A SENSE OF URGENCY John P. Kotter

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Chapter 1: It all starts with a sense of 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 make matters worse. The problem is complacency. We have all seen it, yet we underestimate its power and its prevalence. With complacency, no matter what people say, if you look at what they do, they are mostly content with the status quo. Paying insufficient attention to wonderful new opportunities and frightening new hazards. Far too often leaders think they have found the solution to this problem when they see lots of energetic activity: where people run from meeting to meeting and have agendas with long lists of activities. This

flurry of behavior is more driven by anxiety and anger, and the frantic activity that comes with it is more distracting than useful. The real solution to the complacency problem is a true sense of urgency. 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. 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 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. It does not mean frenetic activity. It's often believed that people cannot maintain a high sense of urgency over a prolonged period without burnout. Yet with all the alertness, initiative, and speed, true urgency doesn't produce dangerous levels of stress. This is partly because it motivates people to relentlessly look for ways to rid themselves of chores that add little value to their 3 organizations but clog their calendars and slow down needed action. People who are determined to move and win simply do not waste time or add stress by engaging in irrelevant or business-as-usual activities. A real sense of urgency is rare, yet it is invaluable in a world that never stops. True urgency is not a natural situation. It must be created and recreated. In organizations that have survived for a significant period, complacency is more likely the norm. People have become content with the status quo and comfortable with the way they have been doing things.

Chapter 2: Complacency and false urgency the first step in creating a true sense of urgency is to deeply understand its opposites: complacency and false urgency.

The dictionary says complacency is "a feeling of contentment or self-satisfaction, especially when coupled with an unawareness of danger or trouble." For our purposes here, two words in that definition are especially important. The first is feeling. Complacency is a feeling, not just a thought. It's usually less a matter of rational analysis than unconscious emotion. The second key word is self. Complacency is a feeling that a person has about his or her own behavior, about what he or she needs to do or not do. This is important because it is possible to see problems and yet be complacent because you do not feel that the problems require changes in your actions. False urgency is a condition that is very different from complacency. While complacency embraces the status quo, false urgency can be filled with new activities. While complacency often has a sleepy quality, false urgency is filled with energy. Complacency is built on a feeling that everything is basically fine; false urgency is built on a platform of anxiety and anger. Anxiety and anger drive behavior that can be highly energetic—which is why people mistake false for true urgency. But the energy from anger and anxiety can easily create activity, not productivity—and sometimes very destructive activity. One source of anger is failed attempts to change in the past. People become so frustrated by earlier efforts that they can become mad when you point to an important new issue. Another source is current difficulties, which people rarely think are their fault. The anxiety driving false complacency is very different from anger, yet the ultimate effects can be very similar. With anxiety, people eventually come to worry most about their jobs, their careers, and the future of their work groups. They become preoccupied searching for nearby personal dangers. They can spend hours seeking safe retreats. A worried mind, focused on its own preservation, will never act with a true sense of urgency. 4

Chapter 3: **Increasing true urgency an increasingly popular management tool is the business case.**

