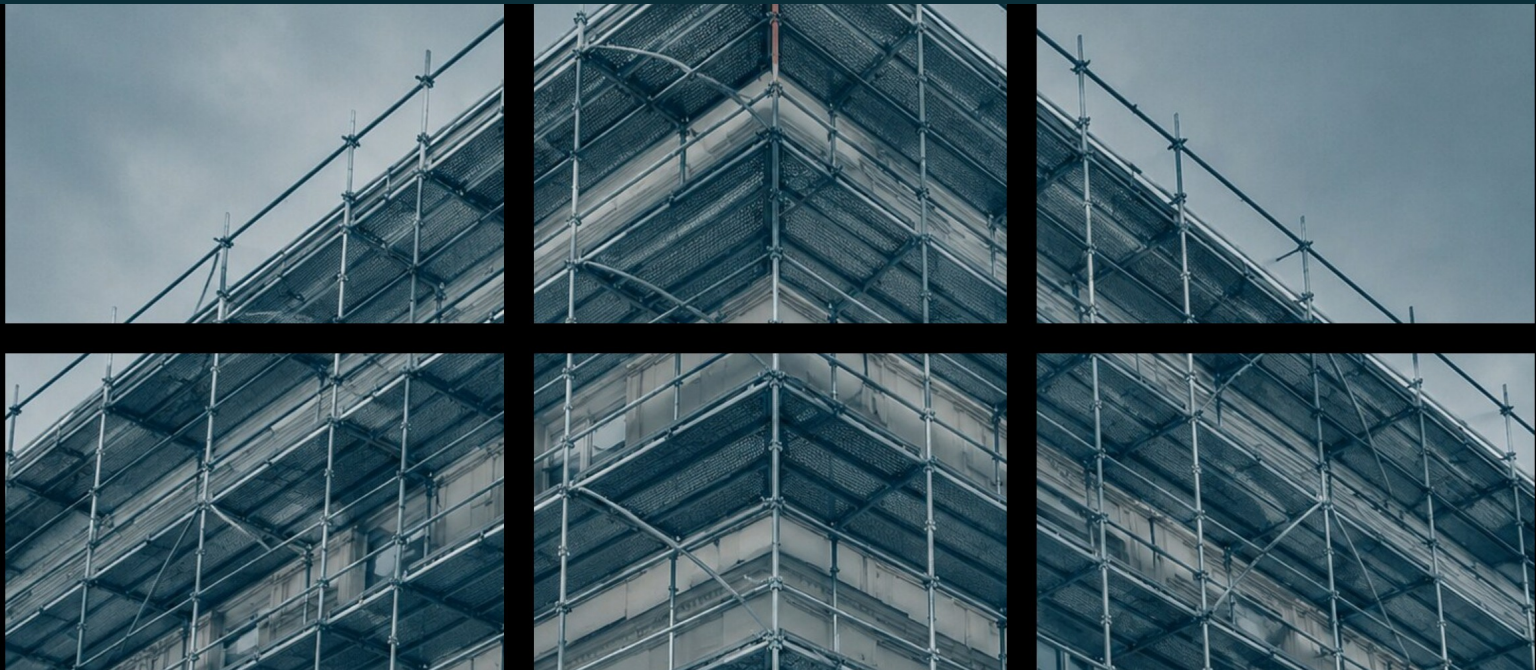


BEYOND THE FALSE ALARM

The Burning Platform That Wasn't Burning: Why False Urgency Corrodes the Change It Buys

How manufactured crisis buys short-term motion and quietly spends the trust that transformation cannot run without



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1. When the alarm does not ring true

Everyone who has worked inside change has sat in the room where it happens. The senior leader stands, the lights come down, and the language turns grave. The market is shifting beneath us. Competitors are circling. We cannot afford to stand still. This, colleagues, is our burning platform. The words are urgent. The faces are not. Around the table sit people who have read the same numbers the leader has read, and they know the platform is not, in fact, on fire — that the quarter was adequate, that the competitor's rival product is late, that the deadline supposedly forcing the whole programme was invented last month in this very building. They nod anyway. They have learned that nodding is cheaper than arguing. And in that small, practised gesture — the nod that does not believe itself — the change programme has already begun to fail.

