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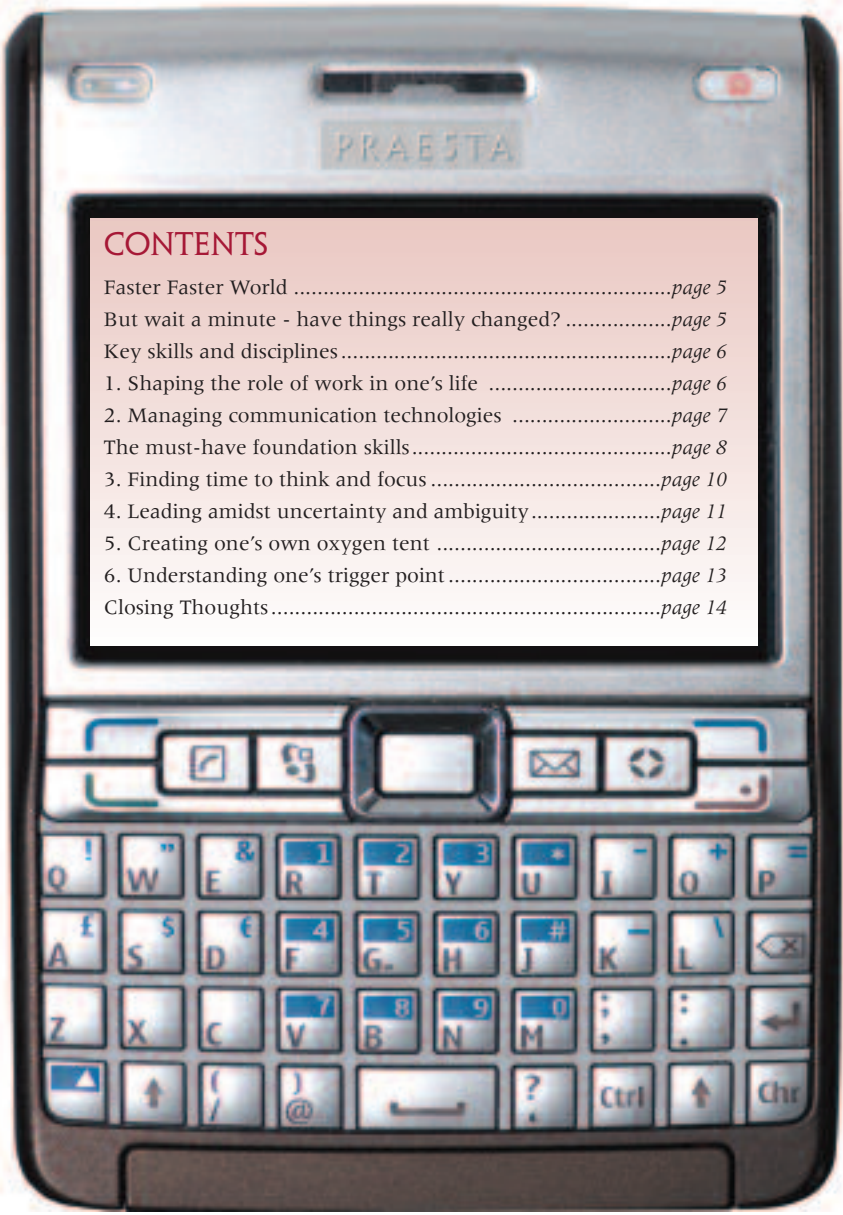
FASTER  
FASTER

WORLD

BY  
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PRAESTA

LEADERS IN EXECUTIVE COACHING



## CONTENTS

Faster Faster World .....	page 5
But wait a minute - have things really changed? .....	page 5
Key skills and disciplines .....	page 6
1. Shaping the role of work in one's life .....	page 6
2. Managing communication technologies .....	page 7
The must-have foundation skills .....	page 8
3. Finding time to think and focus .....	page 10
4. Leading amidst uncertainty and ambiguity .....	page 11
5. Creating one's own oxygen tent .....	page 12
6. Understanding one's trigger point .....	page 13
Closing Thoughts .....	page 14

## FASTER FASTER WORLD



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Work, at senior levels, in the 21st century has accelerated – many executives find themselves in what we call a “faster-faster” world, with unrelenting pressure, global travel and high performance expectations. Yet, contrary to popular belief, many individuals thrive in this pressured environment. How is this possible? We decided to explore this question and draw together what other executives could learn from those who cope well, because this shift to a “faster-faster world” has been so noticeable in our coaching practice.

