



# Speed of Learning: The Ultimate Competitive Advantage

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# Speed of Learning:

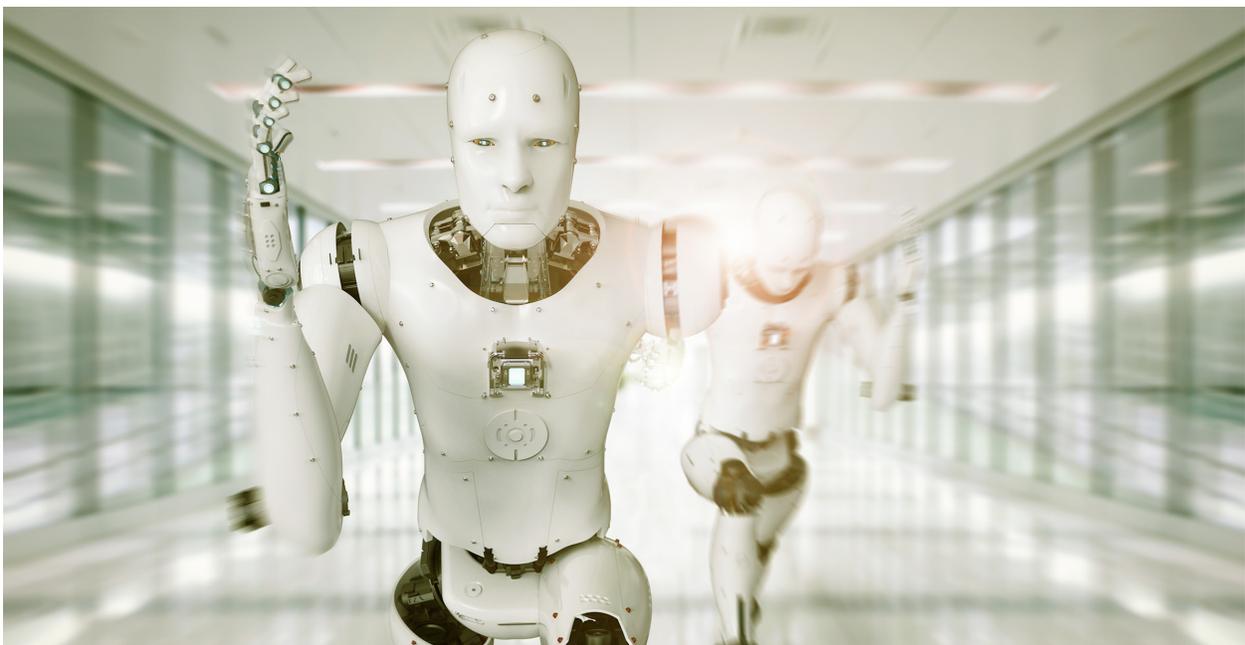
## The Ultimate Competitive Advantage

**John O. Burdett**

*“If you’re not fast, you’re going to be last!”*

The flooding in Texas in August and September 2017 contained several powerful lessons: in times of crises a sense of community overwhelms the need to be part of a tribe; buy a house on a hill and the survivors are those who adapt the fastest. Especially adept in the art of survival were fire ants. When their habitat floods they simply form giant rafts – visually they look like water-born pancakes – that can float for weeks. And if they come across solid ground and it is still raining, they form towers that rise 30 or more fire ants high – keeping the majority of the nest dry. And you thought Cirque Du Soleil were pretty good!

