BY ADRIAN SAVAGE

SLOW LEADERSHIP:
CREATING CIVILIZED ORGANIZATIONS

Imagine that you're driving along the freeway in heavy traffic and bad weather. Your hands are gripping the wheel fiercely and you're concentrating as hard as you can simply on staying on the road. Because you're late for an appointment, you know that you're driving a little too fast for the conditions—maybe at 60 mph when you should be doing 40. You wish you could slow down, but everyone else seems to be in a hurry too. Now it's getting dark.

Then a huge truck, an eighteen-wheeler, comes up behind you, driving really fast. The driver starts flashing the headlights and blaring the horn for you to go faster. You put on a little extra speed, but your car feels unstable on the wet road. The truck presses close on the rear of your car, still flashing those lights. All you can see in the mirror is the truck's radiator, inches from the back of your vehicle. Every time you speed up even a little that truck is right there pushing you still faster. There's no let up. You increase speed to 65 mph, then 70. The vehicles around you are disappearing in spray, and the rain is coming down harder than ever. Now you're doing 80 mph and the truck is still close behind, pushing you faster.

How do you feel?

That's how many people experience every day at work. They're being pushed to go faster and faster, until they know that they have no margin of safety left. They used to be confident at 50 mph, only now the pace of work is rising towards 80, and shows no sign of ever slowing down again. Once an organization gets the idea that making everyone work faster, driving people to their limits and beyond, will push up productivity and profits, there's no obvious limit. If they start by pushing everyone up to 75 mph, then 80 mph, why not go on to 100 mph or beyond? Few people have the skill, or inclination, to go at that speed. It's too scary.

But the boss, like the eighteen-wheeler in my scenario, is on your tail, forcing you to cut corners and take on yet more work. Someone is going to crash and burn very soon. Maybe that someone is you.

There is an alternative: an approach based on recognizing that good leadership takes time, thought, intelligence, attention, and wisdom. This approach rejects instant answers, outdated management dogma, and all the trappings of macho-style, oversimplistic, "grab-n-go" management. I call it Slow Leadership, and it is the subject matter of this manifesto.

Is the *Jingle in Your Pocket* Worth the *Jangle in Your Head?*

Why is there this mad obsession with the twin requirements of productivity: doing more work and cutting costs at the same time? Commercial organizations have always sought to increase returns and boost output. There is nothing new in that. So what has changed? Is there some new crisis that justifies such exceptional effort?

We have manufactured a belief that some unprecedented predicament is before us. The basic causes of today's epidemic of overwork come from nothing more than the overweening expectations of the financial markets.

There can be none coming from globalization, since much of that process is driven by organizations themselves seeking lower-cost labor overseas to increase profits still faster. Nor are today's massive global corporations facing unprecedented competitive pressures. Many have established a virtual stranglehold on their chosen market segments. New products are flowing smoothly into the market. Consumers are spending as freely as ever. New markets are opening as the consumer society spreads to developing countries such as China.

There is no crisis. We have manufactured a belief that some unprecedented predicament is before us. The basic causes of today's epidemic of overwork come from nothing more than the overweening expectations of the financial markets. We are so focused on increasing the jingle in our pockets that we ignore the increasing jangle of stress and confusion in our heads.

The capital investment necessary for business is almost wholly controlled by huge financial institutions such as global banks and investment houses, themselves businesses with shareholders trained to expect continually growing returns. Very little of those returns comes from dividends. Indeed, many businesses, especially in high-tech fields, pay no dividends at all. The high returns that Wall Street and its equivalents around the world crave are produced by rising stock prices and the buying and selling of stocks, derivatives, and even less comprehensible financial instruments. And whereas benefiting from dividends is a long-term activity, relying on a steady income stream, trading is an essentially short-term business. You take your profits as soon as you think a peak has been reached, and before the inevitable slide in prices follows.

