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# Management Is All in the Timing

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BY SALLY BLOUNT AND SOPHIE LEROY

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**T**he pace of business keeps hastening, as advanced technology hypercharges the speed at which data and business opportunities emerge, in addition to increasing the amount and accessibility of those things. Fundamental shifts in market structure have shortened the life cycles of innovation, products, and even executives. CEO tenure in the Fortune 500 has fallen from an average of 11 years in 2002 to six years today. The end result is a pervasive sense of anxiety and time famine, as both companies and the executives within them struggle to keep up.

But speed and urgency, although necessary attributes of leadership, are not sufficient. In fact, our research suggests that the leaders who can tether an obsession with deadlines and time to an ability to sense the work and energy flow of their colleagues will have the most success.

Humans don't experience time with linear consistency. All of us feel an ebb and flow of cognitive alertness and physical energy throughout a day. In the absence of a clock or watch, what feels like a minute or an hour to a person can vary considerably, depending, for example, on how interesting the task at hand is, whether distractions are available, or even what the physical conditions



surrounding the person are. As Einstein is quoted as saying, “Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute, and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour, and it seems like a minute. That’s relativity.”

Cultural anthropologists were the first to recognize that people tend to track time in two ways: clock time and social time. Edward T. Hall’s famous 1983 book, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time* (Anchor Press/Doubleday), first brought this distinction to light cross-culturally. Under clock time, punctuality and predictability are highly valued. Meetings start and end when people say they will. People adhere strictly to deadlines and appointment times. Under social time, by contrast, conversational and relational smoothness

are valued, as is the ability to complete a thought or interaction without abruptness.

Research found that, traditionally, southern European and Latin cultures placed more emphasis on social time and Anglo-Saxon cultures placed more emphasis on clock time. But these cultural differences are beginning to wane as more of the world moves to a global business culture driven by clock time. Still, within the same culture, research has long found significant differences in how people experience time.

## The Importance of Flow

The most well established psychological measure of differences in how people track time is known as *time urgency*. Highly time-urgent people adhere tightly to schedules, lists, and deadlines; they place a value on punctuality. But in our research over the last 10 years, we’ve been exploring the existence of a second dimension to how humans track time, inspired by the cultural differences in time perception that anthropologists have observed and work by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and others on the concept of flow.

We start with the idea that humans in groups like to experience a sense of social synchrony, which we define as alignment in how people perceive and adapt to create a sense of relational smoothness and flow in interaction. In a recent paper we published in *Personnel Psychology*, completed with coauthors Abbie Shipp and John-Gabriel Licht, we showed that even within cultures, people vary widely in the degree to which they notice synchrony in their interactions. What’s more, they vary in their willingness to

adapt their own pace in order to better align with others' pace. We call the willingness and proclivity to adapt the *synchrony preference*. The synchrony preference captures the degree to which a person tracks the pace of other people's behavior and is willing to adapt his or her own behavior to match it, in terms of both speeding up and slowing down.

To make this idea concrete, some examples of the socio-temporal cues that people might use in conversation to indicate a sense of aligned pace include the gentle nodding of one's head and short expressions of "yes" and "that's right." When one wants to speed up another person, one may look at one's watch, nod one's head more rapidly in a way that suggests moving things

along, or express anxiety about taking up others' time. Similarly, to slow things down, one may say "let me stop you there for a minute" or subtly put up one's hand.

In general, we have found that people who score high on synchrony preference are more likely to notice and incorporate these types of cues into their own mental processing and behavior. By contrast, people who rate low on synchrony preference place more value on maintaining their own rhythm or pace in interaction and tend to ignore social cues that might deter them. And when they do align on pace, it is often because they make a point of filling their teams with people who have similar pacing preferences. We have found repeatedly in our own

and others' research that people tend to like coworkers with whom they feel naturally aligned on pace. Pace alignment is often what people feel when they express feeling "flow" or smoothness in an interaction.

