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Insights on Speed and Quality

**A Conversation with
Dr. Jack Zenger and Dr. Joe Folkman**



Dr. Jack Zenger and Dr. Joe Folkman

In this edition of the Zenger Folkman podcasts series, Cheryl Snapp Conner turns the table and interviews Dr. Jack Zenger and Dr. Joe Folkman to discuss their new book, *Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution* and the upcoming Zenger Folkman Speed workshops.

Cheryl Snapp Conner is a columnist, author, and speaker. She writes ongoing columns on business communications for Forbes and Inc. and authored the Forbes eBook, *Beyond PR: Communicate Like a Champ in the Digital Age*.

This eBook is a short part of that conversation.

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Snapp Conner: Could you quickly define “strengths-based leadership development” for those not familiar with the concept?

Folkman: When I first got into this field, I spent most of my time pointing out what was wrong with people. As we think about improvement, most people try to figure out what they’re good at and then work to improve their weaknesses. When Jack and I got together about 15 years ago, we started to look at that assumption and we discovered a very interesting fact: when we looked at the best leaders, we discovered that they did things well. But we’d spent all of our time focusing on what was wrong with people, not what was right.

In our philosophy, about 80% of the time, you are better off working on your strengths, trying to develop them, and trying to stand out and differentiate yourself than you are working on your weaknesses.

Snapp Conner: I like that. It is a much more positive approach.

Folkman: It is a more positive approach and it really fits our notions about how we can be successful. When we are working on our



weaknesses, oftentimes, people don't really care that much and they don't like it. When we are working on our strengths, we are trying to differentiate ourselves and we are producing the leaders in us. The big "aha" is that it doesn't need to be a huge number of strengths; a relatively small handful make a huge difference.

Snapp Conner: So, become a super hero in the thing you're best at, rather than hammering away at the thing you're worst at?

Folkman: Most of the time, unless you have something we call a "fatal flaw," then we say that you'd better fix that.

Snapp Conner: What impresses me is that you have so much data that you've aggregated from hundreds of thousands of people. In all of your research, what has surprised you the most?

Zenger: What's surprised me the most is how endless the supply of good ideas is when you begin to mine this body of data. Yes, we were fascinated to learn about strengths and how improving a handful of strengths makes an enormous difference. Yes, we were fascinated to see that the top performers make such a huge contribution to the organization in comparison to the average. But for me, what's been the big surprise is that there doesn't seem to be any end to the insights you can gain by mining this data.

Folkman: A few years ago we were looking at the best leaders versus the worst leaders in one organization. As we sorted through the data, we picked out the 20 most-differentiating behaviors, and then we did a factor analysis that clustered these behaviors. We found three behaviors that were clustered—one behavior had "early" and two had "quick" associated with them. These behaviors all came from different



competencies, but when we clustered them, they fit tightly. As we looked at that, we determined that this was talking about speed, and in this one organization, speed seemed to be important.

We kept conducting that study with other organizations, and speed emerged again and again. After we had the same theme emerge 20 or so times, Jack and I thought, “Maybe there’s something there. Maybe the speed of a leader is important.”

Zenger: Speed is not a totally new idea. You can go back to the year 2000 when Jack Welch, in his annual report to GE, talked about the importance of speed, simplicity, and self-confidence. This became a mantra inside GE for a long time. Intuitively, people have known for a long time that speed is important, but no one has really looked into the data behind it. What has been fun about that exercise has been to do it in a more analytical, empirical way.

Snapp Conner: We talk about things like speed of execution, speed to market, and speed of delivery, but what was surprising to me was seeing your data on what a difference speed makes for revenue and even to engagement.

Folkman: Speed affects overall effectiveness. We looked at leaders that were below the 75th percentile on speed and asked, “How effective are they?” And they’d come in at about the 40th percentile. When we looked at leaders that are at or above the 75th percentile on speed, their average effectiveness ratings were at the 83rd percentile—they were twice as effective. This one characteristic seems to have a lot of influence.

We then looked at performance ratings and we found that people that were low on speed had a very small chance of being rated highly and having potential. People that were rated high on speed had a significant chance of being rated high and having great potential. Over and over again, we’d see the influence of speed in terms of helping people have the perception of effectiveness.



The one finding that made us scratch our heads was this engagement thing. As you think about it, is there a point where speed might make people unengaged? We didn't find that. We found that the higher the speed ratings, we went to the 95th, 96th, 97th, 98th, and 99th percentiles, engagement continued to go up. Why is that?

Zenger: I believe that we all enjoy being on winning teams. When we see things moving along efficiently and effectively, there is a sense that speed really does energize people. Back to Jack Welch, in his annual report, he said, "Speed scrapes the barnacles off the bottom of the boat." I think there is something about moving rapidly that people just find exhilarating—people don't seem to get excited about lazily going down a river on a raft.