Shareholders and managers have an uneasy relationship. Shareholders want as much return as possible, which means keeping salaries down. Managers want to take their own profit from the work they put into running the enterprise. I don't know who invented what must have seemed a sure-fire way to keep both sides happy, but I'm going to guess he or she was looking to earn a mint of money as a result. The solution was to base as much as possible of the incomes of those at the top of an organization on upward movements in the share price, whether by paying direct bonuses or awarding stock options. At one stroke, the interests of shareholders and managers were perfectly aligned. Pay top executives to drive up the share price, so shareholders can trade the shares at a greater profit.

Fluctuations in share prices are short-term phenomena, and most are driven by the profits reported on a quarterly or semi-annual cycle. The immediate result of our unknown genius's brainwave to link executive pay to share-price movement was to fix every executive's gaze on one place: the next quarter's profit figures. Falling profits now signal cuts in executive earnings (or, since employment negotiations tend to ignore the downside, at least a standstill), something no one views with ease. Worse still, in the tightly-knit world of boardroom members, "missing the numbers" represents a loss of face for all those involved. It must have seemed that the plan was working beautifully.

Then the law of unintended consequences kicked in. At least two consequences seem to have been missed. First, in the crazy logic of Wall Street, meeting your objectives is seen as no more than you are paid for. It may (sometimes) stop the share price from falling, or limit its decline, but it is no reason to drive it up. To do that you must exceed not only your own estimates, but also the expectations of a legion of analysts, whose thinking is based on who knows what calculations. And since this year's or this quarter's results are old hat the minute they are announced, whatever you do achieve must be exceeded again on the next cycle. It is an accelerating treadmill no one can get off.

The second unforeseen consequence of a myopic focus on quarterly numbers is simple: meeting or exceeding them becomes worth any sacrifice. A recent survey of more than 400 financial executives reported that 80 percent of the respondents said that they would decrease discretionary spending on such areas as research and development, advertising, maintenance, and hiring in order to meet short–term earnings targets; and more than 50 percent said they would delay new projects, even if it meant sacrifices in value creation. (*Mapping the Terrain*, Business Roundtable Institute for Corporate Ethics, 2004). The press release for the report summarized their findings like this:

> "The obsession with short–term results by investors, asset management firms, and corporate managers collectively leads to the unintended consequences of destroying long–term value, which decreases market efficiency, reduces investment returns, and impedes efforts to strengthen corporate governance."

Top executives don't find it easy to stay on the treadmill. CEOs nowadays last barely two years in office on average, even if some manage to leave with generous "golden parachutes." Most executives work harder than rich people have ever worked in the past. However, it takes more than their own efforts to keep ahead of the relentless demands from Wall Street for more productivity and higher profits: it takes forcing everyone else to work just as hard, or preferably even harder, than they do. And if people must continue to produce more at less cost, that means driving up output without increasing wages, salaries, and benefits to match. Longer hours, harder work, less time for anything else, more insecurity, smaller salary increases. Is that how we want to go on living?

Many of today's leaders are already overstretched and overburdened. Most are overly concerned with the demands of the financial markets and oppressed by the insistence of stockholders (read "financial institutions") on immediate gratification. The result is leadership that is based on short-term perspectives, habitual and automatic reactions, jangling emotions, snap judgments, and quick-fix solutions. When you are going flat out, you have few alternatives and no time to find any more.

It's time to call a halt. The essential first step in changing course must be a shift in attitude and viewpoint: in this case, a move away from the current obsession with short-term results and immediate returns towards a long-term understanding of what makes for organizational longevity and a worthwhile working life. Until this happens, the treadmill is only going to run faster.

The Brute Force Approach to Productivity

"Short-termism" is the natural response of anyone whose horizons are narrow and limited. The opportunist, the gambler, those out for all they can get, have never shown any interest in things that require waiting for a reward. All have an essentially short-sighted view of the future. Like nations at war prepared to resort to any sacrifice to ensure their survival, today's organizations believe they must continue to boost profits by all available means, however unpleasant the consequences. A brute force approach to productivity is all the rage today, because innovation, creativity, and fresh thinking are thought to be too slow and uncertain. Never mind that they are the only effective ways to increase productivity in the long term, it's the short-term that matters: to meet the target for the next quarterly figures and to hell with everything else.

