



It All Starts With a Sense of Urgency John Kotter

WE ARE MUCH TOO COMPLACENT. AND WE DON'T EVEN KNOW IT.

Yes, urgency is relevant, but...

"Urgency is not the issue," she tells me. "People know we are in trouble and need to change. The economic evidence in our sector of health care is everywhere. We have a burning platform. Our old complacency is, for all practical purposes, entirely gone. Communicating the new strategy is now the big challenge."

From where she sits, her views seem valid, and most are. The good news: she has a growth strategy that could make her enterprise highly successful. The bad news: the complacency, which she thinks is gone, is alive and very well. Why? Lazy or less-than-competent employees? There are some people who will not win any talent contests, but that's not her problem.

The few people who do have smoke pouring into their offices are furious that somebody has started a fire. But instead of demonstrating a real sense of urgency to solve the problem, starting today, they complain.

Two levels below this manager, employees are living in a different world. Some of them are never exposed to the flames coming from investment analysts or the blistering comments coming from customers. They don't live on a burning platform but instead in a building that seems to require no renovation, at least on their floor. The few people who do have smoke pouring into their offices are furious that somebody has started a fire. But instead of demonstrating a real sense of urgency to solve the problem, starting *today*, they complain. "Yeah," the angry accountant tells me, "we need major changes in marketing. You wouldn't believe what those people do!"

"I think we could do with a little less urgency," he says, almost defiantly. "We're running so fast and long that we are completely stressed out. We can't take this much longer."

Go check, and you find people are running and they are stressed out. But this man, and almost everyone else around him, is mistaking the enormous amount of activity as a sign of a real sense of urgency. It's not. It's just frenetic activity, with people trying to cope with fifteen issues, few of which are central to his organization's success. All this action is exhausting employees and actually killing true and positive urgency. Who can feel absolutely determined to deal *now* with the central issues facing an organization after racing into nine meetings on nine different topics in the space of one day?

COMPLACENCY AND FALSE URGENCY

We have a serious problem. It could grow more serious in the future if we don't act now. What many people often see as the solution is not the solution. It can actually make matters worse. There is a real solution. You can find it in use today. It can produce the achievements we all want for organizations, nations, and ourselves.

The problem is complacency. We have all seen it. Yet we underestimate its power and its prevalence. Highly destructive complacency is, in fact, all around us.

With complacency, no matter what people say, if you look at what they do it is clear that they are mostly content with the status quo. They pay insufficient attention to wonderful new opportunities and frightening new hazards. They continue with what has been the norm in the past, whether it's short hours or long, suits or jeans, a focus on products or systems or not much of anything. As an outsider, you may correctly see that internal complacency is dangerous, that past successes have created sluggishness or arrogance, but complacent insiders—even very smart people—just don't have that perspective. They may admit there are difficult challenges, but the challenges are over there in that other person's department. They think they know what to do and they do it. In a world that moves slowly and in which you have a strong position, this attitude certainly is a problem, but no more so than a dozen other problems. In a fast-moving and changing world, a sleepy or steadfast contentment with the status quo can create disaster—literally, disaster.

Far too often, managers think they have found the solution to this problem when they see lots of energetic *activity*: where people sometimes run from meeting to meeting, preparing endless PowerPoint presentations; where people have agendas containing a long list of activities; where people seem willing to abandon the status quo; where people seem to have a great sense of urgency. But more often than not, this flurry of behavior is not driven by any underlying determination to move and win, *now*. It's driven by pressures that create anxiety and anger. The resulting frantic

activity is more distracting than useful. This is a false sense of urgency that may be even *more* destructive than complacency because it drains needed energy in activity and not productivity.

Since people mistake the running-around for a real sense of urgency, they sometimes actually try to create it. The frustrated boss screams “execute.” His employees scramble: sprinting, meeting, task-forcing, e-mailing—all of which create a howling wind of activity. But that’s all it is, a howling wind or, worse yet, a tornado that destroys much and builds nothing.

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The real solution to the complacency problem is a *true* sense of urgency. True urgency focuses on critical issues, not agendas overstuffed with the important and the trivial. True urgency is driven by a deep determination to win, not anxiety about losing. With an attitude of true urgency, you try to accomplish something important each day, never leaving yourself with a heart-attack-producing task of running one thousand miles in the last week of the race.

In a turbulent era, when new competitors or political problems might emerge at any time, when technology is changing everything, both the business-as-usual behavior associated with complacency and the running-in-circles behavior associated with a false sense of urgency are increasingly dangerous.

In bold contrast, a true sense of urgency is becoming immeasurably important. Real urgency is an essential asset that must be created, and re-created, and it can be.

A TRUE SENSE OF URGENCY

The dictionary tells us that urgency means “of pressing importance.” When people have a true sense of urgency, they think that action on critical issues is needed *now*, not eventually, not when it fits easily into a schedule. *Now* means making real progress every single day. *Critically important* means challenges that are central to success or survival, winning or losing. A sense of urgency is not an attitude that I must have the project team meeting today, but that the meeting must accomplish something *important* today.

Urgent behavior is not driven by a belief that all is well or that everything is a mess but, instead, that the world contains great opportunities and great hazards. Even more so, urgent action is not created by feelings of contentment, anxiety, frustration, or anger, but by a gut-level determination to *move, and win, now*. These feelings quite naturally lead to behavior in which people are alert and proactive, in which they constantly scan the environment around them, both inside and outside their organizations, looking for information relevant to success and survival. With complacency or false urgency, people look inward, not out, and they miss what is essential for prosperity.

