



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 33: Sense of Urgency

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[Intro Music]

Brian Miller: Welcome to the Coach Approach Ministries podcast where we help people find their way with God by training the best Christian coaches in the world. I'm Brian Miller, strategic director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short, and I'm joined here today by the president of Coach Approach Ministries, taking time out of his busy schedule, shaking hands, kissing babies, Mr. Chad Hall.

Chad Hall: I was actually shaking babies and kissing hands. I think I got it wrong.

Brian: That's a crime. Those are both probably crimes. Golly. That explains a lot, but... No, we're just kidding. In today's episode, we want to talk about a key to change that most people miss. This key is what John Kotter, Harvard business professor calls a sense of urgency. Kotter says that 70% of all change efforts, big and small, fail, and that of those that succeed, and even achieve more than expected, that the one thing they all have in common is this clear sense of urgency. Chad, I know in my last two coaching sessions, I coach a lot of leaders, I found that both leaders did not have a clear sense of urgency in their leadership, and this was so helpful to me to think about what Kotter had said in his definition. I mean, you've coached a lot of leaders. Do you see this?

Chad: I do. I think that leaders, at least some leaders, especially those in the church, where we do a lot of coaching, they're trying to keep people calm. Even if they are creating change in the organization, they think, "Well, if I'm going to create change, I have to manage it. I have to plan it. There's a vision. It's more of a planning process and having ducks in a row. That kind of thing," and honestly, urgency is... There's a sense of emotion to that that a lot of leaders think, "I shouldn't do that. I shouldn't stoke any kind of emotional embers," so they actually try to keep things calm instead of urgent. There's time for that maybe, but if you're going to create change, as Kotter says, a sense of urgency is really needed.

Brian: I was talking to an apostolic type leader, somebody that starts a lot of things, the other day, and he was talking about one type of apostolic leadership is managing discomfort. He was talking about that's what the apostle Peter did, just managed discomfort. People were not quite comfortable, but it's different than what you were describing which I think you see a lot of, people just trying to make things so calm, so peaceful, that I think it'd be haphazard to the change, for sure. Kotter talks about two other kinds that you often see instead of a sense of urgency. One, you see complacency which is usually achieved by some success, and I think even saying some success can be misleading because I think of a

lot of churches, I coach a lot of pastors, I think of churches that the people say to themselves, “You know, we’re not going to close tomorrow, we’re not. Sure, we’d like a lot of people to come in, but if they don’t, things are going to be just fine. We’re going to be here. The pastor’s going to come. The pastor’s going to go.” There’s a sense of complacency. Have you seen that complacency? I’m sure.

Chad: Oh yeah, and again, that’s kind of over valuing stability and just assuming things are stable, they’re going to be stable, and that that’s a good thing. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with stability, but that can easily go into complacency of just doing the same thing over and over, it’s all going to work out, that kind of thing.

Brian: Now, one of the leaders I was coaching was saying exactly that. That his leaders, they’ll get done what has to be done at a certain point, but they just don’t have any fire about it. It was interesting because he was talking about changing some of the nuts and bolts, some of the inner workings, because maybe they just weren’t catching on to that. Maybe what he was introducing to them was... It was actually strengths based which is great stuff, but it wasn’t catching on and so he was thinking about changing that which just sends up this red flag as I was thinking about Kotter’s stuff because the other side of complacency is a false sense of urgency where we have this sense that we’re doing all of this work, but it’s not getting us anywhere. I’m sure you’ve seen that as well.

Chad: Yeah. Both the leader and the people in the rest of the organization can feel like, “Oh, we’re chasing our tails. This is flavor of the month. Just wait, this too shall pass.” I think pastors and other church leaders are notorious for this false sense of urgency, and what happens is they get the tension to some program, or ministry, or initiative, and then next month, it’s something else. The next month is something else. So, the urgency isn’t really strategic. It’s not part of a really thought through change, process for the organization. I’ve seen that in business plenty of times too. I think one of the reasons businesses don’t do it quite as much as churches is you can go broke quickly. I think the Darwinian thing, survival of the fittest, it gets businesses a little quicker than in does churches.

