

# Best Practices

*Slower is faster*

## OVERVIEW

If you cross the old Bauhaus design motto “Less is more” with the lesson from the parable of the hare and the tortoise, you come up with a new slogan for an age of too-rapid change: “slower is faster.”

We are a nation--in some ways a world--in a hurry. We want to get where we are going as quickly as possible. We value machines and devices that speed up our lives. We are suspicious of anything or anyone that slows us down.

Speed and haste are appropriate for some activities, and they have their rewards. Here in Kentucky we have a race in the spring where the fastest horse wins a wreath of roses and a lot of money. In the Kentucky Derby, and in many other areas of life, slower is not faster.

Because speed is so obviously desirable in so many ways, we find it hard to justify slowing down. In the workplace, people often view appeals for more time to plan or complete tasks as excuses to cover inability or failure to perform.

The slogan “slower is faster” is meant to draw our attention to the ways in which unmindful devotion to haste and speed are counter-productive. Slower is faster in all situations where people need to understand, so that they can make choices for themselves.

What follows are some examples where people need the kind of deep understanding and agreement that come only from making patient progress. These examples have one basic premise: slower is often faster for anything you want to be of high quality and last a long time. The premise is equally true of human agreements, manufactured products, organizational structures and systems, and even our physical, intellectual and emotional well-being.

This issue of *Best Practices* takes a paradoxical statement and provides some ways to think about its implications.

**slower:** *adv;*

Took or required a long time.

**faster:** *adv;*

Accomplished in relatively little time.



Roberts & Kay, Inc. presents *Best Practices*, a publication highlighting progressive strategies that will serve both private and public sector organizations in the next decades.

# EXAMPLES

## *When slower is faster*

### Planning and Decision Making

The problem with plans and decisions in this “just do it” age and culture is that key decision-makers often value completion more highly than participation. This kind of rushed direction-setting often backfires because it offers such a weak launch pad for implementation. People who make decisions and plans that affect others often skip the step of inclusion in order to save time. In fact, that time is lost, and more, after the decision is made when decision-makers need to persuade the skeptical, enforce against resistance, correct the poorly informed, and repair damage to good working relations. Anyone who has produced a plan or made a

decision that was then ignored, or undermined, or second-guessed to death, understands the costs of rushing a decision or a planning process.

**Tip:** Before making a decision, think of the decision and its implementation as a whole. Instead of “just do it,” think about “just get ready to do it well.”

The shortest route to the goal of full implementation of most decisions lies through the seemingly slow paths of full communication, participation, and engagement of the people who must live with and implement that decision. Involve them from the beginning, and account for the time it takes as time saved during the implementation and quality check phases.

### Learning New Work Skills

Whether it is to a new job or a particular task, proper orientation takes time. The payoff for the investment comes when the person understands enough about the job to make intelligent decisions about what needs to be done. Over the long term this saves employees from consulting their supervisors or peers too often, and it saves the time that is wasted when something is done wrong and must be done again. It also saves the greater expense incurred when inadequate orientation leads to uncertainty, stress, poor performance and eventually the need to replace an employee.

**Tip:** Invest in careful orientation and training for new employees, and for people moving into new responsibilities. Plan carefully to expose new employees to the people who most strongly demonstrate the kind of employee you want the new person to be. Make sure you show -- not just tell -- employees what you expect and what constitutes high quality work.



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## *Personally Speaking*

I first heard someone utter “slower is faster” at a mediation training. The slogan validated feelings I have often had, in both my personal life and my professional work.

I grew up and did most of my schooling on the east coast, a place famous for its speeded-up life-style. I remember in grade school rushing to be the first one finished with an assignment, and being rewarded for my speed. I learned english, and math, and history, but I also learned to rush.

I moved to Kentucky in part to escape the fast pace of life on the east coast. I have learned many lessons about the effectiveness of a slower pace at times. Still, I have had to work hard to remind myself to slow

down, and to remember that some goals are even more important than finishing first or finishing quickly. I also have had to learn that some things cannot be rushed.

Some of my oldest habits of haste continue in certain settings. When I am at the computer--even as I write about the need to slow down--I rush in my three-fingered way across the keyboard, so intent on finishing as quickly as possible that before I know it I have a pain in my shoulder. And when I am behind the wheel of a car my body remembers all too well the lessons it learned on the roads with crazy Massachusetts drivers.

Steve Kay

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### Mediation

In mediation, a hurried agreement is likely to result in a false settlement that falls apart immediately, or after a time. Going slowly and working completely through the issues is likely to result in a more permanent solution.

**Tip:** Make sure that all parties to a dispute understand the implications of a proposed resolution and are comfortable with all its consequences. This requires the mediator to do two hard things: make sure people address uncomfortable issues, and wait through what may seem to be endless interchanges before people develop full understanding of where their best interests lie.

### Recuperation

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey cites one key habit that integrates and encompasses all the others: “sharpening the saw.” Covey uses this metaphor to suggest that taking the time for personal renewal is like taking the time to sharpen a saw so that it will cut more efficiently.

**Tip:** We increase our effectiveness by slowing down when we are becoming dull and in need of recuperation. The “sharpening” can be a short break to stretch, regular time spent in relaxation, exercise, or meditation, a longer break to clear one’s head, or a badly needed vacation or sabbatical. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* noted that, with a boost from President Clinton and other noted, hard-

working types, even the usually-suspect nap in the middle of the day is gaining respectability.

### Organizational Transformation

Call it down-sizing, right-sizing, strategic change, positioning for the future, re-engineering, or anything else you want: when an organization goes through a reorganization of its structure and functioning, slower is faster. New roles, titles, relationships, responsibilities take time to assimilate. Rushing that process increases the number and extent of the negative reactions and confusing episodes that are an inevitable by-product of major change.

**Tip:** If you are leading systemic organizational change, think and plan in terms of the long term -- years, not months. Since productive people thrive on self-control, offer as much control as possible to affected people. For example, although people affected by change may not be able to influence the nature of the change, in many cases they can serve as guides on the pace of important changes. They can also contribute to decisions on the best ways to implement necessary changes.

*Measure twice,  
cut once.*

*Haste makes  
waste.*

*Sin in haste,  
repent in leisure.*

*Slow and steady  
wins the race.*

*One who hurries  
cannot walk with  
dignity.*

## *IN PRACTICE*

“Do you mean to tell me that you intended to get this newsletter out six months ago?”

“Six or seven. We had most of the pieces in good draft form in early fall, but then we put them aside and worked on a newsletter that was tied to the workshop on democratic practice in everyday meetings that we produced in December.”

“What happened between December and now?”

“Many things, but we spent all our spare energy--and some that wasn't spare--working on the first Lexington Citizen Summit at the end of April.”

“So a newsletter whose theme is “faster is slower” comes out seven or eight months behind schedule.”

“I wouldn't say `behind schedule,' but certainly many months later than we originally intended. And I'll leave you to figure out whether this is a good example of slower is faster.”

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*Slower is Faster*