

# HOW PACE CONSTRAINS SPACE

*A critique of the dominant thinking and practice in corporate life that denies us  
all the essential time to think at work*

*By Mark Cole*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In looking to analyse the circumstances that lead us to live organisational lives that are defined by pace and busyness, thereby limiting the time for critical engagement, reflexive consideration, and meaningful dialogue, I propose here to offer some observations under the following four themes:

1. First, I look at our human relationship with time and the way in which that shapes our corporate context.
2. Second, I explore the tensions between structure and system in the workplace.
3. Third, I reflect on the way in which contemporary practices in respect to leadership and management impact upon our experience.
4. Lastly, I conclude by discussing our workplace ways of being and doing, now and potentially in the future.

## 2. HUMANKIND AND TIME

### Facing Finitude

In existential thought, one of the key observations is that we are unwittingly delivered into life; one minute we are nowhere, and the next we are in the world. We then must come to terms with navigating this move from not being to being, in terms of exploring freedom as we seek to create purpose and meaning in our lives – and managing the anxiety that arises from being confronted with facing myriad personal choices.

Heidegger refers to this as *thrownness* – and Sartre adds a sophisticated layer to it by introducing concepts that he calls *transcendence* – our capacity to define our own lives through our choices – and *facticity*, which is the circumstances into which we find ourselves thrown. Our lives, then, are also a subtle balance between choice and constraint, a reminder that the tension between structure and agency – where we find ourselves and how we can act in that context – is central to human existence.

Overall, this philosophical perspective means that – whether we choose to be actively aware of it or not – we live a life defined by finitude: we are born into time, with a clear sense that our presence will have a beginning and an end. All of which leads us very often to feel caught up in considerations of the complexities of time and the way in which it can be seen as bounded.

## **The Abyss between Past and Future**

Time, then, can feel to be central to our presence in the world, something that it is always to some extent in mind and which defines our relationship with the world. Beyond this very personal issue, it is worth acknowledging that corporate life adds another interpretive – and powerfully ideological – facet to the notion of time. Broadly, this manifests in respect to thoughts about the past, the future, and the present.

It very often feels as though our companies have a dismissive position in respect to the past, which is denigrated as a graveyard of failed ideas and unsuccessful activity. This view can often lead to a generalised neglect of what has gone previously. Such a denial can see some people to lapse into nostalgia, wherein they seek solace in an idealised past. As [I've argued elsewhere in respect to considering our National Health Service](#), they see the past as a place of residence rather than as a point of reference.

Meanwhile, the future very often feels like a space that is exclusively defined by the vision, mission and strategic thinking that is seen to be the exclusive preserve of senior leadership. Indeed, this is a role into which people defined as leaders tend to project themselves due to the ongoing elusiveness of a clear sense of how leadership distinguishes itself from management in the contemporary business world. We are urged to speedily put distance between ourselves and the past, with an aim of rushing into an imagining of the future that is foisted upon us by others.

Absent in this past-and-future shaping of corporate time is what is referred to as the [specious present](#), the slightly extended moment in which we all actively live – and where we reside in terms of our organisational lives. And yet this is where we are seeking meaning, tracing out a sense of purpose, and making multiple choices, as part of our human existence, whilst being mindful of previous experience and conscious of the unwritten future.

So, we are conscious of time in light of our fundamental human existence. But, on top of that, organisational life inhibits our meaningful engagement with that due to its crude unequal tripartite ideation in respect to temporality.

## **The Machine Age**

Even before this broad calibration of past, future and neglected present, time was an integral aspect of the world of work. Prior to industrialisation, life was lived in broad sweeps of time, shaped by sunrise and sunset and the coming and going of the seasons. To a large extent, this was due to the fact that work and life felt strongly connected to nature at this time – and the human experience was seen to be something tethered to the world's physical cycles.

The age of the machine dragged people away from an immersion in nature. The crucial machine in respect to this was the emergence of the timepiece, which artificially calibrated our existence into seconds, minutes and hours...thereby establishing a metricised framework for the working day – and what things needed to be done and by when, in terms of this temporal imposition.

Workers drifted away from piecework and started to be paid for their time, something that led to the emergence of management as a practice that scrutinised what people did and how much they did in the timed duration for which they were paid. The tick-tock of the clock became the metronome of the workplace, with a new occupation arising to demand pace and productivity in that context.

And industrial machines interacted with the factory clock or supervisor's watch: workers clocked on and off, in order to engage in fragmented work processes that were defined by the simple machines that undertook each phase and task of the procedure.

