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Tom Peters gets high on SPEED

By Terry Deacon

Tom Peters is a speed freak. On 30 August he jetted into South Africa to present a one-day event "Distinct or... Extinct", WOWed his audience, collected a cheque for \$80 000, and flew back that same evening.

I was kindly invited (couldn't afford the R7 000 price tag) to attend Tom Peters' fascinating talk hosted by the Institute for International Research, and would like to share his and some of my views with ProjectPro readers (no free lunch).

One of the recurrent themes of his talk was the frenetic speed at which things take place these days. He set the pace in his opening sentence by telling us that the slides in our handouts were a week out-of-date. We could download the latest PowerPoint slide show from www.tompeters.com (and so can you).

I believe that "more haste, less speed" and "look before you leap" are prudent sayings. Conventional project management principles advise us to invest sufficient time in defining and agreeing the scope with all stakeholders before implementing a project – it's a case of Ready, Aim, Fire. However, with increasing time pressures it became Ready, Fire, Aim. Tom Peters sees things differently – Fire, Fire, Fire! In this chaotic, fast-changing, competitive world, he may have a point worth pondering... but not for too long or you'll get left behind.

Some of the quotations from his talk border on the heretical:

"Time cannot be sacrificed for better quality, lower cost, or even better decisions."

John Roth;

"We are in a brawl with no rules." Paul Allaire;

"Reward excellent failures. Punish mediocre successes." Phil Daniels;

"Do Something. Do Anything. Get Going. Now." Tom Peters.

Don't think that fast-tracking is a modern project management phenomenon (subsequent to the 1950s when CPM and PERT were invented). In the 1930s a USA shipbuilder Henry Kaiser built his first Liberty Ship in 240 days, but soon cut this down to 9 days per ship. And then, in a contest between two of his shipyards, a ship was assembled in only 4 hours, 15 minutes and 26 seconds! Another feat of the 1930s was the 102-storey Empire State Building in New York that was built in 18 months. At one stage the structural steelwork rose 14 storeys in 10 days. The time elapsed between rolling the steel beams in the foundry and riveting them into place on site was just 18 hours!

We do have many modern examples of fast-tracking. Two lightning-fast projects that used the Critical Chain Method (invented as recently as 1997) are worthy of mentioning. Harris Semiconductors built a plant that according to industry standards would have taken 46 months to build... in 13 months. Israeli Aircraft Industries reduced average turnaround time per aircraft from 12 to 2 weeks.

Businesses traditionally held strategic planning sessions once or twice a year, but now it's common to hold weekly strategy meetings. Tom Peters advocates not just speed, but boldness too:

"Incrementalism is innovation's worst enemy." Nicholas Negroponte;

"Wealth in this new regime flows directly from innovation, not optimization. That is, wealth is not gained by perfecting the known, but by imperfectly seizing the unknown." Kevin Kelly, *New Rules for the New Economy*;

"It's better to be first with less than last with more." Jeff Levy, eHatchery.

Working quickly is only half the challenge. These days things change so fast we haven't got time to master one technology, when a new one lands in our lap:

"These days, you can't succeed as a company if you're consumer led – because in a world so full of so much constant change, consumers can't anticipate the next big thing. Companies should be idea-led and consumer-informed." Doug Atkin, Merkle Newman Harty;

"There is probably going to be more confusion in the business world in the next decade than there has been in any decade in history." Steve Case;

"It used to be that the big ate the small. Now the fast eat the slow." Geoff Yang, Institutional Venture Partners.

This is all well and good, but I have a concern. David Schneider & Grady Means of MetaCapitalism said, *"The period 2000-2002 will bring the single greatest change in worldwide economic and business conditions since we came down from the trees."* Mankind has had millions of years to (successfully) adapt to the change from living in the trees of a tropical jungle, to living in a concrete jungle. Radio took 37 years to reach 50-million listeners, but the Internet reached that in only four years.

In the past 20 years – a mere tick in the eons of time – we have experienced (suffered?) technological advances such as the personal computer, e-mail, Internet, cellphone, e-commerce and e-banking. The main objective is to speed up the pace of life, and for those (all?) of us who can't cope, it means high stress levels (a subject I will deal with in my next editorial). Mario Andretti, Grand Prix racing driver said, *"If things seem under control, you're just not going fast enough."* Apparently we are going fast enough, because life seems out of control – even the help-lines are shouting HELP!!!.

On reflection, it's not a new phenomenon to have the Tom Peters of this world urging us to be quicker, better, weirder, more innovative and successful. As long ago as the 1500's Michelangelo urged us on by saying, *"The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it."*

- *Terry Deacon, Pr Eng, B Sc, B Eng (Hons) CPM, PMP, is the founder and CEO of ProjectPro and is Managing Editor of ProjectPro e-Zine.*

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