

## *Dan Coughlin's 23 Accelerator Actions*

The discipline of business acceleration is the field of study that examines how businesses generate sustainable, profitable growth. It includes your role as an individual employee, the role of the groups you work within, the role of the organization you work for, and the role of the end users who purchase your products and services.

These 23 Accelerator Actions are not sequenced in order of importance or by category. The goal is simply to stimulate your thinking on how to generate sustainable, profitable growth for your organization and accelerate your career.

### **Accelerator Action #1: Clarify Your Purpose**

Roy Spence, president of GSD&M, the national advertising agency for BMW, AT&T, Southwest Airlines, and Wal-Mart, taught me that an organization's purpose is a definitive statement about the difference it is trying to make. When you know the difference your organization is trying to make, it simplifies everything else. Your strategies, mission, tactics, and planned activities are either supporting your efforts in making the difference you want to make or they are not. Stay true to your purpose.

### **Accelerator Action #2: Use the Observation Tower**

There are ideas on how to accelerate your most important business results and your career all around you. Stay on the look out for them. Go up to successful people and ask them what makes them successful. These don't have to be movie stars or business giants. Observe people in action.

On a recent vacation to Mexico I watched in amazement as one of the employees masterfully interacted with guests during water aerobics, water volleyball, dancing, singing, and a host of other activities. He interacted with children, senior citizens, young adults, and with people from all over the world. What was his secret? He smiled and had fun. The more fun he had, the more people wanted to get involved. Look around you. What "secrets" can you garner from other people today?

### **Accelerator Action #3: Collaborate to Accelerate**

As you study highly successful organizations like Apple, GE, Disney, Marriott, McDonald's, and Toyota, you'll quickly notice that no one person creates and delivers value to customers all by himself or herself. All of the value that is created and delivered to customers at these great organizations is created and delivered through groups of people.

Collaboration is the highest form of acceleration. It's more effective than mere cooperation or competition. Collaboration means you put your ideas on the table, the other person puts her ideas on the table, and you work together to come up with even better ideas. Is it time consuming to collaborate? Yes. Is it hard work to collaborate? Yes. Is it painful to your ego to come up with your best ideas and have someone else look at them and make recommendations that are actually better than what you came up with? Yes. Will you generate better sustainable, profitable growth by collaborating? Yes, and that's why it's so important to collaborate.

#### **Accelerator Action #4: Operate at the Intersection of Acceleration**

The greatest impact you can make on improving sustainable, profitable growth is to apply your strengths and passions in a way that helps your customers achieve what they want to achieve while simultaneously helping your organization to achieve its desired goals. Rather than copying how your boss does things, take out a sheet of paper and answer these questions:

*What am I good at doing? What am I passionate about doing? What are my organization's most important desired outcomes? What are our customer's most important desired outcomes? How can I apply my strengths and passions toward improving both my customer's desired outcomes and my organization's desired outcomes?*

When you're done answering these questions, move into action.

#### **Accelerator Action #5: Deliver Solutions, Not Commodities**

Average sales people make calls. Great sales people retain customers and attract new customers. Average engineers conduct analyses. Great engineers resolve problems and prevent future problems from happening. Average managers conduct meetings. Great managers improve sustainable, profitable growth. Average bosses conduct interviews. Great bosses enhance the level of talent throughout their organizations.

#### **Accelerator Action #6: Learn From the Past**

To improve your future desired outcomes start by identifying what you've learned in the past. Say for example that an organization has \$500 Million in annual revenue and wants to go to \$1 Billion. It could start by asking, "What did we do that helped us to go from \$10 Million to \$20 Million? What did we do to go from \$200 Million to \$400 Million? What worked well and what didn't work well? What lessons did we learn? What will we do with what we learned?" Many times the answers are already inside your organization, but you have to take the time to dig them out. Think of it as "internal business archaeology."

#### **Accelerator Action #7: Constantly Strengthen Your Culture**

"Corporate culture" is a fancy business term that gets tossed around a lot. To me, a corporation's culture is the way people consistently act. If their people are consistently rude to customers, then that's their culture. If their people go out of their way to be on time and treat customers with respect, then that's their culture.

Business results can fluctuate over time and are sometimes out of your control, but a strong culture can sustain a business through good times and bad times. Decide on the culture you want in your organization or business unit, and then recognize people when they display the behaviors you're looking for. Hold them up as exemplars in your organization. Strengthen the desired culture everyday.

