

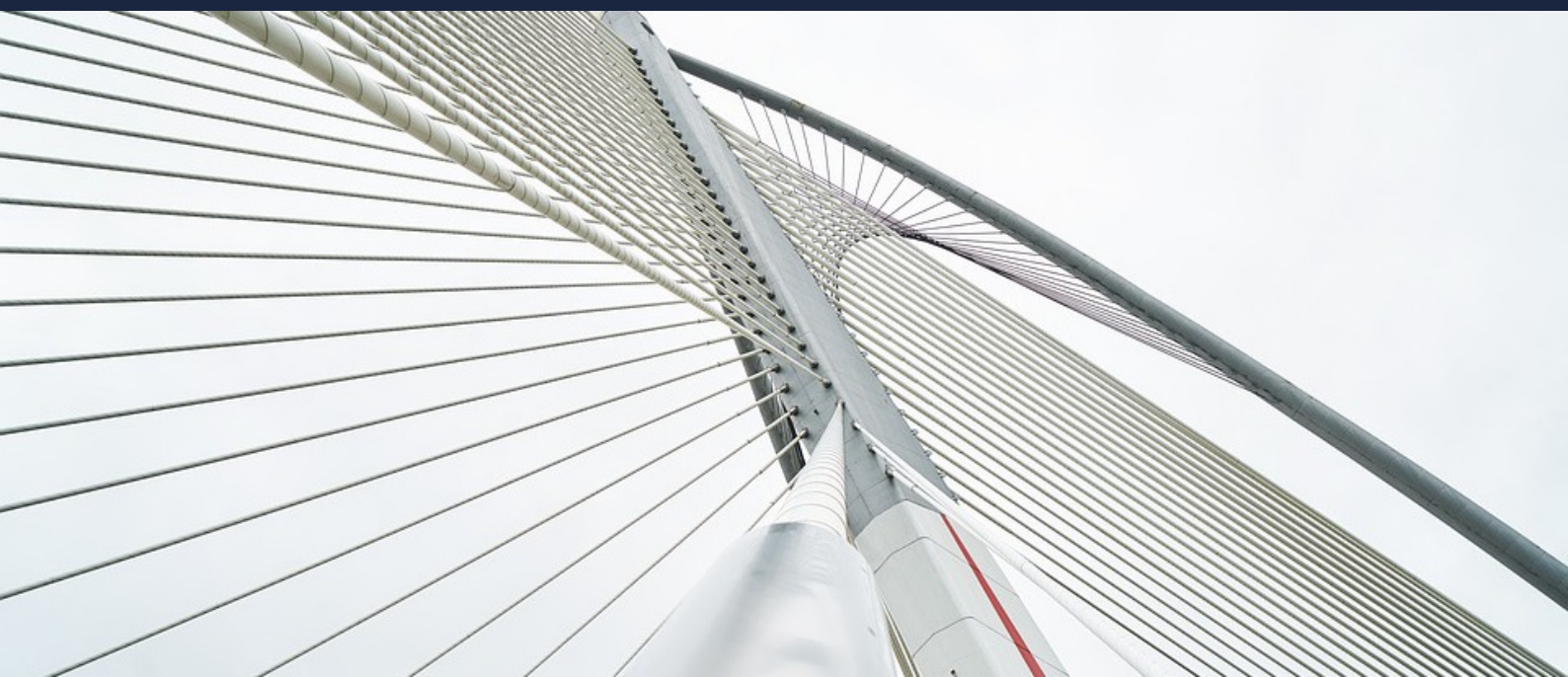
BEYOND VELOCITY

The Case for Slowness — What Should Not Accelerate

Why the Most Capable Organisations Are Learning That Some Friction Is Structural

Giovanni Leonardi

May 2026



Contents

1. Executive Summary	3
2. The Speed That Earns Its Name	3
3. The Category Error	4
4. What Cannot Be Undone	4
5. What Cannot Be Compressed	5
6. What Must Consolidate	6
7. The Voice That Needs a Night	7
8. The Polytemporal Discipline	7

The Case for Slowness — What Should Not Accelerate

Leadership · No. 116
May 2026

"It is an organisation that has stripped the load-bearing slowness from processes that needed it, and is now making consequential mistakes with extraordinary efficiency."

