

# Decision Velocity:

## *A Target for Coaching*

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The pace of social and technological change is probably faster now than it has been at any time in history, and it shows no sign of slowing down. As economies become more global, people in organizations have more to do in less time. They have to live with the prospect of reorganization, right-sizing, and the changes in the social contract that often go with these initiatives. The consequence is that both individuals and organizations have to be more responsive and flexible than ever before. They have to take action more and more rapidly in order to stay in touch with a market that changes at an ever-faster rate.

### **The Changing World: A New Game**

This new “game” compounds the impact of organizational inertia. In the dictionary, inertia is defined as the “indisposition to change.” Organizational inertia is made up of the combined interference (the mental and organizational noise that colors our perceptions, creating different points of view) of the people in the organization. At best these different views promote diversity and creativity; at worst they lead to resistance and more inertia. One indicator of interference is a gap between how people think they perform or behave and how they actually perform or behave. The more interference that is present, the more inertia the organization experiences. Inertia generates interference, interference generates inertia. It’s a vicious cycle.

### **Closing the Performance Gap**

Keeping an organization performing is a constant battle. Every organization is trying to overcome its inertia, to gain momentum, and to become more productive. This battle with inertia means there is constant change—change that people often resist, deny, and frequently become angry about.

Ultimately, everyone in the organization wants higher performance. This occurs at its highest levels in spite of resistance to change when people are clear what their team or personal goals are; understand the business outcome that their team or personal goals contribute to; and ensure that each task they do supports these goals.

One way to raise the performance of an organization is to help all individuals become more efficient and effective in their daily tasks. Historically, leaders have tried to develop this effectiveness and efficiency in their people by using two approaches:

1. **A command-and-control approach:** Controllers lead their people as if they are herding sheep. Their mind-set is to train their people well enough to be able to control them. It works, but it costs a lot of time and energy.
2. **A knowledge-based approach:** It is often assumed that if people have more information, they will be able to do things better based on that information. This is the organizational equivalent of reading a book on golf and expecting to be able to play at the level of a professional. More often than not, it is not a lack of knowledge that blocks performance, but a lack of consistent, accurate implementation of the knowledge that people already have that blocks individuals, teams, and organizations from performing at their best. People in organizations are rarely stupid, but they often suffer interference that blocks their performance.

## Performance



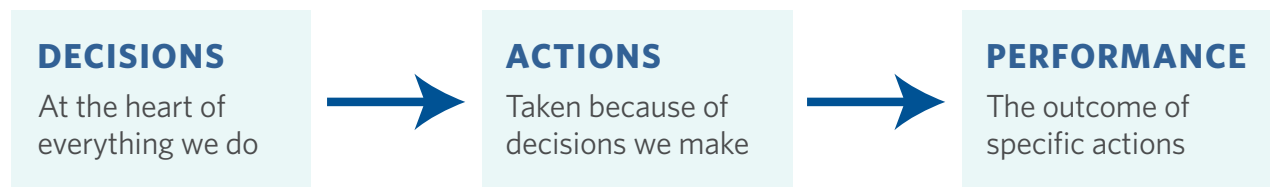
In sports, the measurement of performance is easy and obvious. The media show us the dollar earnings and world rankings. The coaches gather huge amounts of data to help identify less obvious measures—critical variables for the athletes to improve. In sports such as golf, athletes spend a lot of time improving what we would call swing velocity. (We are borrowing from physics for this concept.) In physics, velocity is speed in a direction.

If the golfer can increase his or her swing velocity, the speed and accuracy of the swing, he or she will hit the ball farther and more accurately—a big advantage in golf.

## Decision Velocity<sup>®\*</sup>

As in sports, effective coaches in the workplace are clear about what performance they are trying to improve. To this end, the concept of decision velocity can be of value. (See Figure 24.1.) Decision velocity is the speed and direction (or accuracy) of decisions. Performance is the outcome of specific actions that people take to implement the strategy of the organization.