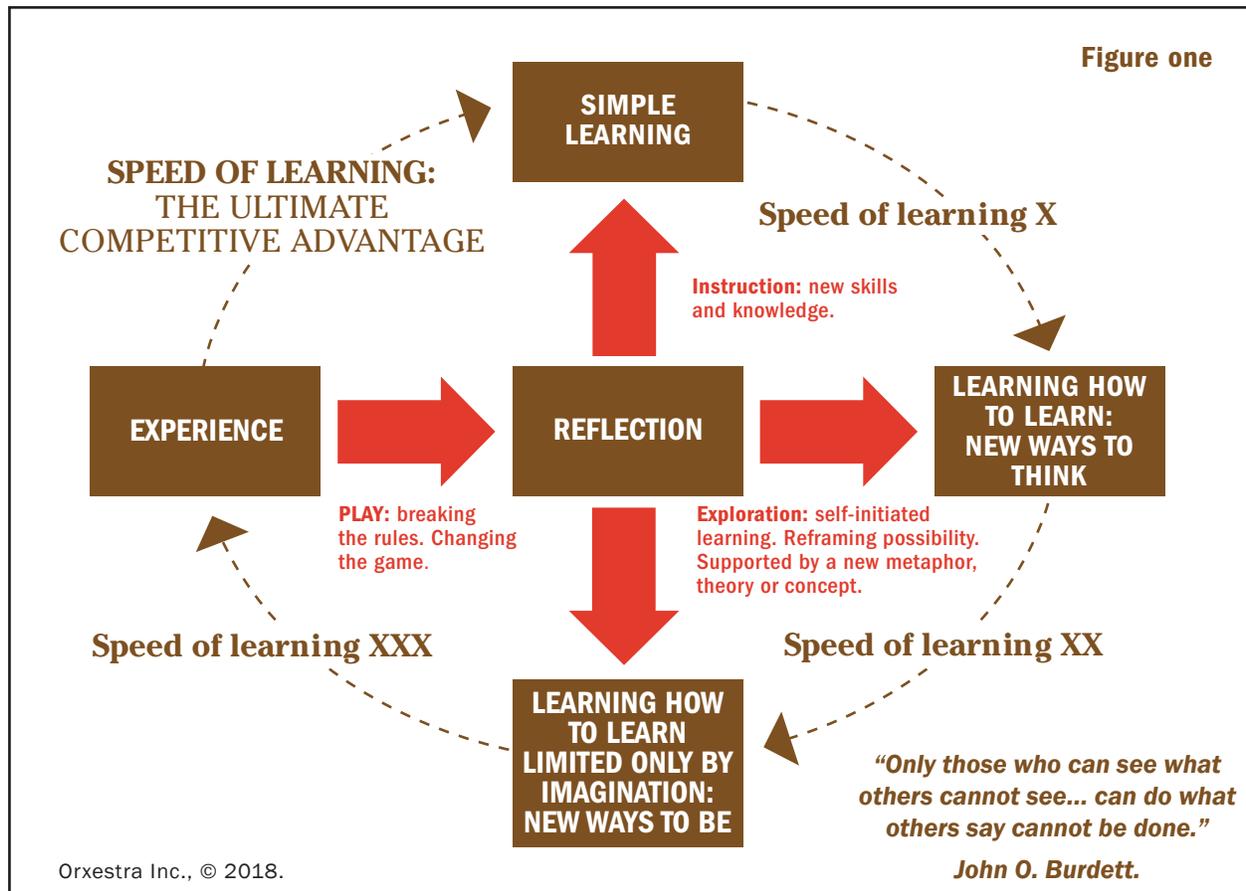
There is one fact of life that is impossible to ignore – tomorrow will be (very) different. More specifically, the rate of change is getting faster – and about to get much faster. It’s a matter





of adapt or perish. Flexibility, a flatter structure, enhanced freedom to act, and a laser-like business focus represent part of the answer. Being faster, however, is ultimately all about how people learn. Consider the following.

1. Uncertainty creates confusion. If people don't know where they are headed and **why** they are going there, then hesitation, indecision and asking for permission become inevitable. A compelling purpose, rich language (imagery, story and metaphor) and a leader who projects that it **will** happen create tomorrow in the room today.
2. The organization's values (clear, meaningful and relevant) give people permission to act. The alternative? A need for a long list of rules. Unnecessary rules slow people down. Those who lack leadership ... love rules, past precedent and the self-induced illusion of being in charge.
3. Tomorrow's successful leader will be someone who can slalom through the white water of unanticipated disruption and culture change. To that end, little is more important as a navigation aid than the organization's story. That story has five essential building blocks: (1) Where are we headed? (2) What do we believe in? (3) What makes us





special? (4) What is our brand promise? And (5) How do we make a difference in people's lives? Story is culture and culture is story. Yesterday, strategy informed culture. Moving forward, culture enables strategy. If you're not measuring culture ... you're not managing it.