1. Executive Summary

The prevailing operating doctrine of 2026 treats speed as a universal good — and for most of what organisations produce, it is right to do so. But the assumption breaks when applied without discrimination. Some processes are slow not because they are inefficient but because their slowness is load-bearing: it is doing work that acceleration would destroy. This essay identifies four domains where the case for slowness is structural rather than sentimental — irreversible decisions, trust formation, consolidative learning, and dissent — and argues that the emerging discipline of tempo governance, the deliberate orchestration of fast and slow layers within the same organisation, is what separates durable speed from the confident error that fast organisations make at scale. The leaders who will last in this era are not the fastest. They are polytemporal: fast where reversible, slow where it counts, and clear-eyed about which is which.

2. The Speed That Earns Its Name

Every transformation dashboard now includes a velocity metric. Cycle times are published in board packs. "Time to value" has become the phrase that ends debates about whether to invest in something — if the answer is "eighteen months," the initiative is already losing sponsorship. This is not irrational. Organisations that learned to ship faster, decide faster, and restructure faster over the past decade did, in most measurable respects, outperform those that did not. The evidence is not subtle: the consulting firm that cut its methodology from twelve phases to four won work from the one that kept all twelve. The technology function that deployed weekly left the one deploying quarterly competing for the same outcomes with a fraction of the feedback loops.

Speed, in its proper domain, is a genuine capability. The argument of this essay is not against it.

The argument is against its promotion from capability to ideology — the point at which "faster" stops being a description of how a particular process has been improved and

becomes a general-purpose answer to any question about how an organisation should operate. That promotion has happened, largely unexamined, across the past several years. And it has created a specific category error that is now producing failures at a scale worth examining.

3. The Category Error

The error is this: treating the speed of production as the speed of everything.

Production — the creation, testing, and delivery of defined outputs — accelerates beautifully. It yields to automation, to pipeline thinking, to the removal of handoffs and approval gates. The organisations that have invested in continuous delivery, in platform engineering, in the elimination of bureaucratic friction from their build-and-ship processes, were right to do so. We should continue to do so.

But an organisation is not only a production system. It is also a decision-making system, a trust-building system, a learning system, and a dissent-processing system. These other systems operate on different timescales — not because they are badly designed, but because the work they do requires time in the way that fermentation requires time: not as a delay to be optimised away, but as a condition of the output's existence.

The category error is to apply production-speed logic to these other systems. The result is not a faster organisation. It is an organisation that has stripped the load-bearing slowness from processes that needed it, and is now making consequential mistakes with extraordinary efficiency.

The strongest version of the counterargument deserves an honest hearing. Lean thinking — and its descendants in agile, DevOps, and the broader acceleration movement — has always distinguished between value-adding work and waste. Its practitioners would say they are not arguing for speed everywhere, only for the removal of waste everywhere. The distinction matters, and it is correct in principle. The problem is that in practice, the test for "waste" has become "anything that slows the cycle down," and by that test, the load-bearing processes described here look indistinguishable from genuine friction. They are slow. They do not produce measurable output. They resist being decomposed into tickets. And so they are cut — not because anyone decided they were unnecessary, but because the operating system no longer has a place for them.

4. What Cannot Be Undone

The first domain where slowness is structural is the domain of irreversible decisions.

Not all decisions are equal, but most decision frameworks treat them as though they were — varying the level of approval authority by financial threshold or organisational seniority, but not by the one variable that matters most: whether the decision can be reversed if it turns out to be wrong.

The reversibility test is simple and rarely applied. A decision to launch a feature can be reversed by withdrawing the feature. A decision to restructure a division, to exit a market,

to outsource a capability, or to make a public commitment to a regulatory authority cannot be reversed at all, or can only be reversed at a cost that exceeds the original investment by an order of magnitude. These decisions are in a different category — not because they are larger, but because they are irreversible.

