

A person wearing a dark suit is holding a black leather briefcase. The briefcase is rectangular with a flap and a handle. The person's hand is visible gripping the handle. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

***FASTER  
FASTER...  
AND BETTER***



## Ken Hudson reckons you can make snap decisions that are as good as they are fast. Quick ... read it now!

**T**HE LAUNCH of the Apple iPhone not only represents a new way of communicating with each other but a potential window to an entire new philosophy that anyone working in business will need to grasp – welcome to the world of faster and better.

To win in today's marketplace, not only do managers, leaders and small business owners have to produce a better product, but it must be done at a faster pace than ever before. Speed-to-market must be coupled with high quality. We have to let go of the notion that somehow doing things quickly has to come at the cost of quality. This is similar to an earlier belief that either you had to create a mass-produced product at a lower price or create a product that was individually designed at a higher price. But no-one told the consumer as they demanded big brands that were tailored to individual needs at a reasonable price – enter the era of mass customisation.

My proposition is that we all have to abandon this idea of a trade-off between time taken and quality. To borrow a concept from Collins and Porras<sup>1</sup>, we need to embrace the genius of the 'and' not 'or'. And I will take this thought further – in everyday situations, thinking and doing things quicker can lead to an increase in quality. A big claim, I know, but I will show you how and why this might be the case.

But first here are a number of varied examples to support this proposition.

- In a ground-breaking article<sup>2</sup> by Emily Pronin and Daniel Wegner, two academics from Princeton and Harvard respectively, found that the simple process of thinking faster can have a positive impact on mood and lead to enhanced feelings of power, creativity, energy and self-esteem.

- In a novel set of experiments<sup>3</sup>, researcher Sian Beilock (et al), demonstrated that expert golfers (ie a handicap less than 8) were better at putting when they were placed under time restrictions. In other words, the less time they spent thinking about their stroke the better the results were.
- Dr Max Sutherland, author of the book *Advertising and the Mind of the Consumer*, has suggested<sup>4</sup> that, all other things being equal, the more we recognise something and the more familiar we get with it, the more we tend to like it. This finding suggests the possibility that fast-cut ads, almost independent of content, can impact mood and likability of advertisements.
- In another fascinating example from the corporate field, Stanford Professor Kathleen Eisenhardt found, in her research<sup>5</sup>, that the greater the speed of the strategic decision process, the greater the performance (of the business) in high-velocity environments. The reason, she says, is that slower decision making meant that opportunities were missed in the marketplace and that it was difficult to catch up. Another reason was that faster decision making led to more action which led paradoxically to more mistakes, hence the leaders were learning more. Leaders that followed a slower decision making path did not learn as much both individually and collectively.
- Now let's move to the Small Explorer Project at NASA. The group there has accumulated nearly a decade of experience building missions with the underlying philosophy "Faster, Better, Cheaper". Together, this project has accumulated 14.6 years of in-orbit experience without a spacecraft mission failure<sup>6</sup>.
- In a more grounded example, consider the case of the fruit juice maker Nudie. After a fire burned down its factory, the management

team had to regroup and try to stay afloat. Despite this pressure the marketing manager, Sally Draycott, recalls "There was no time to really doubt if a marketing campaign would work, you just had to go on your gut instinct. It allowed us to be more creative with our marketing."

- We also know from years of research that the process of waiting for people to have their turn in brainstorming-type sessions slows down the workshop and leads to a loss of productivity. Faster sessions, where everyone can contribute simultaneously (eg via their own terminal), can enhance the originality and number of ideas. These are just some practical examples supporting the proposition that faster can (in fact, must) co-exist with better. But it will require a different way of thinking. One that does not involve trade-offs or compromises.

I have called this new approach 'speed thinking'. As the name implies, this new type of thinking covers any time you deliberately try to increase the pace at which you are thinking. It is a skill that anyone can learn regardless of age, role or education. It should be noted that speed thinking complements rather than replaces traditional approaches – much like a balanced work-out in a gym contains stretching, regular cardio work, perhaps weights and then some high intensity sprints. In this analogy speed thinking is the sprinting component – it strengthens and extends your work out but it is used selectively otherwise you burn out.

My insight for speed thinking emerged when I was working with business people and I noticed that in an effort to get through more work I gave them less and less time. Paradoxically this seemed to have no impact on the quality of their output. In many cases the originality of their work



improved and they certainly felt more energised. I wondered what was the logical extension of this concept? I kept asking myself, just how long do you need to solve a problem?

