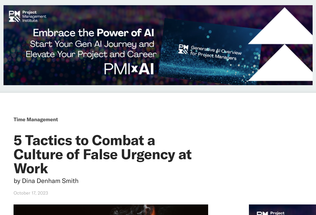
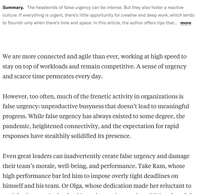


Time Management

5 Tactics to Combat a Culture of False Urgency at Work

by Dina Denham Smith

October 11, 2022



Kevin Dooley/Flickr Commons

Summary. The headwinds of false urgency can be intense. But they also foster a reactive culture. If everything is urgent, there's little opportunity for creative and deep work, which tends to flourish only when there's time and space. In this article, the author offers tips that... more

We are more connected and agile than ever, working at high speed to stay on top of workloads and remain competitive. A sense of urgency and scarce time permeates every day.

However, too often, much of the frenetic activity in organizations is false urgency: unproductive busyness that doesn't lead to meaningful progress. While false urgency has always existed to some degree, the pandemic, heightened connectivity, and the expectation for rapid responses have steathily solidified its presence.

Even great leaders can inadvertently create false urgency and damage their team's morale, well-being, and performance. Take Ram, whose high performance led him to impose overly tight deadlines on himself and his team. Or Olga, whose dedication made her reluctant to push back on senior leadership and caused excessive additional work for her team. Or Seb, whose competitive spirit resulted in endless shifts for the team as he explored new ideas and trends.

Of course, you want your team to act with genuine urgency about what matters most. But it's easy to mistake false urgency for true urgency — both look like high initiative and activity. As stress and burnout in leaders and employees remain alarmingly high, leaders must recognize the distinction and root out false urgency from their teams.

Here's how to ensure you don't unwittingly create false urgency on your team and avoid its damaging downstream impacts.

Recognize the Signs

No leader intentionally fabricates false urgency, but it can surreptitiously embed itself and become a team norm. Overturning it begins with recognizing the signs: Are you and your team in a chronic state of overwhelm and reactivity? Do you catch yourself apologizing for yet another fire drill? Do you and your team only have time to do "real work" in the evenings or on weekends? Have you or received feedback that you need to prioritize more? If any of these indicators are present, you may unintentionally create false urgency.

Appreciate that due to your positional power, your requests, casual spitballing, and even inadvertent reactions can cause your team to spring into action. Over time, your team may even begin to anticipate your needs and "jump" without you ever making a request. All this "jumping" sidelines the most critical work and results in perpetual job stress and burnout, draining your team of energy.

Pinpoint the Source of Urgency

False urgency reflects a genuine desire to succeed but is often rooted in anxiety. For example, Ram worried that if his team didn't produce top-quality work at warp speed, they would disappoint their internal clients and be seen as uncooperative. Olga feared that pushing back would make her look uncommitted and damage her relationships with the executive team. Seb was concerned that he and the team might miss out on the next big thing and become less competitive.

Ask yourself, "What is the primary source of my urgency?" If it is rooted in anxiety, you may have limiting beliefs that keep you stuck in unproductive behaviors. The way out is to challenge your assumptions and reframe these beliefs. For instance, Olga reframed her belief — "Pushing back will make me look uncommitted and damage my relationships" — to "Respectful challenges are a sign of engagement and will enhance mutual respect." After all, the best ideas are often forged in the heat of spirited debate.

Leaders can also unintentionally cascade and perpetuate a broader organizational culture of false urgency, neglecting to question the status quo. Regardless of the source of false urgency, your responsibility to improve things for your team remains the same.

Prioritize Ruthlessly

Difficulty prioritizing the important over the urgent is a universal struggle and a key culprit in false urgency. Research shows that we prioritize tasks with the shortest deadlines, even if those aren't the most important. We also default to addition rather than subtraction when trying to improve situations, and the sunk cost fallacy makes us loath to abandon efforts we've already invested in. And under stress, we often forget to step back to focus on what is most important.

Creating psychological distance is one technique that can help you stay focused on the big picture. Imagine physical distance, a separation in time, or that someone other than you is involved in the current situation. For example, you might ask yourself, "If I imagine it's a year from now, what is the most important thing for us to do now?" Or "If this was someone else's team, how would I advise them to prioritize what's on their team's plate?"

Additionally, deliberately focus on the potential gains of abandoning ideas and endeavors into which you've already invested time, money, or effort. Ask yourself: "What are the advantages of discontinuing? What will it cost us if we don't suspend our efforts?" Or ask the leader to create reminders that subtraction is an advantageous option. Challenge your team to develop a list of everything they think the team could subtract or stop doing in the coming year.

