

1. It All Starts With a Sense of Urgency

We are too complacent.

And we don't even know it.

<A> Yes, Urgency Is Relevant, But...

“A sense of urgency is important, of course,” he tells me. “Complacency is a disaster these days. But complacency is a relatively minor issue for us. Better execution of our innovation initiative is our challenge.”

It is true that his firm is not executing his very clever initiative well. He's a smart man, and his competitors do not understand the opportunities nearly as well as he does. Nor are they inclined to take new actions when profits are good, which is what he is doing. But look around him and you find employees who think they innovate just fine. You find people who think “the innovation thing” is the latest flavor-of-the-month which will come and go, so they see no point in wasting time on it. You find people making lists, writing papers on innovation, to-ing and fro-ing, but it's all driven by anxiety and is largely focused on making sure a new initiative does not hurt them. You find angry people who feel the innovation program is being crammed down their throats. They act, all right, and with energy, but to covertly undermine the initiative. Our man doesn't see any of this clearly, not least because others around him don't either. Under these circumstances, execution is obviously going to be a huge problem.

“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. Her new growth strategy could make her enterprise highly successful. But two levels below her, people live in a different world. Some employees 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 nice office building that seems to require no inconvenient renovation. 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 guys do!"

"I think we could do with a little less urgency" he says, almost defiantly. "People are running around all over the place. But it doesn't add up to anything. They all move in different directions, bump into each other, or argue with one another. My boss is a poster-boy for this problem."

Go check and you find he is mistaking the enormous amount of activity for a real sense of urgency. People are trying to cope with 15 issues, few of which are central to his organization's success. But all of 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?

"Within a month, we are going to have to lay off two or three thousand people," he tells me. "What's really terrible", he adds with great frustration, "is that if we had acted a year ago we wouldn't be in this mess. Why didn't you act a year ago, I ask? "I don't know," he says. "With 20-20 hindsight, I suppose I'd say some complacency. Some arrogance." And why was the firm complacent and arrogant? "Probably too much success in the past", he says. "I would bet that's it."

It's a good bet.

<A> Complacency, True Urgency, and False Urgency

Complacency is all around us, including in places that where people would deny it, deny it, and deny it still more.

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 new opportunities or 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 a sluggishness or arrogance, but complacent insiders 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 do it. In a world that moves slowly and in which you have a strong position, this 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.

All the time, people point to energetic activity around them and see it as proof that complacency is not an issue. Yet more often than not, what they see is actually the behavior of anxious or angry people who are reacting to various pressures or recent failures. These people run from meeting to meeting, preparing endless PowerPoint presentations. Their agendas contain a long list of activities, but the activities are more distracting than productive. There is a false sense of urgency which may be even *more* destructive than complacency because it so drains needed energy in activity not productivity. Because people mistake the running-around as a real sense of urgency, they sometimes actually try to create it. Having started a tornado, they wonder why needed-results come slowly if at all and why so many houses are destroyed in the process.

A real sense of urgency is never associated with an endless list of exhausting activities. It has nothing to do with anxious running from meeting to meeting. It's not supported by an adrenalin rush that cannot be sustained over time. It's a powerful, internalized desire to move, win, and *now*. It's characterized by a set of beliefs, attitudes, and feelings that lead you to constantly look for important issues and make some progress in dealing with them *today*. People behave with a sense of urgency by being exceptionally alert, always scanning broadly for an organization's opportunities or hazards. They jump to help with sensible initiatives coming from others. They launch intelligent initiatives if others

don't. They push to make useful action happen smarter, faster, and now. People with a sense of urgency do not give up easily, do not delay, do not move at 35 miles an hour when winning will require 65, and do not divide their time among 23 issues, 20 of which have little to do with an organization's success. They do not stress themselves out with 70 hour weeks that ultimately make them ineffective. They are exceptionally clever about shedding unneeded work; at pushing the many distractions out of the way to save time and energy; at winning and receiving that marvelous, energy-giving feeling that comes with success.

In a turbulent era, where new competitors or political problems might emerge at any time, where 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. They undermine task forces and nations. They hurt investors and peoples' careers. They are not only torpedoes that will eventually sink ships, they are often stealth torpedoes, making them doubly dangerous.

In bold contrast, a true sense of urgency is becoming immeasurably important. The results of my recent research on this point are exceptionally clear. Real urgency is an essential asset that must be created, and recreated, and it can be. I'll show you how.

