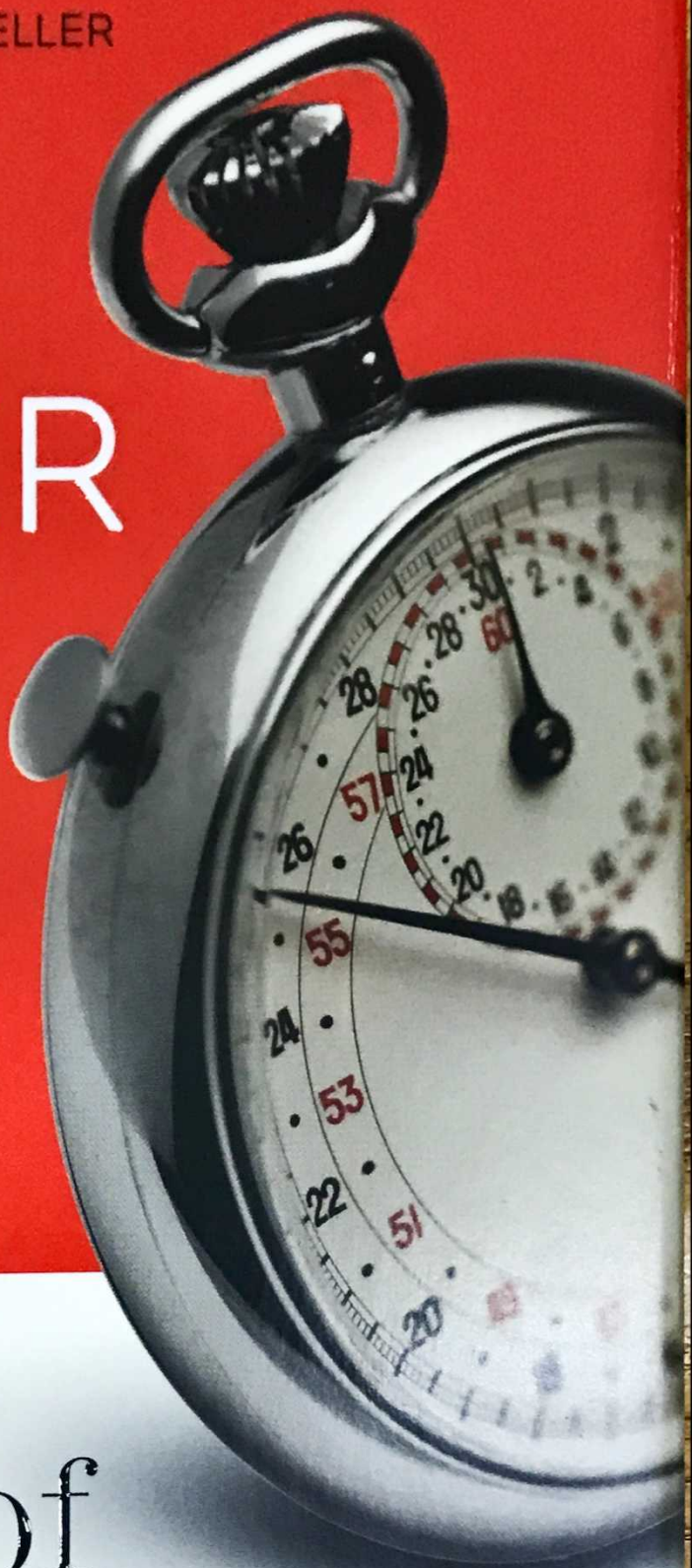


A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# JOHN P. KOTTER

*Author of Leading Change and  
Our Iceberg Is Melting*

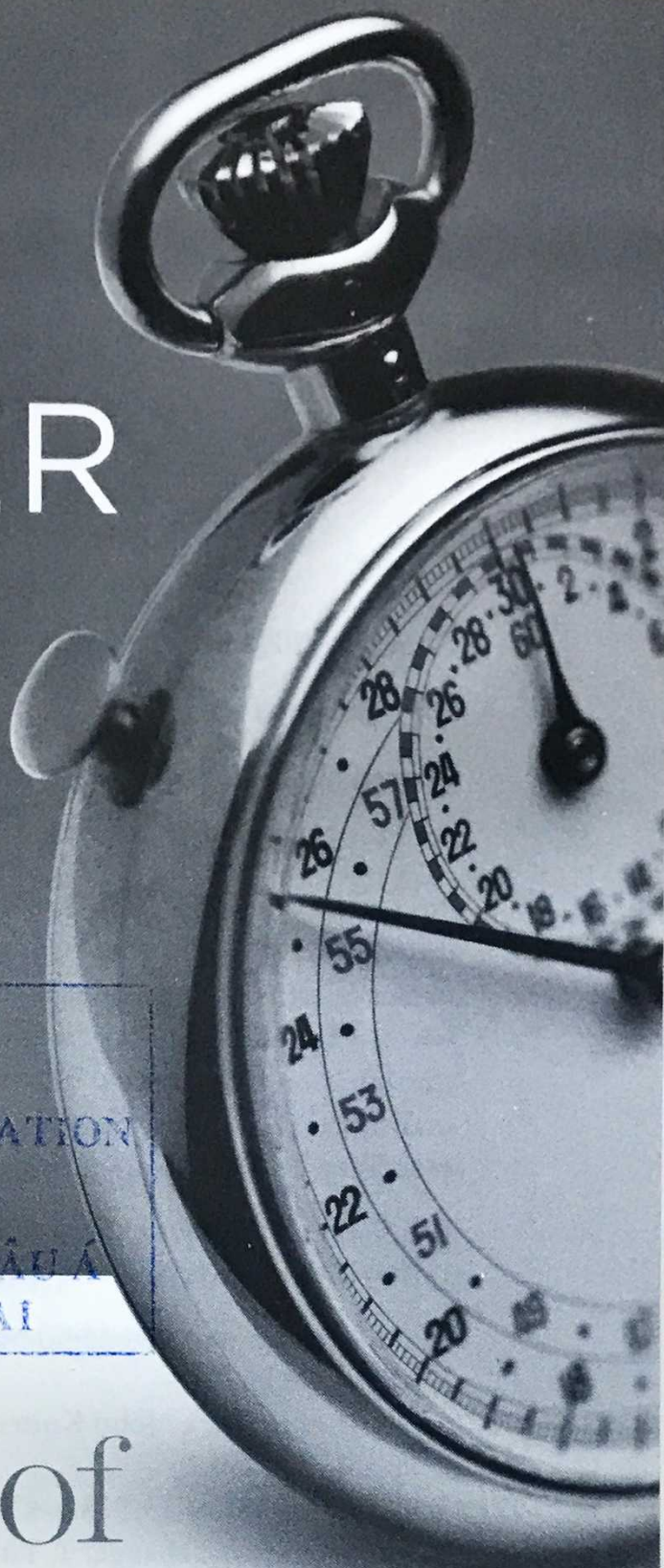


## a sense of urgency

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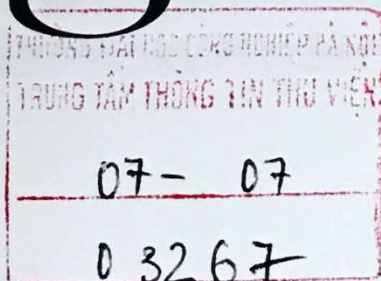
JOHN  
KOTTER



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a sense of  
urgency



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# contents

<i>preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
<b>1. it all starts with a sense of urgency</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. complacency and <i>false</i> urgency</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3. increasing true urgency</b> one strategy and four tactics	<b>39</b>
<b>4. tactic one</b> bring the outside in	<b>63</b>
<b>5. tactic two</b> behave with urgency <i>every day</i>	<b>97</b>
<b>6. tactic three</b> find opportunity in crises	<b>119</b>



## contents

<b>7. tactic four</b>	<b>145</b>
deal with NoNos	
<b>8. keeping urgency up</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>9. the future</b>	<b>189</b>
begin today	

*about the author* 195

## preface

This is a book about a seemingly narrow issue—creating a high enough sense of urgency among a large enough group of people—but an issue I have come to believe is of overriding importance in a fast-moving, turbulent era. When the urgency challenge is not handled well, even very capable people and resource-rich organizations can suffer greatly. When the challenge is handled well, even those who face formidable obstacles can produce results we all want for our careers, employers, and nations.

