LEADERSHIP

Urgency vs. Agency:
Getting Commitment to Your Change Agenda

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People can't take action on a concept or a dream. Once they believe in a change, they need small, concrete ways to help.

As I listened to Michael Krasny's Forum on KQED FM the other morning, my frequent drive-time companion summarized a guest's dilemma as "urgency vs. agency." The phrase sounded a chord for me. No matter how impassioned our plea, how glorious our vision, how strong our alignment, people can't take action on a concept or a dream. The more broad and abstract our cause, the less it compels others to commit to practical steps to make it happen. It's one thing to gain agreement on big ideas, quite another to engage others in realizing them.

Some see the world as nothing more than a battleground of competing interests and believe that people only do things that benefit them directly. I disagree. Most people yearn to do things that make a positive difference in their families, communities, and organizations. But believing in a change message doesn't automatically provide people with a set of activities that will help to move the change forward. In order to have "agency," we need to feel that our actions make a difference and that we are capable of doing our part in a larger, meaningful effort.

Communicating and engaging around strategic change is a complex and important skill-set and not one that I can cover in a brief article. But once people understand and buy into a change message, there are two important keys to getting them to be active on behalf of that change:

- They need to see how the change will positively affect them, their communities of interest, and the larger world.
- They need a "starter kit" of actions they can take that are (at least at first) small, concrete, inexpensive, relatively easy, and not a huge stretch. If you can make it easy to "do the right thing," more people will do it. For example, a lofty message about the environment might not be as effective as sending a mail-back bag with free postage for used ink cartridges (along with new ones) in keeping the old cartridges out of landfills.

Urgency without agency can lead to fear, avoidance, and resistance to change. A few good, small, pragmatic ideas communicated clearly to enough people in your organization can make a huge difference in engagement and energy around the change. Confidence increases commitment and once people are committed, creativity and passion can continue to move your organization toward achieving a desired result.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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