

A Sense of Urgency – Dr. John Kotter

“The future belongs to those who see possibilities before they become obvious.”

– John Scully

The toughest of the 8 steps for successful change and the most often overlooked is the process of increasing the **urgency** in an organization for the need for change. Urgency must be core to a successful organization, and it must be sustained over time. It is critical to set the stage for making a challenging leap into some new direction. Urgency is becoming increasingly important because change is shifting from episodic to continuous. That means there is a constant need for an urgent focus on what is important.

True urgency focuses on critical issues. It is driven by the deep determination to win, not anxiety about losing.

Many people confuse it with false urgency. This misguided sense of urgency does have energized action, but it has a frantic aspect to it with people driven by anxiety and fear. This dysfunctional orientation prevents people from exploiting opportunities and addressing real issues.

The worst thing for an organization is to step into **complacency**. In a fast moving and changing world, a sleepy or steadfast contentment with the status quo can create disaster – literally.

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.

For more information about the importance of urgency, please refer to Dr. Kotter's book, A Sense of Urgency.