**Figure 24.1. Decision Velocity**



Increasing the speed of decision making alone is not necessarily helpful to the bottom line, because if the decision is not accurate, you will get poor performance. Increasing the accuracy of decision making on its own is also not necessarily helpful, because if it is not fast enough then your competitors get ahead of you. However, increasing both speed and the accuracy of decision making can be a source of competitive advantage because these activities underpin everything people do at work.

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Unlike under the command and control approach, when an action is chosen by an individual, then that person's commitment, energy, and focus for action are far greater. In other words, when the sheep want to get into the pen, the shepherd and his dog have less work to do. Similarly, when people make and own their decisions, they devote their discretionary effort to these activities. Discretionary effort (as distinct from mandated effort) is what people put into their private lives when they get up at 3:30 on a Saturday morning to go fishing, or work on a rape crisis hotline, or coach Little League teams. This kind of effort cannot be mandated or written into a job description, but it is the “stuff” of peak performance. It is given by performers, not mandated by leaders.

## Coaching

Decisions lie behind all the actions that people take. Workplace coaches accelerate decision velocity, and are therefore a high leverage point for creating change at any level in an organization. Leverage comes from leaders being coached, coaching others throughout the organization, and focusing that coaching on decision velocity.



The word coaching came into common usage in the 15th century, when it described something that “conveyed valued people from where they are to where they want to go.” This definition, of course, referred to a stage coach. Although simple, the words are revealing when we think of excellence in coaching:

- **“Conveying valued people”**—Great coaches ensure that performers are able to leave a coaching interaction with their self-esteem enhanced. The coach does this by preserving the self-respect and dignity of performers—even when they have to be tough with them and/or they do not like them.
- **“From where they are”**—This sounds obvious, but many coaches/leaders give their followers more information than they can digest at one time (for example, a new hire’s orientation program in which a huge amount of new information is thrown at people, most of which doesn’t stick). The rationale is that “we don’t have time to do this in ‘digestible’ amounts.” It is convenient if people can start from where the coach is (that is, able to deal with all the new information). However, people will always start from where they are, not where the coach wants them to be.
- **“To where they want to go”**—Of course everyone in the organization cannot go in whatever direction he or she wants. What people do must add value to the strategy, and the strategy defines the direction the organization needs to go in. However, unless the employees choose to make a decision that is consistent with the organizational strategy, they will wait for and comply with directives from above, merely delivering minimum standards of performance. To meet high levels of performance demanded by today’s competitive environment, we need people to choose to give their discretionary efforts. We have to help them want to go where they need to go, and coaching their decision velocity is a way to do this.

## Increased Decision Velocity

Watch master coaches execute their special skills and one thing becomes apparent: they seem to be effortless in their execution. They know the few high-leverage things that have to be attended in order to deliver high performance—the critical variables of the task. Observers always comment on how simple skilled coaches make it look. One could say they bring simplicity to complexity.

Among the many models for describing how human beings make progress, one very simple process is in four stages: goals, reality, options, and the way forward—GROW®\*. We might call these stages critical variables in making progress—critical because if you leave any stage out it can be problematic and variable because the content of these stages is different in different situations.

The significance of these four stages as critical variables comes from looking at how human beings and organizations make decisions. People and businesses have current situations or problems they want to change in some way—their reality. They define in what way they would like this situation to be different—their goal. They then develop ways in which they can close the gap between their reality and their goal—their options. Finally, they commit to some action, based on the options they have energy about and believe will create results—their way forward. So we could call these stages the critical variables in decision making.

For progress to be made, people must go through these stages. If they miss or are unclear on any of them, the downsides at each stage are as follows:

- **The goal—we don't go anywhere or we solve the wrong problem**
- **The reality—we don't know what we are dealing with**
- **The options—we have fewer ways to bridge the gap between the reality and the goals**
- **The way forward—we don't have a clear sense of, or commitment to, next actions**

One or more of these downsides tend to show up when people are “stuck” in their decision-making process. It is common for people to follow a specific path when they are thinking of conversing about a situation. They start in reality and wander around (often complaining) before trying to set a goal. Then they return to reality and wander around some more, develop one option, and immediately return to reality and decide it will not work.

