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MANIFESTO TO ACCELERATE

15 TRUTHS BY DAN COUGHLIN



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Great businesses are defined by their ability to accelerate.

My definition of “accelerate” is “to increase the rate of achieving desired outcomes in a sustainable manner.” The objective of every business should ultimately be to create a great business. This manifesto is a call to action to accelerate your business and your career.

This manifesto to accelerate is based on ten years of executive coaching experience where I have provided more than 1,500 coaching sessions for presidents, vice-presidents, and senior directors in Fortune 500 companies and major privately owned firms including Toyota, Marriott, McDonald's, Coca-Cola, St. Louis Cardinals, and Salomon Smith Barney. The insights are culled from more than 3,000 hours on-site observing executives and managers in over 20 industries as they conducted their normal day-to-day business routines.

At the end of 10 years, I asked myself, "What do I know to be true about business acceleration?" This manifesto contains 15 Acceleration Truths, which are insights about accelerating the many aspects that comprise a highly successful business. These truths are applicable to all businesses, regardless of industry, and all managers, regardless of their business function.

Acceleration Truth #1

To accelerate effective behaviors, ban eight-page performance reviews covering 28 core competencies.

John was not happy. He said, “I just got my annual performance review and what a wjoke that was. My boss made me fill out this ludicrous eight-page evaluation about myself and give it to her before our meeting. We were supposed to have a one-hour meeting to go over my performance. She put the meeting off for two months, and then when it did happen she showed up fifteen minutes late, left ten minutes early, and at one point stopped the meeting to turn up the radio and said, ‘I really like that song.’ During the meeting, she went over my evaluation of my own performance, made a couple of corrections, thanked me for doing a great job, and then gave me a ‘satisfactory’ rating. I have no idea what I did to deserve that rating or what I should be working on. I was really looking forward to my review, but as usual, I left the meeting more unmotivated than when I walked in.”

Inspired performances come from encouraging environments. Regardless of his income, every employee wants to feel appreciated. He wants someone who is honest during the evaluation, challenges him to improve, and doesn’t mire him down in meaningless numbers of 3.5 or 4.2 or 6.7 on some arbitrary scale.

Invest the time to share thoughtful answers to the following three questions, for the job this employee is being asked to do:

- What do I think this person does that is effective?
- What do I think this person does that is not effective?
- What do I think this person could do to be more effective?

When you answer these three questions, give specific examples of why you feel this way. Provide observed behaviors and real-life anecdotes to support your answers. Look the person in the eye, be candid about her strengths and weaknesses, and provide plenty of time to listen to her ideas on what she does well and how she can improve in the weeks and months ahead.

Relationships, honest, open, two-way relationships, improve performances; not cold, perfunctory, one-way written evaluations that employees fill out first.

Acceleration Truth #2

To accelerate accountability, reward doers, not talkers.

MaryAnn, the regional director of sales, had four options to describe Tim's performance: outstanding, satisfactory, below average, or needs immediate improvement. In her heart, she felt Tim's performance was 'below average,' but she was hesitant to give that rating. She said, "When 85% of the rest of the team is getting a 'satisfactory' rating, it's pretty hard for me to tell Tim he's 'below average.' It's going to lower his financial bonus by 50%, cause a lot of resentment, eat up a lot of my time and energy, and maybe lead to him leaving our company. What should I do?"

I said, "MaryAnn, if Tim's performance is 'below average,' then you have to give him that rating. You're doing him a disservice by being dishonest, and over the long run you're going to hurt his career and hurt the performance of your team and your business. There's going to be no reason for him to improve his performance if he thinks he's already doing a satisfactory job. When he goes for a promotion and doesn't get it because of his below average performance, he's going to want to know why you weren't honest with him during his review."

If 90% or more of your employees are receiving a rating of "satisfactory," then either stop rating people or get serious about using the process. Poor managers chicken out from being honest

with their employees. They give everyone a “satisfactory” rating, and rationalize to no end why being honest with people will ruin individual and group morale.

