How To Achieve Your Goals At The Speed Of Light

It takes a photon of light a little over 8 minutes to reach the earth after it leaves the sun's surface. In the vacuum of space, the photon literally travels at the speed of light over the 150 million km journey. But doesn't light always travel at that velocity? Well, not quite, as it turns out.

The center of the sun is incredibly densely packed with hydrogen and helium atoms – even more densely packed than shoppers at Selfridges at the start of the Boxing Day sale! – and this means that the photon cannot escape quickly at all. Each photon's energy is repeatedly absorbed and released by these atoms, creating a path of travel that scientists call a 'drunkard's walk' of 700,000 km through the center of the sun, rather than a straight line between the sun's core and its surface.

In probably the longest 'drunkard's walk' ever, each photon takes 20,000 years or more – some estimates put it at one million years! – travelling inside the sun before starting its journey through space. It seems that the speed of light in the center of the sun slows down to 3 meters per hour, less than the speed at which a snail crawls!

Why do I tell you this? Well, many business leaders highlight the need for pace when they really mean that they want their organization to do more. In a bid to raise performance they add further initiatives, projects and demands on managers and teams that are already struggling to deliver last month's priorities.

As one strategic initiative hits all the other 'special' projects – never mind 'business as usual' operations – it loses momentum and slows down in a similar way to photons at the sun's core. Over time, each initiative performs its own 'drunkard's walk', sometimes hitting a milestone and other times veering a million miles away from its goals and targets.

If you want to achieve more, faster, you must have the discipline to do less. Here are five practical ways you can make that happen:

1. Establish your #1 performance goal. When I worked at Boots the Chemists, the retailer was struggling to embed its operational priorities and there were many gaps on the shelves. As a result, the executive team set a goal of improving on-shelf availability, halting any projects which didn't help achieve this objective. Within 6 weeks, product availability had improved so much that it added over 3% to sales growth.

2. Set 90-day priorities. Most planning looks at a 1-year time horizon. Yet, most projects are shorter than this. By breaking down your year into four quarters, you can focus on a smaller set of specific priorities and, once they're achieved, move onto the next set of projects. As a coach once told me, it's better to move three things a mile than a hundred things an inch!

3. Ruthlessly kill pet projects. This is perhaps the simplest yet hardest action. Pet projects destroy productivity, but it requires top-down focus and leadership to make sure they are totally eradicated. At one of my clients, the CEO identified over 30 'special' projects to stop. Not only did this reduce overall costs, but, more importantly, it step-changed the pace and performance of the remaining important initiatives

4. Focus solely on your biggest opportunities. I once helped a UK retailer identify new categories to add to its offer. At a meeting with the senior team I suggested three new product categories that they should trial. I could see people nodding, but with little genuine enthusiasm. Then, the CEO, said, "I think we should just do this one category. It's clearly the biggest opportunity and if we can't get this one to work, we'll have no chance with the others." There was an immediate change in energy as the team worked out how they could rapidly make this one thing happen and, within a few months, had grown sales by rolling the new offer out across the chain. (This was a lesson for me that I haven't had to learn again!)

5. Set clear project end dates. Have you noticed how many 'projects' seem to have a life of their own and just keep on going? Most initiatives can be completed within a few months. By ensuring that your project team has a clear end date, they will ensure that everything that needs to be done is done more quickly. Take the time to celebrate each project's success and impact, recognizing the effort that the team has given, but don't allow projects to morph into jobs-for-life.

Which of these five steps could help your organisation do less but achieve more, accelerating your pace of delivery from a snail's crawl to the speed of light?