

## leadership instalments

### Urgency is a Powerful Force

By Dan Gaynor

*“Throw your men where there is no escape,  
And they will die rather than flee,  
Men who have faced death can achieve anything;  
They will give their last drop of strength, officers and men alike.”  
Sun Tzu, The Art of War - Written 3,000 years ago*

**I AM OFTEN IMPRESSED BY WHAT PEOPLE ARE** capable of when they are really motivated. The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 created a sense of urgency for people around the world – most significantly for those closest to crash sites. At the Calgary Herald we created an unprecedented special same day special edition. It wasn't perfect but it was a triumph.

People came together from all across the newspaper, many doing things that had little or nothing to do with their normal work to get that edition to the street. We knew something unprecedented had taken place and it was our job to tell the story. We were not the only paper covering it. We were in a race against our competitor on the biggest story of our lives. Some weeks later we met to talk about the lessons of the day.

Our team responded to the challenge with unprecedented levels of cooperation and initiative. Before we called the first meeting our press foreman had the presses ready to go just in case we needed them. It was one of many examples of people doing what needed to be done. There wasn't time to direct a lot of what took place so we trusted our team to execute. They did.

We worked more effectively as a team that day. We had to rely on each other much more than usual. We had to lean on each other and cross the boundaries of normal job descriptions. We learned how much we really needed each other. We felt a stronger sense of purpose. Bringing the story to our readers quickly became a compelling and inspiring mission. The heightened commitment was almost palpable and it brought out the best everyone had to offer.

This summer, the Marda Loop Business Revitalization Zone faced its own urgent situation. Just weeks from their annual summer



Marda Gras festival sponsorship funds were lagging far behind previous years. They faced the possibility of losing the event or running a huge deficit. They rose to the challenge. Once again urgency brought out the best in people.

The special edition at the Herald hit the streets within hours of the first airplane striking the tower. The Marda Gras went ahead with the money needed to cover all expenses and put on a great show. The successes rightfully became sources pride for everyone involved. When people rise to meet a challenge they take a new sense of confidence with them.

There is an unmistakable connection between urgency and performance. If you are not careful, too much comfort can create urgency's opposite - complacency. This can kill a team as fast as urgency can pull one together. "The place needs to have an edge," said one former boss – his way of describing the leader's role in maintaining a sense of urgency. Strong accountabilities and a mission that matters help leaders maintain urgency. Tap into this force and your team will perform at a higher level. Sun Tzu, the legendary Chinese military commander understood this when he wrote the quote we opened with. He didn't leave urgency to chance. Neither should you.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. What has your own experience with urgency been?
2. How would you describe your environment today, is it urgent or is complacency creeping in?
3. What steps can you take to keep an edge on the place?

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