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Establishing a Sense of Urgency

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When sputnik went into outer space it reaffirmed and strengthened America's resolve to put a man on the moon. The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 provided the urgency needed to win a war. I believe that overarching desires also provide urgency and commitment. When Orville and Wilbur Wright flew their little powered airplane at Kitty Hawk, on December 17, 1903, the desire of man to fly (with all its imagined benefits) furnished the fuel of urgency.

During the past 40 years, my group has been able to transform productivity in manufacturing facilities in as little as 18 months although one took as long as four years. Eighteen-month candidates knew they were in trouble, their urgency was apparent. The four-year candidate was much harder to reach with a message that would engender urgency.

As you no doubt realize, "change" needs a driving force that most of the involved people can accept. It must be powerful enough to produce images of things to come that are so positive they excite people to action.

Which would be a more powerful goal, saving the world or saving one's job? If you selected the latter, you are correct. Most of you know that you can do little to save the world, but you can help to save your own jobs. So your driving force must have a dimension of **practicality**.

It must also be designed so that people do not have to defend their prior actions. The facility that I mentioned previously, which took four years to transform, resisted change to new thinking because it's nine, long-term managers kept procrastinating. What they were really doing was defending the decisions they had previously made. When they were rotated one click so that each manager gave up his previous assignment to accept another, changes moved rapidly into place. Your driving force should **recognize previous work** as a stepping stone to a new future.

While visiting a paper mill, which was in very big financial trouble several years ago, I found that no employee except management believed their jobs were in jeopardy. After all, most of the personnel at this facility, in this small town, had fathers and grandfathers who once worked at the mill. The mill was an icon of stability. Trying to convince them that the facility might shut down was a waste of time. As it turned out, these people were correct because the plant survives today. So your message must take into consideration **deep-seated convictions** of the personnel whom you need to impress.

What needs to be done is to build up a cadre of people – a critical mass that will spearhead necessary changes. It is this cadre that will demonstrate the viability of the changes needed. Once changes are instituted and begin to produce results, most of the rest of the people will come on board. The message that defines the changes in terms that can be accepted is probably the most important action that the changes agent can perform to start the process of change.

Let's analyze this puzzle of creating a force to drive a critical mass of people into a *new* concept of what their reality can be in the future. Fundamentally, only two things drive people to change.

- Desire for something that is generally marvelous to have but is usually reserved for other people.
- Fear that remaining where one is can damage them financially, physically, mentally or spiritually.

The promise of recognition, achievement, money and power head the list of desires. Loss of prestige, health, jobs, perceived job security, position, money, recognition and status head the slate of fearful prospects.

There is one more element that has to be considered, time. Survival now or survival in the future, which is most powerful? Obviously, the one that is most believable is the one that is upon us now. So when you frame your message, you will have to formulate your words and conditions carefully.

One essential last point is that your message will have a far greater appeal if it is sincere instead of contrived. Additionally, it allows the framers to present a clear and consistent message.

What you want to do is to use these factors to create a sense of urgency – your driving force. For example:

- Six hundred workers will be laid off by this time next year. To affect this layoff many of those remaining will have to learn new jobs. Because of your previous contributions we want to avoid this situation, if possible. You can help this by a quick turn from reacting to proacting and taking charge. If you can meet the following requirements by December 2000 we will avoid the layoff and be on the road to growth and job security.
- We have used the best minds and the best techniques that money can buy and have concluded that the company will survive and be prosperous only if we:
 1. Transform our culture from a reactive entity to one of proactive
 2. Make the transition in the next eighteen months.
 3. Achieve the following numbers by December 31, 2000.

Because of your previous contribution to the business, prosperity will be shared. Starting next month, we will institute a new profit-sharing plan.

- ABC Company, in recognition of the new competition that has invaded our shores finds that it must establish a new way of operating. We need to do this in spite of the many contributions that you have made to our business up to now. Accordingly, as of January 1, 2000 we will provide employees with a new profit-sharing plan. Our focus will be on growth. As we develop new products and add them to the product line, we will redefine jobs in terms of proaction. Our goal is to be functioning as effective, money producing teams within the next 12 months.

A Sense of urgency is not created in one communiqué. You have to get your message through the barrage of information that competes for the mind of your people every day. To do this, your message must be carried and presented in several different ways. For example:

- A taped video message from the head of the organization
- Presentation by executives
- Memos for distribution to everyone
- Posters
- Posting defined metrics and their targets

- Organized discussions
- Mentored team exercises to identify Precision applications and proactive activities
- Reminders inserted into paychecks

These message modes have to be timed-spaced and refreshed from time to time. This is definitely a form of in-house advertising. As such, it has to be tested at regular intervals to determine if a sense of urgency is developing. Testing can include:

- Random surveys with carefully crafted questions
- Observation of Precision and Root Cause Analysis activities
- Achievement of business metrics

In conclusion, it is vital (if change is to take place) that a sense of urgency be established in a critical mass – say 30% of the personnel needed to effect change. Certain issues are critical to the message:

- It must be practical
- It must recognize previous contributions
- It must unfreeze deep-seated convictions
- It must consider time
- It must be presented in many different modes
- Its impact must be tested
- It must be true and sincere

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