The result is a workplace culture that's like driving flat-out on wet slippery roads with roaring traffic all around you. It's full of reluctant high-speed, high-anxiety drivers under constant pressure to go still faster, with every likelihood of accidents. There's no let up, because the prevailing organizational attitude is that if you can't stand the pace, you had better just get off the road and make way for someone else who can.

This brute force approach to increasing productivity is entrancingly simple:

→ Cut staff, ration resources, and force those who are left to work longer hours, with higher output, for the same amount of pay. Fire any who can't stand the pace.

→ Create an atmosphere of constant fear through layoffs and outsourcing. This will prevent employees from refusing to accept the new working conditions.

→ Cut benefits and replace fixed salaries with variable incentives. Rely on people's fear of unemployment to make this seem acceptable.

→ Create a continual state of competition, so that nobody ever feels safe and survival appears to depend on undermining your colleagues as well as always staying in front.

→ Focus only on the shortest of short-term objectives to keep up the pressure. As soon as an objective is achieved, "reward" the achiever with a new objective that is even more demanding.

→ Close your eyes to the casualty count. This is war. Generals cannot allow themselves to worry about those whom they sacrifice along the way.

→ If brute force hasn't yet worked, the reason is obvious: you aren't using enough!

Business in a civilized country cannot be based on making money regardless of anything else; that is the attitude of gangsters and mob bosses. The madness needs to stop.

Whenever and wherever the brute force approach to productivity is used, the outcome is the same. Corporations become obsessed with short–term goals and "meeting the numbers." People are sacrificed to build profit, while macho–style management becomes the norm. And any other viewpoint is dismissed as a sign of disloyalty and weakness. Dissent is the first casualty in any tyranny.

Brute force productivity is mechanistic, manipulative, obsessive and ultimately ineffective. Like all mindless uses of power, it produces short–term wins at the cost of long–term exhaustion and collapse. There is no surer way for any organization to ensure its future extinction than to throw itself headlong into a no–holds–barred contest for short–term advantage.

Thinking Through the Consequences

Many people have come to believe this way of working is inevitable; overwork, long hours, continual pressure, and sacrificing everything else to meet corporate goals is simply how working life has to be in the 21st century. But organizations are not machines that can constantly be driven faster without penalty. Leadership is not about forcing people to accept what no sane person can see as acceptable. Business in a civilized country cannot be based on making money regardless of anything else; that is the attitude of gangsters and mob bosses. The madness needs to stop.

Human beings are not designed to perform at the outer reaches of endurance on a continual basis. They need ups and downs, excitement and rest. Driving themselves—or being driven by others—to work flat out all the time leads to breakdown and collapse. Today's uncivilized workplace culture of constant pressure and overwork can only continue at the cost of rising health problems and increasing numbers of people facing a warped and debilitating existence. A workplace needs to meet certain standards to be judged civilized. Here are the minimum criteria:

→ It must operate in ways that ensure that everyone is treated with the dignity befitting a fellow human being.

→ It must recognize work as part of life, but not the whole of it. People who choose to set family and non-work commitments on a par with their work must not be penalized or treated as less valued for doing so.

→ It must be free from discrimination, bullying, unfair pressures, and any exploitation of the weak.

→ It must be a place where ethics are adhered to in deeds as well as words and honest dealings are the norm.

→ It must recognize and honor values that go beyond the obvious financial and economic ones.

→ It must be a place where people make choices on the basis of what is right—intellectually, ethically, and spiritually—not what is currently expedient.

