

**D**uring a recent trip to CCL's office in Brussels, I enjoyed meeting two very impressive groups of business executives. They represented many different sectors, including finance, pharmaceuticals, and telecommunications. But as we explored the challenges of leading through the global recession, one trait emerged as particularly crucial for leaders of all backgrounds: urgency.

## From the President



In fact, it's a topic that's been on my mind since reading *A Sense of Urgency* (Harvard Business Press, 2008), the superb book from Harvard Business School change

expert John P. Kotter.

Kotter points out that organizations used to expect one large-scale change a year, or what he refers to as "episodic change." These types of changes—such as mergers or acquisitions—naturally brought their own challenges, but their arrival was not unexpected. Because leaders faced just one big issue, they often could focus intensely on it and ensure a successful outcome. Now we live in a world of constant change. Big challenges come at us nonstop—from new competitive threats and fundamental shifts in strategy to the worst recession in seventy-five years. It's nearly impossible to predict what will happen next. In these conditions, establishing—and even more important, sustaining—a true sense of urgency throughout an organization becomes a critical asset.

In my own forty-year career in the military, higher education, and nonprofits, however, I have found that urgency can be elusive. When things are going well, it's tempting to take your foot off the gas. Leaders at all levels have a tendency to tell themselves that whatever they're doing must be working, so it can't hurt to relax for a while. In other words, they lose the discipline that made them effective in the first place. So this global economic crisis actually does offer a great opportunity to change our ways. We have a chance to reestablish discipline in how we hire and develop our talent and in how we design our business processes.

At the same time, leaders must stay alert to the dangers organizations encounter at times like these—among them, the tendency to focus more on survival than on long-term success. To use an analogy from sports, this is the difference between being satisfied merely to play on a team and wanting to be a consistent winner. A short-term outlook sets you up for lower performance in the long run, so it's critical for leaders to keep their men and women focused on growth. It all starts with urgency—and as leaders it's our responsibility to communicate it. So don't hesitate to share bad news when necessary. But also convey optimism and passion to your colleagues. Publicly praise them for moving quickly. Involve them closely in creating and executing your strategy. They'll be more invested in your organization's success—and will help you sustain a culture of excellence, with a sense of urgency.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John R. Ryan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

*John R. Ryan, president and CEO, CCL*

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