### **Fascination with Pace and Action**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, artistic movements arose that fetishized the age of the machine and idolised the speed at which things were done in the modern age. In Italy in particular, [the Futurist artistic movement](#) sought to graphically represent industrialised society and to capture the sensation of pace that undergirded it. The manifestoes of Futurism uncomfortably aligned with the burgeoning political thinking and practice of Fascism in that country.

Whilst this is the most extreme instance of this fascination, society at large became enamoured with speed. Traveling and doing things fast began to dominate our lives. This obsession continues up to the present day, with online commerce monetising things like “next day delivery”.

## **3. STRUCTURE AND SYSTEM IN ORGANISATIONAL LIFE**

### **Constraints on Corporate Thought**

Away from considerations of time, there are a number of foundational thoughts that dominate corporate life – and, in particular, inhibit managerial thinking. For example, in our book entitled [Leadership Unravelling](#), John Higgins and I explored a number of paradoxes that reside in a great many companies – and followed that up by seeking to articulate what we saw as a series of myths that stifle rich and critical thinking in the firm.

Chief among these was the notion that “All is fixable”, which in turn connects with a second key assumption that the only state worth pursuing is perfection – and this dovetailed with the third presumption, which is that there is but one true way of achieving things.

If one accepts that these precepts distort managerial and leadership thinking because of their unchallenged dominance in both social, cultural and economic settings, one is left with the conclusion that – alongside the issues around time and pace previously discussed – these ideological constraints inhibit serious discussion in organisations.

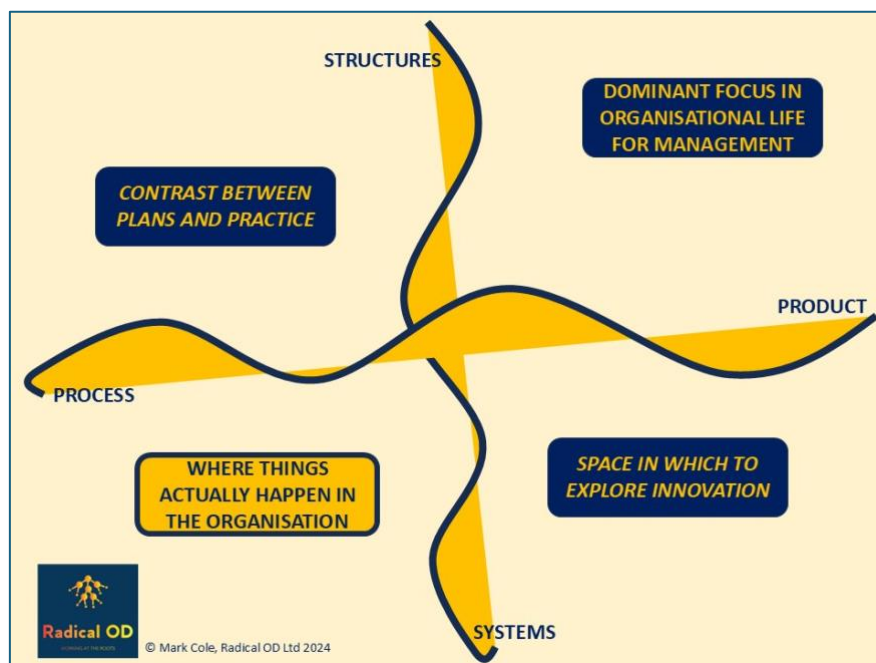
## Exploring Below the Organisational Surface

Alongside these intellectual restraints, our experience of the workplace tends towards an intense focus on superficial aspects of organisational life. My perspective on this is deeply informed by the work of two crucial writers in the field, both of whom acknowledge what is often seen to be in the foreground – but then usher us away from that fixation to attend to what can be seen to be in the background.

On the one hand, back in 1969, Karl Weick, in a discussion of the social psychology of organisations, made the distinction that any company offers a space for both *organising* and *organisation*: the former is the practice of people coming together in pursuit of a shared aim, while the latter is often seen as the bureaucratised carapace that arises as the business of organising progresses.

On the other, the work on group dynamics of Harold Bridger – who worked in the field with Wilfrid Bion in an exploration of the psychodynamics of the workplace – makes a vital distinction between the *Primary Task* – the business of the business, the processes and procedures that determine what a company produces in terms of goods and/or services – and the *Double Task*, which is the how and why things happen in this context, in respect to the relations and connectivity between the people working together.