Even so, there are some who take the attitude that they can handle it, that it is a mark of high potential to be able to function under pressures that would defeat any "ordinary" person. To that there can be only one response: you are free to run your own life according to whatever testosterone-fueled fantasies please you, but you are not free to force the same regimen onto those who have neither chosen that path nor stand to reap the same rewards. For while productivity, at least in the United States, is still proceeding upwards at a good pace, the rewards of that increase are far from evenly allocated. Those whose income depends mostly on capital (the bosses and investors) are getting massive increases while the rest mostly fail even to keep pace with inflation.

It's time to drop this callous, short-term, macho nonsense for the sake of everyone's sanity, health, and long-term success. There is no objective reason to accept today's stressful, brutalizing workplace culture, with its constant emphasis on meeting short-term expectations however unrealistic they may be. Neither national prosperity nor our own futures depend on such a way of living. Our woes are self-inflicted. We are all working flat out to enrich a tiny minority of people who are mostly too rich already ever to be able to spend their accumulated wealth during their lifetimes.

Changing Course

It's often the case that an essential first step in changing course comes from a change in attitude and viewpoint: in this case, away from an obsession with short–term results and immediate returns towards a long–term understanding of what makes for organizational longevity and a worthwhile working life. A good start would be to understand that an organization is not a machine to be run as hard as possible. An organization is alive and needs the care required by any living entity. It is a community of people, just like a village, a township, or a city. It has its own loyalties and ways of operating in the world. And if neighboring organizations, like neighboring cities, devote all their wealth to constant warfare with those around them, none will ever grow to the stage where civilization can flourish.

When you think about it carefully, an organization is also more than a grouping of people. It is an expression of a common purpose. Wise leaders know that if this sense of shared purpose breaks down, perhaps because it becomes obvious that the business is no longer run to benefit all, any organization will swiftly degenerate into a collection of warring groups, "us" versus "them," fighting over whatever goodies remain.

At the highest level, an organization is an assertion of meaning in a random world: a way of making sense of people's lives and providing them with a place to develop their skills and individuality. People dislike being treated as mere cogs in an organizational machine, not just because they find it demeaning, but because it robs their work and achievements of the meaning that makes them valuable.

Once people understand the complex importance of the organization in our way of life, they can also see that brutal, tyrannical, and manipulative macho leadership is no leadership at all.

Far from being a bundle of mechanistic skills to be picked up on any MBA program, leadership is first and foremost an assertion of character, based on expressing deeply–felt values and attitudes. A leader is who and what you are, not what you do. Anyone can copy the actions of successful leaders, but it will not make him or her into any kind of leader, let alone one that others will respect and follow.

One of the hallmarks of today's conventional management thinking is how dogmatic much of it has become. When people believe that they already know all the answers, what need is there to question further, or even review, what they believe they already know? It is this dogmatic belief in conventional business principles that has fueled much of the aggressive, narrow–minded thinking among today's leaders. Where someone with a more open cast of mind sees fresh questions to be explored and new principles to be considered, the conventional leader sees only known tasks to be completed as quickly and cheaply as possible. For one of the most fiercely–held dogmas of conventional leaders is an unquestioning belief in the primacy of profit, whether it is over people, principles, or the passion that makes work worth doing.

Finding an Alternative

Stressed and fearful people will sacrifice much to survive. The greater their feelings of pressure and anxiety, the more they are willing to set aside. Creativity is an early casualty, since any kind of creative thinking takes time and is ruined by anxiety and stress. Next goes patience. When no one has enough time, to be patient becomes an unattainable luxury. Yet events unfold at their own pace, regardless of our huffing and puffing, and the true nature of a problem or opportunity is usually apparent only to those with the patience to wait until reality becomes clear before leaping into action.

Many other important leadership attributes cannot survive for long in an environment of haste, fear, and cut-throat competition. There's no time to learn or reflect, so people rely on rules of thumb and quick fixes to get them through, endlessly repeating the same mistakes until some catastrophe forces them to take notice. There's no time to be open-minded or appreciate the first signs of new opportunity. Nor is there enough space for appreciation, respect, or support of colleagues. In the headlong rush to cope with overwhelming demands, just about everything that makes life worth living is jettisoned. You may earn good money, but the life you'll be earning along with all that cash is anything but good.

