

How to Get Ahead: Act with Urgency

by Abby Ellin



John P. Kotter, professor of leadership at Harvard University, is the author of 17 books, most recently *A Sense of Urgency* (Harvard Business Press, 2008). Among the book's tenets: Always think of crises as potential opportunities and not just "problems that automatically must be delegated to the damage control specialists," he says. "A crisis can be your friend." Additionally, "If urgency is low, never patiently wait for a crisis — which may never come — to solve your problems. Bring the outside in. Act with urgency every day."

BNET contributor Abby Ellin spoke with Kotter about thinking of urgency not as a periodic state of mind, but as permanent asset of a well-managed organization.

How do you distinguish between a real and a false sense of urgency?

Behavior. With a false sense of urgency you get lots of action, but it's action for action's sake, not productivity. "Frenetic" is my favorite world for that — lots of meetings, lots of PowerPoint presentations, and not many results. It has no logical direction, and it grinds people down.

A real sense of urgency is a marathon, but it's a marathon in that people get up for it every day, and even if they're busy with their normal routine, they find some way to get on the old marathon track and do something. If they're so busy they don't have any time to go out to the track, they look for the junk on their calendar, and they eliminate it. And you can see progress every day.

In order to instill a real sense of urgency in others, do you have to feel it yourself?

Role modeling is essential. One way is to lead by example. You have to feel it yourself first. My favorite example in the urgency book is the manager who would repeat: "There are big opportunities out there if we don't allow ourselves to be complacent." He ended all his meetings by adding to what everyone was working on: "I will do X on Monday and Y on Tuesday." He was very specific. The implicit message was: You do the same thing.

What are some characteristics of a real sense of urgency?

There are so many. The manager I mention wouldn't let meetings wander off the agenda, and he made it clear why people couldn't waste time. He always demonstrated his own sense of urgency by committing to specific plans over the next five days. And he always started with himself.

Let's say you just won a big contract. Should you celebrate? Is complacency *never* good?

Never! It always makes you vulnerable. There's nothing inconsistent with having a sense of urgency and a big party to celebrate some big success. But successful organizations that develop complacency turn inward, and they don't even see the hazards and the opportunities in their business. So once you get complacent, it doesn't go away. In some cases it grows.

For example?

Before Lou Gerstner became the first "outsider" to run IBM in the early 1990s, it was losing market share. It had become complacent. If you're arrogant and inwardly focused, you can imagine how little you pay attention to competitors and what customers really want. And that's what happened until Microsoft and Intel basically took IBM's business away. IBM knew there was a problem, but there was a lot of false urgency. Everybody was running around in circles and making things worse, until they literally had a change of regime.

How can people sustain this accelerating sense of urgency without burning out?

If people are out there every day, pushing away, keeping their eye on the big picture, and watching for opportunities, they tend to win. If you're winning you don't get drained, even if you're working 12-hour days. If anything, it becomes more exhilarating. That's what happens with a strong sense of urgency. It can be maintained over time because it produces results that beat the competition. And people love that.