

# Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today*

*Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

### Creating Urgency for Change

#### In A Nutshell

Talk with almost any school principal and you get a sense that there's a need to improve their school. Changes may involve instructional practices to improve student learning, the culture of the school, or strengthening engagement with the school community.

Over the past fifty years a lot has been written about the need to accelerate school reform, to improve schools and student learning. But there remains a fair amount of complacency about the pace of change or even the need for change. The lack of resources, changing student demographics, or even resistant teachers is often seen as inhibiting change. Too many principals don't convey a sense of urgency about the need to make changes at their school.

#### Creating Urgency

The need for change will not subside. If anything demands for change will accelerate. Creating a sense of urgency is one way that school leaders alert their employees, families and students that change will occur. Leaders can do so by following four approaches designed to create a compelling need for urgency. They can act in ways that demonstrate why change is valuable and why the status quo may be a dangerous place to remain. In other words, leaders create a narrative about why it is not in their best interests for the school to remain the same.

Creating urgency is as much an emotional response, a set of feelings, as an academic exercise (Kotter, 2008). Not only does a leader need to engage the minds of employees, they must also connect with their heart. When employees and other stakeholders "feel" a connection to the proposed change, they are far more likely to engage in behaviors that propel the change toward implementation.

Perhaps the best-known advocate of urgency is John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor and author of *Leading Change* (2012) and *A Sense of Urgency* (2008). Kotter described four strategies leaders can use to address the lack of urgency in their organization. Those approaches suggest a path for school leaders to create urgency for authentic change in their school.

#### Strategy 1 - Break Down Barriers to the Outside

Most organizations are internally oriented. They focus most of their energy on sustaining their current programs and practices, promoting people to new positions from within, talking most frequently with one another, relying on others in the organization for professional development, and resisting the idea that those outside the organization can, in any way, inform their work. This internal focus supports complacency and is a barrier to change.

Continuing to do things the way they've always been done is exactly what happens in many organizations. They continue to focus on sustaining what they're already doing when they need to look outside the organization for insight into what emerging issues and trends as well as strategies to deal with those issues.

Schools are not immune from this complacency. Schools where most students are successful see little incentive for change. Those that are less successful choose to blame external factors like students, families, or society rather than look at their own practices.

So, what does a school leader do? How do you respond?

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**Recognize the Problem of Relying on an Internal Focus** – Relying primarily on an internal focus means your school can miss opportunities for growth. It also means you may encounter hazards that will undermine your current program. Here's what you can do.

- Read widely from a variety of sources and gain insight into emerging social, economic and demographic trends. Most importantly read about trends with which you may disagree. Whether you like them or not, they will impact your school.
- Share what you've read and information you learned with employees and others in your school and district. Talk about the issues but focus on the possibilities not the threats. This will lessen the gap between inside and outside.

**Listen to Employees and Families** – Create an opportunity for a candid conversation with employees and families who send their children to your school. Focus on listening and be authentic in your response.

- Hold a series of focus group or town hall meetings where you listen to what's working and what is not working. Occasionally this can be a tough conversation but it is vital that you demonstrate your willingness to hear both the good and the bad about your school. Take thorough notes and use them to develop a plan of action.
- Be respectful of employees and families. It's hard to engage either group when they feel distrusted or disrespected. Be candid and honest in all interactions.

**Share Uncomfortable or Troubling Data** – When you see troubling data about your school or you learn uncomfortable information, be prepared to share it. Don't shield employees from this information or it will re-enforce complacency.

- Meet regularly with your school improvement team to share information, both good and bad, about your school. Strive for open, honest discussion of the issues with an emphasis on what you can learn. Never blame the data or those who provided it.

**Send People Out and Bring People In**– Kotter suggests that you send “scouts” out to visit other organizations and learn about what is going on.

- Send teachers and other employees to conferences to learn about new trends and to visit schools that have implemented some of the innovations. Expect them to return and offer an honest assessment of what they learned.
- Bring in an outside expert, or a team of teachers from an innovative school, to talk about the issues and to share what they've done. Be explicit about what you want the outsiders to share but don't limit the information to only benefits of any initiative. Every innovation has costs as well as benefits. Talk candidly

## Strategy 2 – Act with Urgency Every Day

It's always been true that what leaders pay attention to becomes important. Leaders are role models and employees, families and students all note what the leader talks about and how the leader behaves.

**Respond Quickly** – When you respond quickly you don't make hasty decisions or act in less thoughtful ways. Rather, you are clear about your priorities and your respond quickly with a well thought out plan of action.

- Be clear about your priorities and respond quickly to issues related to those priorities. Don't be hasty but be prompt. A quick response demonstrates the importance of the topic or the issue.
- In meetings, emails, and in casual conversation in the hallway talk about your priorities, ask questions about what is happening in classrooms and use every interaction as an opportunity to signal what's important.

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- If you're attending a meeting about one of your priorities, make active engagement a priority. Avoid interruptions and avoid leaving before the meeting is complete. Never end the meeting without being clear about whom will do what and how quickly they tasks will be completed.

**Stop Doing Things That Aren't Urgent** – Every school falls into the trap of doing things the way they've been done in the past. It might be replicating last year's schedule, organizing meetings the same way or engaging families the same way from year to year. Occasionally those behaviors telegraph messages about complacency. So, change some of those "un-urgent" behaviors.

- Change the organization of meetings and other routine activities. Modify the agenda. Insist that cell phones and tablets be turned off. Find ways to gather input from all and listen to the voices of every participant.
- Take control of your calendar. Purge low-priority items and projects. Delegate to assistants or teacher leaders. Create time to read and think deeply about the issues. Avoid unnecessary meetings but increase the time you visit classrooms and other places where students and teachers hang out. Talk with them but more importantly listen to what is being discussed.