In this diagram, I endeavour to merge these two perspectives, so as to give us insight into where the focus tends to reside when it comes to organisational life – and where we might usefully turn our attention in order to support people to understand, engage with, and enhance their experiences at work.



Ultimately, combining these two standpoints should – at the very least – encourage us to move below the surface in order to focus on how things happen in the workplace. It is arguable that the main focus in most companies is on outputs and how they are delivered; this

neglects the relational and communicative mesh of connections which is where the work and the people that combine to do it actually reside.

### **Denying Complexity**

Overwriting constrained thinking and a focus on structure in contrast to systems, there is the fundamental idea that the world around us will yield to linear cause-and-effect interventions, even though we all reside in a complex world that cannot be sensibly thought to be susceptible to a simple relationship between action and outcome.

In our very recent history, the corporate world very much experienced the wider world as somewhere that was uncertain and unknowable. A global pandemic, appearing from nowhere and unfolding in an unforecastable fashion, really should have underscored from the frontline to the board room that we cannot control circumstances, merely make sense of them and experiment in the course of our immersion in them. This runs counter to the somewhat God-like conceit that human beings have the capacity to be both omniscient and omnipotent.

Experience – including that of trying to respond to the Coronavirus – should remind us that it is mere hubris to imagine that humankind can mechanically intervene in situations – and that action A will guarantee predicted outcome B again and again. Instead, we should prepare ourselves to accept the idea that the world in which we find ourselves is unknowable and uncertain, so our existence in such circumstances needs to be carefully reconsidered.

### **Managerial Obsession with Business and Pace**

Before the corporate world became filled with discussion of leadership, management was the traditional approach wherein those who looked to supervise and oversee sought in practice to support, direct and control the approach, ideas and actions of the workforce; it was also apparent that these two sides of the same coin could quite easily have differing agendas, which – in turn – could lead to conflict.

The position taken by management could on occasion be seen to run counter to that of the workforce as a whole or to key groups of employees. Holding differing views in terms of analysis and expectation meant that there was a potential for conflict, which was something acknowledged in the time when organisations were segmented in this way.

One argument exists that the idea of leadership in corporate settings has arisen as a way of ideologically disguising those fissures. Instead of the tension of managers and employees, facing down each other, we are confronted not with a dichotomy but with a relational connection, namely a mutually acknowledged connection between the leader and their followers.

Because leadership indicates a step away from practical management (although it can be said that managerialism persists in a shrouded fashion in the structures of leadership that exist in organisations), it struggles as a practice to justify itself through defining what it is that it is suggested to do. Those who carry the title of leader – particularly at a senior level – can be seen to have drifted away from the practicalities of how things get done in the company and are thereby compelled to engage themselves with epiphenomenal practices distanced from

the frontline of work, such as drafting visions, missions, values and strategies...things that barely impact in any meaningful way what gets done and how in a firm.

Those who define themselves as leaders – in keeping with the wider managerialist agenda – also end up casting themselves as cheerleaders for speed and accelerated performance – which focuses everyone on getting stuff done without necessarily reflecting on practice, critically interrogating the way in which things are done, and discussing fresh ways of thinking about and doing the work that needs to be done to generate the outcomes that are required.

The leader, after all, is seen to be a decisive individual, someone equipped to come to a speedy conclusion and see it rapidly put into practice. It is also seen as a directive as opposed to a connective practice, where people follow the leader and unthinkingly do their bidding in light of the position accorded to them.

Moreover, pace and busyness have a tendency to become badges of senior leadership pride, with people endlessly both celebrating and condemning how busy they are, whilst – at the same time – demanding busyness and pace of those around them. Far too many people in positions described as leadership declare their busyness to be a virtue, something integral to being a leader in a corporate setting. Far too few call a halt to their packed days and back to back meetings so as to allow themselves to actively consider whether that actually is or should even be thought to be the case.

#### **4. MANAGERIALISM & LEADERSHIP**

##### **The Leader as Superhero**

Notwithstanding the 57 varieties of leadership that can be found on the shelves of the Heathrow Academy, it remains the case that – behind the presumption of a cosy relationship between leaders and followers – a traditional idea of leadership prevails. We may pontificate about servant leaders and such like – but the actuality of leadership in contemporary contexts in my experience suggests that the role model that persists is something akin to Henry V.

The person occupying a formal leadership position is far too often cast as some kind of deeply insightful visionary. Largely defined as being both heroic and individualistic, it is both a way of being in leadership roles and also a template of how to be in an organisational setting, a model to be actively pursued by everyone in corporate life.

