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## Combat Complacency to Make Change Happen

"Bad business results are both a blessing and a curse. Losing money does catch people's attention, but it gives less maneuvering room. With good business results, the opposite is true; convincing people of the need for change is much harder, but you have more resources to help make changes." John Kotter, Harvard Business Review, 1995

You would think bad business results are enough to shake people out of complacency. But approximately 50 percent of companies fail to establish a sufficient sense of urgency to succeed in their transformation efforts, according to John Kotter, author of *Leading Change* and *A Sense of Urgency*.

People in organizations are entrenched in maintaining the status quo, even in the face of devastating news such as:

- ▶ Shrinking margins
- ▶ New competition
- ▶ Decreasing market share
- ▶ Flat earnings
- ▶ Lack of revenue growth
- ▶ Declining competitive position
- ▶ Global economic recession

In spite of bad news, getting people to change and motivating them to participate in change initiatives are major problems. Starting a transformation program requires full-bore cooperation from many individuals. Without sustained motivation, people won't stay with the program long enough to get results, so the effort goes nowhere.

Executives underestimate how hard it is to drive people out of their comfort zones, even when these zones lack security. Management also overestimates its success in creating a culture of urgency — the element that may, in fact, be the most important contribution to transformation efforts.

Research reveals that in situations where substantial changes were clearly needed, the following results were typical in 70 percent of companies:

- ▶ 1. Changes were not fully launched.
- ▶ 2. Change efforts failed.



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- ▶ **3.** Changes were achieved, but they were over budget, late and extremely frustrating.

In reality, only 10 percent of company change efforts achieve inspirational results. What distinguishes them from the appalling 70 percent?

Emotions play a strong role, Kotter asserts. When there's a dramatic sense of urgency, people are motivated to do whatever they can to help implement changes. Where there's complacency, leaders will be faced with resistance and a desire to maintain the status quo.

## *The Big Error*

When you fail to create a sense of urgency, your people will be unwilling to take the critical leap toward an uncertain future.

Here are some questions to test the effectiveness of your company's change program:

- ▶ How high is managers', peers' and workers' sense of urgency?
- ▶ How do you know this?
- ▶ If it's too low, why?
- ▶ What exactly are you doing to change this?
- ▶ If you cannot change the level of urgency, what are the consequences for your organization? How about your career?

At the beginning of any change effort, of any magnitude, leaders fail when the organization's sense of urgency is lacking. This leads to a variety of difficulties, pain, disappointment and that distressing 70 percent statistic.

## *Complacency Is Rampant*

Complacency is much more common than we think. In the current economic recession, you'd think that workers would be too worried about job security to be complacent. Sadly, the consequences of complacency seldom make a blip on their occupational radar.

People gravitate toward doing whatever alleviates their anxieties and worries, and they will go to great lengths to avoid discomfort. This usually means "Don't rock the boat. Hang onto what used to work." It's human nature to cling to the familiar.

Often, complacency is invisible to managers and leaders, as well as the employees in its grip. You, too, may be complacent and not even realize it. That's because success produces complacency and, for peace of mind, we often focus on success instead of our failures or gaps.

Complacency occurs on many levels: organizational, team and

personal. An organization's many years of prosperity may have ended a decade ago, but the complacency created by prosperity can live on — and the people involved don't see it.

A smart, savvy manager may be oblivious to the extremely complacent individuals who are two levels beneath him in the organization's hierarchy—so much so that his blindness will thwart his dreams of career advancement. People can easily live in delusional memories of success and be unaware that they are dangerously close to complacency. As humans, we simply like our well-established routines too much.

This problem is augmented by our tendency to replace a true sense of urgency and purpose with frantic activity and unfocused anxiety — what we call a false or misguided urgency. This phenomenon is as prevalent as complacency, but it's more insidious.

## *False Urgency*

When organizations suffer from a false sense of urgency, they experience a great deal of energized action, but it's driven by anxiety, anger and frustration. There's activity, but little focused determination to win — and to do so as soon as possible.

With false urgency, you will frequently witness:

- ▶ Running from meeting to meeting
- ▶ Sending lots of emails
- ▶ Writing unnecessary reports
- ▶ Juggling lower priorities
- ▶ Compulsively making lists that are never completed

The danger here is that participants and observers actually believe their increased activity is productive. Some workers may actually be driven by a sincere desire to contribute to the change process. But if they're not guided by a clear sense of purpose toward winning results — and if these results never manifest — then people will give up. Spinning their wheels can create intolerable anxiety and frustration.



