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***A Sense of Urgency*: John Kotter's book on why urgency is the most powerful business tool of all**

With urgency anything is possible, without it, success will never follow

John Kotter presents a simple and compelling case in his recent book *A Sense of Urgency*. After 30 years researching hundreds of organisations to see what determines successful change and high performance, he has identified one essential requirement that tops all others: a sense of urgency. With this anything is possible, without it, success will never follow.

What a false sense of urgency looks like

There is no new research and the small, easy to read, book only has the substance of a strong article. Kotter is better at describing the practical realities of what goes wrong than he is with practical solutions, but his list of symptoms of a 'false sense of urgency' is compelling (and recognisable):

- an executive team too busy with too many problems to focus on the key issues
- delegating too many problems to consultants to find answers
- lots of task forces with deadlines that are too far away
- continual delegation of problems back to middle managers, while the executive team focuses on chasing them for answers

Creating a true sense of urgency

At the heart of the book, Kotter describes four tactics for leaders to create a true sense of urgency in their business:

1. Bring the outside in

- Bring outside reality in: use data, people, video, sights, sounds to bring the external world of the customer, competitor and other stakeholders, to life
- Listen to customer-facing employees regularly and without assumptions

2. Behave with true urgency yourself every day

- Never act content, anxious or angry, but keep up the positive energy
- Demonstrate your sense of urgency in meetings, one-to-one and in emails - visibly

3. Look for the upside possibilities in crises - selectively, credibly and carefully

- Always be alert to see if crises, or aspects of them, can be friends
- But proceed with caution, never be naive, as crises can be deadly

4. Confront the problem of naysayers, effectively

- Remove or neutralise all relentless urgency-killers, colleagues who are determined to keep a group complacent (usually because of past success), or are destructive (as cynics).

How a leader can behave with urgency

Kotter also lists his advice on how to personally, as a leader, behave with true urgency:

- **Purge and delegate:** clear the diary of the routine and less urgent, focus the executive agenda on the key issues only
- **Move with speed:** do not wait if you discover something, be proactive, respond fast, and end every conversation with agreed actions
- **Speak with passion:** talk with feeling based on credible emotion, not just the business case
- **Match words and deeds:** be prepared to do yourself, everything you demand of others
- **Let them see it all:** don't hide bad news or problems, harness colleagues to address them.

Kotter's views are reinforced in *Fast Strategy* by Doz and Kosonen

The focus and simplicity of Kotter's case is compelling and matches other recent published material, including *Fast Strategy* (by INSEAD professor Yves Doz and past Nokia strategy head Mikko Kosonen). Based on interviews with 150 leaders, they identify three aspects of staying fast:

- **'Strategic sensitivity'** or being open-minded and attentive enough to sense big (sometimes difficult) changes and major opportunities. This requires a strong combination of regular tracking, particularly of 'lead' indicators, combined with a process and behaviour at the top which ensures that this input always influences decisions
- **'Resource fluidity'** or the ability to redeploy resources rapidly enough to exploit emerging opportunities, or avoid problems in a fast-moving environment. Achieving this requires the right approach to organisation and people-management model, with clear accountabilities and effective and fast decision-making

Brief

- **'Collective commitment'** or the ability of top teams to make bold decisions fast, without getting caught up in politics. This requires the right team structure and behaviour and, above all, well planned and maintained decision-making processes.

Stonecourt view: while there may not be new research in Kotter's book – and his solutions may sound like common sense – his wisdom and experience are enough to ensure this book should be taken seriously. A good read.