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Dear Reader,

Our December issue has always been a special one for us. The end of the year inspires reflection and balance. What worked well? What have we learned? This time, the end of the year is facing us with a global crisis that is filled with uncertainty. The tremors of the economy are felt worldwide and in mostly every home. The white waters we are rafting through pose numerous small crises that demand immediate attention, creativity, sound judgment, and action. This is what made our issue very timely —featuring two stories about a process to solve a crisis.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

#### Quote of the Month

*"The measure of a country's greatness is its ability to retain compassion in times of crisis."*

Thurgood Marshall  
(1908 - 1993)



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## Deliberate Speed

by Ernie Turner<sup>[1]</sup>

The current financial crisis is impacting almost every country, organization, team, family and individual with painful effects — bankruptcy, foreclosure, cost cutting, re-structuring, and lay-offs. We often see that this frequently results in a financial and psychological depression. To survive and, hopefully, prosper, all of us must address these challenges as soon as possible. As we do, we face the paradox known as *deliberate speed*. Managing a crisis calls for immediate action with the hope of quick results. Yet best results come from a calm, reflective and deliberate process. This means that the emotional stress accompanying a crisis often inhibits reflection, creativity and

sound judgment.

All too often decisions are made without taking into account a number of important questions. Here are just a few:

- What got us here anyway?
- Have we been here before?
- If so, what did we learn or should we have learned?
- How have we contributed to this situation?
- What can we learn from others who have faced a similar situation?
- Who are the stakeholders whose voices we must hear?
- What assumptions are we making that we need to test?
- What are the conditions for turning this crisis around?
- What are our options?
- Which one makes most sense?

Since time is limited we often succumb to the temptation of making speedy decisions with an air of decisiveness to give the impression of thoughtfulness, believing that it's important to appear decisive in times of crisis. And thus, instead of taking a few minutes to identify all the questions we need to address like the list above, we jump into action mode — addressing symptoms instead of the causes, looking for quick fixes instead of cures, opting for band aids where surgery is required. Our focus is all too often on the short term at the expense of the mid and long term. As a consequence we run the risk of developing reputations of being *'never in doubt but not always right.'* And this is not the type of leadership families, teams, organizations and nations need in a crisis. Confidence is critical as long as it is based upon sound thinking.

### **Speed is Not Enough**

So what prevents us from taking some time to reflect (think) and listen to our common sense? Well, first of all 'common sense' is not that common. Secondly, we all have a number of other voices that drown out the weaker voice called common sense. Here's what those louder voices are yelling — 'Time is money.' 'We don't have the luxury of time to reflect.' 'People are expecting us to make a decision now.' 'The ship is sinking; this is not the time to arrange the deck chairs.' 'Speed is of the essence!'

Yes, **speed** frequently becomes our instinctive driver in times of crises often at the expense of reason.

What we often block out is what that quiet voice of common sense is saying — 'Haste makes waste.' 'A stitch in time saves nine.' 'A few moments of reflection can save years of regret.' 'We don't have to cry over spilt milk if we can avoid spilling it.'

Let's not forget that it is NOT an either or option we face. ***We can have both — speed and deliberation.*** We can make fast and good decisions with deliberate speed.

From time to time I and other LIM colleagues have been asked to help organizations or teams that are facing one challenge or another take decisions with deliberate speed. Here are two stories that illustrate this point.

### Story One

A few years ago the HR VP from a large multinational insurance company asked us if we could help them find a solution to a situation that had grown into a major crisis — their US organization was losing both revenues and market share simply because they were unable to keep up with the high turnover of their sales staff. In simple terms they could not hire and train new sales staff as fast as they were losing them. The company president put it bluntly — "We are slowly bleeding to death!"

We first formed a design team to plan for a 2-day workshop where a task force of key stakeholders was invited by the company president to analyze and solve this problem. Prior to the workshop we interviewed all those who were attending plus a number of current and former sales people. We also interviewed the managing director of the Japanese organization because we were told he did not have a sales turnover problem at all. We encouraged the president to invite this man to join the meeting.

At the beginning of the meeting we took some time to establish ground rules that emphasized the importance of honesty, speaking up, listening, learning, innovation, and challenging one another's assumptions. We emphasized that this was not a session to assign blame; it was a time to learn together and find a workable solution to the crisis. Throughout the workshop we used the ***Power Planning Process***, a simple yet systemic problem-solving tool, to guide our deliberations. (See the side bar for a brief description) By the end of the second day, the task force came up with a solution very similar to the strategy being used in Japan with some cultural adaptations for the US market. They also took with them an effective planning process and other problem-solving tools they could apply in similar circumstances. The big insight was — innovative solutions can come from within; thinking "out of the box" sometimes means looking inside the box!

As a result of this workshop, the company instituted an important change in selection criteria for their sales force. This led to significant change in retention of sales persons, and allowed the US business to regain market share and make their revenue targets.

#### Power Planning Process

**What is it?** This is a practical tool to help individuals or teams go through a problem-solving process. Originally, created by MDI, it has gone through major re-design by LIM.

**Why is it valuable?** It is systemic in nature with 10 focused steps; each step has a number of questions that allow individuals and teams to address critical aspects of the problem-solving process.

