

Factors that Reject Urgency: Complacency

The first step in creating a true sense of urgency is to deeply understand its opposites: complacency and false urgency.

The dictionary says complacency is "*a feeling of contentment or self satisfaction, especially when coupled with an unawareness of danger or trouble.*" For our purposes complacency here, two words in that definition are especially important. The first is *feeling*. Complacency is not only a thought. It's very much a feeling. It is usually less a matter of conscious, rational analysis than unconscious emotion. People usually treat complacency as a state of mind that can be changed solely with "the cold, hard facts." The second key word is *self*. Complacency is a feeling that a person has about his or her own behavior, about what he or she needs to do or not do. This point is also extremely important, because *it is possible to see problems and yet be astonishingly complacent because you do not feel that the problems require changes in your own actions.*

Almost always, complacent individuals do not view themselves as complacent. They see themselves as behaving quite rationally, given the circumstances. They can sometimes be aggravatingly creative in justifying their point of view. You offer "the facts" about a threat or opportunity. They come up with their own highly selective data and think to themselves that you worry too much. These people can sometimes be

hard to spot because they look rational, thoughtful, and prudent. Worse yet, they can see themselves as rational, thoughtful, and prudent.

If you confront people with your observation that they are being complacent, almost without fail they will think you are wrong. Often, they will be offended (seriously offended) or wonder what your real agenda is. Even in cases where problems are very hard to deny, complacent people will often say, in essence, "Of course we have challenges and problems." Probe with questions, and you will learn that the complacent think that others, and not themselves, are failing to face the challenges and problems. If those others would change, all would be well.

Very, very smart people can be astonishingly complacent in the face of needed change. There are many reasons, and none more important than historical success. With sufficient success, the threats from outside are, or once were, conquered. With no need to focus outward, eyes shift inward to manage a larger and larger organization. Competitive instincts can also easily turn inward, creating bureaucratic politics. As a result, new problems or opportunities in the outside world are not seen clearly, if at all. Complacency grows, leading to even less interest in or focus on outside reality, leading to still more complacency.



how do the complacent think?

The complacent virtually never think they are complacent. "I'm doing what's right." "Sometimes it isn't easy, but I know what to do and I do it-or if I can't entirely do it, the problem is created over there (in that department, by my boss, by competitors that don't play fair, etc.)."

what do they feel?

At a very basic, gut level, the complacent are content with the status quo. Sometimes they cling to what exists because they are afraid, often irrationally afraid, of the personal consequences of change.

how do the complacent behave?

The best way to identify the complacent is by what they do instead of what they say (though words can be revealing). The complacent do not alertly look for new opportunities or hazards facing their organizations. They pay much more attention to what is happening internally than externally. They tend to move at thirty miles an hour even when fifty is clearly needed to succeed. They rarely initiate or truly lead. Most of all, they do what has worked for them in the past.

where does complacency come from?

Complacency is almost always the product of success or perceived success. Complacency can live on long after great success has disappeared. Perceptions do not have to be accurate.

Factors that Reject Urgency: False Urgency

False urgency is a condition that is very different from complacency. While complacency embraces the status quo, false urgency can be filled with new activities.

While complacency often has a sort of sleepy quality, false urgency is filled with energy. While complacency is built on a feeling that the status quo is basically fine, *false urgency is built on a platform of anxiety and anger*. Anxiety and anger drive behavior that can be highly energetic-which is why people mistake false for true urgency. But the energy from anger and anxiety can easily create activity, not productivity, and sometimes very destructive activity.

With anger at the bosses, the union, or the marketing department, people spend their time racing around, often looking for and using the corporate equivalent of firearms. They create battles that get the company nowhere. They waste hours developing long Power Point presentations to shoot down good ideas from other units in the organization. They hold meeting after meeting strategizing how to fight the union, even if the latter prefers peace.

They go through the motions, using passive aggression to stall projects (as in "Oh, was I supposed to have that done today?"). They create destructive conflict, such as pounding the table so that a sensible meeting is impossible. All this takes time and energy, but it is wasted energy-not in the service of mobilizing people to grab opportunities or duck hazards.

Four sets of behaviors often stop change. The first is complacency, driven by false pride or arrogance. The second is immobilization and self-protection, driven by fear or panic. The next is "you-can't-make-me-move" deviance, driven by anger. And the last is a pessimistic attitude, leading to constant hesitation. These behaviors prevent people from taking action. Instead, they hold back or complain as others initiate new action. The result is that a needed change effort is derailed.

One source of anger is failed attempts to change in the past. People become so frustrated by earlier efforts that they can actually become mad when you point to an important new issue. Another source is current difficulties which people rarely tend to think are their fault.

The anxiety driving false complacency is very different from anger, yet the ultimate effects can be very similar. With anxiety, people eventually come to worry most about their jobs, their careers, and the future of their work groups. They become preoccupied searching for nearby personal dangers. They can spend hours seeking safe retreats. A worried mind, racing around looking for a safe retreat, will never act with a true sense of urgency.

