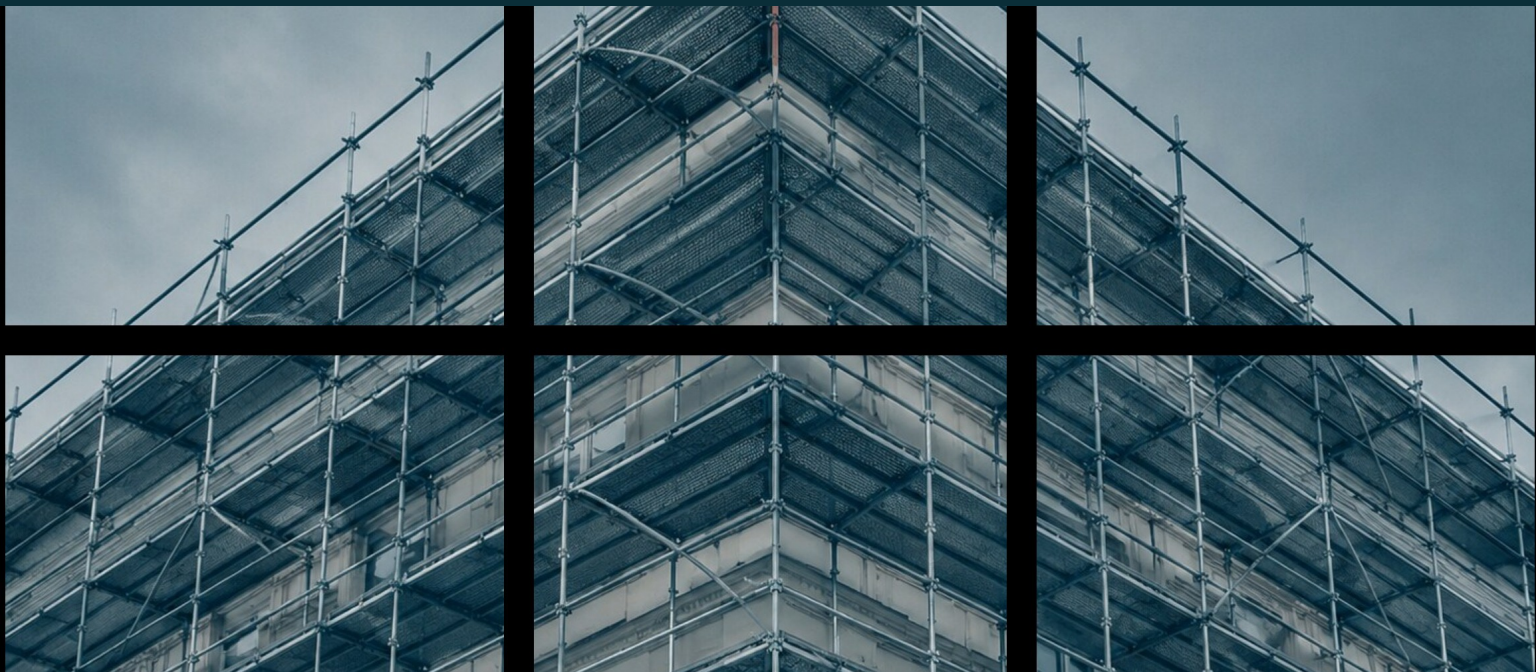


BEYOND THE FALSE ALARM

The Platform Isn't Burning, and Everyone Knows It

On the quiet cost of manufactured urgency in change programmes



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“You can startle someone into rearranging their desk. You cannot startle them into changing their mind.”

The speech everyone in the room has now heard

There is a slide that has become a fixture of the change programme kick-off. It shows an offshore rig at night, wreathed in flame, and beneath it a single line of text: we are standing on a burning platform. The executive lets the image sit for a moment, then delivers the message it is meant to license — that the old way is finished, that standing still is the most dangerous option of all, that everyone in the room must move now.

The trouble, more and more often, is that everyone in the room can see the platform is not on fire. The order book is healthy. Last year was a record. The competitor everyone is told to fear has just posted its third flat quarter. So the slide lands, the audience nods in the way audiences nod, and they file back to their desks having learned something the executive did not intend to teach them: that the alarm cannot be trusted.