4. In a world where ideas dominate, collaboration has to replace cooperation. Cooperation is two or more people working together where the outcome is of mutual benefit. Collaboration is altruistic. Your success is more important than mine. This speaks to the organization being a team of teams; a culture where the leader works for the team and where resilience, leadership reach and comfort with ambiguity are behavioural imperatives. To the previously mentioned organization design attributes – flat, fast, focused and flexible – we need to add fertile to new ideas.
5. If, as a leader, you lack coaching mastery, you won't be allowed to lead. At the same time, digitalization, generally, and training and leadership development, specifically, need to evolve from simple learning to learning how to learn ... and, wherever possible, to learning how to learn limited only by the imagination of the learner. In leading-edge organizations, the first four characteristics of success listed above are fairly well understood; how people learn significantly less so. **See Figure one.**



## The Building Blocks of Learning

How and what we learn is a product of (1) the nature of the experience; (2) the mental model (metaphor, theory, hypothesis, conceptual template) used to access the learning; (3) the quality of the question(s) posed; (4) the time set aside for reflection; and (5) follow-up. Without the right mental model, it's difficult to see the bigger picture. Without reflection, there is no learning. Without meaningful follow-up, two-thirds of the initial learning investment is lost. And the intangible quality that makes learning "sticky" is DISC: Dissatisfaction with the status quo; Inspirational leadership; Shared values; and Commitment to the agreed outcomes. Incidentally, we don't learn from mistakes. We learn by getting it right ... reflecting on what worked ... and then replicating that success. Getting knocked out a lot doesn't make you a better boxer!

None of this is to suggest that simple learning (instruction) doesn't have its place. **See Figure one.** Imparting knowledge and skill – as, for example, in making sure safety dominates any and all learning – clearly has its place. We don't want people to "explore" different ways to stay safe. Legal issues, drawing practical insight from best practice, learning the first basic steps and employees who speak only hesitantly the language of the country they are working in are all best served by simple learning.



“Simple” doesn’t mean “simplistic.” Our brain is wired to interpret the world visually. Learning that gets the message across visually has a far higher retention than text alone. That said, instruction – all learning for that matter – is most impactful when it embraces succinct text, compelling language, the right tactile experience and impactful visual imagery (multimedia).

Multimedia doesn’t mean multitasking. We can only effectively handle one modality at a time. Too many words on the slide detract from the imagery.<sup>1</sup> A dramatic story stimulates the brain to secrete dopamine and oxytocin; in doing so a story connects with the audience in a way that even the best written text cannot compete with. And the right metaphor is like shooting imagery straight into the brain!

One executive who understands the power of metaphor is Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella. Faced with changing what he called a “dog-eat-dog” culture, he read on an internal social media site that there was a general concern that people took milk out of the fridge to add to their coffee but, all-too-often, failed to put it back in the fridge.<sup>2</sup> Caring and collaboration go hand in hand. If employees care so little about who will use the milk next ... what does this say about the mindset needed to become truly collaborative? Somewhat more colourfully expressed, when faced with what he thought was too much “whining” from his team, he pointed out that “to be a leader in this company, your job is to find the rose petals in a pile of shit.”

One should not forget, of course, the speaker’s body language and his/her power of presence. For the audience to believe, first the speaker has to believe! For the audience to be committed, the speaker has to be committed. Humour breaks down barriers. Our kind are learning machines. The audience (the team, the group, the listener) is on your side. Mastery is to own – but not dominate – the room.

Measurement is the handmaiden of mastery. And less is more. In his eulogy to the slain at Gettysburg, Lincoln’s address (November 19, 1863) was only 272 words. Learning also, at some level, involves risk. As a presenter, ask yourself, “In the presentation I just delivered where did I take some risk?” No risk, no learning.