The style of management that most often results from all the pressure for speed and quick fixes is a predictable response to trying to do the impossible. I call it Hamburger Management, because it's like the menu in a typical fast-food outlet; simple, plain, repetitive, and based on whatever can be produced fastest and cheapest.

Despite the unhealthy ingredients, there's nothing too terrible about eating a hamburger once in a while. Most of us do, just as most mangers must resort to quick fixes and superficial ways of dealing with a problem in a true crisis. But there's nothing healthy about living on nothing but hamburgers. Nor are there any good outcomes for anyone who makes a normal practice of Hamburger Management. Trying to pretend it's acceptable, let alone treating it as haute cuisine, is plain dumb.

Slow Leadership

Slow Leadership offers an effective alternative for returning civilization and humanity to organizations. The need for slowing down has less to do with taking life easy, or getting out of the rat race, and much more to do with ensuring long-term survival. It is an essential requirement for leaders to think more clearly and make better choices, free from a constant obsession with meeting unrealistic, short-term expectations. Slow Leaders are slow only in making irrevocable decisions or jumping to conclusions based on nothing but a quick glance and a belief in looking busy at all times.

Slow Leadership is an attitude based on accepting that the most important characteristics of successful leadership are to be found within the leader, not in college courses or textbooks. It is "slow" because becoming such a leader takes time, and acting like one requires a long-tem perspective that is the antithesis of "grab-and-go" management. It also aspires to be more than a movement concerned only with improving work/life balance or workplace culture. We suggest that you slow down, but not simply to rest and renew your energy. You need more time to allow your innate powers of reasoning the relaxed atmosphere that they need to find solutions to the dilemmas that face you; and to question, again and again, whatever others tell you that you must accept on the basis of obedience to doctrine.

What distinguishes a leader is not skill or technique: it is character and values, with both firmly based on taking whatever time is needed to exercise freedom to think and seek out what is beneficial to all, not merely convenient for a few.

When Mrs. Thatcher (a lady not noted for flexibility of mind or belief) was Prime Minister of Great Britain, she was fond of saying: "There is no alternative." This was meant to end all debate in her favor. But there are always alternatives. If you believe there are none, it is either because you have not allowed yourself time to find them, or you do not like those you can see. Management and leadership are about the practical application of rational and ethical thought. There is no basis in either one for unchallengeable doctrine or dogma, just as there is no known ethical basis for dishonesty, fraud, discrimination, or greedy exploitation of others. What distinguishes a leader is not skill or technique: it is character and values, with both firmly based on taking whatever time is needed to exercise freedom to think and seek out what is beneficial to all, not merely convenient for a few.

Taking Action

Leaders need to slow down to be able to think, reflect, learn, and listen, yet there's no requirement to give up high levels of productivity. It's a myth that hard work, busy-ness, speed, and productivity are the same. Lots of people look tremendously busy, yet manage to accomplish little of real value. Slow Leaders are often more productive than others because they don't need to waste time repeating work to remove hasty mistakes or deal with missed issues. Besides, as your levels of stress and overwork increase, the quality of what you do will fall in direct proportion.

If simple rules for business success did exist, the sheer number of researchers, writers, journalists, academics, and managers studying the topic would surely have found them by now. It seems more probable that there are no such rules; and that business success, like any other kind, depends on causes that are neither constant from context to context, nor strong enough to outweigh the impact of random events.

Leadership is too demanding to rush, too complex to skimp, and certainly too important to neglect.

In such circumstances, the only rational course is to take whatever time you can make available to consider all the details of context, choices, and uncertainties. You may still be wrong—chance will see to that—but you will at least learn something during the process that might be useful even if you fail. Many successes have begun as failures, then been rescued by people who realized from studying the causes of that first failure what would lead to success next time.