I have watched this scene play out enough times to be confident it is not an accident of a particular leader or a particular firm. It is a technique, taught implicitly and copied widely, and it rests on one of the most quoted instructions in the whole change-management canon: that transformation begins by establishing a sense of urgency. The instruction is sound. What has been done with it is often not. Somewhere between the seminar and the town hall, "establish urgency" quietly became "manufacture a crisis," and a generation of change leaders learned to set fire to platforms that were structurally sound in order to make people move.

This is a perspective on that habit — why it is so tempting, why it works just often enough to survive, and why, over any horizon longer than a single programme, it is one of the most expensive shortcuts a leader can take.

2. Where the fire came from

The burning-platform image did not begin as a manipulation. It came from a genuine catastrophe on a North Sea oil rig, where a man faced with certain death in the flames chose the near-certain injury of a jump into freezing water, and lived. The point of the story, as it entered the management vocabulary, was precise and honest: people will accept enormous, frightening change when the alternative is genuinely worse, and the leader's job is to make the real stakes visible. The fire, in the original, was real. The man could feel the heat.

What happened next is the quiet tragedy of most good management ideas. A vivid, truthful metaphor was stripped of its condition and kept for its drama. The condition was that the

danger had to be real. The drama was that fear moves people fast. Practitioners under pressure to deliver a merger, a systems consolidation, or a restructuring on an impossible timetable reached, understandably, for the part that worked — the fear — and left behind the part that mattered — the truth. The result is a change practice that has become fluent in the production of urgency and nearly illiterate in the diagnosis of it.

The orthodoxy says change begins with urgency. It does not say urgency may be counterfeited. Every practitioner remembers the first half of that instruction and forgets the second.

3. Why the counterfeit passes

Manufactured urgency survives because, in the short term, it appears to work. Deadlines that were invented are still deadlines; people still hit them. A programme launched on a fabricated crisis will show early movement — meetings scheduled, resources reassigned, a plan on a wall — and to a steering committee watching for signs of life, movement reads as progress. The technique is rewarded precisely when it is most dangerous, because the reward arrives long before the bill does.

The bill arrives through a mechanism every parent knows and every change leader forgets: the discounting of alarms. The first time a leader declares an emergency that turns out not to be one, the organisation pays close attention and is mildly embarrassed to have been fooled. The second time, it pays less. By the third, the workforce has quietly recalibrated. It has learned that "burning platform" is simply the noise this leadership makes when it wants something done, in the way a car alarm in a city street has become a sound people step around rather than a signal they respond to. The tragedy is that organisations do, eventually, face real fires — a genuine competitive threat, a genuine solvency problem, a genuine regulatory reckoning — and when that day comes, the leader reaches for the alarm and finds that the wiring has been cut. Not by rebellion. By repetition.

There is a subtler cost, and it is the one I would put first. A manufactured crisis does not only spend credibility; it corrupts the information system of the enterprise. When people believe the stated reason for a change is false, they do not down tools — they comply on the surface and privately withhold the one thing transformation actually needs, which is their honest read of what is and is not working. The engineer who can see that the new platform will not scale says nothing, because the deadline is a fiction and fictions are not to be argued with. The manager who knows the integration timeline is fantasy pads her estimates quietly rather than challenging them openly. False urgency, in other words, does not merely fail to build trust; it actively trains the organisation to lie back. And a transformation staffed by people who have decided it is safer to agree than to tell the truth is a transformation flying blind.

4. A worked example, composed from many

Consider a consolidation programme — the kind that recurs in every era and every sector — where three regional operations, each with its own systems and its own way of working, are to be merged onto a single platform. The genuine case for consolidation was real but unglamorous: duplicated overheads, reconciliations that took a fortnight each month, a support model that could not scale. None of it was on fire. All of it was expensive.

The programme's sponsor, sensing correctly that "expensive but stable" would not command the urgency he needed, reached for a sharper story. A regulatory change, he announced, made consolidation mandatory by year end. It did not; the regulation in question touched the business only glancingly and carried no such deadline. But the story was clean, it was frightening, and it moved the budget. For roughly two quarters it worked beautifully. Then the people doing the actual integration discovered what the sponsor's story had papered over: that the three regions did not merely use different systems, they ran genuinely different operating models, and that forcing them onto one platform by an artificial date would break processes that customers depended on.