**Be Visibly Urgent** – Because people pay attention to the leader, their behavior and their priorities it is critical that you be visible and clearly demonstrate urgency.

- Be visible and accessible throughout the school day. In addition to being seen, you also want to talk with teachers, other employees, students and families. Use every opportunity to talk about your vision for your school, your initiatives and how they positively improve the experience of students.
- Talk with passion about your school and the initiatives you propose. Be relentless in talking about the need to move, adapt and respond to changing conditions. Talk with feeling and identify examples of how these initiatives impact students and their learning.

## Strategy 3 – Embrace Crises

Too often people see a crisis as harmful with negative implications on their school or organization. And that can be true. Leaders often try to avoid crises. But a crisis can also provide an opportunity to reexamine practices, to commit to new approaches and to adapt the school to a new reality.

- **Use a Crisis to Create Urgency** – After any crisis the leader must take time to reflect and focus on what you, and your school, learned. Use that reflection to engage employees and families in examining your core beliefs and values, and identifying ways to respond that don't threaten those values but rather reinforce their importance. Be mindful that a crisis doesn't guarantee greater urgency. It may simply lead to greater reliance on past practice.
- **Create a Crisis** – Only partially in jest do I suggest creating a crisis. And I don't mean anything that might threaten your organization or harm individuals. But if urgency doesn't emerge, you want to develop a strategy and act. Priority should always be on engaging employees and families in your initiative. But, you simply can't allow your school to fail to act. Use data to shape the crisis or set expectations for individuals so they are forced to respond. Just be clear that manufactured crises must be about "real" problems not used to distract from "real" issues or tough personnel issues.

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## Strategy 4 – Deal with Naysayers

Every school has naysayers. They may be teachers or other employees, families, influential community members or even members of the administrative team. While they can't be ignored neither can they be allowed to dominate the conversation or inhibit change. Don't confuse a naysayer with a skeptic. Skeptics ask questions, respond to data logically, and often seek additional information. While skeptics can be annoying and slow down decision, naysayers don't appreciate data or information, and often suggest that no action is needed. They value the status quo.

- **Don't Waste Time Co-Opting a Naysayer** – Naysayers want to stop action and destroy urgency. Because of their tendency to disrupt conversation and delay action it is best to avoid wasting resources on trying to co-opt them. They are often not inclined to listen to others and won't accept decisions by others. Avoid their involvement in study groups and other activities designed to create urgency.
- **Never Ignore a Naysayer** – On the other hand you can't ignore them either. If ignored a naysayer can continue to create mischief. They are adept at raising questions that have an element of truth, or overstating the problems. They often organize an active resistance, sometimes covertly, and sow dissention among members of the school community.
- **Distract the Naysayers** – If you can't ignore them and you can't co-opt them what do you do? Kotter (2008) suggests you distract them and he provides three suggestions. First, find a special assignment or task for your naysayer. Ideally, that assignment will take them away from the work on your initiative. Second, pair them with someone who understands their job is to keep the naysayer distracted. Third, give them so much work that there is little time to create disruption and dissention. They still may find ways to be disruptive but that disruption will be minimized.
- **Get Rid of Them** – We're not suggesting you simply fire, demote or force someone into retirement. But, on the other hand, you need to be clear about expectations for employees and be honest about how their behavior impacts your school. Don't exaggerate on evaluations and other assessments but be honest in how you measure their performance. Many teacher evaluation protocols now include expectations about collaboration and participation in school improvement planning.
- **Immobilize Using Social Pressure** – In most schools everyone knows who the naysayers are and understands how they disrupt efforts for improvement. Find socially acceptable ways to identify the naysayers in public and let social pressure do the rest.

## Final Thoughts

A sense of urgency is often needed to accelerate change and improvement in schools. Urgency is not created by a single event, or through a single conversation or presentation. Rather, urgency emerges when there is a systematic approach by the school leader to modify the culture of their school. It starts with the leader and the way the leader spends time, the things they talk about, and the priorities they set.

## References

- Kotter, J. P. (2008). *A sense of urgency*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.  
Kotter, J. P. (2012). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

### Creating Urgency

**Leading Change: Creating a Sense of Urgency (2017) – Robert Tanner**

<https://managementisajourney.com/leading-change-step-1-creating-a-sense-of-urgency/>

This article describes a model for creating urgency in any organization.

**What is a Sense of Urgency (2008) - John Kotter**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5802FBaMSI>

This short video interviews John Kotter, professor at Harvard Business School, about his model for creating urgency.

**Leading Change: Establish a Sense of Urgency (2013) – John Kotter**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Yfrj2Y9III>

This video describes the importance of creating urgency as the first step in making significant change in an organization.

**20 Ways to Create Urgency(2015) – Rob Llewellyn**

<https://enterpriseproject.com/article/2014/8/20-ways-create-sense-urgency>

This brief article discusses twenty ways to create urgency. Each strategy can be adapted to any school or organization.

**Sustaining a Sense of Urgency (2013) – Janel Keating**

<http://www.allthingsplc.info/blog/view/233/sustaining-a-sense-of-urgency>

This blog by a school leader in Washington offers strategies to maintain a sense of urgency for improving student learning.

This *Research into Practice* brief was prepared by Practical Leadership, LLC and authored by Ronald Williamson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University and Howard Johnston, Professor Emeritus of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. This brief is prepared for use by principals and school staff in Oregon GEAR UP schools.

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