

A HANDBOOK FOR MANAGERS,
ENTREPRENEURS, AND CEOS

TOM DEMARCO



Slack

GETTING PAST BURNOUT, BUSYWORK,
AND THE MYTH OF TOTAL EFFICIENCY

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Prelude

Slack and Other Secrets of the Agile Organization is a prescription for building a capacity to change into the modern enterprise. It looks into the heart of the efficiency-flexibility quandary: The more efficient you get the harder it is to change. The book shows managers how to make their organizations slightly less efficient but enormously more effective. It coaches them on the introduction of *slack*, the missing ingredient required for all change. It counsels a thoughtful use of slack instead of the mindless obsession with elimination of all slack in the interests of efficiency.

Why now?

We live in an age of acceleration. Whatever the formula was for business success a few years ago, it won't work today. Today there needs to be more and more work crammed into less and less time. There are fewer people doing more and doing it faster in less space with less support and with tighter tolerances and higher quality requirements than ever before. The average manager or knowledge worker is so busy today that there is simply not a spare moment for anything. There isn't time to plan, only to do. There is no time for analysis, invention, training, strategic thinking, contemplation or lunch.

Only a decade ago, the workplace was characterized by "bankers' hours," conversations around a water cooler, extended business meals, early closings in summer and the corporate softball league. Today such things have gone the way of the milkman and the full-service gas station.

The ubiquitous Hurry Up mantra of business today has undoubtedly helped corporations speed up. They do what they do faster and more cheaply than before. But there is a downside . . .

Enter the need for change

Suppose that what the corporation is doing now has to be changed. The needed change is not just to do the same things still faster, but to switch directions and do something else entirely. Change is always complicated and

challenging, but in the super-accelerated corporation, change of direction is almost impossible. The very improvements that the Hurry Up organization has made to go faster and cheaper have undermined its capacity to make any other kind of change.

An organization that can accelerate but not change direction is like a car that can speed up but not steer. In the short run it makes lots of progress in whatever direction it happened to be going. In the long run it's just another road wreck.

Plan of the book

The book is divided into four parts, each with its own mini-theme:

- PART I Slack: The unfortunate tradeoff between efficiency and flexibility. How organizations tend to get more efficient only by sacrificing their ability to change. How slack can come to the rescue.
- PART II The effect of stress on organizations: It leads them badly off course while causing them to re-double their speed. Causes of and cures for corporate stress
- PART III Change, growth, and organizational learning: The difference between companies that can learn (and profit from their learning), and those that can't.
- PART IV Risk taking and risk management: Why running away from risk is a no-win strategy, and why running *toward* it makes sense when managed sensibly (and what that entails).

Slack is directed toward management at all levels in knowledge organizations and other modern corporations where knowledge workers predominate. It is also directed to the knowledge workers themselves. It's directed toward you if you sense that there is something terribly wrong in the infernal busy-ness of the modern workplace, if you know in your heart that the slack that has been squeezed out of your organizations over the last ten years now has to be reintroduced, or no further meaningful progress will ever be possible.

The fact that you've decided to read this book says that you are *busy*. You haven't got time for an extended treatise on organizational forms or a theory of management. At most, you may have the time for a very fast, very pointed airplane read. I have put this book together so it can be read cover-to-cover on a flight from New York to Chicago or from Amsterdam to Rome. It is my hope and expectation that after reading it, you can step off your flight with a straightforward approach for helping your organization make the kinds of change it will need to make in order to survive.

Benefits of slack

Reduced stress and reintroduction of an essential bit slack is my best recipe for:

- increased organizational agility
- better retention of key personnel (what I call your "human capital")
- an improved ability to invest in the future
- a capacity for sensible risk taking instead of risk avoidance

EARLY PRAISE FOR SLACK

1. [Dan Gillmor](#), San Jose Mercury News columnist:

“During the rise of the so-called ‘New Economy,’ too many business books reflected the same crazy logic that marked countless dot-con-game business plans. In other words, common sense disappeared. Tom DeMarco's volume is refreshing because it starts with common sense and goes from there.”

2. [David Kaplan](#), author of *The Silicon Boys and Their Valley of Dreams*:

“This book is the ideal tonic to the '90s craze of down-sizing restructuring, cost-cutting — all in the name of efficiency and global competition. What DeMarco shows is that the resulting costs in human capital (stress, pressure, over-commitment) may ultimately deprive an organization of the very success it seeks. DeMarco's remedy is what he calls ‘slack.’ Read this book and learn why.”

3. [David Liddle](#), General Partner, U.S. Venture Partners:

“DeMarco understands the temptations we all experience in the high-pressure management world, and is able to separate incentives from accomplishments and process from culture in a clear and memorable way. Buy this book for your CEO or your favorite entrepreneur, or better still buy a copy for yourself and profit from DeMarco's insights.”

4. [Bob Metcalfe](#), inventor of ethernet, founder of 3Com, author and pundit:

“DeMarco puts his finger on something I'd only vaguely felt during my years in Silicon Valley. When asked to cut people some slack, I knew something was amiss, but not exactly what. Reading this tight little book clears up the trade-offs between efficiency and effectiveness, between doing and planning, between switching and concentration, and shows how squeezing excess capacity out of your company can sometimes leave it terminally unresponsive.”

5. [Michael Schrage](#), MIT Media Lab, author of *Serious Play*:

“Tom DeMarco's insights are shockingly pragmatic. Where other writers aspire to be Machiavellis of management, he is a Montaigne: pithy, sharp, intimate and wise.”

6. [David Weinberger](#), author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto*:

“Tom DeMarco goes after one of the most pervasive and pernicious myths of business -- that humans are efficient the same way machines are. This book will change the way you manage and understand your business.”

PLACING AN ORDER



Slack will be available by May 1, 2001. To order with a 20% discount, go to Amazon.com and search on “DeMarco Slack” or use the following URL:

[Order Slack from Amazon.com](#)

For something completely different, look for Tom DeMarco’s mainstream novel, *Dark Harbor House*, recently published by Down East Books. Lisa Alther (author of *Kinflicks*) had the following to say about *Dark Harbor House*:

“I missed this book whenever I had to put it down, and rushed to get back to it.”

You can order DHH as well from Amazon. Just search on “DeMarco Dark Harbor” or use the following direct link:

[Order Dark Harbor House from Amazon.com](#)

See also: <http://www.systemsguild.com> for more about Tom DeMarco, his books and Guild consulting services.