The best thing you can do for an employee’s future is to be honest. Give the person exactly the rating he deserves, explain why he got it, and let him know what he needs to do and achieve in order to improve the rating. This way he will know where he stands and what needs to happen in the future. Then you can see for yourself how he responds to honest and candid feedback.

Don’t give everyone the same bonus. Money talks. If an employee doesn’t deserve a raise, it is counterproductive to give her one. If she deserves a far bigger bonus than anyone else, then give it to her. If you want your evaluations to have any relevant meaning for your employees, give bonuses and raises that fit their ratings.

Acceleration Truth #3

To accelerate impact, transform chaos into elegance.

In 1978 my brother, Kevin, graduated from college. To celebrate he bought a stereo system with a turntable, receiver, and two three-foot loudspeakers. He had several hundred albums stored in milk crates that seemed to cover one whole wall of his apartment. In 2005, Kevin and his wife, Sue, bought their daughter Kaylee an iPod. The iPod took up six square inches and held more than 10,000 songs.

The iPod was elegance in action.

Business elegance consists of simple, clear, clean, and powerful processes that deliver great solutions. Look at every aspect of your business and search for ways to make it more elegant. Let’s focus on perhaps the most inelegant aspect of business: small group meetings.

A typical one-day meeting I've observed had 16-20 agenda items. Invariably, the group attacked the first item with enormous passion regardless of what it was about, quickly realized they were going to run out of time, decided to keep the meeting going through lunch, extended the meeting for an hour past the ending time that was communicated, and rushed like long-tailed cats in a room full of rocking chairs to wrap up the last eight agenda items.

That's inelegance in action.

For your next meeting, send out the agenda one week before the meeting with just three questions on the agenda. Select the three highest priority desired outcomes for your business group and turn them into open-ended questions. Notice: I said three items on the agenda, and each is turned into an open-ended question. That's it, no more. Attach to the agenda any important documents, articles, or reports that people should read before the meeting in order to improve the conversation on the three open-ended questions.

When the group walks in, start with the first open-ended question. Gather the best two ideas from each participant, look to combine ideas to make even better ideas, make a decision, and develop an action plan. Then move to the next question. Start and end your meetings on time. Give people reasonable breaks to eat lunch, clear their heads, and go to the bathroom. Make sure people show back up on time and don't keep the whole group waiting while they answer their cell phone. That's an elegant meeting.

It takes courage and sacrifice to generate business elegance.

Acceleration Truth #4

To accelerate your talent pipeline, be a talent hound, not a position-filler.

Lou, the regional vice-president of a major retail company, needed a new marketing director immediately. Dave, his current marketing director, had accepted a new job and had put in his two-week notice. Lou was the vice-president of an \$800 Million region, and the marketing director's position was critical to bringing in new business.

Since Lou was a talent hound, he always had his nose to the ground and obsessed over having a network of people he could call on for referrals. The next marketing director had to have certain values, strengths, and passions, which Lou had determined long before Dave left. Lou started making calls immediately to his contacts, interviewed seven people, three from within his organization and four from outside of the organization, and hired the new person before the old director had left.

Moral of the story? Lou's proactive approach led to no gap in marketing or new business acquisition.

Have you decided on what business talent you need for every position in your organization?

If not, it's time to determine the VSPs you want in every position in your organization.

Business talent consists of VSPs (values, strengths, and passions).

- Values are beliefs that determine behavior.
- Strengths are what a person does well.
- Passions are what the person gets excited doing.

Decide on the business talent you need in every position in your organization to accelerate your business. Then become a talent hound. Obsessively search for people who have the specific business talent you need for each position in your company.

Before you interview anyone for an opening, develop interview questions, role plays, and case studies for the candidate to respond to that will help you determine if the person has the right VSPs for the position. Don't fall in love with a candidate who has a stunning resume or job experience or references. Make sure the person has the appropriate talent for the position you want to fill.