|              | Complacency  | False Sense of Urgency   | True Sense of Urgency   |
|--------------|--|--|---|
| People Think | "I know what to do, and I do it."  | "What a mess this is."   | "Great opportunities and hazards are everywhere."   |
| People Feel  | The status quo (and sometimes anxious about the unknown)   | Very anxious, angry, frustrated  | A powerful desire to move, and win— <i>now</i>  |
| Behaviors    | <b>Unchanging activity:</b> action that ignores an organization's new opportunities or hazards, focuses inward, does whatever has been the norm in the past (many meetings, 9 to 5, or 8 to 6) | <b>Frenetic activity:</b> meetings, writing, going, projects, task forces, PowerPoint presentations to the extreme – all of which exhausts and greatly stresses people | <b>Urgent activity:</b> action that is alert and fast moving, focused externally on the important issues; relentless, continuous purging of irrelevant activities to provide time for what's important and to prevent burnout |

(Source: John Kotter, *A Sense of Urgency*, Harvard Business Press, 2007.)

### Continuous Change

We live in an age when change is accelerating. Over the next five or 10 years, it will probably increase even more, with huge consequences for nearly everyone. Change is no longer cyclical or episodic, but is becoming continuous.

External change must be seen and recognized so it can be acted upon. With an insufficient sense of urgency, people tend to avoid looking hard enough. When they do look, they don't see, believe their eyes or recognize the need to change.

External change demands internal change. Processes must become more efficient. New work methods and products must be created. Organizations need to be reorganized to focus more on customers or growth.

When there's complacency or false urgency, none of these changes can happen fast enough, smart enough or efficiently enough.

If U.S. companies are going to maintain their leadership status and economic power, the people who work for them must learn to become more responsive and adaptable to change.

### Communicate for Urgency

Communications are critical to creating engagement and building a true sense of urgency. To that end, here are four steps for creating buy-in, courtesy of John Baldoni (*Great Communication Secrets of Great Leaders*).

- ▶ **1. Inform.** Explain the situation in general and specific terms. Generality provides context; specifics provide expectations. For example, make the case for your initiative, ask people to support it and tell them why it's necessary.

- ▶ **2. Involve.** Once people understand the facts and what's expected of them, they will decide whether to participate. Critical to gaining commitment is communicating "What's In It For Me?" (WII-FM). You must make the specifics clear and demonstrate what people will gain by supporting your initiatives.
- ▶ **3. Invite.** Once people understand what's expected of them, ask for their support. Never assume people will follow you until you ask them to do so. Be specific and persistent: "Can I count on your support for this initiative?"
- ▶ **4. Ignite.** This final step is not always possible, but it separates the ordinary from the extraordinary. You must try to take individuals' commitment and transform it into a collective willingness to work toward a cause greater than themselves. Excite their imaginations by talking about what will happen when your initiative is a success.

One further point: Never assume that you can stop communicating after your people buy into the process and understand the WII-FM. Use a combination of rhetoric and storytelling to make your followers feel that they are vital to the cause.

This is the challenge that faces any leader who attempts to push through a significant change initiative. Make people feel as though they have an important role to play. They must embrace the idea that their participation matters.



## *Beware of Barriers to Change*

Complacency can set in at any time, but it's often a default attitude when change becomes too difficult. Change is, by definition, difficult because it requires us to move outside our comfort zones for an extended period.

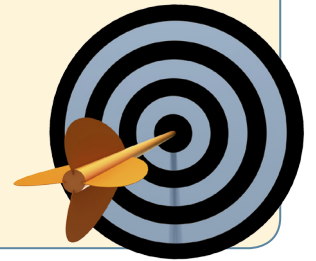
Familiarize yourself with these five common barriers to change so you can stay on track:

- ▶ **1. Ownership:** It's easier to pass the buck than to stand up as a leader and take over responsibilities that may not even be yours.
- ▶ **2. Time:** Change always takes longer than estimated. Add 50 percent to 100 percent more time to your expectations.
- ▶ **3. Difficulty:** Change is always more difficult than anticipated. When a task appears to be easy, you may set yourself up for disappointment and frustration if you miscalculate the time required to complete it. Anticipate troubles, and give yourself credit for small victories.
- ▶ **4. Distractions:** When the going gets tough, as it will, it's easy to be distracted by competing goals, other interests and priorities. Anticipate how easily you can become distracted; you'll be amazed at how much easier it is to regain your focus.
- ▶ **5. Maintenance:** Once you expend all of the effort needed to achieve a change goal, be willing to face reality. It takes time for the new to become habitual. Give up too soon, and you're back to square one. Maintenance requires vigilance and perseverance —more than you may think.

Urgency tends to collapse after a few successes. As we move toward a future that requires continuous change, urgency will become a powerful asset that carries you through the years.

A changing world offers many hazards, but also wonderful opportunities. To capitalize on these opportunities, you'll need many skills and resources. But progress begins with an appropriate sense of urgency, accepted by a large group of people.

Get this right, and great things are possible.



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