## **Learning Starts with the Experience**

Ultimately, an investment in learning is about orchestrating change. In pursuit of that goal, simple learning or otherwise, learning starts with the experience. Let’s, for a moment, take a look at experiential learning; a hodgepodge of potential activities that have become “de rigueur” in virtually any leadership workshop. The mistake that many of those introducing experiential learning make is to settle for “Learning as a way to engage” when “Learning as

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1 It’s important to point out that PowerPoint is a visual medium. If a slide has more than three or four words the potential impact is lost.  
2 From Satya Nadella, *Hit Refresh* (2017).



a way to deliver real change” is demanded. Too often, those directing and/or supporting a specific workshop or program – when realising that some of the content is less than inspiring – simply opt to merely spice it up. In such cases, cooking (no pun intended), drumming, a ropes program, a team activity – the list is endless – are added not because they enrich the learning experience but because they go for the entertainment jugular.<sup>3</sup>

Participants love the change of pace and the fun that often accompanies these engaging exercises but the reality is that, more often than not, the activity has little to do with the learning outcomes. This limitation is compounded when the facilitation employed asks, “What happened?” “How did you feel?”<sup>4</sup> “What did you learn from that?” “How does this relate to what you do at work?”

The “What happened” question can build rapport but if the learning stops there, what the facilitator is asking participants to do is (1) reflect on the experience (invariably, in-the-moment); (2) interpret what happened without access to a robust conceptual model;<sup>5</sup> (3) compare complex group behaviour within the activity with what’s happening back on the job (an entirely different context); and (4) construct a response that will shape future behaviour. It’s a tall order! If the activity is disconnected from the overall learning outcome, it’s also an opportunity missed.

Experiential learning as a way to deliver change asks, “What is the outcome we are seeking and how can we build – often starting with a blank piece of paper – an activity that makes that new behaviour come to life?” In essence, the activity becomes a living metaphor through which to examine the behaviour demanded. The right metaphor creates a new way for people to reframe their reality. We are describing an intervention that is more difficult to deliver than simply pursuing the entertainment root but the learning is anchored deeper and, as a result, implemented far faster. To deliver change you have to first change the conversation (the way the challenge is perceived). Same old language ... same old behaviour. Same old facilitation ... same old future.

Here one needs to factor in that culture change without a significant emotional event, somewhere in the equation, is a bridge to nowhere. We live most of the time in an emotional bubble; a way to be that strongly reinforces the status quo. Leaders are in the emotional

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- 3 This is not to decry the power of learning that is entertaining. The point being, that if its only attribute is that it is entertaining ... not much changes.
  - 4 Asking “How did you feel?” will elicit an answer but it will either be a superficial response or framed in such a way that the learner will tell you what he/she thinks you want to hear. In my own coaching experience I am acutely conscious that one has to have truly established trust and be well into the relationship before someone will share how they really feel.
  - 5 In my experience such activities are rarely supported by even a robust team model. And “forming,” “storming,” “norming” and “performing” doesn’t count. Note: there is a case to be made that the right “model” is a visual metaphor.



transportation business. A significant emotional event<sup>6</sup> gets people's attention.<sup>7</sup> Not so easy when the visual and verbal pollution that engulfs us every day can be literally overwhelming. The right significant emotional event also prompts participants to appreciate that – often with team support – they are able to go further than their belief system was previously telling them. Without such a reframe, risk and pushing to the edge become little more than a hoped-for possibility. The first step is always the hardest. Beginnings start with those involved letting go of what is holding them back. To break out of the habits that dictate how things get done means changing the patterns of play.

Changing the patterns of play can be implicitly part of how the learning is designed. See “A Leadership Retreat in Central Ontario” later in this piece. The experience was designed, literally, as a “learning how to learn” event. The result: the experience not only introduced a new way to think about the learning process but became a gateway through which participants explored possibility. In terms of developing new behaviour, it was remarkably successful. To change the game you have to tap into people's imagination. Speed of learning brought to life.

To better understand the needed shift in the way people learn see the examples that follow.



## **Learning How to Learn: It's a Beautiful Day in Brisbane, Australia**

The European-based business is looking to retool its operation in Australia. With that in mind, a new and very international team has been pulled together.

They don't know what to expect. When, at the conclusion of an early breakfast, they are handed \$300 AUD they quickly find out. Their challenge? By legal means and working as a team, double the money they were given.

The ideas flow. Most of them – such as collecting abandoned carts at the airport – are quickly rejected. Then one of them suggests becoming a charity for the day by supporting the Brisbane Sick Kids Hospital.

