Leading change: The nonsense of urgency

Post in 40 words

Creating urgency has become synonymous with leading change to the detriment of individuals, organizations, and societies. The more leaders create these artificial crises, the less we trust and engage with our leaders and the less effective their change leadership becomes.

Introduction

The sense of urgency on a major organizational change was famously likened to a burning platform (Conner, 1998). Subsequently, the question has frequently been asked – what's the burning platform? Conner (1998) recounts learning about the burning platform through television coverage of an explosion and fire on an oil-drilling platform. Whilst, 166 crew members, and 2 rescuers lost their lives, there were survivors. Andy jumped 150 feet in the middle of the night into a sea of burning oil and debris, subsequently commenting 'it was either jump or fry.' We will all be confronted with situations requiring urgency, though hopefully less dramatic. Thankfully the urgency required when confronted with an explosion and a fire was atypical for oil exploration companies. It is likely that many of their successes were by-products of patient desk research undertaken over many years, rather than taking 'jump or fry' gambles on different oil exploration sites. In this post, I argue that creating a sense of urgency has been overemphasized in accounts of leading change and that the urgency instinct may even be problematic with implications for leading change practices.

How did Kotter encourage a sense of urgency?

Kotter (2008) devoted a book to change leaders creating this sense of urgency, which was the third of Kotter's (1996/2012) eight leading change steps.

Visible crises can be enormously helpful in catching people's attention and pushing up urgency levels. Conducting business, as usual, is very difficult if the building seems to be on fire. But in an increasingly fast-moving world, waiting for a fire to break out is a dubious strategy. And in addition to catching people's attention, a sudden fire can cause a lot of damage. (Kotter, 1996: 45)

Whereas, Andy jumped from the burning platform because it was a case of 'jump or fry', Kotter (1996) appears to pre-empt the fire with the change leader encouraged to engineer a sense of urgency so that the 'building seems to be on fire.' Kotter (1996:44) offered many tips on raising urgency levels, such as 'create a crisis by allowing a financial loss, exposing managers to major weaknesses vis-à-vis competitors, or allowing errors to blow up instead of being corrected at the last minute.' Leading change in such an unethical way is likely to result in trust between leaders and subordinates being lost. There is a primitive appeal in the urgency instinct as it appears to invest power in the change leader over subordinates, but at what cost to individuals, organizations and societies?
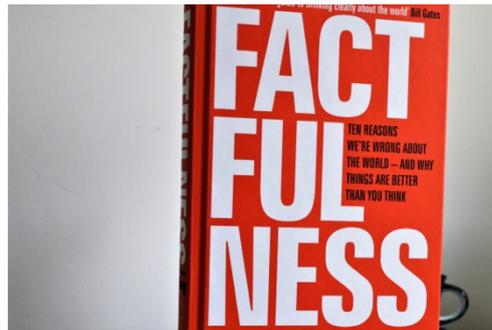
Why is change urgency problematic?

Rosling et al (2018) in _Factfulness,_ was concerned with global risks such as global pandemics, financial collapse, world war, climate change and extreme poverty. The reason _Factfulness_ is invoked here is that one of the eleven problematic instincts highlighted when dealing with these risks was the urgency instinct. Hans Rosling shared very human examples to demonstrate how the urgency instinct can have tragic human consequences. He would have agreed with Andy's 'jump or fry' instinct, he would not have favoured Andy applying this instinct to all scenarios or change leaders modelling their leadership around such an instinct.

When we are afraid and under time pressure and thinking of worst-case scenarios, we tend to make really stupid decisions. Our ability to think analytically can be overwhelmed by an urge to make quick decisions and take immediate action. (Rosling et al, 2018: 226)

Rosling et al (2018) question the either/or dualism of act or don't act as too simplistic. The warning is that framing everything in terms of creating a sense of urgency drains credibility and trust with such constant alarms numbing us to when real urgency is required. The provocative warning is that 'when people tell me we must act now, it makes me hesitate. In most cases, they are just trying to stop me thinking clearly.' (Rosling et al, 2018:228)

We appear to have been seduced by a form of change leadership which emphasizes being strong with the Just Do It (JDI) mantra invoked. Everything is cloaked in a

sense of urgency – who is going to debate the merits of an organizational change approach or question a change leader when a 'building seems to be on fire.'

What can we do practically to control the urgency instinct?

Burning platforms and creating urgency have become interwoven with how to lead change with no appreciation of the diversity of change approaches and contexts. Urgency strengthens the hand of individual leaders to force through change, but it is potentially detrimental to individuals, organizations, and societies. A constant sense of crisis distorts our worldview, which inevitably is to the detriment of everyone.

Even change leaders encouraged to create this constant sense of urgency eventually suffer 'we cannot get into a situation where no one listens anymore. Without trust, we are lost' (Rosling, 2018: 233). Rosling (2018) offers four small steps in controlling the urgency instinct which may be applied to leading change.

Ask for more time and more information. It is rarely now or never, it is rarely either/or.

If something is urgent and important, it should be measured with only relevant and accurate data used.

Any prediction about the future is uncertain.

Step-by-step practical improvements and evaluation of impact are usually less dramatic but more effective.
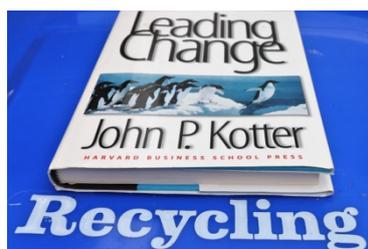
In organizational change terms, this is more about an evolution, rather than a revolution. This does not negate the need for decisive and prompt action when a real crisis occurs, but creating artificial crises *urgently* needs to be challenged. All of this is contingent on understanding the nature of the organizational change problems which determine if management, leadership or command is most appropriate. These considerations are addressed in the next post.

Further Reading

Conner, D.R. (1998). *Managing at the speed of change*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

Kotter, J. (1996/2012). *Leading change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Kotter, J. (2008). *A sense of urgency*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Rosling, B.H. with Rosling, O. and Rönnlund, A.R. (2018). *Factfulness*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.