### **Accelerator Action #8: Maintain Urgency in the Absence of Emergency**

Casey Stengel, the legendary manager of the New York Yankees in the 1950's, said there is a time to push your team and a time to relax. He said the time to push is when things are going well. When your team is winning, maintain a sense of urgency. He said when you have four or five losses in a row relax a bit because some people around you will start panicking. When your business delivers great results focus on what can be done to take the organization to the next level.

### **Accelerator Action #9: Schedule Thinking Time**

Ok, here's a controversial one. I recommend this idea at every presentation, and I get tons of push back on it. Take out your weekly calendar and block out one hour for pure thinking time. This is not a time for you to organize your calendar or finish a last-minute report or pick up your clothes at the cleaners or put out a fire for a customer. This is the time for you to get away from your office, your home, and your customers. Find a quiet place. Take out a sheet of paper. Select one important issue you want to focus on in your business. Turn the issue into an open-ended question. Say you want to focus on sales. The question you select will guide the answers you generate. Perhaps your question is, "How can we increase sales with our current customers?" Now answer that question from your perspective, your boss's perspective, your current customer's perspective, a prospective customer's perspective, and your competitor's perspective. For 45 minutes write down as many answers as you can. Take the last 15 minutes to select your best ideas, combine them where possible, and develop an action plan. One good hour of solid thinking a week can enhance all of the other hours.

### **Accelerator Action #10: Be Creative and Do the Grunt Work**

When I was a high school math teacher, parents used to ask me what their child needed to do to get an A in my class. For the first seven years I taught I told the parents that grades were not the most important thing, but that learning how to think logically by analyzing information and finding a solution was the most important thing for their child to learn from my class. Every time I said that the parents would roll their eyes and say, "We understand. Now, what does our child need to do to get an A in your class?" In year number eight I got ready for them. When they asked me the inevitable question, I said, "To get an A in my class requires grunt work and creativity. Your child has to do the grunt work in terms of taking notes, asking questions, doing their homework, and studying for the test, but on the day of the test your child has to be creative. They have to take in new information and solve a new problem."

To generate sustainable, profitable growth requires grunt work and creativity. You have to be a doer and a thinker, not one or the other.

### **Accelerator Action #11: Sacrifice to Accelerate**

Imagine you want to travel across the U.S. Picture two scenarios: an overstuffed car with tons of luggage and barely enough room to see or move your arms, and the same car with one suitcase and lots of leg room. Which one has the better chance of accelerating and maintaining a fast pace? Picture two organizations: one has four purpose statements, six strategies, 14 tactics, and 63 planned activities, and the other one has one clear purpose, one strategic framework, six tactics, and 12 planned activities. Which one has the better chance of accelerating and maintaining a fast pace? Do a few things extraordinarily well rather than doing 20 things halfway.

### **Accelerator Action #12: Apply Talent Management**

Business talent is the capacity to add value to customers. In order to add more value to customers, you need to increase the talent in your organization. There are three ways to increase talent: retain the talent you have in your organization, develop the talent you have in your organization, and add talent to your organization, either through hiring people full-time or bringing people in on a project basis.

Talent is the fuel that makes businesses accelerate. Of course, those talented people need to consistently display the behaviors that are important in your organization. That's a given, but they also need to have talent in order to create more value for your customers. Make the attraction, retention, and development of talent one of your top three priorities every day in order to generate sustainable, profitable growth. The best person for you to begin developing talent with is you. What do you need to be able to do to help your organization add more value to customers? Start with yourself by improving your skills and knowledge in those areas.

### **Accelerator Action #13: Build Your Brand Everyday**

Your brand is the value customers think they get when they buy from your organization or prospects think they would get if they did buy from your organization. Ultimately, it goes back to your purpose. What is the difference you're trying to make for your customers? Is that difference perceived as truly valuable by the end users? If it is, how can you do even better at making that difference for your customers? Your brand needs constant attention. Be diligent in making sure that your decisions and communications support the value you want your organization to be known for delivering.

### **Accelerator Action #14: Increase Your Luck Factor**

I have a friend who thinks people who are successful in their careers are lucky and people who are unsuccessful are unlucky. I would say he is sort of correct, but it's not the random kind of luck he believes in.