**How does it work?** A work-sheet with questions and suggested tools is available to support individuals or teams as they work through the 10-step process:

1. Select the right question as the place to begin.
2. Identify lessons from the past.
3. Surface all relevant assumptions.
4. Brainstorm potential solutions and selecting the best one.
5. Set targets.
6. Make a plan that fits the complexity of the problem.
7. Delegate responsibilities with requisite power and authority.
8. Deliver on the plan with adequate support and oversight.
9. Evaluate the progress and process on an ongoing basis.
10. Celebrate success all along the way.

**So what are some implications and applications?** Clearly it can be used for planning. We also use this as a framework for coaching teams.

Not only had the bleeding stopped; the underlying wounds had been addressed as well.

## Story Two

A couple of years ago I was asked by one of our client's regional HR VP to facilitate a meeting of a regional leadership team. A new leader had just been appointed. This new leader brought with him two colleagues; all three had just been 'head-hunted' from a competitor. Several other members of the team were new as well — mostly promotions from within the organization. So in essence, it was a completely new team and they all had similar questions as we discovered in the interview process prior to the meeting — Who is this new leader and who are his friends? What is his leadership style? What are his expectations of us, the team and the region? How is his vision different from what we had before? How will this affect our current culture? Is my job safe? To avoid disaster these questions needed to be addressed head on with the entire team together.

### Open Space

**What is it?** A very simple and effective way of engaging groups of 2 to 2,000 (or more) around questions of interest to them. The tool was created by Harrison Owen, a meeting planner, with modifications by LIM. The most significant modification is the use of the **Power Planning Process**, wherever it is appropriate.

**Why is it valuable?** It is one of the most effective techniques available that truly engages a group because it focuses entirely on their questions related to the overall topic — for example 'Making our Vision a Reality' as in the example here.

#### **How does it work?**

- a) After a brief introduction of the topic, establish some very simple ground rules.
- b) Then invite anyone who has a question related to the topic to write it down on paper.
- c) Depending upon the size of the group there are a variety of ways to group like questions; then let individuals self-select the question they want to work on.
- d) Then with the **Power Planning Process** worksheet in hand, send them off.
- e) Light facilitation may be required while the various sub-groups work on their questions.
- f) After some time bring the subgroups back together for an exchange that allows everyone to give his/her input to all the questions using post its.
- g) Depending upon time, these groups can go back with input from their peers to make refinements before a further exchange.
- h) Take decisions where possible if you have decision-makers in the room; ensure you have clear next steps.
- i) Extract insights from the process so that everyone is able to go back to his or her own part of the organization and apply the process.

#### **So what are some implications and applications?**

This meeting format can be adapted for regular team meetings, larger unit or functional meetings, conferences or family gatherings.

The agenda for this meeting was ambitious and crucial to it was the need to get buy-in to the new leader's regional vision and strategy. His vision would require a completely new way of thinking and acting from the leadership team and their direct reports. And his mandate for change was very clear as he had been appointed by the CEO.

The Design Team agreed that it was essential to allocate time at the beginning of the meeting for everyone to get to know one another better and establish some team norms before wrestling with the new vision and strategy. They recognized the need for speed with deliberation and realized that personal rapport and respect was key to changing the culture and getting buy-in on the strategy. Some team members, however, were anxious as they wanted to discuss the vision and strategy right away since there was so much to achieve and so little time. At the end of the meeting the new leader acknowledged to his team that had they not spent the time getting to know and trust one another they would not have made the progress they did in getting acceptance of the new vision and strategy.

After two days with the leadership team we brought the next layer of leadership into the meeting. Using a modified **Open Space** process, we were quickly able to get their questions and concerns related to the topic, *Making the New Vision and Strategy a Reality*, into the open, discussed and resolved. The side bar describes the process we used.

The lesson here was very clear — get the "people part" right, and the vision and strategy will follow.

For most teams it is counter-intuitive to spend time on "soft" interpersonal issues, when time is limited and critical decisions are urgently needed. However, important organizational decisions that are taken without attending to the personal issues later unravel for lack of real acceptance.

### Summing Up

Times of turmoil and crisis, like today, are marked by uncertainty; there are few certain formulas for success. The complexities of our interconnected world make it difficult to find easy solutions, and we need to think differently in order to discover different solutions. Yet time pressures and financial constraints put additional stress on the system. Organizations are asked to do more with less, faster, better and, ideally, without getting burnt out. This calls for creativity and innovative thinking to identify new opportunities and solutions while paying careful attention to the details and risks required for success. It also calls for employee engagement to ensure ownership so the decisions taken are actually implemented. It means we need to think faster and smarter.

From these examples and our experience working with clients in other critical times, we know that taking time to slow down, reflect and ensure that those who have a stake also have a voice is not a luxury; it is a necessity for success. After all, reflection is thinking and thinking is real work. And managing soft issues is hard and one of the most important responsibilities of a leader.

**Bottom line:** in times of crisis it is possible to take rationale decisions on business challenges quickly while attending to people issues by using *deliberate speed*.



#### LIM's Solving a Crisis Workshop:

A solution-driven workshop offering  
tools and processes for strategic success

If you'd like to learn more about managing a potential crisis  
or challenge or even better avoiding one, click here:

[Solving a Crisis Workshop](#)

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[1] Ernie Turner is President of LIM LLC and co-author of **Action Reflection Learning: solving real business problems by connecting learning with earning** (Davies Black; 2008).

If you want more triggers for reflection, visit <http://isabelrimanoczy.blogspot.com>



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