The idea is both original and worthwhile. They contact the hospital and surprise, surprise they receive charity status for the day. Making charity boxes with their \$300 comes next.

This is quickly followed by visiting some of the roughest pubs in Brisbane to leave their collection boxes. These are hard rock miners and they have no qualms about going where others might fear to tread.

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6 Programs involving height, personal stress and/or deliberately changing the patterns of play challenge people's beliefs. Taking the executive team tap dancing is an example of changing the patterns of play.

7 At a TED presentation (2009) on malaria Bill Gates released a small jar of (malaria free) mosquitoes.



They far exceeded the goal ... even more so when the CEO doubled the amount.

The best was yet to come when their contact from the hospital arrived. With her was a large, framed thank-you letter signed by, and with a photograph of, a young boy dying of leukemia. That certificate was hanging in the company’s lobby before the sun had gone down.

<b>It’s a Beautiful Day in Brisbane, Australia.</b>		
<b>Learning paradigm</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Questions</b>
Simple learning	The experience	“What happened?” “In the way the team interacted, what worked and what didn’t work?” “What would you change?”
Learning how to learn	The metaphor as a way to reframe mindset	“What is the difference between cooperation and collaboration?”
Learning how to learn ... limited only by the imagination of the learner	The metaphor as a vehicle to explore future possibility	“Imagine, it’s a year from now and we have built a great team. What do you take pride in?”



## **Learning How to Learn: Winter in Northern Europe**

Eighteen of the organization’s country managers have been asked to meet at daybreak in one of the company’s factories on the very edge of the Arctic Circle. That some travelled from the sunshine of Australia, Argentina or Florida made this a somewhat foreboding request.

After setting aside scarves, parkas and gloves, the attendees were handed an apron and told to serve breakfast to the workers. To spice up the event music was played and a young lady in a ball gown asked different workers to dance. Good humour and the musical setting produced an atmosphere of goodwill but there was no doubt ... the service was pretty bad. The idea for the session was born at the Hockey World Cup where, in one of the VIP tents, the company’s executives were impressed by the level of service.

After the music-accompanied breakfast, the catering company responsible for the hospitality tent trained the country managers in how to really serve. Lunch followed and was a big success. Not even an occasional thumb in the soup.

Two days of dialogue led to a comprehensive service plan. In the next 12 months the service revenue increased by \$100m (US).



And the key? A Finnish word: *hinku*. To serve with a passion ... but in such a way that both the server and those served are enriched.

Winter in Northern Europe.		
Learning paradigm	Focus	Questions
Simple learning	The experience	“What happened?” “What can we take away from that experience?”
Learning how to learn	The metaphor as a way to reframe mindset	“What would we be doing that we are not doing now if <i>hinku</i> dominated our customer interaction?”
Learning how to learn ... limited only by the imagination of the learner	The metaphor as a vehicle to explore future possibility	“For our service business to be the best and the most profitable in the business how do we move from a ‘service’ to a ‘serving’ culture?”



## Learning How to Learn: A Leadership Retreat in Central Ontario

That this is a group of high potential employees is evident by the energy in the room. Most are millennials. They have all previously been through three, three-day leadership modules: (1) leadership of self; (2) leadership of others; (3) leadership of culture.

This session is different. Within an agreed budget, over the next year, they will navigate their own learning ... both as a group and individually. Day one is to set the scene.

Working in teams they collectively build a context map of the changes likely to impact the business over the next five years. Measuring the culture the organization has and needs follows. This provides a platform for defining the key leadership competencies demanded to thrive in tomorrow’s culture.

Without any external input, on day two they pull together their learning agenda. Culture, coaching and digging deeper into how the business makes money feature strongly.

As the learning unfolds, each month a team member takes the lead in the video conference they have. Ongoing communication is supported by a website the group created. They meet



quarterly. To support those meetings they bring in speakers, attend conferences together and continue to challenge and coach each other.

<b>A Leadership Retreat in Central Ontario.</b>		
<b>Learning paradigm</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Questions</b>
Simple learning	The experience	“What insights surfaced about the way you work together?”
Learning how to learn	The experience as a way to reframe mindset	“With tomorrow’s culture in mind, how would you inspire someone wedded to the status quo?”
Learning how to learn ... limited only by the imagination of the learner	The experience as a vehicle to explore future possibility	“In that failure isn’t an option how are you going to explore not only what needs to be done but how you learn?”