Acceleration Truth #5

To accelerate respect, don't be a mood ring leader.

Susan, the director of marketing, had eight bosses in three years. You read that right. Without leaving her company, she reported to eight different executives over a three-year span.

One day she said to me, "Dan, my boss says I'm a mood ring leader."

I said, "He called you a what?"

She said, "Do you remember the mood rings in the 1970s?"

I said, "Vaguely."

She said, "They changed colors whenever the person wearing one had a mood change. My boss says my reputation is that I change my leadership style every time I get a new boss. Consequently, nobody trusts me when I say we should go in a certain direction. What should I do?"

Susan had a common challenge. She thought leadership meant doing what her boss wanted her to do. That's not leadership. That's compliance; that's taking the easy way out. It's also a shortcut to career disaster. I gathered input on Susan from her peers, which supported what her boss had told her, and shared it with her.

I said, "Susan, you need to stand for something and stick to it, regardless of who your boss is at the moment."

At first she put her head down, and then she looked me in the eye and said, "I don't care if I fail. I'm going to lead my department the way I believe is the right way."

She went back to her preferred leadership style, which was to give people personal attention, coach them behind closed doors, allow them to make mistakes, and remove barriers that other people insisted on putting in place. At first, she struggled trying to be herself, but in the end she did extremely well and was promoted to the next level.

To be a leader, take a stand on a given issue, decide what you believe in, and work to influence how other people think in the way you believe to be most effective.

Acceleration Truth #6

To accelerate brand identity, know the business you're in.

Toyota is in the business of making unbelievably high quality cars, trucks, and vans.

Apple is in the business of making cool stuff with technology.

Disney is in the business of entertaining all the members of the family.

The American Girl Doll Company is in the little girl business.

Wal-Mart is in the business of providing a lot for a little.

Southwest Airlines is in the business of democratizing the skies.

McDonald's is in the business of feeding people with fast, accurate, and friendly service in a clean environment and at a good value for the customer.

What business are you in?

When you and your employees know the business you're in, you can make decisions that connect to each other. And the more decisions throughout your company connect to each other, the more you reinforce the business you're in. That helps employees make decisions that have to be made on who to hire, what products and services to offer, and what products and services to remove. Knowing the business you're in helps you select better strategies and better tactics. It helps you make better snap decisions, and it helps you decide what not to do.

You and every one of your employees need to be able to state the business you're in within one sentence. And it needs to be the same answer.

Acceleration Truth #7

To accelerate great ideas, say no.

One of my all-time favorite ads was a BMW ad that simply said, “No” in large letters. In the small print it basically said BMW says no to a lot of good ideas so it can say yes to a few great ideas. That is tremendous advice! It’s healthy to consider a lot of ideas, but don’t run to the market with just a lot of good ideas. Keep searching until you find a few great ideas.

I had lunch with a CEO of a \$1.5 Billion business. He told me he was serving on 15 boards. I thought he meant he had served on those 15 boards over the course of his career, but I came to find out he meant he was on all 15 boards at that moment. He told me he simply couldn’t say no to any of them. Later in the conversation he shared with me the on-going struggles his company faced. Do you see a problem here? Are you able to say no to anything?

What have you said no to today?

What have you said yes to today?

How about your employees? What do they say no to and what do they say yes to?

Is it clear what opportunities and ideas your organization should say no to and which ones it should say yes to?

Keep generating ideas on how to accelerate your business, and keep sifting through them until you find the one to three great ideas you will act on. Don’t try to do more than three great ideas because before you know it you’ve turned a great idea into terrible execution. Trying to do too many ideas at once is a sure-fire way to generate mediocre results.

Acceleration is the art of sacrifice. Be willing to let go of many good ideas so you can execute the few great ones.

Acceleration Truth #8

To accelerate teamwork, stop the silo insanity.