Slow Leadership is not only about making work a better environment for everyone involved. It is also a severely practical way to improve the chances of business success in the long term. Either would be a sound reason for taking Slow Leadership seriously. Together, they suggest that any other course of action makes no rational sense.

What has arisen as a result of the prevailing superficial, hawkish attitudes is a leadership and management style based on the premise that the future can be forced to deliver on almost any promises, if only you drive everyone hard enough. People believe that sheer effort must succeed, despite all the contrary evidence. The result is leadership based on using willpower and brute force in place of innovation, cool judgment, wisdom, or rational thought.

Leadership is too demanding to rush, too complex to skimp, and certainly too important to neglect. The problems leaders must face are not solvable by quick fixes and simple, obvious answers. If they were, there would be no need for leaders; everything a leader needs to know could be written into a few brief and simple books. If few leaders have time to reflect carefully on the complexities of business choices—which is, after all, what they are paid to do—it's because they've helped create a leadership culture that fails to value thought and well-considered judgment over instant reactions.

Slow Leadership encourages people to slow down wherever doing so is rational, in the sense that it is reasoned, considered, and consistent with the reality of the situation. Taking time to reflect and consider is a precondition for a successful approach to leadership. If you don't know clearly where you are now and how you arrived there, you can't possibly judge which path is most likely to take you somewhere you would rather be.

Overwork, stress, domination through fear and manipulation, the exploitation of the many on behalf of a chosen few, are ethically and practically unacceptable. Reason and experience show us that they cause long-term harm to individuals and society at large. Living and working in an atmosphere of fear and threats produces alienation and hatred, with results that range from personal feuds and labor disputes, through social unrest, to terrorism. When a select few manipulate and exploit others for their own benefit, there can neither be freedom nor democracy. As many totalitarian societies have proved (and not a few authoritarian corporations as well), the result is a long slide into corruption and repression. The elect suppress those they exploit out of fear that their corrupt rule will be overthrown and their cozy lives ruined. The exploited come to hate their masters and so plot secret rebellion.

Do long-hours cultures and high-pressure workplaces exploit and demean the lives of those who work in them? Is it sensible to neglect all other obligations in favor of work schedules? Are there better ways of producing higher productivity that do not demand that people subordinate the whole of life to the pursuit of profit for others? Can we balance the need for profits to sustain a business with the need of its people for stimulation, personal development, and a sense of meaning and satisfaction in what they do? These are all ethical questions, and the answers are most likely to be found by slowing down and using reason to consider the consequences of our actions and to explore the alternatives.

The basis for civilized work is a sensibly-paced, reasoned, and ethical approach to business life. To set aside macho, brutalized, and dogmatic business beliefs is to set aside what must, in the end, destroy the very people and organizations who hold to them. Remember Enron.

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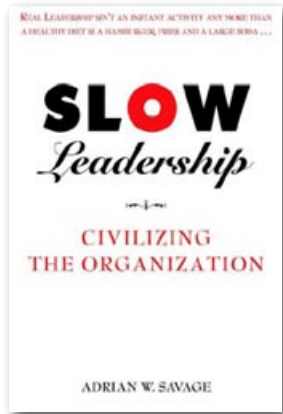
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For more details or to buy a copy of Adrian Savage's, *Slow Leadership: Civilizing the Organization* [click here](#).

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Adrian Savage is a writer, an Englishman, and a retired corporate executive—more or less in that order. He took a Master's degree at Cambridge, worked in a range of organizations ranging from central and local government to giant multi–nationals, taught in a British business school, founded two successful consulting companies, and ended his career as CEO of a corporation based in California. He now lives in Tucson, Arizona, where he enjoys the desert and its amazing wildlife—not to mention a very different climate from the land where he was born. His second book, *Slow Leadership: Civilizing the Organization,* is to be published in October 2006.

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