Here is the mechanism that matters. Because the deadline was known to be invented, no one felt able to challenge it — challenging a fiction feels like insubordination, not diligence. The integration team, unable to move the date, moved the only thing they could, which was scope, quietly deferring the hard reconciliations to a "phase two" that everyone understood would never be resourced. The programme hit its fabricated deadline and was declared a success. Eighteen months later the deferred work surfaced as a running operational wound: manual workarounds, a reconciliation burden larger than the one consolidation was meant to remove, and a support team that had learned never to trust a programme timeline again. The false fire had not accelerated the change. It had bought two quarters of visible motion at the price of two years of hidden repair — and, more lastingly, at the price of a workforce that now discounted every future alarm from that leadership on principle.

“Manufactured urgency does not accelerate change. It borrows speed from the future at an interest rate no one discloses.”

5. The honest objection

The case against false urgency is not a case against urgency, and the strongest reply to everything above deserves to be stated at full strength rather than waved away. Complacency is real, and it is lethal. Organisations do sit contentedly on trajectories that lead over a cliff; comfortable, profitable, well-run businesses do fail to change until it is too late, precisely because nothing feels wrong today. Anyone who has tried to move a successful organisation knows the peculiar difficulty of it — that success is the hardest soil to plant urgency in, and that "the numbers are fine" is the sentence that precedes a great many corporate deaths. Against that reality, is a leader who dramatises the threat, who makes the slow-moving danger feel present and vivid, not simply doing the job the orthodoxy correctly prescribes? Is a little theatre not sometimes the only way to make a real but distant fire feel warm enough to act on?

It is a serious objection, and the answer is a distinction, not a denial. There is a difference in kind between revealing a real danger and inventing a false one, and it survives every hard case. A leader who takes a genuine but under-appreciated threat — the eroding margin, the ageing platform, the customer base quietly greying — and works to make it visible, felt, and undeniable is doing exactly the honest work of urgency. The fire is real; the leadership act is to help people feel a heat they had learned to ignore. What corrodes is not intensity but fabrication: the deadline that does not exist, the regulation that does not apply, the competitor threat inflated past what the evidence supports. The test is

simple and unforgiving. When the pressure is applied and someone in the room asks is this actually true, does the honest answer strengthen the case or collapse it? Revealed urgency welcomes that question. Manufactured urgency cannot afford it. That is the whole difference, and a leader always knows privately which one they are practising.

6. What grounded urgency asks of a leader

If the counterfeit is so tempting, the alternative has to be more than a scolding. Grounded urgency is harder because it forbids the shortcut, but it is not vague. In practice it asks three things.

1. Find the real fire before you light a false one. Most organisations that feel stable are carrying a genuine, under-examined threat — a cost line quietly compounding, a capability quietly ageing, a dependence quietly deepening. The disciplined leader's first job is not to generate drama but to do the diagnostic work of locating the real danger and quantifying it, so that the urgency, when it comes, is reporting on the world rather than performing for the room.
2. Make the true stakes felt, not merely stated. A real threat that stays abstract will not move anyone; this is the legitimate craft the burning-platform metaphor was always pointing at. The work is to translate a slow, structural danger into something concrete and near — the specific customer that will leave, the specific month the numbers turn, the specific capability the organisation will no longer have — so that people feel a heat that is genuinely there rather than manufactured.
3. Protect the alarm for the day you will need it. A leader's credibility to declare a crisis is a finite, slowly-earned asset, and every false alarm spends it. Treating urgency as a reserve to be guarded rather than a lever to be pulled is what leaves the wiring intact for the real fire — the one that, sooner or later, every organisation faces.

None of this is as fast as fabrication, and that is precisely the point. The false fire feels efficient because it moves the near-term deadline; it is ruinous because it mortgages the one asset a transformation cannot run without, which is a workforce willing to tell its leaders the truth.

7. The platform, turned around

The metaphor deserves to be reclaimed rather than retired. The man on the rig jumped because the fire was real and he could feel it. That is the whole of the lesson, and the industry has spent years quoting the jump while forgetting the fire. A leader who has to invent the flames has, by that very act, admitted that the real case for change was not strong enough to carry itself — and a change that could not be argued honestly is a change that probably should have been examined more carefully before it was launched.

The organisations that transform well, in my experience, are not the ones with the most dramatic sense of urgency. They are the ones that have kept their alarms honest, so that when a leader finally stands up and says the platform is burning, the room looks at the numbers, sees the smoke, and moves — not because they have been frightened, but because, this time, they believe it.