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Haste Makes Waste

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“The only reason for time is so that everything doesn’t happen at once.”

- Albert Einstein

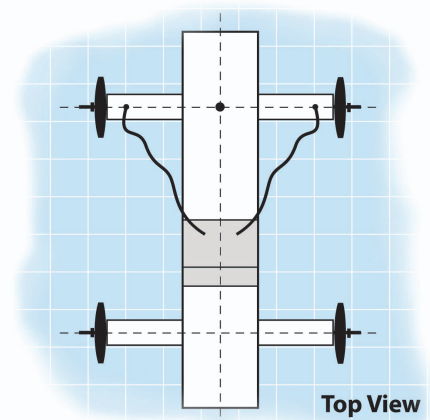
When I was a little boy, go-karts were all the rage in my neighborhood, and many of the kids had great-looking karts that their dads had noticeably spent a bunch of time constructing. Obviously, I, too, wanted a kart that I could push around and ride down the hill near our house. The road on the hill was paved with a tar and pea-sized gravel surface (I guess roads are no longer covered this way for environmental reasons).

When I asked my dad to help me build a kart, he proceeded to take one large board, slap a couple of smaller boards to the bottom of it in order to hold the axles and wheels (the front board was able to pivot), and place a rope on both ends of the front board to be used for steering (see diagram to the right).

Needless to say, my dad wasn’t too worried about visual aesthetics and was far more concerned about getting me started with my “new ride” (ironically, if he built this for me today it would probably look like a Formula One Indy Car made of wood). However, there was one major flaw in my dad’s rapid design; he used completely threaded steel axles that extended a few inches beyond each end of the smaller boards with large threaded nuts to hold on the wheels. It seemed like a good idea at the time and an easy way to attach the wheels. However, each time I took the kart to the top of the hill and proceeded to let gravity do its job, the spinning wheels would gradually unscrew the nuts from the axles and one or more of the wheels would come off while the kart was in motion. You can picture the rest.

My dad is one of the smartest people I know, and an exceptional craftsman when it comes to building furniture and doing many other hands-on projects. Granted, the kart construction occurred about 40 years ago before he had fully developed his skills, but this isn’t a story about skill. It’s a story about haste and not completely thinking through the long-term outcomes of very short-term actions.

Throughout my entire childhood, my mom used the phrase “Haste makes waste!” to emphasize what would happen if I rushed something or was more concerned about hurrying through tasks rather than doing them correctly. Her intention was to get my brother, sister, and me to slow down, take our time, and do our best job on whatever we were doing at the time.



Thinking back on this now, I realize how almost comical our lives have become today as we try to cram as much activity as possible into a finite amount of time. We justify this busyness as “multitasking,” and the result is a life filled with added undue stress, a growing lack of long-term focus, and a resulting decrease in long-term effectiveness. I regularly see people working frantically each day, performing tons of tasks and activities, expending a bunch of energy, and yet seeming to accomplish very little of significance before becoming frustrated.

Take-Out Culture

People are so busy being busy that we have about created a total “take-out” existence. Our expectation is to do ever more while achieving instant response and gratification. With changes in technology, delivery systems, and social norms, our take-out culture now allows for:

- automatic teller machines and real time, online banking
- pay-at-the-pump gas
- instant credit approvals for purchases (that you may or may not be able to afford)
- pills to rapidly fix a host of physical or psychological problems
- fast food with drive-up windows or rapid delivery
- even more drive-up windows in pharmacies, dry cleaners, liquor stores, banks, coffee shops, bakeries, and grocery stores
- same-day and overnight delivery services
- e-mail, voicemail, text messaging, tweeting, and the cell phones that facilitate it all
- social media sites and blogging from your sofa
- online and downloadable movies, music, television, and virtually all other forms of entertainment without leaving your house (or sofa)
- expedited checkout and ordering through barcode scanning
- web-based education
- 10-minute oil changes
- virtual reality
- schemes for rapid weight loss, getting rich quick, and fast exercise routines
- instant bill pay
- complete microwavable meals made in seconds
- 8-minute speed dating events and online dating services

...and the list of life-accelerating examples goes on and on. With the growing rate of “now” in our lives, one thing is becoming increasingly clear: we now live in a society where flexibility, immediacy, and instant gratification have become the norms in life. So much so, that I’ve come to think of the youth of today as the “generation of instant”, or iGen (to steal from Apple).

Notice those around you. Many people today seem to have very little patience, complain when they don’t have enough time to do everything, have shorter attention spans and a lack of focus, and expect change or things to happen faster. As a result, these same people don’t seem as willing to allow initiatives to play out until the end, don’t seem as willing to make decisions that may require considerable time to accomplish, and don’t seem as willing to focus long enough to complete a goal. It’s almost as if our entire society suffers from some form of collective attention deficit disorder. At the very least, as my mother would say, it’s haste making waste.

Having taught undergraduate and graduate college courses and holding a variety of leadership positions for over twenty years, I’ve witnessed a growing discontent and frustration by people concerning the lack of time

they have to complete tasks. Almost daily, I hear people complain about not having enough time to do everything. But I can't help but think, "Don't we all have the same amount of time...24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 52 weeks per year?"

