It All Starts with a Sense of Urgency

Laying the Groundwork for Change

Excerpted from

A Sense of Urgency

By

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it all starts with a sense of urgency

We are much too complacent. And we don’t even know it.

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.”

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, as he is doing. But there is no question that his firm is not executing his very clever initiative well. Why? Look around him and you find employees who think they innovate just fine. They don’t tell the boss that, but that’s what they honestly believe. You find people who think “the innovation thing” is the latest flavor-of-the-month, which will come and go. So, quite rationally, 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, and will certainly remain, a great 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. 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.

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?

“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 probably wouldn’t be in this mess.” Why did they not act a year ago? I ask. He’s a man of action, not reflection, so he struggles with the question. Finally: “With 20/20 hindsight,” he tells me, “I would say complacency. And some arrogance.” And why was the firm complacent and arrogant? “Too much success in the past,” he says. “I would bet that’s it.”

It’s a good bet.

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, including in places 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 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.

The real solution to the complacency problem is a true sense of urgency. This set of thoughts, feelings, and actions 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. 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. They are not only torpedoes that will eventually sink ships, they are often stealth torpedoes, and that makes 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 re-created, and it can be. I’ll show you how.

**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. They don’t move at thirty-five miles per hour when sixty-five is needed to win.

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. 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, we know what these people do, and what many others could do.

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.
a sense of urgency

### Complacency, False Urgency, and True Urgency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complacency</th>
<th>A False Sense of Urgency</th>
<th>A True Sense of Urgency</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More pervasive than people recognize, insidious, and often invisible to insiders</td>
<td>Also pervasive, insidious, and often seen, incorrectly, as a true sense of urgency</td>
<td>Rare and immeasurably important in a rapidly changing world</td>
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<tr>
<th>Roots</th>
<th>Successes: real, or perceived wins, usually over a period of time</th>
<th>Failures: recent problems with short-term results or long-standing, incremental decline</th>
<th>Leadership: people not only at the top but up and down the hierarchy who create true urgency and re-create it when needed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People Think</td>
<td>“I know what to do, and I do it.”</td>
<td>“What a mess this is.”</td>
<td>“Great opportunities and hazards are everywhere.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Feel</td>
<td>Content with the status quo (and sometimes anxious of the unknown)</td>
<td>Very anxious, angry, and frustrated</td>
<td>A powerful desire to move, and win, now</td>
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We live in an age when change is accelerating. This observation, hardly new news, cannot be overemphasized. 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.

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.

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. In virtually all these cases, people use a basic formula, a pattern with eight steps that 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. 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.

Most organizations handle step 1 poorly. Many fail elsewhere too. Smart people put the wrong group in charge of a new initiative. They don’t get the change vision entirely right. They greatly undercommunicate 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 number-one 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.
it all starts with urgency

1. **A sense of urgency**: Winners *first* make sure that a sufficient number of people feel a true sense of urgency to look for an organization’s critical opportunities and hazards *now*.

2. **The guiding team**: With a strong sense of urgency, people quickly identify critical issues and form teams that are strong enough, and that feel enough commitment, to guide an ambitious change initiative, even though the team members may already be overworked or overcommitted.

3. **Visions and strategies**: Strong and highly committed teams orchestrate the effort to find smart visions and strategies for dealing with a key issue—even when the best strategies are elusive.

4. **Communication**: High-urgency teams inherently feel a need to relentlessly communicate the visions and strategies to relevant people to obtain buy in and generate still more urgency in their organizations.

5. **Empowerment**: Those with a true sense of urgency empower others who are committed to making any vision a reality by removing obstacles in their paths—even if it’s very difficult to remove those obstacles.
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 re-created. 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.

For the past thirty-five 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 that 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 counter-intuitive. Some seem to be virtually a secret.

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.