In this study, for the first time, we have been able to link the synchrony preference to improved work performance. We have found that people who rate high on synchrony preference not only notice differences in pace with others, but are able to adjust their own behaviors and, in turn, collaborate more effectively with others in the process.

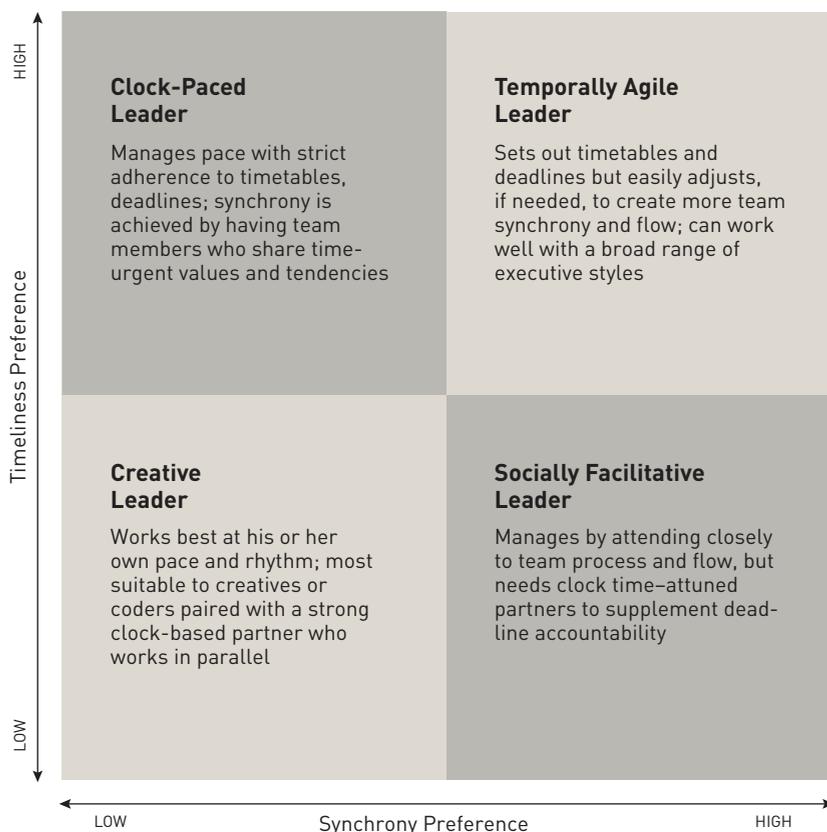
### The Synchronous Leader

People who score high on both synchrony preference and time urgency tend to be better liked, and their contributions are more valued in team settings. They are also more likely to hold leadership positions within their teams. Further, controlling for national culture, we found that executives with high synchrony scores tend to view and experience themselves as interdependent with others, rather than independent, and are more open to new information and experiences and more amenable to multitasking.

These findings show that although effective leaders must be able to keep their teams on schedule and manage time effectively in order to meet deadlines (something at which time-urgent individuals excel), they also need to facilitate interpersonal interactions within these schedules to help employees function as a team (something at which individuals high on synchrony preference excel).

On the basis of our findings, we have developed a framework for teaching executives about the importance of temporal perception in management (see exhibit). We've

Exhibit: **Four Types of Temporal Leadership**



Source: Sally Blount and Sophie Leroy

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identified four temporal leadership types, depicting the degree to which a leader is high or low on both the preference for timeliness (the time urgency measure) and the preference for social synchrony. It also describes how important adhering to self-pacing versus group pacing is considered by different types of leaders.

We find that the most successful leaders fall into the upper right quadrant (temporally agile leaders). Most striking, perhaps, our research suggests that a high score on timeliness is no longer enough to get to the C-suite. In fact, those who score high on timeliness but low on synchrony will find themselves limited in both roles and advancement in our high-speed culture. Those who are able to combine timeliness and synchrony are more likely to affiliate with others and to help them effectively, and less likely to show dominance, autonomy, and impulsivity. They can exhibit give and take. And when a team is under stress, these leaders can pull back to allow team members the kind of breathing room that will lead to long-term resilience. +

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