With a real sense of urgency, when people see an opportunity or a problem of significance to their organization, and others don’t, they quite naturally search for effective ways to get the information to the right individual—and not when they meet him or her next month. With a true sense of urgency, people want to come to work each day ready to cooperate energetically and responsively with intelligent initiatives from others. And they do. People want to find ways to launch smart initiatives.

And they do.

A real sense of urgency is a highly positive and highly focused force. Because it naturally directs you to be truly alert to what’s really happening, it rarely leads to a race to deal with the trivial,

to pursue pet projects of minor significance to the larger organization, or to tackle important issues in uninformed, potentially dangerous ways.

It is often believed that people cannot maintain a high sense of urgency over a prolonged period of time, without burnout. Yet with all the alertness, initiative, and speed, true urgency doesn't produce dangerous levels of stress, at least partially because it motivates people to relentlessly look for ways to rid themselves of chores that add little value to their organizations but clog their calendars and slow down needed action. People who are determined to move and win, now, simply do not waste time or add stress by engaging in irrelevant or business-as-usual activities.

True urgency is not the product of historical successes or current failures but the result of people, up and down the hierarchy, who provide the leadership needed to create and re-create this increasingly important asset.

A real sense of urgency is rare, much rarer than most people seem to think. Yet it is invaluable in a world that will not stand still. Complacency is pervasive, in part because it simply is not seen, even by many smart, experienced, and sophisticated people. A false sense of urgency is pervasive and insidious because people mistake activity for productivity.

With a true sense of urgency, people want to come to work each day ready to cooperate energetically and responsively with intelligent initiatives from others. And they do.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF LITTLE TRUE URGENCY IN AN ERA OF CHANGE

We live in an age when change is accelerating. This observation, hardly new news, cannot be over-emphasized. The argument that change is always with us, or that change is cyclical, misses the point entirely. Both may be true over a millennium. But for now, and for the next five or ten years, the rate of change will continue to go up and up, with huge consequences for nearly everyone.

With complacency or false urgency, none of these changes happens fast enough, smart enough, or efficiently enough.

New technologies alone can affect all organizations, even firms in older and mature industries. Globalization can open markets that, to be exploited, demand new offices, factories, employees, and more. International political turbulence can upset the most carefully crafted plans. A merger can produce a gigantic competitor overnight.

Countless statistics demonstrate these trends. Two of my favorites: patents filed in the United States have gone from 132,000 in 1986 to 211,000 in 1996 and on to 452,000 in 2006, showing both huge increases and an accelerating rate of growth. Total merger and acquisition activity in the United States has gone from \$173 billion in 1986 to \$469 billion in 1996 to \$1,484 billion in 2006, again huge jumps and an increasing rate of increase.

External change must be seen to be acted upon. With an insufficient sense of urgency, people don't tend to look hard enough or can't seem to find the time to look hard enough. Or they look and do not believe their eyes, or do not wish to believe their eyes. Even if seen correctly, and in time, external change demands internal change. More processes need to be made more efficient. New work methods and products must be created. Organizations need to be reorganized to focus more on customers or growth. With complacency or false urgency, none of these changes happens fast enough, smart enough, or efficiently enough. From years of study, I estimate that today more than 70 percent of needed change either fails to be launched, even though some people clearly see the need, fails to be completed, even though some people exhaust themselves trying, or finishes over budget, late, and with initial aspirations unmet. A 70 percent failure rate is an *enormous* drag on a company, a government, an economy, or a society. Investors are obviously hurt, but the pain goes in all directions: to employees, customers, our families.

A PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTION

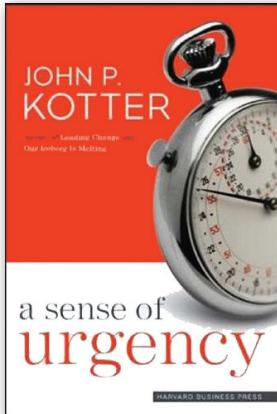
A big reason that a true sense of urgency is rare is that it's not a natural state of affairs. It has to be created and recreated. In organizations that have survived for a significant period of time, complacency is more likely the norm. Even in organizations that are clearly experiencing serious problems, devastating problems, business-as-usual can survive. Or it can be replaced by hundreds of anxiety-filled, unproductive activities that are mistaken for a real sense of urgency. And in organizations that handle episodic change well, with a big initiative every five years or so, you can still find a poor capacity to deal with continuous change because urgency tends to collapse after a few successes. This last point is exceptionally important because we are moving from episodic to continuous change. With this shift, urgency will move from being an important issue every few years to being a powerful asset *all the time*.

The urgency question is not limited to any particular class of organization or group. Insufficient urgency, with all of its consequences, can be found in winners and losers, businesses and governments. It can undermine a plant, an office, or a whole country. Conversely, in all of these situations, a high sense of urgency can help produce results, and a whole way of life, that we all desire.

The good news here—and there is good news—is that a changing world offers not only many hazards but wonderful opportunities. Such is the very nature of shifting contexts. To capitalize on the opportunities requires any number of skills and resources. But it all begins with a high enough sense of urgency among a large enough group of people. Get that right and you are off to a great start. Get that right and you can produce results that you very much want, and the world very much needs. ☑

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In his newest work, [A Sense of Urgency](#), John Kotter shows what a true sense of urgency in an organization really is, why it is becoming an exceptionally important asset, and how it can be created and sustained within organizations. His international best-seller [Leading Change](#)—which outlined an actionable, eight-step process for implementing successful transformations—has become the change bible for managers around the world. [Our Iceberg Is Melting](#), the *New York Times* best-seller, puts the eight-step process within an allegory, making it accessible to the broad range of people. In October 2001, *Business Week* magazine rated Kotter the #1 “leadership guru” in America based on a survey of 504 enterprises.

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