*Luck = Ability to Add Value + Relationships + Opportunities to Add Value*

You can increase your "luck" by enhancing those three variables. Increase your ability to add value by reading books, taking courses, volunteering for challenging assignments, studying successful people, and so on. Strengthen your relationships by staying in touch with people and adding value to them. Broaden your opportunities to add value by always being open to large and small opportunities to add value. Of course, be selective in what you actually take on, but be open to considering opportunities as they open up. Suddenly people will call you "lucky."

### **Accelerator Action #15: Answer the 80,000 Hour Question**

If you work for 40 years, 50 weeks a year, and 40 hours a week, then you will have worked 80,000 hours in your lifetime. That's a whole lot of hours. Now the big question: *What difference do you want to make with those 80,000 hours?* When you clarify your purpose as an individual, you are in a better position to be purposeful at work and in helping your organization to accelerate. When you have a clear purpose, you come to work with enthusiasm and are willing to work through obstacles. When you come to work without a purpose, you'll soon find yourself treading water in the flood of gossip and complaints that swirl around you.

### **Accelerator Action #16: Preserve Your Dignity**

Sometimes one good sentence makes the purchase of a book worth it. In the book, *Maslow On Management*, I found one great sentence: "True self-esteem rests on a feeling of personal dignity, the feeling that you are in control of your decisions and your life." One of the biggest ways to lose your personal dignity, the feeling that you are in control of your life and your decisions, is to feel trapped in your career. When a person feels he can't afford to lose his job, he feels trapped. If he's only staying in it because he doesn't believe he can do anything else that would allow him to keep his lifestyle, then he begins to suffocate. The golden handcuffs become golden prison bars.

Take out a sheet of paper and write down all of the other types of jobs you could do well and be passionate about. Do this while you have a job. Make the list as long as you want. Consider each of these options. If you choose to stay in your current job, you will be doing it because it is your choice. That will increase your sense of dignity. If you don't see any other options, then your dignity will go down. If you lose your dignity, you won't be able to add value. Personal dignity is a fragile entity and needs to be strengthened all the time.

### **Accelerator Action #17: Maintain Healthy Paranoia, Avoid Unhealthy Paranoia**

Andy Grove wrote a classic book called, *Only The Paranoid Survive*. Paranoia does help organizations, groups, and individuals accelerate, but it can also become debilitating. You have a healthy paranoia when you realize you could lose your job tomorrow. That is true. You could. We all could. The tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 instantly threw thousands of people out of work when industries were turned upside down overnight. Something crazy could happen again. Knowing you could lose your job tomorrow is a perspective builder. It helps you keep the mindset that you have to prove yourself every day.

Unhealthy paranoia occurs when you think the world is out to get you, that no matter how hard you try someone hides around every corner and behind every copy machine waiting to pounce on you to ruin your career. That's unhealthy. The people in your meeting yesterday aren't out to get you. They just disagree with your perspective.

### **Accelerator Action #18: Leverage Your Career Assets**

Throughout your career you have piled up a huge amount of assets. You have the money you've earned and the things you've bought, but that's just a small fraction of your assets. You might have skills in organizing, delegating, planning, creating, establishing a strategy, executing tactics, communicating, or using technology. You have piled up knowledge about certain industries or products or services. You may have honed your strengths in research, sales, operations, or marketing. During your volunteer efforts in your community or while you served on association boards, you may have improved your ability to clarify a vision and purpose and to effectively influence the way other people think. Write down your career assets. Then ask yourself this question,

*"How can I leverage my career assets in a way that will help my organization to achieve better sustainable business results?"*

You have assets to offer, but you have to step off of the train of constant activity in order to recall those assets and figure out how to apply them to generate better results.

### **Accelerator Action #19: Master the Four Primary Rational Thinking Skills**

Roger Federer is perhaps the greatest tennis player of all time. Why? He simply executes the fundamentals of tennis better than any other player. He's not the biggest, fastest, tallest, or strongest tennis player, but he is the most skillful.

In business, there are four primary rational thinking skills. They are clarifying, understanding, predicting, and selecting. They serve as the foundation for problem-solving, innovation, issue/opportunity assessment, decision-making, strategy development, and planning. The best managers I've ever seen perform these four basic rational thinking skills at a very, very high level.

In the most basic form, here are the key questions associated with each skill:

*Clarifying* – What is the current situation? What is the desired situation in terms of objectives we must meet and objectives we want to meet?

*Understanding* – Why did the current situation occur? Why will the desired situation be better?

*Predicting* – For each option you could choose from to improve your current situation, answer these three questions:

Would it meet the required objectives? If not, then don't do it.

