

Fast company

In this ultra-connected world, Sophie Devonshire helps business leaders thrive by carefully selecting what's important for them, and vitally, what isn't

Interview — Harriet Hirschler

Learning to live and work in a rapidly changing world isn't easy. And the pressure is on for businesses to keep pace with the disruptors shaping the economic landscape.

Someone who understands the challenges and opportunities this presents is Sophie Devonshire, CEO of The Caffeine Partnership, a consultancy which specialises in brand-led business growth.

It's why she wrote *Superfast: Lead at Speed*, a book for business leaders who want to survive and thrive in the fast lane (and enjoy the ride). Having worked for the likes of Coca-Cola and Procter & Gamble, and as an entrepreneur herself, Sophie understands the excitement of growth, but also the complexity of getting people on board.

Here she takes a breather to explain why striking the right balance between fast and slow is the key to success.

Q. *What was the thinking behind Superfast: Lead at Speed?*

S. I'm an acceleration addict. I love the thrill of seeing businesses and people grow fast. But a couple of years ago, I noticed the people I knew in business were all saying the same thing: 'This world is moving so fast, but my business is moving too slow.' At the same time, others were saying that although the disruption, digitisation and democratisation of business was exciting, they were all exhausted.

I wanted to find some techniques from leaders who had managed to get the pace right. Anyone who wants to go faster loves a shortcut, and learning from others is just that. I believe work can be exciting and fun. So I decided to write about it, partly, when I realised how few women write business books.

Q. *Who did you get in touch with?*

S. I spoke to 100 different leaders, including ones you'd expect – from places like Google to founders of fast-growing companies like Farfetch – to the less obvious like the head of the Joint Intelligence Counter-Terrorism Unit. If you think you have some tough stuff on your to-do list, try saving the world from terrorism!





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Sophie presents her expertise to events all over the world

Q. *Is this fast-paced environment always good for business?*

S. Technology allows fast growth and the barriers to entry and creativity are much lower, so projects, plans and product development happen faster. But of course, if you can move quickly, so can your competitors. The pressure in business is now immense. Companies like Uber and Airbnb have changed expectations, and there's impatience from shareholders, investors, bosses and clients.

Q. *Are there any shortcuts to stimulating business growth?*

S. Eleanor Roosevelt said: "We must learn from other's mistakes. Life is too short to make them all ourselves." So, often the most successful leaders have peripheral vision – they look up and around, not just at their own business, and get inspiration from elsewhere.

Q. *What makes a great leader?*

S. They need to be able to make courageous decisions and act fast. But they also have to be disciplined enough to make time to listen and assess whether it is right to act (is that a 'ripple' or a 'wave' about to hit the ship?).

Leading in a super-fast world is different from the old command-and-control leadership model. The ability to listen to those closest to the problem needs to be matched with the ability to make a decision when the data is unclear. The world moves so fast you won't ever have 100 per cent certainty – if you have 70 per cent that's enough. Aim for clarity.

Q. *Any good leadership qualities that might surprise us?*

S. The ability to be 'strategically lazy': i.e. learning to focus only on what you should do. Delegation; saying no; being comfortable with not doing everything, this is all part of the focus that's needed to lead. Strong leaders need to make the right decisions, and they can't do it if their brains are overburdened. Energy management is more important than time management and sometimes that requires an understanding that while you may be able to do anything, you can't do everything. Focus, choose, prioritise and 'edit' your calendar and your life. Do less, and you'll achieve more.

Q. *What's your favourite innovation of late?*

S. The best ones either deliver convenience or an exceptional customer experience. I love Citymapper and Apple Pay for their help to get me to places fast (and the taxi app Gett, which I think matches speed with an enjoyable experience). Retail companies like Farfetch are incredible for speed and luxury as well.

Q. *Finally, how do you slow down?*

S. Reading, reading and reading – whenever I can. It's my meditation, my education and my escape. •

For more information on Sophie and The Caffeine Partnership, go to thisiscaffeine.com



Superfast: Lead at Speed is published by John Murray Press and is available in hardback and as an audiobook, superfastthebook.com