My path to these conclusions began eleven years ago with the publication of *Leading Change*. That book was based on the analysis of about one hundred efforts in organizations to produce large-scale change: implementing new growth strategies, putting in new IT systems, reorganizing to reduce expenses. Incredibly, we found that in over 70 percent of the situations where substantial changes



were clearly needed, either they were not fully launched, or the change efforts failed, or changes were achieved but over budget, late, and with great frustration. We also found that in about 10 percent of the cases, people achieved more than would have been thought possible. Surprisingly, at least to us, in those 10 a similar formula was used in virtually all instances, a formula I described as eight steps, the first of which was creating a sufficiently high sense of urgency.

Six years ago, Dan Cohen and I published a follow-up study in a book called *The Heart of Change*. Here we conducted hundreds of interviews to document small but important stories within each phase of large change efforts. We found the same appalling 70 percent figure, the same inspiring 10 percent, plus a powerful role that emotions played in the most successful cases. Two years ago, Holger Rathgeber and I published this material as a fable—*Our Iceberg Is Melting*—that made complex ideas about change more accessible and highlighted the emotional lessons of *Heart of Change* with a story about emperor penguins, using color illustrations, and with colorful characters.

While writing the fable, it first occurred to me how often I was being asked, “What is the single biggest error people make when they try to change?” After reflection, I decided the answer was that they did not create a high enough sense of urgency among enough people to set the stage for making a challenging leap into some new direction.



## preface

Both to test this observation and to probe deeper into the issues, I began to systematically ask managers a new set of questions: How high is the sense of urgency among relevant people around you? How do you know this assessment is accurate? If it is too low, why? If it is too low, what exactly are you doing to change this fact? What specific actions are you taking? How successful or unsuccessful are your actions? If you are unsuccessful, what seem to be the consequences to your organization (and to your own career!)? If you are succeeding, what exactly are you doing? From these discussions emerged a number of interesting conclusions.

First, I became more than ever convinced that it all starts with urgency. At the very beginning of any effort to make changes of any magnitude, if a sense of urgency is not high enough and complacency is not low enough, everything else becomes so much more difficult. The difficulties add up to produce failure, pain, disappointment, and that distressing 70 percent figure.

Second, complacency is much more common than we might think and very often invisible to the people involved. Success easily produces complacency. It does not even have to be recent success. An organization's many years of prosperity could have ended a decade ago, and yet the complacency created by that prosperity can live on, often because the people involved don't see it. A smart, sophisticated manager can be oblivious to the fact



that two levels below him in the hierarchy is an organization so complacent that his dreams of the future will never be realized. That same manager can sometimes be just as oblivious to the fact that he too is being dangerously complacent.

Third, the opposite of urgency is not only complacency. It's also a false or misguided sense of urgency that is as prevalent today as complacency itself and even more insidious. With a false sense of urgency, an organization does have a great deal of energized action, but it's driven by anxiety, anger, and frustration, and not a focused determination to win, and win as soon as is reasonably possible. With false urgency, the action has a frantic feeling: running from meeting to meeting, producing volumes of paper, moving rapidly in circles, all with a dysfunctional orientation that often prevents people from exploiting key opportunities and addressing gnawing problems.

Fourth, mistaking what you might call false urgency from real urgency is a huge problem today. People constantly see the frenzied action, assume that it represents true urgency, and then move ahead, only to encounter problems and failures not unlike what would happen if they were surrounded by complacency. Task forces underperform. Enterprises underperform. People are hurt, sometimes badly.

Fifth, it most certainly is possible to recognize false urgency and complacency and transform each into a true



sense of urgency. There is a strategy. There are practical tactics. The bulk of this book describes these methods.

Sixth, urgency is becoming increasingly important because change is shifting from episodic to continuous. With episodic change, there is one big issue, such as making and integrating the largest acquisition in a firm's history. With continuous change, some combination of acquisitions, new strategies, big IT projects, reorganizations, and the like comes at you in an almost ceaseless flow. With episodic change, the challenge of creating a sufficient sense of urgency comes in occasional spurts. With continuous change, creating and sustaining a sufficient sense of urgency are always a necessity. These two different kinds of change will continue to challenge us, but in a world where the rate of change appears to be going up and up, we are experiencing a more global shift from episodic to continuous, with huge implications for the issue of urgency and performance. *Put simply, a strong sense of urgency is moving from an essential element in big change programs to an essential asset in general.*

I have talked about urgency before as a part of the eight steps of successful change. So what is new here? Readers of my past books on leadership and change should think of this book as digging much deeper than I have before into a topic that I now see as much more important than before. Here I offer a broader and deeper view of urgency, including a clear distinction between constructive true urgency and destructive false urgency; an expanded set of