## BUT WAIT A MINUTE – HAVE THINGS REALLY CHANGED?

Some point out that senior executives were expected to work long hours in the 20th century, often in highly pressured environments. But executives tell us that the nature and pace of work has changed noticeably in more recent years:

- There is far less time for leaders to settle into bigger and more demanding roles.
- These roles hold challenges that are more varied, numerous and complex.
- Decision making must be faster, leaving little time for consultation and reflection.
- Information from voicemail, email, text messages, websites and “hard copy” documents can deluge senior executives and distract them from

thinking and maintaining strategic focus.

- Boundaries between work and personal time are more porous. Many executives have global responsibilities in different time zones, their sleep and work patterns are disrupted by world travel, and there is a creeping sense of needing to be “available” constantly, with the help of communication technology.

It is notable that those who thrive in this new environment appear to see these trends as opportunities – opportunities to move quickly on major initiatives, to engage with employees and customers around the world using today’s exciting communication technology, and to build new businesses.

So, what skills, disciplines and attitudes underpin the executive who thrives in this faster-faster world?

## KEY SKILLS AND DISCIPLINES

We have observed that there are certain skills and disciplines that allow some individuals not only to survive but even to thrive. The first is a classic set of skills that every successful executive must have. These non-negotiable skills have become even more critical given the sheer complexity and speed of business today. They provide the foundation for success (see pages 8 and 9). But there is also another set of disciplines that gives some executives the edge, allowing them to thrive in a faster-faster world. This paper explores these “faster-faster” disciplines, starting with “shaping the role of work in one’s life”.

### 1. SHAPING THE ROLE OF WORK IN ONE’S LIFE

We have noticed that executives who believe “my life is my own” are a step ahead. They have clarity on the key tenets of their life – what is

important to them, what they would like to achieve, and how they want to lead their lives. They may not have been successful all the time, but they approach their life and work with a positive attitude. They have a sense of choice about the role of their career in their life.

One size does not fit all. Some are fulfilled by working hard in demanding jobs – and they have made that deliberate choice. For others, a different balance between work and family life is appropriate. Some protect weekends and holidays, others appreciate the flexibility of interweaving work and personal life throughout the day – for example, taking children to school, working, getting home early, and working late at night. The notion of uniformly separate times for work (e.g. 8am-6pm) and personal activities (e.g. evenings and weekends) is shifting towards each individual finding a balance that works for him or her.

Whatever their personal rhythm, executives who can see choices feel liberated from the sense of “being done to” or out of control. They may not get all they ask for, but they are often surprised at what they can achieve.

## 2. MANAGING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

In the early 2000s, many executives found themselves swamped by emails and voicemails. They were sucked into the middle of issues that really belonged to other executives or managers. Communication technology can draw executives into a level of detail that is unproductive, thus pushing decisions inappropriately up the line. Moreover, the ubiquitous “ccing” of email allows individuals to abdicate responsibility with the phrase “but we told you so”.

There is now published evidence that interruptions – e.g. through emails, voicemails, instant messaging – reduce productivity. Not surprisingly, then, some executives are beginning to think carefully about the signals they

## THE MUST-HAVE FOUNDATION SKILLS

One, perhaps surprising, insight from our conversations with executives is that thriving in a faster-faster world means really mastering some basic, classic management skills. These skills need practice and updating as responsibilities and circumstances change. Successful leaders master all three:

### 1. BUILD CAPABILITY AROUND THEM

Those who thrive in a faster-faster world recognise and act on the following principles in building a team:

- They cannot do it all by themselves.
- They understand where, as leaders, they can add value.
- They know when to be hands-off or hands-on.

