

# Brief

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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's book *A Sense of Urgency* presents a simple and compelling case. After 30 years researching hundreds of organisations to see what determines successful change and high performance, he finds one essential requirement: 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 here, and the small, easy to read, book only has the substance of a strong article. He is better at describing the practical realities of what goes wrong than he is with practical solutions to put them right, but his description of the symptoms of a 'false sense of urgency' is compelling and recognisable:

- an executive team too busy with too many problems to focus on the most important issues
- delegating too many problems to consultants
- lots of task forces with deadlines that are too far away
- delegation of key problems back to middle managers.

### **Creating a true sense of urgency**

Kotter describes four tactics for leaders to create a sense of urgency:

1. **Bring the outside in:** use data, people, video 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.
4. **Confront the problem of naysayers, effectively:** remove or neutralise all relentless urgency-killers, colleagues who are determined to keep a group complacent, or are destructive as cynics.

### **How a leader can behave with urgency**

- **Purge and delegate:** clear the diary of the routine, focus the executive agenda on the key issues only
- **Move with speed:** if you discover something, be proactive, and fast. End each 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.

The focus and simplicity of the case is compelling. It matches other recent published material - including the interesting *Fast Strategy*, by INSEAD professor Yves Doz and past Nokia strategy head Mikko Kosonen.