

Breaking Free from the Acceleration Trap

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Featured Guest: Heike Bruch, professor of leadership at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland and coauthor of the *HBR* article *The Acceleration Trap*.

11:44

SARAH GREEN: Welcome to the HBR IdeaCast. From Harvard Business Review, I'm Sarah Green. I'm talking today with Heike Bruch, a professor of leadership at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, and co-author of the April HBR article, "The Acceleration Trap." Heike, thanks for talking with us today.

HEIKE BRUCH: Thanks a lot, Sarah.

SARAH GREEN: So what is the acceleration trap, and how did this phenomenon first come to your attention?

HEIKE BRUCH: The acceleration trap describes the risk of companies to do too much at the same time, or to drive their organization constantly to their limits, to an extent that they start to develop burnout. Burnout not of individuals, but burnout of the entire organization.

SARAH GREEN: So can you give us, maybe, an example of one of the companies you studied where you saw this happening?

HEIKE BRUCH: First I would like to explain that there are three kinds of overacceleration. One type of overacceleration is the so-called overloading. That describes the phenomenon that companies do too much with their capacities. And we saw that happening in companies that were confronted with exceptional growth, it's wonderful, positive phenomena in the first step. But it can start to stretch the organization if it is too much and the company doesn't manage to adjust the capacities.

The second type of overacceleration is multi-loading. And that describes the phenomenon that companies do too many different things at the same time. And priorities are unclear, or they lack focus.

And the last type of overacceleration is what we call perpetual loading, and that addresses the risk that companies constantly go to their limits or beyond their limits, and lack regeneration phases.

SARAH GREEN: So how pervasive of a problem do you think this is in organizations globally?

HEIKE BRUCH: We did one intensive study last year. In 92 companies, we found that every second organization is concerned by the acceleration trap, or is trapped. And we also found that the acceleration trap has significant consequences on the organization in terms of the feeling of the people, people suffer in those organizations. You find significantly raised turnover intention, or a degree of aggression, negative energy, emotional exhaustion in those companies, compared to the companies that are not trapped. And you find significantly impaired performance, or reduced performance.

In terms of financial performance, growth, return investment, efficiency, you'll find that companies that are in the acceleration trap have significantly lower performance than the others that are not trapped.

SARAH GREEN: So they may be accelerating and growing for a while in a healthy way, but then ultimately when the organization burns out it affects their bottom line.

HEIKE BRUCH: Yes. Burnout is an issue, quality becomes an issue, customer relationships become an issue, and those problems that emerge in those areas ultimately lead to reduced growth. Despite so many activities and so many different activities and constant activity, this company, in the end, is less productive in growth. Not as much as the companies that do focus and that manage to concentrate on the right things, and allow that regeneration phase following the motto, slow down to speed up.

SARAH GREEN: Well, let's talk a little bit about how to break free of the trap while still maintaining high performance. What are some things that managers or executives should be doing, if they think this is happening in their company, to combat it?

HEIKE BRUCH: There are some activities that managers can take or executives can take to overcome the acceleration trap once they are confronted with the phenomenon. And the overall idea is here to stop activity. To have the courage in order to take time to identify activities that are less important, less urgent, and projects that are less promising, and stop them. Stop the action activities.

We have seen that in companies where, for example, with a rebirth idea management system, many companies do have an idea management system, where people are asked to submit their ideas what the company can initiate or that can start doing.

And we've seen companies that have used the exact same system, but they ask the opposite question. Instead of asking what can we start doing, they ask what can we stop doing. And we accompanied these processes in several companies.

In one pharmaceutical company, for example, you could observe a flood of ideas. It was as if people had collected ideas for years already, but were never asked. And now they were asked this question of what can we stop, and they had so many activities. The company could stop 40% of their projects because people felt they are not promising or they're not as important as others. They prevent us from the most important things.

SARAH GREEN: Well, and it can take some courage to look at your projects and say, OK, we're going to kill off 40% of these projects. Because that involves, of course, killing off projects that may be important to some people and potentially stepping on some toes.

HEIKE BRUCH: Yeah, it involves courage, but it also requires a certainty regarding your goals and a sense of priority. So if you don't have a shared, strong sense of priority you will do everything and at the same time not be successful in anything.

SARAH GREEN: So what one of the other challenges that you mentioned earlier, one of the things you can do to overcome, is instituting periods of regeneration. That sounds like it's really important, but potentially also something that would take some managerial courage, to say, OK, we're going to actually slow down. I'm going to tell you guys to maybe be less efficient for a while. How does that actually improve performance?

HEIKE BRUCH: It's not about telling people to be less efficient. Of course, that is also not what you meant. We have found different forms of allowing regeneration.

One example, Sonova, they are world market leader in the hearing aid industry. And they are enormously innovative. More than 60% of their revenue is derived from products that have been launched during the last two years, so it's enormously innovative, this company. And that is partly due to commitment that is shared in this company that they will launch a new product innovation every year in April and November.

And if you see what happens before those deadlines, before those important milestones, you think people give everything. They are so energized, they're ready to go to their limits, beyond their limits, ready to sacrifice everything in order to achieve this deadline. But they do this only because they know that afterwards they can slow down a little bit.

And slowing down a little bit doesn't mean to go down to zero, but to work at a different pace and let loose. Also to celebrate, or to say thank you to people. To go on holiday, to work at a different mode for a while in order to speed up later again.

That is one forum. And that is, of course, their comprehensive approach here. But you can also think of small activities. Like Bill Gates goes on a so-called think week every year in spring and in fall, where he goes in his cottage, he's disconnected from his email and telephone. And he uses that time to think, to reflect, in order to then, again, speak afterwards. And just recently Microsoft has decided that other managers should follow the same time and use this week every year in spring and in fall to really reflect.

We work with one company that has transformed the entire culture that's guilty of this and have created, we call it a pit stop culture. A culture where regularly managers and their teams go into cultural camp and reflect. One of those cultural camps is called pit stop, and here managers and their teams, and all teams in the entire company take time to reflect. Is the direction right? How do we collaborate? And then they use the word pit stop from the formula one, following that conviction that the race is not won on the street, it is won in the pit stop. Again, slow down to speed up.

SARAH GREEN: How did Lufthansa bring an end to their decade of near constant change?

HEIKE BRUCH: Lufthansa had a very long tradition of cost saving. And they had different strategic programs. After turnaround, their different strategic programs focused on different forms on cost saving. And they used this instrument with this cost focus several times, again, which, in the end, felt like an enormous pressure. This idea of the lemon that is empty no matter how strongly you want to squeeze it. That was the feeling here.

And partly that comes from this constant change, but partly that also derives from a kind of monotony, because it is cost and cost and cost again, which feels heavy after a certain time.

They escaped not by removing the cost focus, but by adding a different one. More playful focus, mainly focused on innovation, which then allows people to develop a completely different kind of creativity and fascination. They got more responsibility, more initiative, and that helped them escape this constant cost saving.

SARAH GREEN: Heike, thanks so much for talking with us today.

HEIKE BRUCH: Thanks a lot Sarah, it was great talking to you.

SARAH GREEN: That was Heike Bruch of the University of St. Gallen. The article is “The Acceleration Trap,” and it appears in the April 2010 issue of the magazine. For more, go to hbr.org or find us on Twitter @HarvardBiz.

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