## **How People Learn Is, Invariably, More Important than What They Learn**

Learning is central to the human ... and animal experience. A good example is the pigeons that have learned to ride the subway in Stockholm. Each morning they line up patiently on the platform before making their one-station journey to the food-filled shopping centre that awaits. Presumably one bird got stuck on the subway before emerging, by accident, into pigeon Valhalla. His/her feathered pals soon learned that they too had a “ticket to ride.” Good mannered birds that they are, they make little mess and choose to travel later in the day when the passenger traffic is light.

Culture is like a clock: a lot of moving parts but leave one element out and it stops working. Culture is also a hologram: examine any single element and you will find the blueprint for the whole. Executives talk of “changing the culture.” If that doesn’t include changing the way people learn, “the clock” is missing a critical piece. And if learning isn’t indelibly imprinted on every action, process and strategic assumption, “culture” quickly becomes just another way to say, “We are stuck.” Trying to change the culture one leader at a time is a misguided and forlorn task. People change when we change the context. Changing the way people learn changes the context. As for organization design, in that tomorrow’s new market entrants – small nimble start-ups – have no limitations around what is possible, think reinvent and not reconfigure.



As the momentum demanded of every modern business both increases and accelerates, learning that draws largely on its entertainment value is a poor investment. Meanwhile, simple learning – other than in the examples given – amounts, largely, to a mandate for improving the status quo. The organization as a team of teams, networks that encompass global constituencies, exponential shift in technology, the need for distributive learning communities, infobesity<sup>8</sup> and a new generation entering the workforce demand a culture where learning how to learn becomes a high priority. And it's not just learning fast at an individual or team level but building an environment where speed of learning becomes an organization-wide competitive advantage. If you're not fast, you're going to be last!

Building bridges within the business, the extent to which someone new to the firm lands without breaking stride, retooling key processes to take advantage of technology, adaptive systems and responding to a competitor's revised offering, all build on the speed of learning ... all determine who wins and who falls away. Consider the questions below.

1. To what extent does your business meet the criteria of being flat, fast, focused, flexible and fertile to new ideas? What needs to change?
2. In coaching discussions is the emphasis on simply unbundling what happened or does the coach, typically, introduce a compelling metaphor? What would it take to do the latter?
3. In developing leadership workshops do the architects of those interventions understand the difference between simple learning, learning how to learn and learning how to learn limited only by imagination? What would it take to make that happen? How will you avoid “the entertainment option?”
4. In meetings and in dialogue that focuses on the future does the thrust of the conversation seek to largely unbundle what is happening today or is the word “imagine” introduced? In future meetings what are you going to do to change the patterns of play?
5. Do you measure culture? When and how will you make that happen?
6. In a steady state business environment the message has always been “customers buy from people just like them.” When “exponential change” frames the reality, customers buy from those who display behaviour in line with who they (the customer) strive to become.” How successful are you in that regard?
7. Speed of learning is a leadership imperative. How is that essential leadership competency woven into hire and promotion decisions?

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8 An avalanche of information.

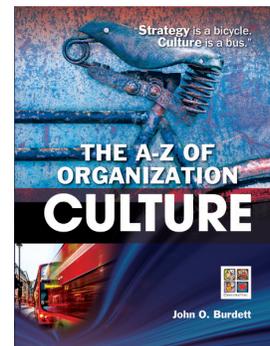


John Burdett has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He has worked on and continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

During the past 12 months, John's partnership with the Bedford Consulting Group and TRANSEARCH INTERNATIONAL meant that his proprietary work on talent acquisition supported over 1,000 top leadership appointments on six continents.

John holds a doctorate in management development and since 2000 has published ten best-selling books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. He recently completed his highly lauded talent trilogy: *Talent* (2013), *Team* (2015), and *The Empty Suit* (2016). His latest book is *The A-Z of Organization Culture* (2017). John lives in Toronto.

The learning experiences mentioned are expanded on, and a number of others added, in John's new book. To purchase a copy go to ...  
**<https://www.amazon.ca/dp/0994763123>**



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