

A SENSE OF URGENCY

What we can learn from **Dr. John P. Kotter of the Harvard School of Business** about taking both our personal and our professional lives from ordinary to extraordinary BY: DOUGLAS S. CAIN

MOST PEOPLE who know me know that I live every day with a sense of urgency because it kind of dovetails with my “not one day wasted” philosophy. Now, while I have had this “sense of urgency” point of view for many years, I thought I was just a bit manic and did not realize it meant much more. That was until I read the book, “**A Sense of Urgency**,” by **Dr. John P. Kotter** of the Harvard School of Business.

As you read through the book, with its corresponding author’s views and wonderful stories, you will find that many of the traits and strategies he uses in the book are things some of us have might have been doing for quite a while without realizing it.

After finishing Kotter’s book and realizing its compatibility in my life, what got me was how I have changed since moving my company to San Antonio about 30 months ago after 62 years in Houston – also, how this change has transformed not just the company and me, but also the people around me, especially over just the past year.

Let’s start by going over a statement Professor Kotter makes that describes how to live with a sense of urgency: “Create action that is exceptionally, externally originated, 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.”

Like me, the statement is concise, but chock full of great ideas. But the implementation of them on a daily basis is what will make that concise statement come alive. So let’s break it down.

Kotter says the problem with more

than 70 percent of the companies he has been involved in (throughout his 30-plus years of researching urgency in businesses) is that they are complacent. If you have read my previous columns or blogs or know me personally, you know there is not a single cell of complacency in me. So Kotter’s first two words get the party started: Create action that is exceptionally alert. If you are just sitting around waiting on the next email or phone call to be the million-dollar contract you were waiting for, well, you are going to be waiting a long time.

“Externally originated”: I used to be glued to my desk ... and I liked it that way. I rarely visited my clients except for the Christmas holidays, and I minimally kept abreast of my industry, much less my competitors. Now I am like a lion in a cage when I am at the office. I cannot wait to go out and visit with my clients and to hear about what is going on in the industry. I try to find out at least one thing every day that I did not already know, and I like it.

Expose yourself to your clients, vendors, industry and employees. You will be able to make the most of upcoming opportunities and prepare for potential hazards.

Are you “relentlessly aimed at winning”? If you are an ex-jock like me, I am willing to bet you have the intensity and an utter disdain for losing, which is the only thing that kept you on the field. Are you getting up every day not willing to accept any failure? Is doing “your best” good enough for you?

Trust me: Your clients do not want to hear about how hard you tried to help them – they just want to know how you succeeded in taking care

of their needs. If your clients can demand that level of response from you, why can’t you demand that level of effort and success from yourself?

Are you “making some progress each and every day”? **We have a Dougism here at the company. If you let something little slide for a day, it turns into three; two days turns into a week; and letting something slide for a week turns into a month.** No matter how little the thing is, get after it and get it accomplished. It’s the daily forward motion that turns your company and your life from ordinary to extraordinary. Remember: Repetition sets you free.

Over the last few years, I went from doing literally everything to having an internal office staff of 15. Needless to say, one learns to delegate responsibilities, but one also learns that for one thing you delegate away, two more things will pop up to rob you of your most important resource: time.

So over the past year, I have become very good at “constantly purging low-value-added activities.” I have flushed so many time wasters from my life over the past year that it has become an inside joke at the office. All meetings are planned and have agendas in bullet points and a set time limit. Everybody talks to me in Doug Bites (only three at a time – if you

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- DR. JOHN P. KOTTER

have more, you have to leave my office for an hour and return). Plan your work and work your plan.

But it’s those last words in Kotter’s quote that really speak to me: “...all by always focusing on the heart and not just the mind.” Folks, you have all heard some variation of the “hearts and minds” speech, whether it was from President John Adams or LBJ, but its most effective use is when you are affecting the hearts of people. That is where the real buy-in is. You have to get your people on board on all major and minor projects. I have learned that one cannot do it alone.

So as you assess your personal and business life, are you living it with a sense of urgency? Are you making every opportunity count? Is there not one day wasted? You have no idea how far you can take yourself in such a short amount of time if you just apply yourself. Until next time ...

Douglas Sterling Cain is the president and CEO of Lake Truck Lines and Lake Oilfield Services. For more information, visit www.laketrucklines.com.