The [Babble Hypothesis](#) suggests that those who occupy most airtime in an organisational context will be identified as the leader by those around them...and also those without formal position who dominate this context will be seen as most likely to progress into leadership.

All of which conspires to put the leader – in terms of their traditional presence and practice – very firmly on a pedestal, which serves to create an ever widening gap between those who take it upon themselves to run organisations and those who immerse themselves organising in order to achieve a shared outcome. Instead of speaking intimately with one another, this leads to the two sides – if indeed they even bother to try to connect, which too often in the

workplace does not happen – shouting across a void, with the uppermost voice louder and more dominant to those coming up from below.

If the leadership ideal is of an heroic and decisive individual, as I have sought to suggest, there would seem to be very limited permission in terms of people taking time to come together to discuss experience and posit new ideas.

### **The Illusion of Structurelessness**

Between the mainstream and fringes of organisational thinking, we find writers and organisations promoting the elusive notion of flat, post-bureaucratic companies. This is a vision of leadership that seeks to reject the traditional approach that was outlined above.

It is suggested in work that promotes this way of thinking about organisational structure that this flattening serves to strip out management and leadership. However, the reality looks to be that, contrariwise, it engenders a marked increase in such activity, with a wide range of people inadvertently finding themselves moved into such supervisory and oversight roles, heading up redesigned fragmented segments of corporate structures.

Even if these organisations were successful in diminishing these functions, we would potentially be facing what is outlined in Jo Freeman's exquisite 1970 essay, arising out of anarchistic practice and the women's movement, entitled [The Tyranny of Structurelessness](#). This work reminds us that structure serves a purpose, especially where people have come together to collectively achieve something – and that the absence of structure has the potential to derail progress in that regard. We just need to interrogate structure as and when it appears to ensure that it facilitates what we are seeking to achieve as opposed to hindering and obstructing our efforts in that regard.

### **The Oppressiveness of Managerialism**

Whilst managerialism might presently be overwritten by the ideology of leadership, it remains the case that – regardless of what people in supervisory roles are called – the function is defined in terms of targets, pacesetting, and performance. Whether the person undertaking your annual performance appraisal is defined (or defines themselves) as a manager or a leader (or some hybrid creation that bridges the two concepts), they are holding you to account in terms of what you deliver and the timeliness – by which is meant rapidity – of the appearance of that agreed outcome.

This has been considerably amplified by the development of [neo-liberalism](#) and practical adjuncts of this political philosophy, such as [New Public Management](#). And, now that managerialism is firmly established in the business world – denying conversational space and relational exchanges – it is busily encroaching into our personal realms, as we begin to see the emergence of the [management of everyday life](#). This sees the idea of seeking to control facets of our existence outside of the workplace through a focus on the use of metrics and the idea already critiqued above that we can directly and predictably control the world achieving dominance.

## **5. WAYS OF BEING AND DOING**

## **Power, Hierarchy, Command**

Whether openly acknowledged or not, the workplace is written through with power, like a piece of Blackpool rock. However, it is worth noting that there are two manifestations of power worthy of note in an organisational context. There is one that arises out of the occupation of a position but there is alongside this also another notion of power that emerges out of the social effect arising from the mesh of social relationships that we occupy – and which resides in a world view defined by scientism, wherein data defines normalcy – and, in so doing, puts outliers at the extremes of the bell curve, thereby promoting a vision of normal and thence defining those to be thought of as Other.

In terms of positional power, our workplaces tend to persist with notions of hierarchy, often working under the assumption that such structuration is in some way natural, a position usefully [critiqued by the writer John Child](#). An acceptance of hierarchy and normalcy gives permission for people to occupy supervisory roles in a way that allows them to embrace command-and-control and deny the need to connect with those above, alongside, and – crucially – below them.

## **Challenging Darwinism's Impact in the Workplace**

The Darwinian view of the world is summarised as an adherence to the idea of the survival of the fittest. Whilst the theory of evolution is the dominant discourse in this field of science, a contrary perspective also exists, in regard to Peter Kropotkin's theory of "[mutual aid](#)". Kropotkin's idea is that human beings will naturally want to come together in the face of challenges, as this collective is a way in which humankind can survive and persist.

Contemporary thought on mutual aid – as outlined by writers such as [Rhiannon Firth](#) – talk about *disaster anarchy*. This theory asserts that, in the face of difficulty and tragedy, where oftentimes the state itself is found wanting in terms of its reactions, informal responses arise in light of people coming together to address the challenges faced. This was seen in terms of reactions to localised problems, such as Hurricane Katrina but also in light of the need to respond to the needs of populations across the globe in response to the Covid pandemic.