Which ones of the objectives you want to meet would it meet and how well would it meet them?

What are the potential risks involved?

*Selecting* – Of all the options available, what's the best option?

By asking these questions, you can remove a great deal of the drama and emotion from situations and move forward logically, efficiently, and effectively. A terrific book on this topic is *The New Rational Manager* by Ben Tregoe and Charles Kepner.

### **Accelerator Action #20: See the Business Upside of Down Time**

Have you ever had a great idea for your business pop into your mind while you were taking a shower? How about when you were sitting at one of your children's soccer games or dance recitals? How about when you were on a vacation or watching tv?

People tell me all the time how ideas come to them when they are not working. Yet some of these same people tell me they have to work 60-80 hours a week because of the demands of the business. They believe they will generate better business results by working more hours. I suggest they will achieve better business results if they work fewer hours. When you get away from your work, your mind opens up and suddenly a breakthrough idea appears to an age old problem. Consequently, you need to plan time away from your work. Go on a vacation, watch a television show, attend a concert, and have a hobby. Do you see the business upside of down time?

### **Accelerator Action #21: Avoid the Futility of Humility**

For his fifth birthday my son, Ben, wanted a hermit crab. I knew that because every day starting four months before his birthday Ben said, "Dad, for my birthday I want a hermit crab." On the morning of his birthday Ben and I drove to PETCO. The salesperson took us to the glass case containing hermit crabs and pointed to a bunch of shells. I said, "Where are the hermit crabs?" She said, "They are in the shells." Ben selected his favorite shell and we headed home. I assumed the hermit crab would come out of his shell during the day time and would go back into his shell at night time. I assumed wrong. The hermit crab stays inside the shell all day and all night. It never comes out of the shell.

That's what we do when we never talk about our strengths or passions. Many of us were taught to be humble when we were growing up. I heard people say, "Don't brag. Don't talk about your strengths. It makes other people uncomfortable." That's bad advice. If you're not comfortable talking about your strengths and passions, how will other people know what you're good at or what you're passionate about. I have four strengths: I listen well to clients, I collaborate well with other people to develop ideas and plans that drive sustainable results, I simplify complicated theories into practical ideas, and I can be candid with executives in a professional manner. There's nothing unique about those strengths. Lots of people have them. The reason they are enormously useful to me is because they are my strengths. What are your strengths and what are your passions? Let other people know them.

### **Accelerator Action #22: Don't be a "Me Too Leader"**

For her seventh birthday my daughter, Sarah, wanted a fish aquarium and two fish. On the morning of her birthday we went to PETCO and she bought an aquarium and two fish, an orange one and a blue one. The blue one was about 10% bigger than the orange one. When we got home, we noticed the orange fish followed the blue fish everywhere. Even when we put the food in the tank, the orange fish would follow right behind the blue fish. After a month the blue fish was 50% bigger than the orange fish, and after three months the blue fish was 100% bigger than the orange fish. The orange fish only got the few bits of food that the blue fish somehow missed.

If you think, speak, and act exactly the same way as your boss does in every situation, then you're going to get the very few scraps of career food your boss doesn't want. You won't be the second most effective person in your organization. You'll be one of the least effective people. A "Me Too Leader" waits to hear what his boss says about a topic, and then he says, "Me too. I feel the same way."

You have to have your own opinions, your own style, your own position, and your own point of view. And that style and position has to remain consistent even if you work for a new boss.

### **Accelerator Action #23: Learn From Consumers**

I'm defining consumers as the potential end users of your organization's products and services. These people might be traditional consumers or businesses or government agencies or not-for-profit organizations. The point is they are making a decision on whether or not to buy from your organization.

These consumers don't care if you hit your sales targets or not. They don't care if you build the world's greatest brand. They don't care if you go out of business. Consumers want one thing: value. That value might be related to price, quality, speed, friendliness, reputation, or some other factor. Consequently, consumers serve one purpose: to teach organizations whether or not they are creating value that is worth buying.

Every time you put a new product or service into the market place consumers teach you something. They either teach you you're on to something that resonates with them, or they teach you that you have missed the mark.

If consumers did buy your new product or service, identify why they bought it. Then determine if it fits within the brand you want to develop. A big seller that takes your organization away from its intended brand can have a negative effect if you're not careful.

If consumers didn't buy your new product or service, identify why they didn't buy it. This understanding can enhance your future offerings.

Consumers teach us lessons everyday. Be open to learn them even if it isn't what you want to hear.

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