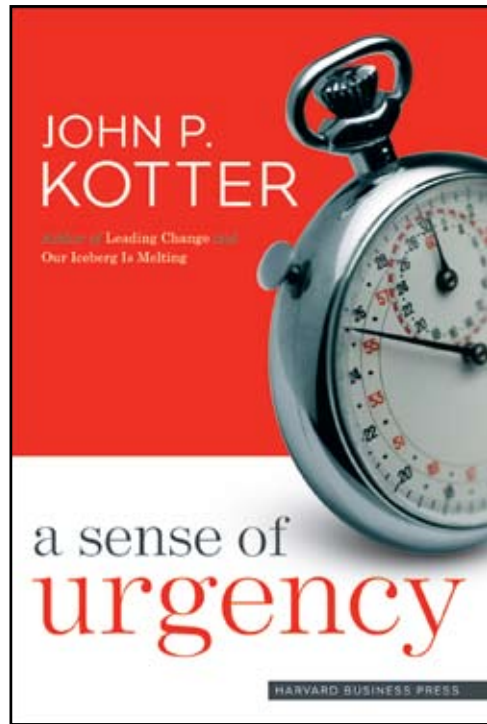


WHEN THE TIME IS NOW

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 A Sense of Urgency

By John P. Kotter
 (Harvard Business Press, 128 pp. \$22)

Reviewed by Paul Flynn



In May 1961, President Kennedy challenged the nation to send a man to the moon and return him safely to earth before the end of the decade. Thus began the space race, and we were already behind. Sputnik, he determined, must not be the defining victory of our age.

The moon was an aggressive goal, to be sure. And we would not get there with business as usual. We would have to change to win, and win we must. Kennedy conveyed a sense of urgency that many others maintained to complete the challenge in spectacular fashion.

Urgency propels us. Urgency is critical to affect real change. So says John Kotter in his new book, *A Sense of Urgency*. Kotter would know—just the other day my teenage daughter asked, “Like, who is the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership Emeritus at Harvard Business School anyhow?” Imagine my surprise to learn that it’s none other than the very same John Kotter.

That fact, and his string of successful books on change and leadership makes him uniquely qualified to teach us a thing or two about affecting change in business.

In previous books (*Leading Change*, *Our Iceberg Is Melting*), Kotter laid out eight steps critical for change. But even when many of these eight steps are followed and there is a great desire for change, Kotter estimates that as much as 70 percent of needed change never occurs in business today.

Why? A lot of people suffer when needed change falls by the wayside. Why is it so hard to change an organization? Kotter shows that a lack of urgency is the main culprit. It is the

most critical of his eight steps as well as the toughest.

So what is urgency? How will we recognize it? It isn't exhausting activity or running about from meeting to meeting. It is focused effort driven by a determination to win. It accomplishes something important every day, and it eliminates unimportant tasks so that it might better focus on the truly important.

"A real sense of urgency is rare," says Kotter, "much rarer than people seem to think. Yet it is invaluable in a world that won't stand still." One reason it's so rare is that it is not our natural state. Urgency is something that has to be created and recreated when it wanes. And it has to be spread to others.

One person within an organization will not be enough to make change happen, but that person can spread a sense of urgency and begin to build a movement for change. Urgency, sustained among as many people as possible, is critical for change.

Urgency is, most specifically, not panic. A real sense of urgency is not overwhelmed by threats. It sees the opportunities. People with a sense of urgency move decisively to capitalize on opportunity. They marshal resources, they focus attention, they build alliances, they spread urgency, and they act to win. They don't get caught in the quagmire of overbooked schedules and bureaucracy. They cut through it. They know that they must change. Complacency is the opposite of urgency and its biggest enemy.

When JFK inspired the nation to go to the moon, he appealed not to our heads but to our hearts. He connected with our natural aspirations. Urgency is created with an appeal to the heart, to the human person. We commit ourselves to ideas, not to facts from a dry business case. A sense of urgency is

deeply rooted in our humanity, and, as such, it can be very powerful.

Kotter's book reads easily. Like all great teachers, he tells stories to illustrate his points. The insights he offers in *A Sense of Urgency* will be greatly appreciated by anyone wondering how to launch a revolution at work. You can read it without having read his previous books, but it will probably propel you to seek them out—perhaps with a sense of... well, you know.

I give it five cups of coffee.

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