Our workplaces feel dominated by an ideological distortion of Darwin's work on evolution. It makes sense to counterbalance this view with a perspective that offers a greater focus on our capacity for cooperation and – crucially, in light of the challenges faced by humanity – by collective intelligence. A climate of pace, busyness and delivery inhibits the idea that we might take time to come together to make sense of our situation and to explore what our various thoughts are in terms of responding to where we find ourselves.

## **Prevalence of Silence and Disregard of Voice**

In our book entitled [The Great Unheard at Work](#), John Higgins and I researched and wrote about the experience of voice and silence in organisations. We noted that there are multiple seemingly open and notionally honest invitations to speak...but that circumstances mean that the power in the situation may well lead people to be silenced or to actively choose silence.

Moreover, we found that being invited to speak might mean that someone looks to be listening (although sometimes this may not even feel to be the case) but looking like you're listening and actually hearing what a person is trying to say to you are very much two different things. In response to this, we often make the observation that we should listen so as to hear; hear so as to understand; understand so as to create a conversational space into which we can step in order to connect.

### **The Denial of Dialogue**

That appearance of listening and failure to hear can be found in most corporate settings these days. It creates the illusion of paying attention whilst allowing those in charge of our organisations to focus on their agenda of driving things forward. Let me here offer two prime instances of where busyness, pace and focus on action had a hugely deleterious effect.

To begin with, we should pause and remind ourselves of the Challenger disaster back in 1986, with the 1990 film called [Challenger](#) powerfully demonstrating that action overwhelmed dialogue in this corporate context with disastrous consequence.

Similarly, [Peter Robison's 2021 book](#) explores the way in which Boeing's corporate culture and focus on delivery can be shown to be the major explanation of the 737 Max accidents that led to significant yet avoidable loss of human life.

## **6. TYING THINGS TOGETHER**

In this diagram, I have tried to indicate how the constellation of issues in organisational life that I have spoken about above dictate a dominant corporate culture that constrains our ability to move beyond pace, busyness and performance to a situation where we would have time to think.

And it is not merely a matter of [thinking alone, like the Rodin statue](#): such a shift would instead hopefully open up the possibility of a greater level of genuine collaboration and the development of an understanding of the world (and the generation of fresh ideas about how humankind could live differently in this context) that arises collectively.

Some of these issues are integral to our humanity, so just need to be acknowledged. Some feel like impositions in terms of accepted thinking or expected practice; these need to be actively challenged. Overall, we need to engage with the current view of the world in a way that generously challenges it, thereby potentially opening up a space for a different way of being and doing in our workplaces.

This is a major ambition – and there are all manner of reasons why it feels as though it may not be achievable. But current corporate contexts deny our humanity and our capacity to connect, so we need to embrace the idea that the existing approach cannot be left unchallenged...and we need to test new ways of co-existing in our companies, which might improve the experience of our lives in that place and allow it to organically develop a different level of effectiveness.

# Humankind & Time



Temporality



Industrialisation



Time machine



Speed

# Structures & Systems



Leadership Focus + Pride



Myths



Action A = Outcome B



Structure, Network, System

© Mark Cole, Radical OD 2024



Traditional leadership



Managerialism



Structurelessness

# Managerialism & Leadership



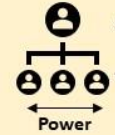
Voice + Silence



Dialogue



Mutual Aid



Power

# Ways of Being & Doing

To find out more about the research and thinking that underpins this piece, please check out the following:

<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.markcole.org">www.markcole.org</a>
<b>Blog</b>	<a href="http://www.radicalod.org">www.radicalod.org</a>
<b>Email</b>	<a href="mailto:radicalod@colefellows.co.uk">radicalod@colefellows.co.uk</a>

 <p><b>RADICAL ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT</b> MARK COLE</p>	 <p><b>LEADERSHIP UNRAVELLED</b> THE FAULTY THINKING BEHIND MODERN MANAGEMENT MARK COLE and JOHN HIGGINS</p>	 <p><b>The Great Unheard at Work</b> Understanding Voice and Silence in Organisations Mark Cole and John Higgins</p>
<p><a href="#">CLICK HERE FOR DETAILS</a></p>	<p><a href="#">CLICK HERE FOR DETAILS</a></p>	<p><a href="#">CLICK HERE FOR DETAILS</a></p>