Fear and anxiety have many sources, but, once again, just as with anger, earlier failed change efforts loom large. If people are hurt when they are asked to make sacrifices for the general good, and yet the sacrifices go on and life does not become better, they can become very anxious. Experience teaches them that the best way to react to new initiatives is to protect themselves, so they do anything the powerful ask, even if it is a total waste of time, or they just flee the building.

Just as with people who are complacent, those acting with a false sense of urgency often don't see it. The human capacity to hide feelings of fear and anger from others, and themselves, can be astonishing at times.

how do people think?

Those with a false sense of urgency do not think that all is well. They may think that the situation they are in is a mess. They may think their boss is applying ridiculous pressures on them.

what do they feel?

Those with a false sense of urgency tend to be very anxious, angry, frustrated, and tired. The odds are reasonably high that there is some around you!

how do they behave?

Those with a false sense of urgency behave in ways that can easily be mistaken for people with a real sense of urgency because they are very active.

But with a false sense of urgency, the action is much more activity than productivity. It is frenetic. It is more mindless running to protect themselves or attack others than purposive focus on critical problems and opportunities. Run-run, meet-meet, talk-talk, defend-defend, and go home exhausted.

where does false urgency come from?

False urgency is almost always the product of failures or some form of intense pressure that is put on a group.

Increasing True Urgency: One Strategy and Four Tactics

Aim for the heart—Underlying the urgent behavior that makes organizations succeed in a turbulent world is not only a set of thoughts. It's not only, "There is a great opportunity or hazard (in IT, for example) and therefore logically we must deal with it." Underlying a true sense of urgency is a set of feelings: a compulsive determination to move, and win, now. When it comes to affecting behavior-creating alert, fast-moving actions that are focused on an important issue, relentlessly launching needed initiatives or cooperating with the initiatives of others, pushing to achieve more ambitious goals despite the obstacles, trying to achieve progress each and every day, constantly purging low-value activities so that time is available to do all this—feelings are more influential than thoughts..

Increasing True Urgency

-Giving people important facts-

Excellent information by itself, with the best data and logic, that may define new needs and new (probably ambitious) goals



Can win over the minds and thoughts of others, but will rarely win over the hearts and feelings sufficiently to increase needed urgency (and this happens all the time).

-Winning hearts and minds-

A logical case that is a part of a *heart-engaging experience*, using tactics that communicate not only needs but *emotionally compelling needs*, that communicate not only new stretch goals, but goals that excite and arouse determination



Can win over the hearts and minds of others and sufficiently increase needed urgency.

The Strategy

Create action that is exceptionally alert, externally oriented, relentlessly aimed at winning, making some progress each and every day, and constantly purging low value-added activities—all by always focusing on the heart and not just the mind.

The tactics

1. Bring the Outside In

- Reconnect internal reality with external opportunities and hazards.
- Bring in emotionally compelling data, people, video, sites, and sounds.

2. Behave with Urgency Every Day

- Never act content, anxious, or angry.
- Demonstrate your own sense of urgency always in meetings, one-on-one interactions, memos, and e-mail and do so as visibly as possible to as many people as possible.

3. Find Opportunity in Crises

- Always be alert to see if crises can be a friend, not just a dreadful enemy, in order to destroy complacency.
- Proceed with caution, and never be naive, since crises can be deadly.

4. Deal with the Resisters

- Remove or neutralize all the relentless urgency-killers, people who are not skeptics but are determined to keep a group complacent or, if needed, to create destructive urgency .

The Urgency Diagnostic

Instructions:

Please read each statement and indicate the extent to which it describes the norm in your organization as a whole. Your responses should reflect what you have experienced as well as what you have generally observed in your organization. Answer the questions using a 6-point scale; the far left of the scale indicates that you strongly disagree and the far right of the scale indicates that you strongly agree. Please respond by checking the box that corresponds most closely to your situation.

Item	Sense of Urgency	Strongly Disagree (x1)			Strongly Agree (x6)		
		x1	x2	x3	x4	x5	x6
1	Our organization must change the way it works						
2	My department must change the way it works						
3	I need to change the way I work.						
4	The leaders of our organization seem committed to an immediate change						
5	To stay ahead, we have to change						
6	To get people motivated when undertaking a change initiative, leadership focuses on more than the “rational” business case.						
7	Leadership really gets involved in leading change initiatives.						
8	We cannot stay ahead by continuing to work exactly as we do today.						
9	Leadership has shown us compelling evidence as to why we need to change						
10	Leadership has shared outside information that supports our need to change.						
11	Leadership understands my job well enough to tell me to change the way I work.						
12	In the past, our organization has done a good job at change initiatives like this.						
13	Changes in this organization usually have a positive outcome for employees.						
14	I see a positive outcome for me as a result of this change.						
15	Leadership takes the time to create a sense of urgency before starting a change initiative						

Add the check marks in vertical columns to get subtotals. Multiply that total by the number at the bottom of each column. Then add the subtotals together to get the grand total. Grand total: 15 = serious problems, 90 = no problems. Any score below a 60 indicates a need for improvement.