

## Leadership and the end of time<sup>1</sup>

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A consequence of the 'no time' ethos is the 'fast ethos'. There is no time, so you have to run fast, be agile, be first, etc. Society, and therefore business, is working on a 'time-space compression'. The American driven fast-food industry has known it for a long time. As it has been expressed, they have "*taught us to eat standing, walking, running and driving and above all never to finish a meal, all in favour of the endless snack*". Eating has been reduced to "*a purely instrumental, no-nonsense utilitarian activity which exemplifies a 're-fuelling ethos', rather than an intrinsic source of pleasure to be anticipated*". No wonder the 'Slow Food movement' became a truly international one!

The 'fast ethos' goes hand in hand with the 'ephemeral ethos' that takes for granted that things will not last. It is a common feature in fast-cycle businesses where products become obsolete quickly, but it has also been extrapolated to the ethos of the entire new, 21<sup>st</sup> century enterprise. We all have friends somewhere who have started their own company with the idea of selling it as soon as possible. Most of the ones I know, do not intend to stay with their own baby for long.

Venture capitalists and investors have long incorporated the 'exit' aspect as central to the deal. How to *exit* is as important as how to *enter*, and it is part of written business plans. I know of somebody who could not give me the name of his new company but had already thought out the 'exit'. He is a young guy for whom this is *the* normal way to set up business. He did not know of any other, and looked at me puzzled at my suggestion of creating something that could last 'forever'.

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<sup>1</sup> Initially posted on [www.theleaderwith7faces.com](http://www.theleaderwith7faces.com), January 2008

► *The end of time*

A quick Amazon.com search will tell you that there are 800+ book titles which start with 'The end of'. Affluence, man, distance, work, politics, nature, sanity, the future, ideology, capitalism are some of them. From those, there are more than twenty recent ones entitled *The end of Time*. This lot includes slow-digestion physics books sharing shelf space with more dubious 'time management books', which are an industry of its own. It's funny to see what lives on the same shelf!

This 'End of Everything' may just reflect the fact that things have changed at an unprecedented pace, producing quantum discontinuity. In this accelerated time, fast is good, slow is suicidal. The fanciest business magazine is called *Fast Company*. *Business Week*, referring to the new start-up companies, announced a few years ago that it takes on average 10 days from idea to business plan and launch. It used to be months. Today, perhaps it's an afternoon. Venture capitalists tell us that "*whilst it used to be that the big eat the small, now the fast eats the slow*". 'Speed' is considered the new revered capability, a crossroads for new corporate competencies that include 'surprise'.

This connection of *no-time/ephemeral organisation/run fast in the meantime* has profound implications on the reflection of your leadership style. Perhaps you have never stopped and reflected upon this (Oops! I see, you can't stop, you don't have time, hum!)

Here are two different views on speed:

John Chambers, President and CEO of Cisco Systems, Inc.:

*"Companies that are successful will have cultures that thrive on change, even though change makes most people very uncomfortable. In the end, you might just have speed, talent and branding. Those things may be the only differentiators"*

Note speed first in the list! Now meet Andy Grove, ex-CEO of Intel:

*"This business about speed has its limits. Brains don't speed up. The exchange of ideas does not really speed up, only the overhead that slowed down the exchange. When it comes down to the bulk of knowledge work, the 21st century works the same as the 20th century. You can reach people around the clock, but they won't think any better or any faster just because you've reached them faster. The give and take remains a limiting factor."*

What I find interesting about those quotations from public statements is that they come from two leader executives of hi-tech industries, certainly involved in ... making information flow faster, to say the least. They represent two legitimate views of the (business) world. What 'side' leaders take, matters because, as architects, the houses they build will be a reflection of their concepts of time and speed.

You can read more about this dimension (Time and Space) by choosing from this list:

- [It's time, stupid!](#)
- [Protecting time](#)
- [The 'always on' leader](#)
- [Leadership is creating spaces](#)
- [Social space](#)
- [Sitting quietly alone](#)
- [But I never heard the builders](#)
- [100K investment lost](#)
- [Intrapreneurs at the gates](#)

You can also read more about the other two dimensions by choosing from this list:

2. [Homes](#)
3. [Legacy](#)

If you want to read more about leadership or want to continue reading from the above, you can read it all in my book [\*The Leader with Seven Faces: finding your own ways to practice leadership in today's organization.\*](#)