This is worth noting now, because the tactic has never been more fashionable, and its costs have never been less understood.

What Conner actually meant

The metaphor is not new, and it did not begin as a piece of stagecraft. Daryl Conner drew it from the Piper Alpha disaster in the North Sea in 1988, from the account of a survivor who chose to jump fifteen storeys into freezing water rather than remain on the burning rig. Conner's point was precise and unsentimental: people accept radical, frightening change when — and only when — the pain of their present position finally exceeds their fear of the leap. The burning platform was a description of a real condition, not a rhetorical device to be deployed at will.

Somewhere between Conner's insight and its arrival on the corporate slide deck, that precision was lost. Kotter's now-canonical instruction to establish a sense of urgency as the first step of any change effort is sound counsel, and most transformations do founder on complacency rather than panic. But "establish a sense of urgency" has quietly been read as "manufacture one." The discipline was supposed to be honesty about a fire that exists. It has curdled into the theatre of a fire that does not.

A fire you have to talk people into believing is not a fire. It is a withdrawal from the account of trust, and the organisation always keeps the ledger.

The tell, and the mechanism beneath it

By the close of 2005 a great many organisations are on their third or fourth restructuring since the dot-com collapse, and a pattern has become visible to anyone paying attention on the receiving end. Each wave arrives dressed in the same crisis language. The first time, people mobilise. The second time, they comply. The third time, they wait for it to pass — because experience has taught them that it will.

The instrumentation now exists to watch this happen. Where leaders run a regular engagement pulse, the question that quietly collapses is not satisfaction or morale but belief in the reason given for the change. It is not unusual to see the proportion of staff who accept that a reorganisation is driven by genuine business need fall from something like two-thirds in the first wave to under a third by the third — while the people with the most options, the ones an organisation can least afford to lose, begin to leave first, because they are the quickest to price in a leadership that cries wolf.

The mechanism is not mysterious. Change runs on a currency, and the currency is credibility. Every crisis that is declared and then does not arrive spends some of it. Manufactured urgency also buys the wrong thing: it purchases compliance, which is visible and immediate and reverts the moment attention moves elsewhere, when what transformation actually requires is commitment, which is quieter, slower, and cannot be frightened into existence. You can startle someone into rearranging their desk. You cannot startle them into changing their mind.

The case for urgency, and where it stops

None of this is an argument against urgency, and the strongest objection deserves to be met head on rather than waved away. The evidence really does suggest that most change efforts fail from too little urgency rather than too much; complacency is the more common killer; a workforce serenely confident in a company that is quietly being overtaken is a tragedy in slow motion. Leaders who refuse to disturb that calm are not being kind.

But the argument was never between urgency and comfort. It is between real urgency and counterfeit urgency, and the two behave in opposite directions. Real urgency surfaces a threat the workforce can verify for itself — the actual numbers, the named competitor, the contract genuinely at risk, the cost line that genuinely cannot hold. Counterfeit urgency asks people to feel a fear that the evidence in front of them contradicts. The first mobilises precisely because it can be checked. The second corrodes precisely because it cannot. And the distinguishing test is one every organisation applies instinctively and within minutes: is the platform actually burning, or are we simply being told that it is?

What to do about it

Three things follow, and none of them is complicated.

- If the platform is genuinely on fire, show the fire. Put the real figures on the screen, name the real threat, give people the timeline and trust them to do the arithmetic. Understatement is more persuasive than melodrama when the facts are on your side, and facts that can be checked are the only kind that survive contact with a sceptical audience.

- If it is not on fire, do not pretend that it is. There are honest engines of change that owe nothing to fear — the ambition to build something better, the pride of doing the work well, the chance to remove a daily indignity that everyone has quietly tolerated for years. Fear is not the only fuel available, and it happens to be the one with the shortest half-life.
- Keep the alarm for real fires. An organisation that manufactures three crises a year will find, when the fourth one is real, that there is no one left willing to run. The most expensive consequence of a false alarm is not the effort wasted on it. It is the silence that greets the true one.

The burning platform remains one of the most powerful ideas in the practice of change, for the simple reason that it is sometimes exactly true. That is precisely why it should be spent with care. Manufactured urgency does not create movement; it teaches the organisation to ignore the alarm — and the day the platform is finally, genuinely alight is a poor day to discover that no one believes you any more.