

The background of the top half of the page is a photograph of two men in a control room. Both are wearing white hard hats. The man on the left is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and a high-visibility yellow safety vest. The man on the right is wearing a dark blue jacket and is holding a tablet computer. They appear to be in a professional discussion. The background is filled with various pipes, cables, and control panels.

Hurry Up and **Slow Down:** The Executive Dilemma

White Paper

Today's executives are faced with a serious communication and operational dilemma. First, they must encourage organizational urgency and be aggressive to stay competitive in a rapidly changing business environment. This means taking more risks, being nimble and decisive, and demonstrating a bias for action. Second, they must keep the organization focused on executing flawlessly. Flawless execution is necessary to keep workers and their surrounding communities safe from harm and to meet customer expectations. Uncontrolled and unmanaged urgency can be the enemy of flawless execution.

From a neuroscience perspective, urgency pressures are a major source of stress, causing work to occur in a reactive, repetitive-processing mode, which ultimately leads to more mistakes and poor decision-making.

Urgency and execution reflect rival values competing for the attention of not just corporate leaders but also the rest of us. There are countless stories of organizations that did not have enough urgency. Some were so resistant to change that they plodded their way to extinction. Others had an inappropriate focus on urgency that led to catastrophic consequences. Excellent leadership decreases the inevitable conflict between the two. The challenge is to achieve the right balance.

Unhelpful Urgency Is the Enemy of Flawless Execution

A high-urgency environment is characterized by a bias for action, a focus on deadlines despite errors, a too-fast work pace, and an emphasis on output above all else. While high urgency may be possible for a short time, it is unlikely to be a successful operational model for the long term.

From a neuroscience perspective, urgency pressures are a major source of stress, causing work to occur in a reactive, repetitive-processing mode, which ultimately

leads to more mistakes and poor decision-making. In Nobel Prize-winner Daniel Kahneman's seminal book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, thinking fast refers to a reflexive mode of acting, devoid of any real examination or thinking. This is also referred to as fast-brain execution, and while everyone works in this manner from time to time, we are even more likely to be on automatic pilot when we are behind in production or at risk of missing a deadline.

As a result, we are less likely to engage in slow-brain thinking, when we carefully consider options, focus our attention, and plan for contingencies. Think about when you take the most risks while driving: it's typically when you're late and rushing to make up for lost time. The same increase in risk-taking and mistakes happens in high-urgency environments. A prolonged period of urgency may yield short-term gains. In the long run, these gains will not be sustainable and the organization will suffer.

Contrast this urgent environment with a flawless-execution environment, where a slow-brain approach focuses not on speed but on high quality, diligence, and attention to procedures and details. A slow-brain environment provides managers and workers with the time and space to think—to consider if the situation is changing and if the assumptions under which they, and their enterprise, have been operating are still valid. For industries such as refining, chemical production, power distribution and generation, and non-emergency surgery, to name a few, most leaders, employees, and community members would prefer a focus on flawless execution.

Both Urgency and Flawless Execution Have Their Place

The greatest danger of the urgency message is when it is transmitted unfiltered to operations. When this happens, it can result in a loss in the management-of-change process and an increase in risk-taking and shortcuts that can have catastrophic outcomes. When executives communicate the need to take risks in innovation and to be aggressive in the market, how does this get translated to operations? How do

long-haul drivers, food-processing employees, or polyethylene control-room operators reconcile quality and safety when they hear they need to, in the words of one CEO, “move fast and break things”? We know that executives do not want quality, customer service, or safety to suffer, and yet, if the communication process is not carefully choreographed, these same executives leave to chance how their messages about urgency and risk-taking are interpreted and acted upon at the worker level.

You might think that flawless execution is the domain of emergency operations workers: police, fire, military operations, and emergency-room personnel, for example. Their focus, after all, is on rapid response, when life can hang in the balance. People like these are trained to operate under tight time pressure, and their skills are honed through intensive and repetitive practice. Even so, their ability to deliver flawless execution—to focus and engage their thinking brain on right-first-time/right-every-time results—is often impaired by the urgency of their environment. For our employees—who lack this kind of intense preparation and practice—pressure and urgency are even harder to manage, making flawless execution nearly impossible.

Different Terms for Different Audiences

Given this tension between flawless execution and urgency, what’s the message executives need to send to their operations to ensure that their people produce increased output and enhanced safety and quality?

The answer lies in understanding the difference between risk and exposure and then knowing when to use each term. Exposure is a state of vulnerability to a bad outcome, such as an injury. With exposure, the probability of a negative outcome occurring is unknown. Put another way, if the employee continues to work in the presence of the exposure, at some point, it will adversely affect him. But no one knows when. Risk, on the other hand, is the quantification of exposure. It represents a probability, such as a 1 in 10 chance that a specific outcome will occur. Risk analysis is the approach used to estimate the likelihood that a bad outcome will happen. Risk

analysis is, generally, used in two different ways. First, it identifies operational and company risks and prioritizes where to allocate resources to reduce or eliminate the risk potential. Second, it determines whether taking a business risk is worthy of consideration (that is, if the potential gains justify taking the chance).

Talking about risk, as defined above, is perfect for conversations with leaders but not so great with employees on the floor.

