

# SLACK

## Getting Past Burnout, Busywork and the Myth of Total Efficiency

TOM DEMARCO

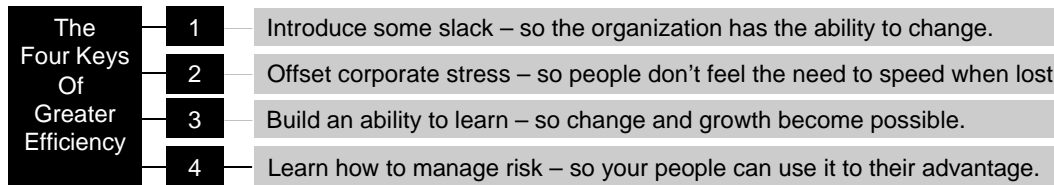
**TOM DEMARCO** is a principal of the Atlantic Systems Guild, a consulting firm specializing in organizational change, project management and litigation. He is the author of seven books, including *The Deadline*, *Controlling Software Projects* and *Peopeware*. Mr. DeMarco's clients include Hewlett-Packard, Apple, IBM, Lucent and others. In 1999, he was awarded the Wayne Stevens Prize for lifetime contribution to software engineering methods.

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**MAIN IDEA**

The more efficient a firm becomes, the less flexibility it has – and the harder it becomes for the business to make any changes that are required for it to operate more effectively in the future. Therefore, managers can actually make their organizations run better if they introduce a little bit of slack within the system allowing new and better ideas to take root and grow to fruition.

Specifically, business builders and managers should keep in mind four keys:



A business manager can always tell when just the right amount of slack exists within their organization since:

- Organizational agility will flourish as workers have more time to think about and analyze what they need to do.
- The job satisfaction levels of key personnel will rise, resulting in better retention of the best people.
- The organization as a whole will enjoy an improved ability to anticipate and invest in the future.
- There will be an enhanced ability and capacity to take rather than avoid prudent commercial risks.

All in all, just the right amount of slack will position the business ideally to meet the future demands and challenges of the dynamic and evolving global economy.

Key #1 – Introduce some slack – so the organization has the ability to change.. . . . . Pages 2 - 3

Slack is the complete opposite and natural enemy of efficiency. The paradox is the more things you do to make an organization more efficient now, the greater you impede its ability to change and reinvent itself later on as the business environment changes. Therefore, tolerate and even introduce a little bit of slack within your business organization. It may make you slightly less efficient at present, but it will facilitate future change and growth. Great companies excel at using slack creatively to grow the business.

Key #2 – Offset corporate stress – so people don't feel the need to speed when lost. . . . . Pages 4 - 5

Managers in all parts of the economy are charged with the goal of reducing the time and cost of getting things done – two mutually exclusive goals. Since they can't achieve both goals at once, many managers feel stressed which results in:

- Declining employee health levels.
- Failing relationships – with employees and customers.
- Bad judgement being applied with increasing frequency.

The solution to corporate stress is deceptively simple – introduce some slack inside the organization.

Key #3 – Build an ability to learn – so change and growth become possible. . . . . Pages 5 - 7

An organization cannot grow if it lacks the capacity to experiment and change. Being able to grow, however, requires more than simply removing the more obvious barriers. Business growth always requires vision, leadership, good timing and more.

Slack is the lubricant which makes all these things possible. With some slack, the business will be vibrant and flexible. Without the right amount of slack, the business becomes brittle and totally inflexible – locked in the present, in fact.

Key #4 – Learn how to manage risk – so your people can use it to their advantage.. . . . . Pages 7 - 8

New business opportunities always involve and imply risk. Unless a corporation takes risks and learns how to overcome them, it will miss all the opportunities generated by new markets, new ways of doing business and borderless competition.

The essence of managing risk is to be prepared to make loads of small (and usually expensive) failures along the way to larger success. Unless you are prepared to lose a few figurative battles along the way, you stand no chance whatsoever of winning the overall war. Thus, you need to set aside a little slack in terms of time and money to take some risks.

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