With these principles and skills, leaders can shape a team with complementary skills. This enables them to focus their energy on the right issues, and it gives their colleagues the space to take on responsibilities.

### 2. DISTINGUISH CLEARLY WHAT MATTERS

Without question, a senior executive needs to master the skill of sorting and synthesising information to get to the heart of an issue. This includes:

- Asking questions so they really understand what is going on, what colleagues think, what the options are

- Listening carefully to colleagues, clients and advisors to help build an understanding of what is important
- Stepping back and asking oneself “what is going on here?”, “what matters?”

Many of our clients appreciate that they need time to do this, either by themselves or in conversations with colleagues. What they find challenging is carving out that time (see faster-faster skill number 3: Finding time to think and focus).

### 3. PLAN AND THINK AHEAD

This skill may seem self-evident, but it definitely helps to manage stress. It includes:

- Understanding when key initiatives will need attention
- Identifying important events and then managing one’s time and energy around these
- Managing the expectations of colleagues, friends and family.

#### EXAMPLE: CREATING A PICTURE OF WHAT’S COMING UP

One executive we know carries with him an A4 notebook containing a hand-written matrix. The left hand column lists key projects and stakeholders while the top shows the months. In the body of the matrix, he writes key points such as when he needs to see someone, project milestones, etc. Thus, at a glance he can see where the stress points are and whether an important initiative is behind or ahead. This simple tool for thinking ahead may not be for everyone but it will work for some.

send out on how they wish their organisations to work with communication technology. By actively managing how they use these technologies themselves, they find they can enhance both their own productivity and their organisation's. Modern technology has increased the pressure to "be on call" or be available all the time, but our experience is that those who thrive in the faster-faster world make very clear where their boundaries are. At times, they switch off "being available", by turning off their mobile phones and email.

### 3. FINDING TIME TO THINK AND FOCUS

Senior executives' days are typically splintered – one-minute conversations, two-hour meetings, social chit chat, a 15-minute catch up with a direct report, a 30-minute video conference, and so on. In this world, executives are finding it more difficult to focus their attention and energy on a single issue, person or activity. In spite of this, and because of it, carving out time to think and focus remains critical to the success of any executive.

Indeed, evidence is mounting from research that "our hyper-connected world is making it difficult to think". First, technology has the capacity to overwhelm people with information from multiple sources. Second, the speed of today's communication technologies encourages people to think that it is "good" to make decisions faster, respond more quickly to issues, and get projects done faster. Slow is equated with "bad".

We have also seen increasing numbers of executives concerned about their ability to multi-task. Indeed, some see multi-tasking as a key part of their success. Work is defined as skimming from one topic to another, in a vortex of emails, voicemails and text messages, while moving from one short meeting or conversation to another. Our experience indicates, however, that this approach to work – operating in mini slices of time and constantly multi-tasking – is at times useful but is not a prerequisite for success at senior levels.

In this fractured working life, it is even more critical that executives find time for deep focus. This enables them to step back and reflect thoughtfully on a business issue, on how they are doing, or on a particularly knotty problem, without distractions. This focused time has a different quality from checking off a to-do list or reacting to what others are saying or doing around one.



Executives have told us about some of the approaches that have helped them find time to focus: changing the physical environment (e.g. working away from a cluttered desk), engaging in conversation/dialogue with a trusted colleague/friend/mentor, writing out pros and cons, going for a walk, working half a day at home. Whatever the approach, finding time to focus and think pays dividends with greater clarity and perspective and renewed energy.

## 4. LEADING AMIDST UNCERTAINTY AND AMBIGUITY

This is the ability to lead when one does not have all the answers, to make decisions without all the information, and to keep going amidst constantly changing circumstances. Executives who respond well to change appear to be comfortable with “not knowing”. They display flexibility and adaptability in more than one sense. The Centre for Creative Leadership in the US has identified three types of flexibility:<sup>3</sup>

- Emotional flexibility. Ability to vary one’s approach in dealing with emotions. This involves being aware of one’s own emotions as well as the emotions of others, balancing one’s doubts with a positive attitude, and combining listening/talking with directing/making decisions.