In a leap of imagination, one day I gave the group two minutes (the lowest time I could imagine) on an everyday problem and, to add an extra wrinkle, I asked them to come up with nine possibilities. After some shuffling of the feet, the group had a go and something magical happened. An amazing array of novel thoughts, ideas, insights and energy emerged. A common response was "Where did that come from?" My love affair with this new way of thinking had begun.

As an example, some warm-up questions from my workshop are: In the next two minutes write down as quickly as you can, what are nine good things that you have done this year? Or what are nine things that make you smile? Or what are nine ways to surprise your boss? Or what are nine ways a customer can say thank you.

One way of conceptualising speed thinking is that it operates at the edge of our unconscious. This idea is borrowed from complexity theory which suggests that creativity emerges at the edge of chaos. In a similar vein, imagine the following two ends of a continuum:

Conscious	Unconscious
Rules eg logic	Complete freedom
Structured	Unstructured
Bound by precedent	Bound by imagination
Sense of control	Random
Fear of evaluation	Deepest emotions
Rational decision-making	Intuition

Since Freud, we have known that a large part of our mind exists below the surface so to speak. It might even be the most important part. As Timothy Wilson explains, "The mind operates most efficiently by relegating a good deal of high-level, sophisticated thinking to the unconscious, just as a modern jumbo jet airliner is able to fly on automatic pilot with little or no input from the human conscious pilot. The adaptive unconscious does an excellent job of fixing up the world, warning people of danger, setting goals and initiating action in a sophisticated and efficient manner."<sup>7</sup>

My experience suggests that speed thinking operates at a dynamic space between the mind's conscious and unconscious state. That is why people can react so quickly and often surprise themselves with their insights, decisions and actions to everyday challenges. When people use speed thinking they momentarily give up control and are right in the moment. It can feel slightly uncomfortable because it relies on the person trusting their unconscious and ignoring their often

critical self-talk or judgemental ways. At this edge of the unconscious, breakthroughs often emerge.

This begs the question what are some practical ways to improve your speed thinking abilities? A number of my most effective suggestions are given below:

### Enjoy yourself

Speed thinking is fun, exciting, slightly uncomfortable and the way you feel can change from moment to moment. It is a paradox but while the end goal can be serious the process is not. Speed thinking, through its time limitation, means that you have to let go of your usual logical thinking approach and allow your unconscious mind to flourish.

### Start anywhere

Because you are not using logic you can start anywhere. The important point is just to start. Write down the first thing that comes into your head. It might be silly or from left-field but that is exactly the point. You have started the journey of unlocking your own unique, inner creative spirit. Once you have made a start, just keep building on this and follow your initial thought and see where it takes you.

### Don't filter

The whole point of speed thinking is to create a situation where you do not filter, judge or evaluate your ideas or the ideas of anyone else. Most people simply do not have the time to do this but old habits die hard. If you find yourself thinking too much, just suspend this feeling and capture the raw thought. Your silly idea might just be the springboard to a better idea for someone else.

### Capture your emotions

Another useful practice to improve your speed thinking skills is to capture your emotions. If the challenge drives you crazy, capture this feeling. If it makes you sad, lonely or angry for example, then these feelings should also be recorded and are equally valid. Anyone who works in business is usually constrained by unofficial norms which suggest that you need to be rational and logical at all times. But without emotion you cannot

make decisions nor have energy to do move projects forward. Speed thinking is a great way to articulate how you are feeling in a safe space.

### Think big

With speed thinking, if the idea is a big idea or a politically sensitive idea or an incremental idea it does not matter. Each one of these all count for one response as you try and reach the goal of nine in the allocated two minutes. Therefore you have a window of opportunity to think big. If a thought pops into your head that you should close down a division or enter an entirely new market or change jobs, then write it down. This is your time to be bold. It is the entire range and originality of all the ideas that is important.

### Write quickly

Speed thinking is not an English exam. There is no right or wrong responses nor do you lose marks for spelling or grammar. In fact, it is in your best interests to abbreviate your ideas or use a single word to capture a new thought or insight. Use an image if you prefer – a quick drawing of a flower, for example, or a sad face might convey more than a paragraph.

### Practice

Speed thinking is a skill that can be learned and with some practice you can improve. Set yourself a goal and try and beat it. The important point is to practice and within a short period you will be able to think more quickly and produce more.

My proposition in this article is that being faster does not have to be at the expense of quality. This is a legacy from a past age. Successful people today have to be able to think and act in the traditional way when the occasion demands but also be able to shift gears up into a higher tempo way of thinking if the situation calls for this. In a time-poor world the ability to change the way and the pace of thinking can be a distinct advantage in your career, business and life. ★

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