

Leaders: Sometimes Your Best Move Is Calling A 'Time-Out'

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'Move fast and break things' is overly glorified. Here's when you should take a strategic pause, says this CEO.



[Source Illustration: Freepik]

In sports, time-outs are a strategic weapon. Super Bowl teams don't just go full speed from kickoff until the clock runs out; they pause at the right moments to regroup, recalibrate, and regain momentum. In business, the same principle applies. High-performing teams know when to stop, reassess, and make adjustments before forging ahead.

Yet, in our relentless, always-on work culture, calling a time-out can feel counterintuitive. Speed is glorified. We celebrate hustle. For many, Mark Zuckerberg's motto, "Move fast and break things," has been the dominant approach to innovating in the digital age. And now, with AI supercharging efficiency, the obsession with speed has only intensified.

But the most effective teams don't just move fast. They move with purpose. And that requires knowing when to slow down.

Slowing Down to Speed Up

I often tell my teams, “We need to slow down to speed up.” It sounds paradoxical, but strategic pauses prevent wasted effort, misalignment, and burnout.

A time-out recalibrates and ensures you’re moving in the right direction. Velocity, after all, is not just speed; it’s speed with direction. Without thoughtful direction, we risk climbing the ladder of success only to realize it’s leaning against the wrong wall.

This is the difference between playing a finite game—focused on short-term wins—and an infinite game, where the goal is enduring growth, adaptability, and purpose. Many organizations default to the former, focusing on immediate metrics, quarterly targets, and rapid iterations. The best leaders, however, recognize that time-outs are an investment in lasting success.

When to Call a Time-Out

So how do you know when to pause? Here are a few critical moments:

Before a Major Launch or Initiative:

When we launched Glean out of stealth, we took a 10-day time-out first. We had set an aggressive timeline—less than 60 days to name and position the company, build a website, and create all external marketing materials. To ensure alignment, we held large team meetings, reinforcing our founder’s commitment to transparency and buy-in. This extra time, even though it pushed our launch back, allowed us to refine our narrative, resolve key debates, and iterate daily. It also gave us the runway to secure an exclusive interview, integrate customer quotes, and orchestrate a “rolling thunder” campaign to sustain postlaunch momentum. Far from slowing us down, this approach set the stage for Glean to become a \$4.6B+ company.

When You Need to Regain Control of the Game:

Great sports teams use time-outs to stop an opponent’s momentum and reset their game plan. In business, if execution starts feeling reactive instead of proactive, it’s time to pause. Often this means shipping another random feature, versus solving real problems. Look internally at your company’s “why” and reset around your original motivation for solving a big problem, and how you uniquely solve it.

When Leaders Need to Update Their Assumptions:

When major industry shifts happen—like disruptive technological advances or regulatory changes—leaders need to take stock. A perfect example is the emergence of DeepSeek, an open-source large language model. The rapid advancement of highly capable, low-cost, and open-source AI models is forcing companies like OpenAI, Google, and Microsoft to rethink their AI strategy. For their leaders, now is the time to call a strategic time-out to ask, are we still prioritizing the right AI strategies, or do we need to pivot to a more flexible, modular approach? Ignoring change and plowing ahead can be a recipe for disaster.

To Prevent Burnout and Sustain High Performance:

Elite athletes don't train at full intensity 24/7. They build in recovery time. Yet, in business, we expect people to sprint indefinitely. I learned this lesson the hard way as Evernote's CEO. I didn't take a meaningful break for two years, and it led to burnout and costly hiring mistakes. A well-timed pause can prevent these long-term setbacks.

Making Strategic Pauses Part of Your Culture

Many teams resist time-outs because they confuse activity with progress. Leaders need to reframe pauses as a competitive advantage, not a loss of momentum. Here's how:

Embed retrospectives into your cadence:

Great coaches make halftime adjustments; great businesses do the same. Frequently review what's working and what's not, and adjust accordingly. Regular offsites, strategy refreshes, and retrospectives ensure course corrections happen before the business veers off track. This avoids an emergency reset later.

Set three strategic priorities at a time:

At GrowthLoop, rather than sweating over every KPI we can measure, we focus on a few vital things around our product, processes, and people that must be true for our customers and team to win. This ensures our team stays focused on what truly moves the needle.

Emphasize deep work:

Elite athletes don't just train haphazardly; they work with intention. They break down their training into focused components—honing agility, refining technique, and studying game film to anticipate their next move. The best business leaders do the same. Instead of glorifying constant busyness, they prioritize deep work—uninterrupted, high-focus sessions where real breakthroughs happen. It's not about doing more; it's about doing what matters most with absolute focus. This more productive work prevents wasted energy and allows time for proper recovery.

The Best Teams Know When to Stop

John Wooden, one of the greatest basketball coaches of all time, once said: "Be quick, but don't hurry." It's a lesson I remind myself of constantly. Speed alone won't win the game—velocity will.

Making strategic pauses a part of your culture and recognizing when to stop and refocus will keep everyone moving in the right direction, together.

So, the next time your team is running hard but you sense a lack of alignment, don't be afraid to call a time-out. It might be the most important play you make.