I have watched organisations apply the same cycle-time pressure to both categories. The result is predictable: reversible decisions are made at about the right speed, and irreversible decisions are made far too fast — not because anyone wanted to be reckless, but because the operating rhythm of the organisation no longer distinguishes between the two. The weekly sprint cadence, the fortnightly steering committee, the quarterly planning cycle — these rhythms are set for the production layer, and when a decision with a twenty-year consequence arrives, it is processed at the same tempo. The restructuring that should have taken four months of consultation is compressed into six weeks. The technology platform commitment that will shape the next decade is made in a procurement cycle designed for commodity purchases.

The discipline is not to slow everything down. It is to build an explicit reversibility test into the decision architecture: when a decision cannot be undone, it earns the pause. Every time. The pause is not hesitation. It is the recognition that the cost of getting this one wrong is not another sprint but a structural commitment that the organisation will live with for years.

5. What Cannot Be Compressed

The second domain is trust formation — and, more broadly, the relational infrastructure on which complex work depends.

Stakeholder alignment is the example that practitioners will recognise immediately. A major programme requires the sustained commitment of people who do not report to the programme director, whose incentives are not aligned by default, and whose cooperation must be earned rather than mandated. This earning takes time. It takes repeated contact, demonstrated reliability, the slow accumulation of credibility that comes from doing what you said you would do, three or four times in succession, before the relationship carries enough weight to survive the first real disagreement.

We know this. We have always known it. And yet the programme plans we write compress it relentlessly — not out of naivety, but because the planning tools we use have no way of representing it. A Gantt chart can show a "stakeholder engagement" workstream, but it cannot show the difference between a stakeholder who has been briefed and a stakeholder who has been convinced. The first takes an hour. The second takes months. And when the programme hits its first crisis — as every programme does — it is the second that determines whether the coalition holds.

The compression of trust formation is not limited to programmes. It appears in mergers, where the cultural integration that takes three years is funded for eighteen months. It appears in leadership transitions, where the new executive is expected to have built relationships across the organisation within a single quarter. It appears in partnerships, where the contract is signed before the working relationship has had time to reveal whether the two parties can actually collaborate under pressure.

In each case, the pattern is the same: the relational process is treated as a dependency to be managed rather than a condition to be met, and the plan compresses it until it breaks. The breakage rarely shows up as a relationship failure. It shows up as a "governance issue," an "alignment problem," a "cultural disconnect" — the organisational vocabulary for relationships that were never given enough time to form.

6. What Must Consolidate

The third domain is learning that requires consolidation — the human processes that mature rather than download.

There is a category of organisational learning that transfers quickly: a new tool, a new process, a new reporting template. Training works for these. Documentation works for these. They are, in the language of the era, "content" — and content can be delivered at speed.

But there is another category that does not transfer at all. It consolidates. Judgement is the clearest example: the ability to read a situation accurately, to know which of several technically correct options is the right one for this context, to sense when a meeting has shifted from productive to performative. Judgement cannot be taught in a workshop. It forms through repeated exposure to consequence — through making decisions, watching them play out, and integrating the results into an increasingly refined internal model of how things actually work.

Culture is another. The culture of a team or an organisation is not a set of stated values — it is the pattern of behaviour that persists when no one is watching, and it is shaped by hundreds of small signals over months and years. An organisation that tries to "install" a new culture through a change programme discovers, reliably, that the programme can change the vocabulary people use in meetings while leaving the underlying behaviour untouched. The vocabulary changes in weeks. The behaviour changes, if it changes at all, over a period measured in years.

Formation — the development of leaders, of professional identity, of the capacity to hold ambiguity without defaulting to premature certainty — belongs in this category as well. We have largely given up on formation in favour of "development," a word that implies a faster, more modular process. The difference is significant. Development delivers competencies. Formation delivers character. And character, by its nature, is slow — not because the individual is resistant, but because the integration of experience into identity is a process that cannot be accelerated past a certain tempo without producing something brittle where something durable was needed.

The organisations that understand this distinction invest in it: they protect the spaces where consolidation happens — the reflective practice, the mentoring relationship, the after-action review that is conducted slowly enough for genuine learning rather than quickly enough for the minutes to be filed. The ones that do not understand it cut these spaces first, because they produce no measurable output and cannot be justified in a cycle-time framework.