Folkman: We are getting a little pushback. I mentioned that we wrote a book on speed and someone said, "Why would you want more of that?" I think people in organizations feel pressure and stress; they feel like they are at the end of their wits. When we suggest that we found that people can do everything more effectively by being faster, they'd say, "I can't do it faster. I can't do more." That's not speed, that's frantic activity. And there's a difference.

I have an old truck. When you're riding in my truck and I'm going 80 miles per hour, it feels too fast. Now in a Cadillac, you can go 80 and you won't even notice it and you'll find yourself going 90 or even faster. When we talk about speed, it's about doing things fast and right. It's all relative. Some things feel too fast, but a fast train goes 200 miles per hour and a jet goes 500 miles per hour. I've never said, "I hope this plane slows down a little bit."

Zenger: I think the one fascinating thing about speed is that it is one competency, unlike maybe problem solving or strategic thinking, that has to be accompanied by a partner competency. You've heard the saying, "It takes two to tango." In this case, you can't do speed by itself. It has to be accompanied by quality—by doing things right. It's only when those two are put together that things really go well.

Speed is a different competency than other leadership behaviors that we've studied. Speed absolutely has to have its partner. When you've reached a certain level of quality, doing more and more quality doesn't create value to the firm. After you've met the customers' needs and expectations, it is the speed that produces the huge amount of value to the organization. Speed provides the big accelerator.

Snapp Conner: I was astonished to find that when you have that magic combination, revenue increases so much. That's like the golden ticket.

Folkman: I think we've had some difficult discoveries about the issue of speed and quality. Samsung clearly discovered that with the Galaxy 7. They were in this race to beat the iPhone 7 to market, and they did, but there was a cost—it blows up.

Here's a case where speed was critical, but they didn't look at quality. I know that if we could get in the archives, we would find an email from some engineer indicating that there were problems with the battery. Nobody listened because Samsung was just trying to get it out. That's not speed. Speed is doing things fast and right.

As we looked at speed more and more, we asked the question, "How do leaders increase their speed?" We went to the data and looked at 54,000 leaders to try to answer that question. What we found is that there are what we call "companion behaviors" that are enabling behaviors that help people to move faster.

Snapp Conner: I've read some articles that you've written about how to coach leaders to raise their speed without being obnoxious about it, things like ending conversations or walking somebody to the door. What are some of the things people can do to make that easier?

Folkman: There are some things that we call "linear behaviors." It is interesting that people fear short conversations. We asked a group of people, "Have you ever had a great coaching conversation with your manager? And how long did it take?" We were thinking they'd say an



hour or two, but the average was 15 minutes. These were impactful conversations, but they were fairly short. I think people can have shorter conversations. Jack wrote a paper called Brilliance in Brief. What were some of your suggestions, Jack?

Zenger: I was amused by an executive from India who told me that when people come into his office, he says, “You need something. What is it that you need?” They describe the situation, and he replies, “Fine. I agree. Thank you very much.” He then stands and the person leaves. It is amazing how you can have very productive conversations if you send the signal that you want to get to the point and you want to move the conversation along. We think some of these linear behaviors that can really make a difference include the ability to manage these brief interactions that happen all during the day. You should make those efficient and productive, but not prolong them.

Meetings. The average person spends 15% of his or her time during a workweek in meetings. In some organizations it’s a lot more. How do you make those meetings productive? Improving meetings is a major thing that can be done to make the workweek progress.

Folkman: I recently asked a group, “Would the organization be hurt if every meeting was shorter?” Imagine what would happen if every meeting were 15 minutes shorter.

Those are the linear things you can do to increase speed, but the companion behaviors are non-linear: they are not logical or obvious. For instance, we found that leaders that have a clear strategy and vision are faster. You’ve probably been in situations where you’ve been headed in one direction and another group was headed in another direction. That never results in speed. When people are clear about where they are headed, they are going to get there faster.

Another companion behavior is innovation. About 20 years ago we were working with Hewlett Packard in the UK and we needed to get them a presentation the next day, which was impossible because Federal Express took two days. As we were commiserating, somebody suggested that we email the presentation. This was a new thought because email was new. We could email the presentation, they could print it there, and we saved \$200 in FedEx fees. Emailing documents is now a daily occurrence, but at that time it was an innovation that created speed.



We now use electronic document-signing products. We are creating speed and making things more efficient and there are so many opportunities for innovation.

Snapp Conner: In the past we thought that quality discussions had to happen face to face. Then 9/11 halted everything, but we found other ways, such as video conferencing, to approximate those face-to-face interactions or even make more phone calls.

