NOT SO FAST: RESISTING THE URGE FOR URGENCY

Aviation, and air traffic management in particular, are often cited as conservative, safety-critical industries. But changes in technology, infrastructure, roles, procedures and airspace, are now accelerating. And for some of these changes, there can be a perceived need for this change to be implemented urgently. **Mark Hughes** explores the effects of the urge for urgency.

KEY POINTS

- **Creating urgency has become synonymous with leading change.**

- **The need to create a sense of urgency may be problematic, with implications for changing practice, and more generally for individuals, teams, facilities, and organisations.**

- **Small steps can be taken to control the urgency instinct.**

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

The sense of urgency on a major organisational 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. He subsequently commented that "it was either jump or fry". We will all be confronted with situations requiring urgency, though rarely so dramatic. Thankfully the urgency required when confronted with an explosion and a fire was not typical for oil exploration companies. It is likely that many of their successes were by-products of patient research undertaken over many years, rather than taking 'jump or fry' gambles on different oil exploration sites. In this article, I argue that the need to create a sense of urgency has been overemphasised in accounts of leading change and that the urgency instinct may be problematic, with implications for changing practice.

Why the urgency?

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

While 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, p. 44) offered many tips on raising urgency levels, such as "create a crisis by allowing a financial loss, exposing managers to major weaknesses regarding competitors, or allowing errors to blow up instead of being corrected at the last minute". Leading change in such an ethically problematic way is likely to result in trust between leaders and
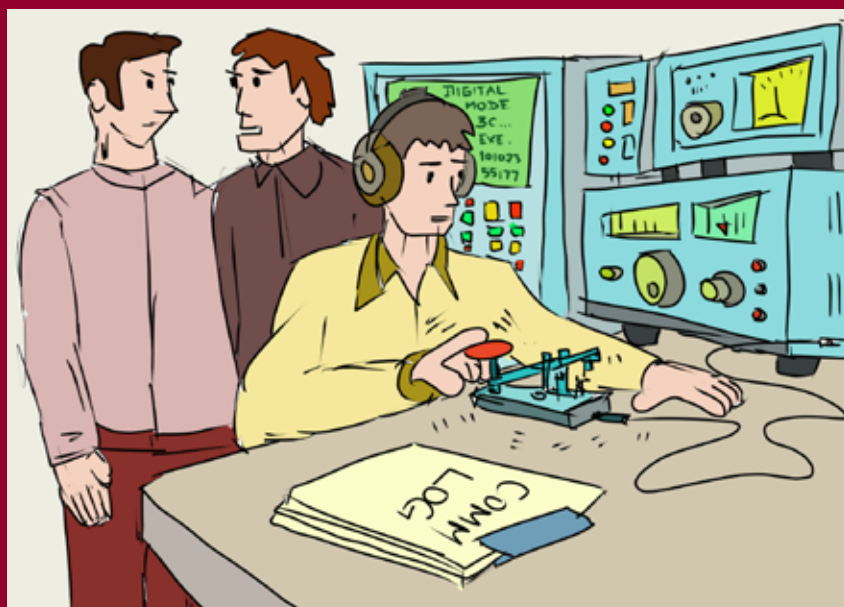
subordinates being lost. The urgency instinct can be appealing as it appears to invest power in the change leader over subordinates, but at what cost to individuals, organisations and societies?

Why is change urgency problematic?

In his book *Factfulness,* Hans Rosling (2018) was concerned with global risks such as global pandemics, financial collapse, world war, climate change and extreme poverty. He highlighted eleven problematic instincts when dealing with these risks. One of these was the urgency instinct. He uses 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 modeling 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, 2018, p. 226)

Rosling (2018) sees the either/or act or don't act as too simplistic. He warns 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. He warns 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" (p. 228).

"We'll move to digital communication eventually, but let's not rush the process."

We must not be seduced by a form of change leadership which emphasises being strong, with the Just Do It (JDI) mantra.

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 can be detrimental to individuals, teams, facilities, and organisations.

Rosling (2018) offers four small steps in controlling the urgency instinct. These steps may be applied by anyone affected by or leading change.
1. **Take a breath.** Ask for more time and more information. It is rarely now or never and it is rarely either/or.
2. **Insist on the data.** If something is urgent and important, it should be measured with only relevant

and accurate data. This data may concern safety, human performance, operability, competency, etc.
3. **Be wary of predictions.** Any prediction about the future is uncertain. Insist on a full range of scenarios, never just the best or worst case. Ask how often such predictions have been right before.
4. **Be wary of drastic action.** Step-by-step practical improvements, and evaluation of impact, are usually less dramatic but more effective.

In organisational 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, especially where there are safety-related implications that may not be obvious. ⑤

References

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