Employ Strategic Procrastination

Procrastination typically has a negative connotation, but it can be helpful when used purposefully. Strategic procrastination involves starting something and not finishing it until it's almost due, allowing you and your team to think about it gradually and eliminating the unnecessary rush of low-value work. This provides time to consider divergent ideas and enable insights to surface, and can result in increased creativity, innovation, and a better final product.

This tactic may require resetting expectations and repartnering relationships with stakeholders, as it did for Ram. As Ram allowed himself and his team more time to complete stakeholder requests, he effectively managed their expectations by proactively communicating timelines and articulating the reasons for them. Over time, he met stakeholder expectations and reduced their dependency on his team to quickly solve their problems, allowing for a more sustainable pace and often better final product.

Vet External Requests and Buffer Your Team

The inflow of requests we receive at work can be daunting. Some of these requests may be genuinely urgent, but many things can wait. As a leader, you must shield your team from external false urgency.

For example, let's say your boss makes a new request of you or your team. While you want to show willingness, leaders are often unaware of the effort necessary to fulfill their demands and the trade-offs required. Rather than quickly agreeing to the new request, you might say, "We're willing to do what it takes, of course, but would you be open to discussing the trade-offs first?" After all, considering the costs and benefits of different courses of action is strategic thinking at its core and fundamental to effective executive leadership.

If your team members are juggling many outside requests, give them clear guidelines about which ones to accommodate and empower them to question requests that have unrealistic timelines and outside the team's remit. Be aware, however, that team members may be reluctant to push back on external stakeholders and more senior leaders. Bolster their efforts by consistently offering to step in and convey a considered "no" or "not now" to external stakeholders.

Foster a Team Culture of True Urgency

Work with your team to create norms that foster a reasonable operational tempo. Consider defining specific criteria for what constitutes an urgent task — such as strategic alignment, critical client needs, or safety concerns — and schedule regular check-ins to reassess priorities and identify instances of false urgency. Also, establish appropriate communication channels and define reasonable response-time expectations based on urgency levels. For example, you might set a 24- or 48-hour response time to emails unless marked "urgent." Without an explicit norm, your team will likely drop what they're doing to answer your emails, even if they aren't urgent.

Give your team permission to challenge the urgency of tasks and provide feedback on instances of false urgency. It is hard for many people to push back on their leader, so make it psychologically safe for them to do so. When team members question deadlines, listen, consider, and acknowledge their point of view, even if you still need to insist on the deadline.

• • •

The headwinds of false urgency can be intense. But they also foster a reactive culture. If everything is urgent, there's little opportunity for creative and deep work, which tends to flourish only when there's time and space. Utilizing these tips will help you focus on what's truly urgent in your organization and enable your team to deliver strong results and sustain high performance over time.

Dina Denham Smith is an executive coach to senior leaders at world-leading brands such as Amazon, Netflix, Pwc, Qualtrics, Stripe, and numerous high-growth companies. A former business executive herself, she is the founder and CEO of Cognitas, and helps leaders and their teams reach new heights of success. Connect with her on LinkedIn.

Tweet Post Share Save Print

Insight Center Collection
Skills Project Managers Need to Succeed
What it takes to deliver results.

Readers Also Viewed These Items

HBR's 10 Must Reads for Mid-Level Managers (Paperback + Ebook)
Special Offer
Buy Now

Know What Matters: Lessons from a Lifetime of Transformations
Book
Buy Now

Read more on **Time management** or related topics **Personal productivity**, **Leadership and managing people**, **Leadership** and **Motivating people**

Recommended For You

Do You Manage Too Many People?

Mistakes First-Time Managers Make When Giving Feedback

Is Your Team Overworking But Underperforming?

PODCAST
How Do I Find Meaning in My Work?

Partner Center

Harvard Business Review

Give a gift!

Explore HBR
The Latest
All Topics
Magazine Archive
The Big Idea
Reading Lists
Case Selections
Video
Podcasts
Webinars
Data & Visuals
My Library
Newsletters
HBR Press
HBR Ascend

HBR Store
Article Reprints
Books
Cases
Collections
Magazine Issues
HBR Guide Series
HBR 20-Minute Managers
HBR Emotional Intelligence Series
HBR Must Reads
Tools

About HBR
Contact Us
Advertise with Us
Information for Booksellers/Retailers
Masthead
Global Editions
Media Inquiries
Guidelines for Authors
HBR Analytic Services
Copyright Permissions

Manage My Account
My Library
Topic Feeds
Orders
Account Settings
Email Preferences
Account FAQ
Help Center
Contact Customer Service

Follow HBR
Facebook
Twitter
LinkedIn
Instagram
Your Newsreader

Harvard Business Publishing
About Us | Careers | Privacy Policy | Cookie Policy | Copyright Information | Trademark Policy
Harvard Business Publishing: Higher Education | Corporate Learning | Harvard Business Review | Harvard Business School
Copyright ©2022 Harvard Business School Publishing. All rights reserved. Harvard Business Publishing is an affiliate of Harvard Business School.