I walked up to the receptionist and said, “What time does the management team meeting start?” She said, “The meeting starts at 10 AM, but I wouldn’t call that a team.” Her words turned out to be prophetic. Department leaders checked their e-mail while other people were presenting, defended their results while blaming others for shortfalls, and pointed out what was wrong with the other functions in the business. The business unit’s performance was steadily declining and continued to do so.

The vast majority of so-called “cross-functional teams” I’ve seen are really “department silos.” In these scenarios, department heads use up valuable time and energy defending their decisions and results while explaining how other departments hurt their performance.

One time while flying on Southwest Airlines I asked a flight attendant what it was like to work for Southwest Airlines. She said, “I love it. I used to work for another airlines, and when we had meetings all the mechanics would sit on the left, all the flight attendants on the right, and all the pilots in the middle. At Southwest we just sit wherever we want because we all have the same purpose and we’re all in it together.”

Now that’s teamwork.

Teamwork is when a group of people support one another toward achieving a meaningful purpose. Stop the silo insanity, and accelerate through teamwork.

Acceleration Truth #9

To accelerate focus, schedule thinking time.

Imagine doing a sales presentation for a VIP client that you put together while driving to work. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? And yet oftentimes commuting is the only place where managers prepare for the day. They're running from one obligation to the next with no time to breathe, much less strategize.

To accelerate your business, thinking time must be scheduled. Take out your calendar and schedule one hour a week just to think. Make this time sacrosanct. Get away from your family, employees, customers, and suppliers. Go to a place where no one knows you. Take out a blank sheet of paper and write one important business objective or issue at the top of the page. During your scheduled thinking time, follow these steps:

- Turn that objective or issue into an open-ended question.
- Answer that question for 45 minutes from a variety of perspectives.
- Combine two or more of your answers to make even better answers.
- Select your best idea.
- Take the last fifteen minutes and build your action plan.

Now go back to the "work" you do.

Ideas, clear, quality ideas, provide the foundation for business acceleration. In order to find them you have to schedule time to search for them.

Acceleration Truth #10

To accelerate thoughtful communication, think first, talk later.

Tom, the senior executive in the group, sat at dinner and told stories for two hours without taking a break. All of his direct reports laughed and listened to every word. When Tom went to the bathroom, one of his direct reports leaned over in front of me and said to the rest of the table, “When did he become such a bore? I can’t take much more of this.” Six months later Tom was fired because of extremely low employee satisfaction ratings despite posting strong business results.

Sally, the manager of a group of more than a hundred people, consistently gave presentations where she would turn her back on the audience and refer to herself in the third person. People at the tables around me stared off in the distance with their eyes glazed over.

Alan, the newly promoted executive of a huge region, frequently threw his glasses on the table and rolled his eyes whenever he heard something he didn’t like. His direct reports didn’t know what they said wrong, but they did become increasingly frustrated with Alan’s behavior. Alan’s credibility as a manager dropped dramatically.

Poor communication skills ruin more management careers than any other single aspect.

Are you communicating in ways that produce rapport rather than resentment? Reflect on the past 10 days and check your own communication patterns. Are you providing enough time to listen to the other person’s ideas? Are you asking open-ended questions to draw out the other person’s best thinking? Are you merely dictating what you think needs to be done, or are you exploring for even better ideas? Ask a trusted colleague to give you a 100% honest assessment about how employees feel about your communication and how you could improve.

Thoughtful communication that creates collaboration is one of the keys to business acceleration.

Acceleration Truth #11

To accelerate improvement, be willing to fail.

When Toyota automobiles first appeared in the United States in 1957, the tires melted, the engines overheated, and the cars guzzled gasoline. They only sold 400 cars in the U.S. that year. In other words, they failed. But for the past 50 years Toyota has learned from their mistakes and has constantly searched for ways to make better cars and trucks. According to The Wall Street Journal, soon they will be the largest automaker in the world. If they had not allowed themselves to fail, they would not have ultimately prevailed.