They try once more to develop an option and half-heartedly choose a way of implementing it that they are not really committed to executing. It is like trying to score in baseball by running in a few circles and over to the stands between stepping on each of the bases. It is much more difficult to score a run this way. They may get there eventually, but there is a lot of wasted time and energy along the way. By systematically focusing on each of these stages in the decision-making process, we can go through the stages faster—one of the elements in increasing decision velocity.

## Reduced Interference



Inherent in the systematic targeting of these stages is a reduction in interference. How this works can be seen from the work of Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) on “the psychology of optimal experience.” He has found that if people perceive the challenge of the task they are working on as being greater than their skill set, they become threatened. This results in their becoming worried and anxious. If they perceive their skills to be greater than the challenge, they become bored (and if bored for too long, anxious). In both cases, if they perceive either one as being greater than the other, they experience interference. People do their best “stuff” when they perceive their skills as being enough to meet the challenge of the task they are currently doing, but only just enough. The task needs to challenge them enough to demand most of their attention, but not be so challenging that it threatens them. This puts them in what Csikszentmihalyi calls their “flow state”—the optimal state for learning a new skill or performing a skill they already have.

A key “task” in decision making is thinking. It is by thinking that we make decisions. When people try to think about a problem they hold as difficult to solve, it represents a challenge they perceive to be greater than their skill to think about. This then moves them out of their flow state by creating interference. Focusing on the four stages of the GROW® Model focuses the decision-making process by breaking it into smaller discrete steps. These smaller steps represent less of a challenge (in relation to skill) and therefore create less interference, helping people get into their flow state to do their decision making. Clarifying each of the stages in the model is much easier in the flow state, and so decision making happens more rapidly—an increase in decision velocity.

## Discipline and Coaching

What coaching does in a corporate context is something that athletes have long recognized as having value. Coaches systematically help performers overcome their interference. They clearly understand that “winning” comes from small increases in effectiveness and efficiency. The coach brings discipline, which helps them stay focused on the critical variables of their tasks. The corporate coach can bring this to bear for individuals, teams, and organizations. And, given that the decisions people make are the precursor to their actions, the coach can help them focus on the critical variables that drive all their decisions.

## Teams and Teams of Teams: Organizations

At the individual level then, decision velocity is increased by focusing on these four critical variables in the decision-making process—goals, reality, options, and way forward. The same is true for teams. With a group of people, developing clarity at each of these stages is more complex and takes more time, but they still have to get through these four stages in order to make a decision. Although clarity of perception is needed for all four stages, consensus is only essential in the goals and the way forward. Diverse views of reality help in the development of a wider range of options. One of the coach’s tasks with a team is to bring discipline to the discussion so that the stages are undertaken systematically.

## Summary

Everyone suffers with interference in decision making at some time or another. A large part of this interference is because of the gap between how people think they behave and how they actually behave and the effects of that gap on others. Interference creates organizational inertia, which slows down decision velocity—the speed and accuracy of decision making. However, coaching can be used to increase decision velocity by reducing interference—closing the gap between how people think they behave and how they actually behave.



### About Alan Fine

Alan Fine is an internationally sought after performance innovator, the co-creator of the widely recognized GROW® Model, and pioneer of the modern-day coaching movement. In addition to his work in human performance, Alan is also a New York Times Bestselling Author, keynote speaker, and well-respected business executive and professional athlete coach. He has dedicated the past 35 years helping people from all walks of life elevate their performance and unlock potential.

Alan’s work has significantly impacted the organizational culture and business results of the Fortune 1000 and touched the lives of athletes such as Davis Cup tennis star Buster Mottram, and PGA golfers Phillip Price, David Feherty, Colin Montgomerie, and Stephen Ames.

Alan’s thought leadership on the nature of performance and the art of coaching for performance improvement includes his New York Times Bestselling book, *You Already Know How to Be Great*, as well as numerous other research articles and publications.

**To learn more about Alan and his breakthrough message, visit [alan-fine.com](http://alan-fine.com).**