

Urgency Versus Complacency

by Jon Craighead

Urgency is the quality or state of being unrelenting or of something needing immediate attention. It is a force or impulse that compels leaders in positions of responsibility to project a sense of urgency in others to meet specified objectives. It's unimaginable that anyone in life or work has never experienced the challenging demands of urgency, or the necessity of dealing with the contentment of the status quo in ourselves or others. A sense of urgency is almost always a primary instigator for revolutionary achievements. "The antithesis of urgency is a conscious or unconscious complacency," wrote John Kotter of Harvard University.

Complacency is a self-satisfaction or an unawareness of actual risks or deficiencies which can lead to unexpected vulnerabilities or dangers. Complacency embraces the status quo. We often underestimate the enormous power of complacency and its pervasiveness. Urgency necessitates a call for swift action or a need for immediate or serious attention. It is important to note a higher rate of urgency does not automatically imply panic, anxiety, or fear. Instead it implies a state in which complacency is virtually absent.

False urgency is another pitfall that impedes accomplishment. This mindset is very different from complacency, and its effect can be even more detrimental. While complacency embraces the status quo, false urgency creates an illusion of engagement. This urgency is grounded in anxiety and irritation. It's the equivalent of running in circles; there's a feeling of movement but you're not moving forward and you eventually wind up in the same place you began. This detrimental experience usually results in frustration, disappointment, and self-incrimination due to wrenching failures. This situation creates a feeling of "what's the use of trying;" it leaves a damaging impact on one's self-efficacy and impedes or prevents future participation when urgency is required.

The need for urgency is constant. It can be dealt with successfully in one situation, then arise unexpectedly but just as quickly in another – it is as challenging as life itself. When one discovers this reality, it produces an ability to create a sense urgency on demand. In fact, urgency has very little staying power on its own and needs to be generated. The unchallengeable fact is that urgency is driven by a desire to succeed, and success is fleeting and unsustainable. Inevitably, urgency is replaced by complacency. This is particularly true when relaxing after a success; complicity potentially sneaks in and takes control.

Effectiveness requires a consciousness to maintain a culture of urgency. This necessitates developing a mindset that is senior to business-as-usual. The ultimate purpose of any business strategy is to create superior products and services for a competitive advantage. Such an achievement demands a workforce that is aligned with corporate goals to fulfill those objectives. This is accomplished thru workforce enrolment. Enrolment is the process of creating a possibility such that others take on that possibility as their own and embrace it with the same enthusiasm and commitment as if they had originally created it themselves.

Alignment causes a bigger game: from business-as-usual to working inside a creative mission. A primary result of alignment is an empowered leadership through creating a culture of shared values. This is distinct from “group think” which stifles input and creativity. An established culture of shared values averts a state of urgency as “have to,” which can produce isolation and separation and ultimately diminishes spirit. Alignment is not an edict or command but a creative process which empowers all, engenders responsibility, and keeps everyone in the game and having a say in the designated outcome. It’s hard to complain when you are choosing to participate in the game and calling the shots on how you will play.

A sense of urgency is a two-way street. Workers who function with a sense of urgency have a greater sense of purpose and experience of satisfaction. At the same time, an often overlooked benefit of workforce urgency is that leadership is empowered by a team of workers who align with them, and so they become better leaders. The result is a win-win for everyone and promotes a high level of accomplishment which is positively shared by all. “Without a sense of urgency, desire loses its value” (Jim Rohn).