The dilemma for executives is that the message they deliver to leaders and managers—of taking more risks and accepting more failures—is often the opposite of what supervisors and operators on the shop floor need to hear. On the shop floor, the message needs to emphasize how to identify and control exposures to make work safer, not messages that encourage risk-taking behavior.

Consider this situation: An employee is about to tackle a job that requires equipment lockout and completion of a permit. The job will take 30 minutes, if all safe work procedures are followed but only 10 minutes, if they are skipped. If the employee has been receiving messages to “Work with urgency and take more risk,” he is more likely to make an in-the-moment risk assessment that miscalculates the likelihood of injury and then proceed without locking out the equipment. While it is unlikely that management meant to signal to the employee to violate safety procedures, management could not predict how its messages heard. Unfortunately, there are countless examples of people incorrectly calculating the risk and then either ending up injured or causing a major incident.

In this situation, instead of calculating the risk, it would be better for the employee to answer the question: “Is the exposure controlled?” For this to happen, leaders need to be crystal clear on their expectations around controlling exposure. These leaders need to back up their expectations with actions that demonstrate their commitment to exposure control.

In a high-functioning safety culture, employees are entrusted to pause (reduce the

urgency) and consider the exposure before tackling a task. They know that if they have concerns, leadership will listen and respond appropriately to ensure that the exposure is adequately controlled. For example, when a delivery driver radios back to his supervisor to say that his cargo is too big to unload by himself and that the customer doesn't have a dock for proper unloading, how does the supervisor react? A supervisor focused on urgency might tell the driver "Do what you can" or ask "Are you sure you can't do it yourself?" Either way, the supervisor is communicating priority of urgency over safe execution and exposure control.

Conversely, a supervisor focused on exposure would commend that the driver pause to think through the situation and ask for assistance in figuring out how to control the exposure. This upward communication about safety allows for a longer-term solution, in which the company works with the customer to solve the underlying problem that created the unacceptable level of exposure.

Creating a Culture to Embrace Change– At All Levels

There is nothing wrong with changing procedures and decreasing the time it takes to complete a job. At the front-line level, this just needs to be done systematically and not under the pressure of urgency. Leadership needs to create a culture in which change is embraced, new ideas flow freely, with an established and fully understood mechanism for trying new and different approaches.

Urgency is everywhere, and from a neuroscience perspective, it is a double-edged sword. It can encourage us to improve how we perform our jobs and push us to go farther, faster. However, if left unchecked, urgency can raise our stress levels, complicate our situational awareness, and lead to poor decision-making. As a leader, ask yourself the following questions:

- To what extent are errors and incidents in my operations due to urgency? How would I know?

- How well is my management-of-change system working?
- What messages am I sending to operations about what's important to me?
- When values or goals conflict, how confident am I that the right decisions will be made?
- Are operators focused on identifying and controlling exposure, or do they take a risk-based approach to decisions?

Getting a better sense of how urgency is used to create change in your organization can help improve exposure awareness and provide leaders with tools to effectively drive a culture of reliability. Here are four considerations for leaders seeking to create a culture of execution and change:

1. Match the Message to the Audience.

Consider carefully who is in the audience, and adjust the message appropriately. It is perfectly fine to discuss the need for urgency with one audience and avoid

unhelpful urgency with another. Emphasize the power of awareness and challenge people to do things more expeditiously and in ways that preserve or enhance safety, quality, and customer service.

2. Create the Mindset for Making Safe Decisions.

When front-line leaders and employees are dealing with a challenging problem, how do you want them to balance your value for safety and quality (flawless execution) with your value for performance and production (urgency)? If it is unclear to you, then execution will be highly variable. One of the biggest challenges we see in organizations is a lack of clarity about priorities when values and goals conflict. It is incumbent upon senior leaders to provide this clarity and ensure that it is woven

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throughout the operations so that everyone knows full well which priority should prevail and which course you expect them to take.

3. Provide a Structure to Manage Execution During Change.

Before sending messages about the urgent need for change, leaders must be sure that a structure is in place for how changes will be addressed at the worker level. While structure may seem to be the enemy of change and speed, it is only an enemy if the organization creates structure that hinders. Telling people that you want innovation and change isn't enough. At the operational level, you must set up mechanisms that set forth how ideas will flow and how new procedures will be tested. Additionally,

there needs to be a feedback loop to ensure that people providing input and ideas know the status of their development on an ongoing basis. At the working level, the process for change will need to be more systematic due to the danger of introducing increased exposure and potentially negative impacts on safety and quality.

4. Celebrate Flawless Execution. Leadership needs

Leadership needs to recognize and celebrate change. However, decisions not to make a change for the sake of safety or quality also need to be recognized. In some situations, such as severe constraints, leaving things the same might be the best decision. Not all change ideas are good ideas, especially those that increase exposure or reduce quality. A good change-management system will sometimes find flaws in a proposed change, which can lead to a better change. When this happens, leaders need to acknowledge the “catch” as being a sign indicating that the process worked. This acknowledgment reinforces the importance of safety and quality while reinforcing the case for structure to shape and monitor change.

Learning to Be Efficient and Safe

Executives need to create urgency in their organizations. Staying ahead of the competition and making step-change improvements cause organizations to thrive and prosper. The key is to be clear on where risk-taking is accepted and more untethered and where risk-taking must be more tightly controlled and follow a management-of-change process.

Ready to solve the puzzle of the executive dilemma?



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