In business, failure has to be an option. When managers feel they can't afford to fail, they stop taking chances and stop trying to find out if there are better ways to get things done. Acceleration is about constant improvement, and you won't constantly improve if you are not capable of failing.

The Process of Failure Capacity Maintenance

- Clarify the highest desired business outcome.
- Identify the approach that could have the greatest positive impact on improving that desired outcome.
- Move that approach into action, even though it is not guaranteed to work.

Taking foolish business risks is not courageous, it's stupid. It wastes money, eats up time, and ruins careers. Doing only those things that are guaranteed to work out successfully is not wise, it's even more stupid because there are no guarantees for success.

When a manager no longer has the capacity to fail because he feels he can't afford to lose his job or lifestyle, he remains trapped in the cage of mediocrity.

Acceleration Truth #12

To accelerate sales, be the customer.

The marketing manager said to the regional vice-president after a particularly bad quarter, “Our customers just didn’t do what they were supposed to do.” To which the VP responded, “No, the customers did exactly what they wanted to do. That’s what customers do.” I about fell on the floor.

If you really want to understand what’s going on inside the minds of your customers, do the following:

Embrace business research. Find out what story the statistics really tell.

- Go talk to the people that buy your products and services. Ask them what they liked and what they didn’t like. Ask them what would make things better for them.
- Set up an easy response form on-line with two open-ended questions people can respond to in less than 90 seconds. Ask your customers what your company does that adds value to them, and what gets in the way of adding value to them. Ask if they have any suggestions for improving the value they get in the future. Boom. That’s it. Now leave them alone.
- Go be the customer. Drive the car you’re selling, use the website you’re designing, and take the training class you’re pushing on others. Go sit in the competitor’s restaurant and just observe people as they walk by. Spend a day with your customer. See their world from their eyes, and watch how they interact with what you sell and what your competitor sells.

Don’t just sit in a room and come up with ideas that you think customers will like.

Go be the customer and see what the world is like from their perspective.

Acceleration Truth #13

To accelerate trust, make intangibles tangible.

The Employee Commitment Survey didn't lie.

In response to the following questions, here were the answers from a company with 84 employees:

I feel respected for the work I do. 55%

I feel what I say to my boss will not be shared with others or used against me. 35%

I understand the direction our company is heading in. 64%

We can't put our hands around trust, integrity, honesty, respect, or courage, but they are very real. Losing a loyal customer can most definitely be felt. The benefit of keeping valued customers over the long-term can most definitely be felt as well. So can the mountain of references you get when you build on-going strong relationships. Losing your best employees directly and negatively impacts your bottom-line.

Underlying the sustainable, profitable growth of an organization is an invisible concept called "corporate culture." Corporate culture is one of those fancy business terms that gets tossed around a lot. Here's what it means to me:

If the people within the culture are consistently rude, then it's a rude culture. If people are consistently nice, then it's a nice culture. Regardless of what "core values" are printed in the company brochures or posted on the walls, the actual culture is how people consistently act. Determine the consistent behaviors you want in your organization, and make those intangibles tangible by modeling, recognizing, and rewarding the desired behaviors.

A corporate culture is how people consistently act within the organization.

Accelerator Truth #14

To accelerate results, it's the relationships that matter, not the Rolodex.

How do many people find job openings? They knew someone who knew someone who made a referral. Conversely, how do many jobs get filled? The person doing the hiring knew someone who knew someone who knew the right candidate. How do many companies find just the right supplier for a new idea they have? Right, an executive knows a friend who knows someone who knows the supplier. The same goes for finding just the right customer.

What you need to enhance your pipeline of great employees, suppliers, and customers are a series of meaningful business relationships. What you don't need is a collection of 2,000 business cards with no meaningful relationships.