Typically, in a business case, facts and figures, analysis, and logic are used to demonstrate that an issue is important and that a particular course of action should be taken. Business cases try to reduce complacency by appealing to people's intellect. The problem is that even if the logic is sound and the evidence good, the case is all head and no heart. When it comes to affecting behavior—creating alert, fast-moving actions that are focused on important issues—feelings are more influential than thoughts. More than thoughts, it is feelings in the heart that create the unchanging behavior of complacency, the unproductive flurry of behavior that is a false urgency, or the powerfully useful actions of true urgency. This doesn't mean that thoughts are unimportant. However, they tend to support the direction and behaviors my feelings lead me towards. Mindless emotion is not the point. The challenge is to fold a rational case directed toward the mind into an experience that is aimed at the heart. The winning strategy combines analytically sound, logical goals with methods that help people experience them as exciting, meaningful, and uplifting—which, creates a deeply felt determination to move, make it happen, and win, now. Tactics that aim at the heart, and successfully increase urgency, all seem to have five key characteristics. First, they are thoughtfully created human experiences. Second, effective experiences work appropriately on all our senses. People not only hear, but they see something in front of them or in their mind's eye that helps raise urgency. They are not only told, but they are also shown. Third, the experiences are not designed to create just any emotional reaction. They make people feel that despite creating a difficult situation, a crisis might be a blessing in disguise. They make change-weary, cynical people believe in a positive future. Fourth, the experiences are rarely, if ever, explained. They don't need to be. The point is clear. Fifth, the experiences almost inevitably lead us to raise our sights, to emotionally embrace goals beyond maintaining the status quo, beyond coping with a difficult situation, beyond incremental adjustments to current practices. There are four categories of effective heart-head strategies that successful people use: In the first, people dramatically bring outside reality into groups that are too inwardly focused. Second, they behave with true urgency themselves every single day. They do not just say the right words daily, but they act, and they do so as visibly as possible. Third, they 5 look for the upside possibilities in crises. A crisis can be a tremendous opportunity to bring change and urgency to an organization since it directly confronts complacency. Fourth, they confront the problem of "NoNos" and do so effectively. They don't accept as inevitable that an organization must put up with people who relentlessly create experiences that kill urgency. These tactics are a part of what virtually all great leaders do. But using them doesn't require genes or charisma; they can be employed by people at any level in an enterprise.

Chapter 4: Tactic one—bring the outside in

Tactic one is based on the observation that organizations of any size or age tend to be too internally oriented. Even people who know this fact often underestimate the size of the problem and its consequences. The disconnect between what insiders see, feel, and think and the external opportunities and hazards can be astonishing. An inside-outside disconnect always reduces an organization's sense of urgency. Most organizations fail, which forces them to confront external realities. Enterprises that grow over a sustained period are seen as successful. With success, a "we know best" culture can easily develop. And why not? The evidence seems to suggest that leaders and employees do know best. An

inward focused organization inevitably misses new opportunities and hazards coming from competitors, customers, or changes in the environment. When these opportunities and hazards aren't seen, the sense of urgency drops. With less urgency, people are even less inclined to look outside for the new possibilities and problems, and complacency grows. Because of the natural tendency toward internal focus and the complacency that follows, one powerful way to increase urgency is by reducing the gap between what is happening on the outside and what people see and feel on the inside. In terms of shrinking the disconnect between the inside and the outside of an organization, one method used today by some of the world's most successful corporations is to listen very carefully, and often, to the lower-level personnel who interact with customers. Frontline people can collect masses of external information as part of doing their jobs well. If that information finds its way to decision-makers, an organization can become more externally oriented, and a sense of urgency will tend to grow. Another method is to share bad news widely. People often resist sharing outside information broadly with leaders or employees either because 1) they believe most people aren't smart or experienced enough to understand it, 2) they fear being blamed for the information that doesn't make them look good, 3) they fear leaks will cause a drop in stock price, or 4) they worry that distributing troubling information will hurt morale and increase anxiety. 6 Conversely, sharing the information can be a powerful way of increasing urgency in an organization. Good leaders can minimize risks by explaining the opportunity and demonstrating urgency in their own actions. In other words, they provide leadership that creates urgency instead of retreating totally into damage control. Another way to bring the outside in is by importing people. Everyone does this to some degree, and yet few gain the true power of the method. Consultants, customers, and suppliers can all bring a new perspective that enables people to see things fresh (and develop a sense of urgency).

Chapter 5: Tactic two—behave with urgency every day

All of us constantly send messages. What we say is obviously important. How, when, and where we speak can be even more revealing. People watch how quickly we move on various issues. They notice tone of voice, facial and body movements, and details like whether we start meetings on time. All these things send a message about urgency. Everything we do communicates a sense of urgency—or not. Effective bosses understand that they must model urgency daily if they want their organizations to embrace it. There are several things that hinder a leader's ability to model urgency. First is a cluttered appointment diary. We are too busy with dozens of different, often unrelated activities. When you are going from one meeting to the next, all on different topics, all run inefficiently, attitudes and feelings about urgency drain out through sheer exhaustion. Clutter and fatigue undermine true urgency. Modeling urgency requires that an executive relentlessly eliminates low priority items from his calendar. He eliminates clutter, and the freed-up space allows him to move faster. It allows him to follow up quickly on action items that come out of meetings, as well as have impromptu interactions that push important projects along. It sends a strong message about what is important. Behavior gives credibility to words. When a manager tells his people that they cannot wait twelve months to finish a project, but must do it in six, his actions will either reinforce a sense of urgency or undercut it. If he is focused on high priority items rather than scattered among many, it will communicate urgency. Effective leaders go out of their way to be visible. They conduct themselves to let as many as possible hear their words and