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<A> 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 sometime, 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 by a core belief 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, win, and now*. These feelings 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 search for effective ways to get the information to the right individual--- and not when they meet him or her next month. With a real sense of urgency, people come to work each day ready to cooperate energetically and responsively with intelligent initiatives from others. People find ways to launch smart initiatives when others do not. People 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 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 failures but the result of people, up and down the hierarchy, who provide leadership. These sorts

of people use a strategy that aims at the heart as well as the mind. They use four identifiable sets of tactics. As you will see shortly, there is no mystery, fog, or mystical charisma here. What these people do can be specified clearly, and, for the most part, certainly does not require larger-than-life capabilities.

A real sense of urgency is a highly positive force and a 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.

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, partially 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.

<A> The Huge Consequences in an Era of Change

An insufficient level of urgency is enormously important in an era of change, and for decades now the rate of change around most of us has been steadily increasing. This observation, hardly new news, cannot be overemphasized. The argument that change is always with us, or change is cyclical, misses the point entirely. Both may be true over a millennium. But for now, and the next five or ten years, the rate of change will continue to go up and up, with huge consequences for nearly everyone.

Technology alone is affecting all organizations, even firms in older and mature industries. With a new technology, a small competitor can more easily attack the larger, established players. Product life cycles are growing shorter, with all the accompanying implications. In some industries, what was a ten year cycle is now closer to ten months. Globalization opens markets which, to be exploited, demands new offices, factories, employees, and more. Globalization also brings more competitors which may require increases in productivity or quality.

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 favorite: total merger and acquisition activity in the U.S. has gone from \$173 billion in 1986 to \$469 billion in '96 to \$1,484 billion in '06, not only huge jumps but an increasing rate of increases. Patents filed in the U.S. have gone from 132,000 in '86 to 211,000 in '96 and on to 452,000 in '06, again huge increases and an accelerating rate of growth.

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 re-organized to focus more on customers or growth. With complacency or false urgency, none of these changes happen fast enough, smart enough, or efficiently enough. From years of study, I would estimate that today over 70% 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% 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.

We know it does not have to be this way. I have documented many cases where people have handled the challenges of a changing world remarkably well. They transform strategies, processes, and work habits with speed, efficiency, and at a low level of frustration. They improve from poor to good, good to great, and, in a few cases, great to astonishing—and then they sustain that success over time. In virtually all successful cases, people use a basic formula, a pattern with 8-steps which I have described at length in three of my books: *Leading Change*, *The Heart of Change*, and *Our Iceberg Is Melting*. Used correctly, this method can produce inspiring results. We have recorded over the past decade many hundreds

of those cases: within firms, parts of firms, parts of public agencies, inside the U.S. and out. The research on this point is absolutely clear. The first step in that formula involves creating and sustaining a sense of urgency that is as high as possible, among as many people as possible. With real urgency, people look for the opportunities and hazards that are inevitable in times of turbulence and change. They find ways to take advantage of the possibilities, to deal with obstacles, and to keep the work going until it is completed. The single biggest problem organizations have is handling this first step well.

That is not to say that organizations handle other aspects of change well. They don't. Smart people put the wrong group in charge of a new initiative. They don't get the change vision entirely right. They greatly under-communicate to people who need to buy-in. They don't eliminate enough obstacles for those people trying to execute a change. They don't achieve enough short term wins to give them credibility and momentum. They let up before the job is done. They don't make the right moves to make a change stick. But the very best available evidence, everything I have seen in my work over the years, suggests that ***the #1 problem they have is all about creating a sense of urgency---and that's the first step in a series of actions needed to succeed in a changing world.***

<A> A Problem and Its Solution

A big reason that a true sense of urgency is rare is because it's not a natural state of affairs. It has to be created and recreated. In

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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 yet 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 crucial *all the time*.

The urgency problem 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 nation.

For the past 35 years I have been studying what people actually do to help their organizations perform well, no matter how difficult the circumstances. My work has led me to this topic and to this book. In the pages which follow, you will find dozens of stories about urgency, complacency, and false urgency. I will describe a strategy and four sets of tactics I have seen people use to create a strong sense of urgency and an unexpectedly high level of performance--- with benefits flowing to investors, employees, national economies, and their own careers. A few of these methods are relatively obvious. A few are totally counterintuitive. Some seem to be virtually a secret.

If it were easy to succeed and sustain success, all this wouldn't matter much. But help me here: where in today's economy is it easy to attain and maintain success anymore? If we had low aspirations for what we would like to achieve, all this wouldn't matter much. But who among us, if only buried in the back of the mind, does not have high hopes and dreams?

The good news here—and there is good news—is that a changing world offers not just hazards but 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.