7. The Voice That Needs a Night

The fourth domain is dissent — specifically, the kind of dissent that takes time to form.

Fast decision processes favour the articulate, the confident, and the prepared. They select, systematically, against the person who senses that something is wrong but cannot yet say what, the objection that needs a night to crystallise, the doubt that is felt before it is formulated. These slower voices are not weaker voices. They are often the ones carrying the signal that the faster voices have missed — precisely because the insight requires time to surface from beneath the assumptions that the room has already accepted.

Decision processes that outrun their critics do not produce decisions with no opposition. They produce decisions with no visible opposition — which is more dangerous, because the opposition still exists, unexpressed, and will manifest later as passive resistance, quiet withdrawal, or the retrospective observation, after the failure, that "some of us had concerns at the time."

The discipline here is architectural, not temperamental. It is not about being a patient listener — it is about designing decision processes that structurally protect the space for slower dissent. The overnight rule — no irreversible decision finalised in the same meeting where it is first proposed — is one example. The designated dissenter role, genuinely empowered rather than ceremonially appointed, is another. The pre-mortem, conducted before commitment rather than after failure, is a third.

These are not signs of indecision. They are governance mechanisms designed to capture the signal that speed would otherwise filter out. And they have a direct, measurable effect: the programme that builds in structured dissent makes fewer catastrophic errors than the one that optimises for decision speed. The evidence for this is not dramatic — prevented errors are invisible by definition — but the pattern is consistent enough, across enough contexts, that it should command more attention than it does.

8. The Polytemporal Discipline

What these four domains share is not a general case for going slowly. It is a specific case for tempo governance — the deliberate orchestration of fast layers and slow layers within the same organisation, governed by a clear understanding of which is which.

The metaphor that helps is geological. An ecosystem runs at multiple speeds simultaneously: the fast layer of weather changes daily, the slow layer of geology changes over millennia, and the layers in between — culture, governance, infrastructure — each run at their own characteristic tempo. The system's resilience comes not from running everything at one speed but from the interaction between layers running at different speeds. The fast layers innovate; the slow layers stabilise. Strip the slow layers and the system does not become faster. It becomes fragile.

Organisations work the same way. The production layer should be fast — and in most organisations, it now is. The decision layer should be variable, calibrated to reversibility. The relational layer should be slow enough for trust to form. The learning layer should be

slow enough for consolidation. And the dissent layer should be slow enough for the important objection to find its voice.

The leaders who navigate this well are not the ones who have learned to move fast. Most leaders in 2026 can move fast — that particular skill has been selected for so aggressively over the past decade that it is now table stakes. The differentiating capability is the ability to move at more than one speed — to be polytemporal. To recognise, in the moment, whether this decision, this relationship, this learning process, this objection belongs to the fast layer or the slow layer, and to govern accordingly.

This is harder than it sounds, because the organisational pressure is almost always towards the fast layer. The executive who pauses an irreversible decision to allow another cycle of consultation will be accused of indecision. The programme director who protects the slow stakeholder engagement process will be told that the plan allows for it and the plan is already behind. The leader who holds space for the dissent that has not yet formed will be asked, reasonably, how long they are prepared to wait. The answer — "as long as the reversibility of this decision requires" — is not one that quarterly reporting cycles make easy to defend.

And yet the alternative is what we are now seeing with increasing regularity: organisations that move at extraordinary speed and arrive, with great efficiency, at the wrong destination. The restructuring that was executed in six weeks and unwound over two years. The platform commitment that saved three months of evaluation and cost five years of lock-in. The merger that closed on schedule and failed to integrate because the cultural work was compressed past the point of viability.

The era's category error is not that it values speed. The error is that it cannot distinguish between the speed of production and the speed of everything — and so it strips the slowness that was doing work, and mistakes the absence of friction for the presence of capability.

The case for slowness is not a case against the age. It is the completion of it. The organisations that built the capacity for speed over the past decade did essential work. The organisations that will thrive over the next one will be those that learn which layers that speed should govern — and which it should not. They will be polytemporal: fast where reversible, slow where it counts, and clear-eyed about the difference.

That clarity is not a temperament. It is a discipline. And it is, I believe, the discipline this era has not yet learned to name.