



DO BUSINESS FASTER™

Jim's Profit Accelerator 243 Backward-Facing Leadership

“How we do it here” is a favorite defense of culture. To be fair, much of culture is constructive, even essential, but not all of it. The trick is to notice what is not essential and then choose which elements are slowing things down. Sometimes it's worse than a slowdown: it's an anchor or a dam, blocking healthy growth.

SPEED BUMP: What culture essentials are not essential?

It's often easier to eliminate such practices than it is to find them. Our habits are crafted to find paths that work, and once we've crafted them, we hardly see them. It's a bit like the weight we gain past age 30. We don't even see it until we weigh ourselves, often assuring ourselves that the pounds are temporary and will flee in the face of diet and exercise. And then they don't flee, they stay and multiply.

It ought to be a matter of just asking our people to help spot wasteful practices. But usually they'll see some small ones while looking past the big ones. So how to spot them? Challenge your leadership team to hit a bigger goal than they think they can reach. The discussion will uncover options that have powerful impact on results, even though those options might have been unthinkable until now.

Let's make this real: In the time since the 2008 recession, leadership teams have generally changed a little, not a lot. (Set aside companies that are no longer with us, whether they have sold or merged.) In my experience, it's not unusual that of the four or five top folks, all but one have been in these positions for at least ten years. Their experience is valuable, but the hard wiring toward “how we do things” hurts innovation, retention, revenue, profit, and morale. Acceptable growth and profit keep these practices in place, hiding the opportunity cost of change and improvement. The opportunity cost is the gap between current practice and the earnings boost that innovation and risk can deliver.

SPEED BUMP: Change is hard when things are good.

The action step? You already have a hunch (or more) about at least one person who needs a new position, either for them or for the company. Skip past the pain of moving them to a new position, and actively seek a person who can step into the role. You may find a candidate that needs development, or one ready now. Either way, once you see an actual candidate, change seems more possible.

The conversation with the incumbent is mostly about them, not the company. You can frame their new position as a chance for growth, for broader skills, for a fresh perspective. You may learn in the discussion that they don't want the challenge and pain of learning, and that's another reason that they need to move on.

SPEED BUMP: Folks who are underperforming almost always are in pain.

ACCELERANT: What position will you start to refresh this week?

Leadership is sometimes about pointing the way, but more often it is about asking others to do what they need to do. The "ask" can be goals, action lists from meetings, tasks from problem-solving teams, and more. The challenge is seldom what to do—it's usually getting it done.

SPEED BUMP: It's not enough to assign tasks, regardless of whether you're the boss.

What's in your toolkit for the folks who are missing their deadlines? Here's a starter list:

Ask, "What did you think the assignment was? When was it due?" Listen closely, because likely the person will tell you mostly what they understood. If they understood it wrong, start with yourself, because this is a leadership learning moment for you. If so, clarify the task, check for understanding, get a due date, and move on.

If they understood it right but didn't get it done, here's an approach:

1. What's in the way?
2. What do you need to get it done?
3. What is the simplest way to answer the question?
4. When do you think you'll have it?

SPEED BUMP: If the deadline is missed, ask about it immediately (within minutes).

Yes, you can wait until your next one-on-one if it's a minor matter. (But if it's a minor matter, why are you managing it?)

Sometimes there's more to the delay than is being discussed, at least at first. If you suspect more, use this two-step approach:

1. Listen very closely and pay attention to voice inflection. Look at eyes, posture, and body language.
2. Ask more questions like these:
 - How are you thinking about approaching it?
 - When will you start it?
 - Who will you work with on it?
 - What project is higher priority for you right now?

If you get fuzz now, there's something else at play, and it's up to you to dig it out. If you don't, you'll have a repeat in a few days: "What's in the way?" (or some variation). Same song different verse.

Now you're into wasted time, rework for you, and warning signs about either your communication or the skill or will of your person.

So, here's a heavier duty approach. Just use one or two; it's not an interrogation.

- That's not like you, what's going on?
- Look, we really need this—what's a real date when you can do it?
- What will it take to get this done? We keep talking about it, but it's not getting done.
- Tell me how you are going to approach this issue/task?
- Tell me how you are going to tell this story to your team?
- This is dragging on. What's that about?

And the final step (before a write-up): ***Let's sit down right now and do this together.***

For more information on how you can accelerate revenues and profits in your business, please call or email me.

A note on **SPEED BUMPS**: Use them to click quickly with an idea that can immediately be implemented in your life as a business leader. Think: "How can I use this today?" or "Who can use this?"

For more information, visit www.grewco.com.

Jim Grew, the Business Defogger and Accelerator, helps leaders discover hidden opportunities within their businesses and exploit them for dramatic results. Jim has led 9 businesses, worked in 31 companies at C-level, and is an expert in strategy and executive leadership. He presents regularly to industry groups, mentors business leaders, and shares insights in his Executive Letter (above). Jim holds BA and MBA degrees from Stanford University. In his new book, *The Other Side of Succession*, he shares how to plan for the future by growing your business now.

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