see their actions. This strategy is also far from the norm today, when so many of us become trapped in our offices, seen, and heard by very small numbers of people. Urgency is contagious, but only if it is visible. Behaving urgently does not mean constantly running around, shouting "faster, faster," creating stress for others, and then becoming frustrated when no one else completes every 7-goal tomorrow. That is false urgency. Because true urgency has a strong element of now, it can be easy to forget the longer time frame into which large changes and achievements fit. The right attitude might be called "urgent patience." This means acting every day with a sense of urgency but having a realistic view of time. It means recognizing that five years may be needed to attain important and ambitious goals, and yet coming to work each day committed to making progress toward those goals.

Chapter 6: Tactic three—find opportunity in crises

Most people hold one of two perspectives on the nature of crises. The first, and larger group, sees crises as horrid events, which can hurt people, disrupt plans, and even cripple an organization or community beyond repair. Others see a crisis as an opportunity; they believe the real danger is complacency, and a crisis may be required to confront it. Situations where people can use a crisis to their advantage all appear to share a few characteristics. Most fundamentally, people are actively looking for a potential opportunity. They don't panic and make the situation worse. They also don't assume that an opportunity is guaranteed. They realize that a crisis can produce the kind of frenzied activity associated with false urgency (which makes things worse). Hence, the word potential. The key players in these sorts of situations either intuitively or consciously realize that the big challenge is almost always more a heart problem than a mind problem. They understand that analysis and logic alone miss the central target— the heart. Because they recognize that the heart needs hope, they tend to act with passion, with conviction, with optimism, and with steely resolve. Analytically correct but unmoving lectures don't succeed, so they don't waste their time offering them. Possibly most important of all, they don't mistake false urgency for real urgency. They don't look at sudden energy and movement as conclusive signs that real urgency has been developed. They take carefully considered action to turn initial anxiety into a determination to act now and win. They develop plans that sequence actions to generate true urgency. Sometimes a crisis is needed to shake people out of their complacency, but there isn't anything that naturally happens. In those times, it is possible to create a crisis. While you don't want to do this as a habit, used judiciously it can be very effective. One way to do that is by setting stretch goals. These goals need to be high enough that they cannot possibly be accomplished through business as usual. They need to make people say "Wow"—but not create a mutiny. The "Wow" must eventually become "Wow, this is a tough but meaningful challenge," and not "Wow, this is stupid." People who successfully create crises to increase urgency use all the same approaches as those who have crises thrust upon them. They think in terms of opportunity. They move proactively, making no assumptions that a crisis by itself will reduce complacency and create 8 needed actions. They see the central role of emotions and not only thoughts. Further, they take actions that are visible and unambiguous. When Jack Welch declared that every sector of GE would be number one or two, or would be shut down, it created a crisis. It wasn't only known by a few people, but was very visible, and sent an unambiguous message that urgent action was needed.

There are four basic mistakes people make when trying to use a crisis to reduce complacency:

1. If crises inevitably will create the sense of urgency needed to perform better.

2. Going over the line with a strategy that creates an angry backlash because people feel manipulated.

3. Passively sitting and waiting for a crisis (which may never come).

4. Underestimating what the people who would avoid crises at all costs correctly appreciate: that crises can bring disaster. A crisis, whether natural or created, can be a powerful tool to reduce complacency, but it doesn't happen automatically. Prudence and wisdom are important. But in a rapidly changing world, finding opportunities in crises probably reduces your overall risk.