Since time moves the same for everyone, then what it really comes down to are choices, priorities, and vacuums. People ultimately choose what they will do, prioritize the order in which they will do it, and often allow vacuums to distract them from staying on course. (A personal vacuum occurs when one's thought process becomes overly focused on a specific situation or event. See my article, "*Attack of the Killer Kirby*"¹)

Personally, I'm no different than anyone else. My life sometimes seems to have blurred together without real distinctions between work, home and play. I get frustrated by flight delays, Internet delays, slow computers, slow drivers, slow customer service, and pretty much anything else that either delays or slows me down. However, one area where I have made considerable progress is in the area of decision-making. Because of many poor past decisions, I have now become very aware of my time and more proactive with how I use it.

In order to be effective in the long-term, I have had to get control of my short-term **DAILY** activity. I now force myself to stop and ask, "Why am I doing this (or that) and what purpose does it serve? I have learned to:

- become very conscious of how I use my time as it is very precious and not unlimited;
- become very conscious of vacuums¹ and how they, more than anything else, can continually pull me away from that I truly want to achieve;
- minimize all of the extraneous "stuff" in my life and especially those activities which don't help me reach my ultimate goals;
- work at a slower, more thoughtful pace which actually makes me more effective, and
- focus on one thing at a time to minimize the multitasking

All of these decisions have helped to improve the quality of my work.

Impact on Leadership

Our take-out, instant gratification culture has also complicated the role of leaders. Leadership is all about decision-making, and one of the biggest decisions that leaders face is long-term success versus short-term gain. As more leaders are now being evaluated on shorter-term outcomes, the temptation is to make decisions that reflect greater short-term gains regardless of how those decisions may or may not affect the long-term.

In other words, to steal a phrase I once heard from a friend and college basketball coach, "You're only as good as your last season." Since people have less patience, leaders are being asked to show rapid, short-term gains that once took much longer to accomplish. Whether you're a coach, politician, CEO, president, sales manager or a church pastor, a growing pressure exists to exceed short-term expectations, unrealistic or otherwise, in whatever manner possible. The result is often rapid success or positive outcomes, followed by a downturn of some manner in the years beyond.

For example, in 1997, Jim Leyland, a very talented baseball coach, was hired by owner Wayne Huizenga to coach the Florida Marlins, a team that was only into its fifth year of existence. With a number of very talented players ("purchased" for a total of \$89 million), Leyland was able to coach the Marlins to the World Series and the expansion franchise's first championship. Immediately following that great season, Huizenga claimed he was losing millions of dollars and immediately began to dismantle the team in what became known as the "great fire sale." As a result, Leyland had a terrible 1998 season and resigned soon thereafter.² This example

illustrates that with enough short-term effort or investment, great short-term outcomes can be achieved. However, without a solid basis or foundation built on a strategic focus, sustaining positive outcomes is difficult, if not impossible.

When Haste Doesn't Make Waste

Up to this point, I have primarily focused on effectiveness in long-term decision-making. However, the aspect of efficiency is also just as important, and there are times when taking a short cut or accelerating a process can actually yield long-term positive results. While effectiveness can be viewed as “making right decisions,” efficiency would then be viewed as “minimizing the amount of required resources.”

Like the phrase that Nike coined in 1988, sometimes the best strategy is to “Just Do It” – just jump in and get the job done because that is what needs to happen. Yet many leaders will delay making decisions because of the risk associated with uncertainty. As long as this short-term process has been thought through in the context of a long-term strategy (and this is key), decision-making can yield a greater level of efficiency by using less time, money, and other valuable resources. Leaders are able to accelerate the process of accomplishing desired long-term goals and objectives through more rapid, yet effective, short-term decision-making.

When a child is taught how to ride a bicycle, she usually gets a bike with a set of training wheels to support the bike during the learning process, or at the very least, the child is placed on the bike while a parent runs along the side. Over time, the parent will gradually inch up the training wheels until the point where the child is no longer using them. This is typically followed by a grand ceremony of taking off the training wheels in front of the child as if she had just “graduated.”

For whatever reason, my dad decided that an expedited, more direct approach would be better. On that same freshly-tarred hill where I rode my go-kart, my dad took me to the top, placed me on the bike, and let me go. Of course, I didn't stay on it very long and fell. Dad just picked me up, brushed off the gravel, placed me back on the bike, and let me go again. We repeated this process until I was riding on my own. Needless to say, I caught on quickly. I either had to learn how to ride or endure the pain of falling and being “tar and graveled.”

I'm not sure how much time my dad spent thinking through this “teaching moment” (which some people today might find somewhat harsh), but his actions had a huge impact on how I approach and deal with goals, tasks and obstacles. Instead of slowly and incrementally approaching them, I have a tendency to more quickly size-up a situation, make a decision, and jump on the bike (so to speak). But unlike speed for the sake of speed, he taught me that the most efficient path to success sometimes can be the quickest, but also the hardest because it requires determination and a willingness to endure short-term pain for long-term gain.

Change is seldom easy. To facilitate it, leaders should identify and empower those who are willing to jump in and try, and then work through these people to accomplish desired goals and objectives. This will actually serve to improve and motivate those around them (as well as raise the level of expectation for everyone).

Of course, I've made mistakes and poor choices, just like everyone else. However, I have come to realize that this one simple teaching moment actually had less to do with learning to ride a bike and far more to do with providing me a greater lesson, as I now possess the tools and drive to be more proactive and determined to succeed at whatever I'm doing.

So whether intentional or not, thanks for the lesson, Dad. And thanks for the go-kart too. A simple kart, even one with a flawed design, was much better than having no kart at all.

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²Marantz, Steve (2002). *History of the World Series – 1997*. Retrieved February 16, 2010, from Sporting News website: <http://www.sportingnews.com/archives/worldseries/1997.html>