- Cognitive flexibility. Ability to look at things in different ways. This means continually watching for the need to change approach, and then creating the appropriate strategy or response.
- Dispositional flexibility. Ability to display realistic optimism in the midst of change and, at the same time, tolerate ambiguity.

Adaptability allows leaders to “let go” of the strain of always being certain. They learn the skill of knowing what they can and cannot control. It is as if they have the ballast needed to remain steady as they are knocked and buffeted from all sides.

## 5. CREATING ONE'S OWN OXYGEN TENT



Executives who know how to maintain their own mental, physical and emotional vitality cope more effectively with the stresses of their jobs. They build in time for their “oxygen tent” or “oxygen pocket” – e.g. a hobby, a physical endeavour, a cultural interest or charitable work. An oxygen tent, separate from holidays and normal family activities, gives executives

energy and refreshes them at many levels – mentally, physically and spiritually. It is an activity for themselves and no-one else. It can be thought of as a form of “enlightened self interest”, providing a space for renewal in the hectic business of leading organisations. Put simply, without a chance to recharge, the battery runs down.

## 6. UNDERSTANDING ONE'S TRIGGER POINT

Finally, even those who master all the disciplines mentioned so far will hit upon the occasional hellish day, when they simply feel overwhelmed. Some executives have found ways to deal with such stressful moments.

The key is understanding one's "trigger point". As Edward Hallowell puts it in his book *Crazy Busy*, this is when we move from the C-state (clear, calm, cool, collected, consistent, concentrated) to the F-state (frenzied, frantic, flustered). In the F-state, we "lose it". We know it is coming when we feel we are about to snap, or sense we are running with "empty" on the fuel tank gauge. If we understand what can bring us to this point – lack of sleep, too many back-to-back meetings, days of constant interruptions and demands – we can figure out how to avoid flipping.

So, how can we anticipate and deal with such trigger points? Of course, getting enough sleep and eating well is a good start. But what some executives also find helpful in moments of feeling overwhelmed is going for a short walk (even 5-10 minutes) to clear their head, taking a few minutes between meetings to call a friend or partner, going to get a glass of water, or talking to a colleague for a few minutes. In other words, in the midst of an unrelenting day, they find they can regain their composure by pausing, changing pace, and varying the activity – even if only for a few minutes.

Research on the interplay between our emotions and the neural and endocrine processes provides a fascinating basis for what happens when we hit a trigger point or stressful time in our day. Our limbic system (thalamus, amygdala, hypothalamus, insula) regulates our emotions by responding to what our senses tell us. As an older part of the human brain, it is quite powerful. The cerebral cortex, on the other hand, is the centre for thinking, discernment, making choices and judging. When in balance, the circuitry works between the limbic system and cerebral cortex

and we are able to register how we feel about a situation. We can evaluate, make decisions and feel balanced. In comparison, when under stress, negative emotions can cause the circuitry to break down. We lose attention, balance and perspective and make poor choices.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Clearly there are many skills to be mastered as a leader – including some that we have not discussed here, such as being able to create a vision, inspire people to pursue it, and ensure that key processes are in place. But our conversations with executives have convinced us that there are distinctive sets of skills and disciplines that can be developed in order to thrive in the faster-faster world of the 21st century.

### SOME PRACTICAL THINGS TO TRY OUT TODAY

- Carve out 1-2 hours fortnightly in the diary to think, reflect or discuss issues with a colleague without interruption
- Find a colleague, advisor, coach or mentor whose judgement and experience you respect. Use this person as a sounding board, to help you step back and focus on what really matters.
- If your assistant is not already screening and placing your emails in priority folders, start today. A PA can screen all emails and put them in folders – e.g. check urgently, action needed, and reading. Design your own categories.
- Ask yourself how you are using communication technologies. What example are you sending to the organisation? Are you, for example, answering emails at midnight, or reacting too quickly to non-urgent requests?
- Build in time for your ‘oxygen tent’ – a hobby, a sport activity, cultural pursuit – that is separate from holidays.

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