agility is only valuable if built on clarity and unity. Otherwise it can be simply pragmatic, directionless and short-term. The research shows that it has a lot in common with perseverance – which, as the authors point out, is not how most people might see it. Success is built on dogged determination to reach the end point and agility around the route.

Clarity, unity and agility then become the framework for planning and managing the approach described in the book.

The strategic speedometer

The research suggests that there are nine factors most associated with strategic speed:

Clarity

1. People have a shared understanding of the business strategy at a detailed level.
2. Organisations focus their efforts on a few critical priorities.
3. Strategy has been translated into concrete and achievable goals and behaviours.

Unity

4. The company has commitment at all levels to the success of its strategy.
5. Strategic initiatives are staffed with capable and dedicated team members.
6. A spirit of teamwork and cross-boundary collaboration is evident throughout the organisation.

Agility

7. People stay open and flexible in the way that goals are met.
8. People maintain a bias for action while making course corrections as needed.
9. People capture and communicate what they learn from initiatives and projects.

Four failings to reduce speed

The book makes the point that strategic speed requires all three of clarity, unity and agility working together. Strength in one or two of these will not lead to success.

The research shows four typical failings:

- **Not my Problem:** *High Clarity, Low Unity, Average Agility:* In this sort of organisation, people are clear about what the strategy is but less clear about how to execute it
- **Everything to Everyone:** *Low Clarity, Low Unity, Average-to-High Agility:* This type of company has a glorious new strategy. There's only one problem: nobody is doing anything about it. Business goals get plenty of lip service but there is little focus or accountability.
- **Myopia Utopia:** *Low Clarity, Average-to-High Unity, Low Agility:* In this type of organisation, there is a heavy reliance on "strong results today" that overlooks the strong behaviours and values necessary for the sustained health of the business.
- **Boiled Frogs:** *High Clarity, High Unity, Low Agility:* How many companies can you name that, after years of success, drop out of the competition - either to fade away or to re-emerge after painful restructuring?

The leadership role in increasing speed to value

Leaders play a central role in increasing speed. The authors describe four essential practices:

- **Affirming strategies:** Clearly articulating the strategy, creating energy and alignment and ensuring widespread understanding so that everyone knows the part they can play.
- **Driving initiatives:** Defining objectives and roles for delivery, resourcing delivery teams with the best people and ensuring that those who lead initiatives keep their hands on the steering wheel.

- **Managing climate:** Creating the conditions for open dialogue, productive collaboration across teams, full ownership and accountability and confidence to pursue new goals.
- **Cultivating experience:** Allowing time to reflect on progress, learn from experience, make adjustments quickly as problems emerge and contribute to each other's learning.

The authors make a key feature of the last point about 'cultivating experience'. Experience is only helpful to strategic speed if it is cultivated. They use the metaphor of green energy - solar, wind, and hydro power. Green energy is everywhere: all around us the sun is shining, the wind is blowing, water is flowing. The question is: are you going to cultivate it, and use it to your advantage. Across the organisation employees and teams are experiencing useful and relevant things. Are they being captured and shared? Other authors often describe this as becoming a learning organisation. As they quote Mark Twain: "A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way". It's better to try something out and learn than to think about it for too long and never be ready.

Strategic speed requires a deliberate practice of actively learning from experience, creating feedback and sharing the experience. Leaders need to encourage people to put unfinished and imperfect ideas forward so that they can be built upon by others.

The book uses research which shows that nearly all failed or slow initiatives happen because the organisation moves to full roll-out without going through phases of educating, communicating, piloting and learning first.

The Stonecourt view. The book is not perfect. It is too focused on the American experience (despite an afterthought on national cultural differences). There are too many tools and lists. It seems to take a quite linear approach on progress, performance and outcome - if you do the right things in the right order, then success will follow. In particular it overlooks the importance of effective business metrics and of providing tracking mechanisms to keep on track.

Overall however, the book contains important and very worthwhile reminders of the organisational practices that support effective speed to execution.

It is most valuable in defining a single strong concept: that of "*speed to value*".