



## The Dark Side of Speed

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**Author's note:** Keep your head up and eyes open as you drive for speed.

On January 28, 1986, the horrendous explosion of the space shuttle Challenger illustrates what happens when speed is decoupled from value and common sense. Pressed to perform, NASA and Morton Thiokol employees who knew the O-ring problem misplaced schedule and publicity priorities over the core purpose of manned space flight.

Without vigilance, the push for fast value creation and delivery can erode into an almost addictive state of constant but mindless action. Everyone and everything is super critical and the workplace hums with activity but there's little traction and forward progress. People don't take the time to discriminate what they work on or the methods they use. They simply do everything they're already doing only "harder". The physics speak for themselves: double your speed, and you'll minimally double your output of errors as well as successes. More likely, your errors will rise and success fall. People burn out, often injuring others as they do so.

Another danger is rampant incrementalism or de-featuring. The push for speed drives us to reach for that which is close and familiar. We don't have time to rethink, stretch or be creative. With the pressure on, the game shifts to delivering the next increment and pumping it up with spin rather than providing serious additional value. Shortly before leaving his role as second in command at BMW to head Ford's Luxury Auto Group, Wolfgang Reitzle told executives at Stanford University that his greatest concern was that the pressure for speed at BMW was significantly reducing the amount of creative design. Later that year, BMW delayed the introduction of their new 7-series after the launch of fresh competition from Mercedes. In comparison, they realized it didn't offer enough new value.

Executives well-intentioned desire for speed can create perverse behaviors. In the effort to get more done faster, some leaders add more to the plate assuming that the pressure will spur people to move faster. In fact the reverse takes place. Just as putting too many cars on a freeway causes traffic jams, putting more on the firms plate saps speed, it doesn't add it. Priorities shift just as rapidly as those with road rage change lanes during rush hour. More importantly, accidents happen and there's little slack to address these problems.

Avoiding the dark side of speed requires clarity and constant messaging backed up by behavior. Begin by never separating the drive for speed from the requirement for value. The message is always how fast are we creating value, satisfying customers and learning how to move both to a new level. Recognize that pressure on people can give you a short term burst but sustained speed comes from re-thinking key priorities and methods of value creation. Sports teams operate at practice to game ratios of greater than 20:1 because they know that individual effort will only take them so far. Last, every now and then, stop, step back and take some time to reflect. Help others do the same. Physiologically we get into mental and physical rhythms that, while productive, can quickly become mechanical. You can't dream in motion.