



URGENT LEADERSHIP:

Why Winning is Better Than Beating the Other Guy

I spent one morning looking up various definitions of the word “urgency” in hopes of helping our team grasp what that means in the work environment. Utilizing an ancient text — a hard copy of the dictionary — I found the word itself invokes emotion. At its core, “urgency” is the “quality or state of requiring immediate action or attention.” It’s not necessarily working faster and longer; it is the *intensity* and the *desire* to meet an issue directly. Couple “urgency” with “leadership,” and you have created a remedy for ridding your organization of complacency. Change management expert Dr. John Kotter contends the urgent method is about the way you attack your day or a problem to get to the finish line first, or in our case, first to market, by minimizing the complacency success breeds. Urgent management is driven by emotion as much as it is intellect. The shift from the arrogant attitude of “we know best” must be made to make existing processes better and, in the midst of crisis, urgent leaders see an *opportunity* on the horizon, and not an *obstacle*.

Let’s be clear on what urgency isn’t. Urgent change management isn’t reactive. Urgent leaders don’t act out of fear, panic or intimidation from competitors — it’s driven by the desire to win by attacking issues incrementally every single day. In other words, urgent management provides a permanent mindset of constant forward movement. In his book *A Sense of Urgency*, Dr. Kotter found that most professionals equate “urgent” with its close cousin of “crisis.” There’s this belief that without a “burning platform,” you can never make change happen.

Can you teach urgency? Simply put — no. Urgency is an innate emotion. You can coach one with leadership potential to embrace their communication style, to be a better listener and to be mindful of the impact their words and deeds have on motivating their team. Combining basic leadership qualities with urgency and you create an atmosphere where winning is a *necessity* — a non-negotiable. The path to winning is a constant, consistent resolve to tackle problems with immediacy — once again — every single day.

The successful organization can easily fall into the habit of maintaining the status quo — the idea of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” or the propensity to leave certain problems alone and they will work themselves out. In fact, success can blind us to the complacent atmosphere that infiltrates an organization because it is doing so well. Urgent management is based on the belief that every single day we start with the mentality that there are big opportunities

and big problems that need to be tackled *now* — not when we *feel* like it, and not when we can fit them into our daily schedule.

A customer service-centric mentality and focus shapes the urgent leader’s goals and drive. They make sure they know their customer and move quickly to meet their changing needs. By pushing the need to tackle problems to the side for others to handle during times of success, you’ll have the negative outcome of your competitors meeting the need of your customers. In other words, rigidity breeds opportunity for your competitor.



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Winning takes on a more specific outcome than just beating your competition. The concept reminds me of a scene in the fourth season of the television show *The West Wing*. Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman challenges Communications Director Toby Ziegler regarding their different approaches to return President Jed Bartlet to the White House for a second term. Josh tells Toby, “He wants to win,” while Toby “wants to beat the other guy. And that was a real problem for [him].” Urgent leadership makes the distinction, as well. *Winning* in urgent leadership is introspective — focusing on excellence every day while staying true to a company’s identity, goals and strategy. *Beating* someone is a *reaction* to the competition’s position — a “keeping up with the Jones” approach to business. Is your company equipped to execute the competitor’s approach — let alone improve upon it and excel? Beating the competition in urgent management focuses on an outside-in leadership approach; it’s a “one-hit wonder” approach that provides short-term success.

Collectively, the tenets of urgent leadership provide continuous improvement, and the sense that panic won’t drive the decisions and the actions made by leadership and the front-line team.

Urgent leaders need to win. They instill winning attitudes and approaches in their team. When winning occurs, the celebrations are quick and the urgent attitude of “what’s next” takes over. It includes an objective internal measurement of the progress made from the day before and how well you won at tackling an issue. Measuring the daily achievement helps keep the goal of winning on track. For the urgent leader, measuring the movement and holding team members accountable for lack thereof fulfills the leader’s role in urgent leadership: attacking issues when they arise and moving the team forward all day every day.

Notice I didn’t say the action of the urgency needs to be big every day. Urgent leaders and teams need to make some impact, *any* impact to move forward to the goal of winning. Sustained action is better than reaching the top and feeling as if you’ve reached the pinnacle; that’s when complacency sets in — also known as the “anti-urgent” leadership model.

Be mindful of the roles and skill sets that need an urgent attitude. Not every person in your organization needs or possesses the stamina to move at a breakneck pace to get everyday tasks completed. For those in research and development where being meticulous is key to the overall success of a project, the key for the urgent leader is challenging the team just to make *some* movement forward every single day. Urgent leaders embrace the methodical steps of those team members tasked with creating and executing the specifics, and view them as a *solution* rather than a *stalemate* to progress

Choosing the right team members for any leadership philosophy is tantamount, but even more so in urgent management. Hiring right in the first place creates a huge cost saving. If your organization wants to cross the finish line first, it is your urgent-focused leaders who will get you there.

And finally the commitment to making and inspiring big change every day must be the “new normal” for the organization from top to bottom; it is a mindset, a shift in culture, that leads to changes that matter and creates long-term impact for the company and the customer for the better.