

Do We Have “A SENSE OF URGENCY?”

The Author:

Harvard's John Kotter is recognized as one of the world's foremost experts on organizational change. For over 30 years Kotter has studied how organizations of all types and sizes change over time. His most recent book, A Sense Of Urgency, discusses what he sees as a key element for organizations that hope to survive in today's rapidly changing world: *a sense of urgency*.

Some Realities Based on Kotter's Research:

- About 70% of attempts to implement significant change in organizations **fail**
- About 20% of attempts to implement significant change in organizations are only **partially successful**
- About 10% of attempts to implement significant change in organizations **actually succeed**
- **The determining factor in whether or not an organization's culture can implement significant change is usually whether or not it has a sense of urgency regarding the organization's ability to thrive in a rapidly changing world.**
- The organizational cultures least likely to have the necessary sense of urgency to change significantly are usually found in large and/or previously very successful organizations (examples: IBM, GM) and tradition-based organizations (examples: fraternal organizations, most mainline churches?) Their focus often is attempting to preserve the comfort level of the status quo, no matter what, until it's too late.
- In the 20th century, organizations could often survive over time by making **episodal changes**, perhaps every decade or so, often changing only when some crisis arose.
- The much faster changes in 21st century operating environments demand **continuous change**. Organizations that can't adapt to that reality are rapidly becoming irrelevant and/or extinct. Waiting until a crisis arrives to change is usually fatal.

Some Definitions:

- **External change:** Change in the organization's operating environment. "External change must be seen to be acted upon. External change demands internal change."
- **Internal change:** Operational and cultural change that adapts the organization to changes in its operating environment (external changes). Like it or not, in today's world every organization's operating environment is constantly changing.
- **Complacency:** A *feeling* of contentment or *self* satisfaction, especially when coupled with an unawareness of danger or trouble. In today's world a complacent organizational culture is usually fatal to the organization over time. Complacent cultures focus on safeguarding the status quo and doing what they've always done, the way they've always done it.

- **False Urgency/Panic:** Is what happens when an organization's culture suddenly realizes it's had its head in the sand and its very existence is now threatened because it failed to recognize changes in its operating environment and adapt to them. It's often characterized by finger-pointing, ill-concieved actions and shooting off whatever toes the organization might have left. *Panic and a true sense of urgency are two very different things.*
- **Sense of urgency:** A general *feeling* by the organization's culture that, in order to survive, it must continuously monitor external changes for both potential opportunities and hazards and then make appropriate internal changes to adapt to its ever changing operating environment. "We need to stay on top of things and be nimble enough to quickly adjust how we function if we're going to survive over time."

Some Clues To A Possibly Complacent Organizational Culture:

- We're doing just fine the way things are now. If it isn't broke, don't try to fix it.
- We're not really concerned about what others are doing. We're doing OK here.
- We've had issues before and they've always managed to work themselves out. Just be patient. It will all work out – eventually.
- Little meeting time is devoted to the organization's future or to what's happening outside the organization. (Inward focus?)
- Lack of follow up by those who agree to do things. This is usually enabled by a lack of an accepted accountability system.
- Reluctance to "look outside" and/or to invite outsiders in to get their perspectives on how external changes might affect the organization. (More inward focus?)
- Fluffy, happy newsletters/bulletins that rarely, if ever, include anything about problems the organization might be facing. (We don't want to risk lowering morale or possibly generate negative feelings. Ignorance is bliss?)
- Frequent attempts to "gloss over" negative trends affecting the organization.

Some Tips For Developing A Healthy Sense Of Urgency In An Organization:

- *Speak with passion – relentlessly talk about the need to behave urgently*
- *Purge low-priority items – focus scarce resources on doing what's important to the vision and mission while adapting to external changes*
- *Match words with deeds – all talk and no walk will get you nowhere. Behaviors rule!*
- *Move with speed – today's operating environments are not tolerant of endless delays. Tolerance for "urgent patience" is about the best you can hope for.*
- *Let them see it all – Visibility and genuine transparency are essential to getting "buy-in"*

A Caution: You Must Identify The NoNos In The Organization:

NoNos are more than reasonable skeptics. They always have 10 reasons why everything is fine, why there is no problem, or, why more time is needed to study the issue before acting.

There are 2 general types of NoNos:

1. The upfront and vocal NoNo type: They're relatively easy to identify and separate from well intended and reasonable skeptics. The latter are helpful, the former are not.
2. The stealth NoNo type: They will pay lip-service to implementing changes and might actually support cosmetic changes of little consequence. But, behind the scenes they stockpile an arsenal of stealth torpedoes that they can unleash against any proposed significant change effort, especially if they suspect it will affect their personal comfort zone in the organization.

NoNos can't be ignored, nor can they be co-opted. NoNos will almost never change, even if they say they will. NoNos can't be allowed to put the organization at risk. They must be identified and dealt with. Depending on their level of "clout" in the organization, one of 3 methods can usually work:

1. Keep them from creating mischief by actively distracting them. Example: Assign them to a major project that will require much of their time and energy.
2. Immobilize them with social/peer pressure. Find socially acceptable and ethical ways to identify them to the organization and let social/peer pressure do the rest.
3. Get rid of them. In some situations this means termination. In others it means counseling them out. "Your views are incompatible with our vision and mission. You'll be much happier elsewhere."

Too often, leaders in an organization refuse to take the uncomfortable steps required to deal with one or more hard-core NoNos. But it boils down to this question:

Do we allow a hard-core NoNo to endanger the future of the organization, or do we take action that might be uncomfortable in the short term but deals with this critical issue now in order to help the organization thrive in the long term?

Warning:

NoNos are more dangerous to an organization than we are often willing to believe. The reality is that just one hard-core NoNo with clout can put the future of the organization at risk. They are often able to mobilize a small group of guerilla fighters and guide them in "creative insubordination" that undermines change efforts and endangers the future of the organization.

Something to think about:

1. **Does our church culture have a sense of urgency or is it complacent? (See definitions)**
What is the evidence for your conclusion?
2. **Do we have NoNos in our midst, especially "Stealth NoNos"?**
 - **How do we know? If yes, how should we be dealing with them?**

Other change oriented books by John Kotter:

Leading Change - Describes an eight-step process for leading change; Step 1: Create a sense of urgency (A good read for pastors!)

Our Iceberg Is Melting – A light look at organizational change (A good read for all church folk!)

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