

# FAST START GUIDE: CREATING A SENSE OF URGENCY WITH JOHN KOTTER

BY STEPHANIE OVERBY

**Want to increase the sense of urgency in your organization? Get going—using five tips from the foremost expert on organizational change.**

John Kotter wrote the book on organizational change. His bestseller *Leading Change* became the de facto transformation guidebook for executives and managers around the world. In his continued research during the ensuing decades, he has studied what makes change possible and sustainable. “What we’ve found again and again and again is, right at the beginning of successful change, you get a sense of urgency going,” says Kotter, whose later book *A Sense of Urgency* argues that without that sense, change initiatives are doomed.



People often think that because they are running just as fast as they can, they are urgent, when in fact they are simply anxious. Anxiety is not urgency.

In the age of digital disruption—with our world changing faster than ever before—one might assume a sense of urgency is a given. But that’s only because many of us mistake frenetic activity with urgency.

“People often think that because they are running just as fast as

they can, they are urgent, when in fact they are simply anxious,” says Kotter, Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership, Emeritus at Harvard Business School and founder of management consultancy Kotter International. “Anxiety is not urgency.”

Urgency, instead, is when you think and behave based on the sense that the world is full of both enormous opportunity and hazard—and have the gut-level determination to do something about that every day. It’s true engagement—something that’s vital as many organizations struggle to respond quickly in a dynamic environment. Fortunately, a sense of urgency is also something that CIOs and other leaders can cultivate in their organizations. The Enterprisers Project talked to Kotter about five tips for creating and sustaining a sense of urgency.

## 1. Recognize the difference between false urgency and the real thing

One big barrier to change is complacency, the thinking that what got you to where you are will get you where you need to go; it’s relatively easy to identify. However, false urgency can be equally detrimental. A state of constant activity and firefighting,

often driven by fear or even anger, is ineffective. “So many people—smart, experienced people—look at their organization and say we don’t have an urgency problem,” says Kotter. But they do. The goal is instead to create what Kotter calls a “large, urgent army of volunteers” motivated to move forward and win.

## ✓ 2. Bring the outside in

Often there is a disconnect between what’s happening outside an organization and what those inside are thinking, feeling, and doing. An insular culture breeds self-satisfaction rather than a drive to explore the opportunities and threats outside the door. Leaders can help their employees connect to that external promise and peril in ways that increase urgency. “Most leaders already do some things, they just could do more—in some cases much more,” says Kotter. “Bring in outside speakers. Send out reports from the *New York Times* or *The Economist* that are really good in discussing some relevant external reality. Hire really good consultants—a few exist! Whenever an opportunity presents itself, tell interesting stories about what is happening ‘out there.’”

## ✓ 3. Behave with urgency every day

Individuals with a sense of urgency approach work with a commitment to making something happen on the most important issues. Leaders can both model this behavior and enable it. “The great leaders I have known seem to do this intuitively,” says Kotter. “The rest of us can simply be more conscious about how we show up, what we say and write, how we approach anything that others will see.”

Leaders should consider the impact of their choices in instilling a sense of urgency. Will that PowerPoint presentation put people to sleep, scare them to death, make them mad that you are wasting their time, or create excitement about the need to move—and move now—to capitalize on an opportunity (and usually avoid a hazard)? Similar questions can be asked in reference to anything—emails, meetings, one-on-one conversations. Leaders who want to create an environment conducive to change must remove hurdles and eliminate wasted effort so employees can get things done smarter, faster, and with fewer resources.

“Individuals with a sense of urgency approach work with a commitment to making something happen on the most important issues.”

## ✓ 4. Deal with the “No-No”s

Great leaders can describe opportunities that appeal to individuals’ heads and hearts and drive them to act. However, there will always be obstacles to significant change—most of them in human form—a group Kotter calls the “No-No’s.”

“You identify the No-No’s by simply accepting that they exist, and then looking for clues as to who they are,” says Kotter. “Then deal with them: with very

stern chats, or moving them out of the way (to open an office on a remote island!), or distracting them with assignments, or letting them go.”

Legacy processes, technology systems, and policies that work well enough but stand in the way of progress can also thwart urgency, of course.

## ✓ 5. Find opportunity in crisis

“Crisis, broadcast clearly to all, can get people’s attention,” Kotter says. “In a world with too much going on and where communication in organizations is difficult given all the noise and attention-grabbers, that gives you the opportunity to make your case for urgency.”

The key is to not do it in a way that stirs up negative feelings like fear about outcomes or anger. “The emotional reaction on your part, to elicit the same elsewhere, is more like ‘Ok, all hands on deck. We need to deal with this. We have a responsibility to deal with this.

We can deal with this, and as fast as possible,” says Kotter. “And if we are clever, we can even find an opportunity for us here. Let’s go!””



In a world with too much going on and where communication in organizations is difficult given all the noise and attention-grabbers, that gives you the opportunity to make your case for urgency.

Get more leadership advice at [EnterprisersProject.com](https://EnterprisersProject.com)