Folkman: We asked a new salesperson in the Bay Area last week if he makes a lot of visits. He replied, “No. That wastes so much time. I can do three meetings on Skype or GoToMeeting every day versus one if I go visit. I stay off the freeways and talk on the phone or do Skype visits. That’s a lot more efficient.”

Zenger: What was fascinating is that it was the clients who preferred that, not the salesperson. Clients would much prefer not having somebody come and then have to entertain him or her for 45 minutes or an hour. They can have a half-hour sales presentation and be done—better quality and it saves time on everybody’s part.

Snapp Conner: Back to that frantic activity, most people seem to have had a leader who puts them under pressure. What can leaders do to not be like that?

Folkman: That’s an awful lot like driving in my old truck; you don’t feel comfortable going fast because everything is falling apart. There are ways to get the speed without putting on the pressure. If you communicate more effectively, have a clear strategy, and set stretch goals, you automatically get people to move faster because these things tend to



encourage that. Our goal is to take that leader who's driving people crazy and making them frantic and say, "Use these behaviors and you will get you the speed you want without the anger and frustration."

Zenger: Lee Iacocca and Mary Kay Ash (founder of Mary Kay), two very different people, made essentially the same observation: the speed of the leader determines the speed of the team. Rather than having leaders put pressure on their teams, we want leaders to ask themselves, "Am I moving at the right pace? And can I, by being a good role model, help the pace of the organization by me turning things around quickly and by me making things happen?"

There's a great story told about Jeffery Immelt, the CEO of GE. Speaking in front of a group of his colleagues, he said that he wanted everyone to have a personal development plan to which he or she is committed and is aggressively working on. One brave guy raised his hand and asked, "So what's yours?" Without hesitation, Immelt said, "I need to make decisions more rapidly. I tend to agonize over important things and I realize that by taking a lot of extra time thinking and agonizing over it, I slow the organization down. I need to pick up the pace." That's the whole message of leadership speed. It isn't more physical work. It isn't having people be harried. It's simply, let's get on with it and make things happen.

Research has existed for the last 40 or 50 years about the enormous difference in productivity in almost any discipline—medicine, law, academics—between the top performer and the middle person, and certainly in comparison to the bottom person. Alan Eustace, a vice president of engineering at Google, said, "One top-notch engineer is worth 300 times or more than the average." There's a Harvard Business Review article from last November that states that the top performer is four times more productive than the person in the middle." Most of this difference comes because top performers operate at a brisker pace. They get things done.

Snapp Conner: We see companies getting food rooms and foosball tables, having parties, and making investments in fun things. That doesn't appear to be



what’s making the difference for these employees in terms of engagement. You would think that employees would want less pressure and more time, but your research shows the opposite.

Folkman: We all love to get stuff done. If you want to make people angry, have work stop. If you ask people what’s the worst situation they’ve been in, most will talk about a project that got cancelled or having to wait for a decision before moving forward. We used that word “dammed.” People hate that and it doesn’t build engagement. What does build engagement and high commitment is when people accomplish things. People want to do difficult stuff. If you ask them if they would like to do something difficult, they’ll say no. But if you challenge them the right way and get them to accomplish something that is really hard, they realize that they are important. They can make a difference in the world. That’s a great feeling.

Snapp Conner: Your data suggests that the company wins too because revenue goes up. If employees feel that accomplishment and revenue goes up, that’s a double win.

Folkman: That is a double win. There’s no doubt that the speed of an organization is going to increase competitive advantage. Speed is how fast you work and high quality, right? If you can get that combination, you’re going to win in the marketplace and you’re going to win with customers.

Zenger: I want to go back to something you mentioned earlier. We all know companies that have great cafeterias and the food is free. They have lots of snacks, recreation, and dogs are walking around. Do those things help? Yeah, I think they do. You’re too young to remember, but there was a man named Frederick Herzberg who did the original research on motivation in business. His fundamental conclusion was that it is the nature of the work you ask people to do that is the primary

motivator, and if you can help their jobs to be broader, richer, and more challenging, they are far more engaged and motivated. That research goes back 50 or 60 years. I don't think anything has fundamentally changed. It is what you ask people to do that is the primary motivator. Along with that, the relationship between them and their bosses is important to their engagement and the general culture of the organization makes a huge difference. These things are all more important than having free food in terms of lasting engagement.

Snapp Conner: In conclusion, what are your plans for this year?

Folkman: One of the things that we're optimistic about is that we can bring the message of speed to people. AT&T asked us to train 2,000 leaders in 90 minutes in three sessions. We had in-person and online audiences. Because we had this product called Speed, we thought that this better not be a one-day training program!

We've been experimenting further with this type of training. We feel like people can understand the concept of speed, create an action plan for development, fill out a self-assessment, and create an ongoing plan in 90 minutes. It's working so far and we've had good success. This is what we want to continue doing in the next year.

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