Find 20 diverse talent hounds and build relationships with them. Work to strengthen your relationships with them all the time. Send something of value to each of the 20 individuals every 45 days, and be willing to respond effectively when one of them needs help, advice, or a lead. These individuals will serve as your own Google Lead search engine. When you put the word out that you are looking for a particular type of employee, supplier, or customer, someone in your group of 20 key individuals will have just the right lead for you.

In a relationship you can call on the other person for advice or help or a lead. If you just have business cards, then you can't call on people for much of anything because they won't remember you.

It is worth repeating: It's the relationships that matter, not the Rolodex.

Accelerator Truth #15

To accelerate sustainability, play it SAFE.

At 19, Walt Disney started his own animation business. At 37, he produced Snow White, the first full-length animated film, and at 53 he opened the gates to Disneyland. At 13, Steve Jobs started spending a lot of time with computers. At 28, he guided the Macintosh into the marketplace, and at 45 he introduced the iPod.

To achieve sustained greatness in any business endeavor, you have to play at it with a Sustained And Focused Effort.

Imagine you just had the best year of your career, and your organization just had its best year ever. Now you need to make next year's performance and results even better for both yourself and your organization. That's the challenge of business acceleration. How are you going to do it? If you think the answer is, "I just have to work harder," then you've missed the point.

The greatest performers on any stage are those who love what they do. They're passionate. They play like children and care about the pleasure of the activity more than the paycheck. The day after the New England Patriots lost the 2007 AFC Championship game, head coach Bill Belichick was asked how long it took him to recharge and if he still had the same desire to coach. Keep in mind that the Patriots had won the Super Bowl three times in the previous five seasons, and they had just lost the right to go to that year's Super Bowl in the last minute of the game the day before.

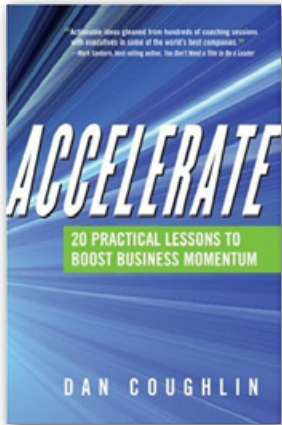
Belichick said, "All of us need a little bit of a break. It's tough, but that's the way it is, and we enjoy it and we love it. Cleanse your mind and start fresh. Put out a new canvas and start going to work. So it's disappointing after yesterday's game, but in the big picture, do I love football? Do I love the

team, the organization, the players and their effort and their cooperation? Yes, to all of those. That's why I love coming to work everyday."

This year you need to find a way to accelerate a sustainable improvement in your organization's performance and results. That's a big challenge. That's your Super Bowl.

The only way to sustain your focus and your effort through this challenge is to have fun while you do it. Enjoy the journey. Play it SAFE. Make it a game, not a job. Put the previous fourteen Acceleration Truths into action. Finally, find what you're passionate about and pour it into what you do everyday in order to accelerate.

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Dan Coughlin is president of The Coughlin Company, Inc., a consulting firm at the forefront of work on business acceleration. As a business speaker, consultant, and author, Dan has given over 500 presentations on business acceleration, provided more than 1,500 Executive Coaching sessions for presidents, vice-presidents and senior directors of Fortune 500 Companies and major privately owned firms, and written the books, *Accelerate: 20 Practical Lessons to Boost Business Momentum* (Kaplan Publishing 2007) and *Corporate Catalysts: How To Make Your Company More Successful, Whatever Your Title, Income, or Authority* (Career Press 2005). The research for Accelerate included over 3,000 hours of on site executive coaching in over 20 industries over a ten-year period. His clients include AT&T, The Boeing Company, Citigroup, The Coca-Cola Company, GSD&M, Marriott International, McDonald's Corporation, the St. Louis Cardinals, and Toyota Financial Services. He has been interviewed by The New York Times and Investor's Business Daily, and has written articles for more than 100 trade publications. Visit Dan at www.businessacceleration.com.

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