Chapter 7: Tactic four—deal with NoNos

NoNos are highly skilled urgency killers. If they cannot undermine attempts at diminishing a contentment with the status quo, they create anxiety or anger connected to a false sense of urgency. You can easily imagine how a NoNo reacts to any new idea! A NoNo is more than a skeptic. Always ready with ten reasons why the current situation is fine, why the problems and challenges others see don't exist, or why you need more data before acting. NoNos are much more dangerous than we are inclined to believe, and that is one of the main reasons we make mistakes in trying to deal with them. There are two ways that people typically employ to deal with NoNos. Unfortunately, both methods work poorly. The first is co-opting them, and the second is isolating and ignoring them. Co-opting doesn't work; bringing them into the process and including them assumes they are skeptical but still willing to examine the data. NoNos aren't open-minded and are usually very intentional about delaying, hindering, or disrupting change. Isolating and ignoring doesn't work either. It seems to make sense to leave a NoNo outside the tent where they cannot do any mischief. Unfortunately, an ignored NoNo can create a lot of problems. He will often relentlessly talk to others, especially the anxious and fearful, those who have a grudge against the leadership, and (ironically) the open-minded. The talk will always include some things that are true, but the effect is to undercut the development of any sense of true urgency for change. A smart NoNo locates weak points in arguments and is expert at creating anxiety and undermining any new determination to exploit opportunities and avoid hazards. There are three effective solutions for dealing with NoNos. The first is to keep them from creating mischief by actively distracting these distracters. Give them something important or meaningful to do that keeps them occupied but away from a place of influence. The second is to push them out of the organization. The third is to expose their behavior in ways that allow natural social forces to reduce or stop it. Once people identify a person as a "NoNo" their ability to exercise influence becomes extremely limited. An unfortunate but accurate rule: never underestimate the damage that a hard-core NoNo can do in undermining efforts to reduce complacency, increase urgency, make smart action happen rapidly, and help an organization to survive and prosper.

Chapter 8: Keeping urgency up

An organization that can sustain a high sense of urgency over time has the potential to become a high-performance machine, where results go from good to great and beyond. But sustaining urgency over time requires that it not only be created, and created well, but that it be re-created again and again.

Urgency does not, and cannot, remain high without conscious effort unless it is very firmly ingrained in an organization's culture, something that is exceptionally rare today. Even when one has a strong culture of true urgency, unless there are crises that are impossible to ignore, natural forces tend to push toward stability and contentment. The basic pattern is simple: urgency leads to success leads to complacency. The tools to maintain urgency are the same ones used to develop it. The key to using them on an ongoing basis is to take note of which one's work in your organization, and which ones are waning in effectiveness. Mix them up to maximize their impact. The ultimate solution to the problem of urgency dropping after successes is to create the right culture. This is especially true as we move from a world in which change is mostly episodic to a world in which change is continuous. With a culture of urgency, people deeply value the capacity to grab new opportunities, avoid new hazards, and continually find ways to win. Behaviors that are the norm include being constantly alert, focusing externally, moving fast, stopping low-value-added activities that absorb time and effort, relentlessly pushing for change when it is needed, and providing the leadership to produce smart change no matter where you are in the hierarchy. I don't think many organizations anywhere have cultures that truly reflect a sense of urgency. This will change. Some people will find that to prosper and maintain that prosperity 10 in a turbulent, fast-moving world, a culture of urgency is a huge asset. Through time, effort, and perhaps a bit of luck, they will create that culture. And it will provide immense benefits to many people. I appreciated Kotter's distinction between true and false urgency. I usually think of urgency as a negative thing, going back to a booklet called The Tyranny of the Urgent that I read in college, which focused on the negative impact of being ruled by the "urgent" things in life. I have also experienced true urgency. Several years ago, I worked for a company that hit a crisis. For a solid year we worked our tails off. We focused on the important things, and those got done quickly and done well. There was no time to delay or "do it tomorrow." It was demanding, but also exhilarating, and the sense of satisfaction we all experienced when we came through was just as real as if we had won a championship of some kind. I think most of us tend to think of urgency as a negative thing, associated with stress, pressure, or a crisis. While that can be true, it's also true that urgency is a key factor in bringing change to any organization.