Brian: Oh, for certain. Absolutely. You said what I was thinking which is flavor of the month which may describe the 20 years of pastoral ministry that I did because I was so excited about these new things, and they weren’t catching on necessarily, so maybe we try something else which is going to lead people into complacency really quickly. It’s going to cause people not to feel the urgency if you’re changing the process every month. It’s such an easy trap to fall into, and Chad, what this really alerted to me as a coach was that Kotter says these leaders who are leading groups who are complacent or have this false sense of urgency, have no idea. They don’t see it.

Chad: They probably think they’re doing a good job.

Brian: Or they think there’s something wrong with the people.

Chad: That’s right. “If only I had better people, I could lead this organization.” That’s probably a sign that it’s you as the leader.

Brian: I’ve seen this on a lot of levels. Another level I’m working on. There’s a lot of parts of the organization that we pretty much know that there’s problems in this organization that I’m working with, but when there’s an individual situation, that situation is not their fault. The whole thing they can feel it,

but when it comes to a specific one, that one's not their fault. Boy, this is just so helpful. So, Kotter talks about this sense of urgency, and he's got a whole book. He's known for *Leading Change* which has eight steps to lead your organization through change, and the first one is this sense of urgency. As he put this stuff out there, he realized that many, many organizations were skipping over a sense of urgency. I can tell you, because I know what two and three are, number two is getting the right people on the bus, and number three is vision, and I think most people go with vision and strategy first and then try to put the right people on the bus, but skip this whole idea of sense of urgency. He ended up writing a specific book called, you better write this down because it's called, *A Sense of Urgency*.

Chad: Well titled.

Brian: Yeah. He definitely got the title right. So, he spends a little time at the beginning, but he gets to one sentence that I think, Chad, not that we should, but I think we could teach a whole course off of this one sentence. It's a long sentence, but I'm going to read through it, and then you and I will go through it piece by piece, but as I read this, Chad, listen for what really just stands out to you because I think that's what our listeners will do to. It's long, but just what's one thing that really just pops out at you. Create a sense of urgency, create action, which is what we do as coaches. Create action that is exceptionally alert, externally oriented, relentlessly aimed at winning, making some progress each and every day, and constantly purging low value added activities all by always focusing on the heart, and not just the mind. So, what jumps out you when I read that definition?

Chad: Well, one thing is I'm really glad I didn't have to diagram this sentence in eighth grade English class. What a long sentence. A lot of modifiers to this idea of how do we create action along the lines that helps develop this sense of urgency, and a couple of things really stood out to me to begin with. The one that really caught my attention was the one around purging low value added activities, and whether you're in a business, a church, a non-profit, whatever, there are a lot of activities. People do a lot of activities.

All the time doing a lot of activities. I think we have these leftover programs, policies, meetings, whatever it is, and they have just carried over through the years, and what a sense of urgency does is I think it says, I kind of get this image of a ship that is in danger of sinking, and you're throwing overboard all the stuff that doesn't matter. You're, I don't know that you're cleaning house, but you're cleaning the ship, but because all of your attention needs to be focused on the thing that really matters the most, so this sort of cleaning house part of it, low value added activities, to me, that really stands out, and I know I've coached a lot of leaders around that particular aspect of creating a sense of urgency.

Brian: So, that could be a coaching topic right there, Chad. I think that's something we could bring to a client and not tell them that's what we're going to talk about, but if you did have a framework, you could say, "This is one of the topics we think is important to your organization to go through."

Chad: Brian, I think we do this as coaches a lot even without thinking about the urgency piece. The urgency piece is going to help us with it. I think a lot of coaches when they hear a client say, "I need to start this. I need to start that. I need to do this. I need to do that.," we instinctively say, "All right. What's on your stop doing list?" People have a hard time. "Oh, well I can't stop that. We've been doing that for 20 years," or, "Well, I can't stop that. This person really cares about it..." What you've done there is

you've helped the leader begin to name some values, and so the value of "We've been doing this a long time," so maybe we value tradition. "We can't stop that. Sister Mary and the choir really loves that." Now we know you value one person's opinion, or if you're a business leader, "We can't stop that. We still get some revenue from that division." Now we value never letting go of something that brings in some kind of money, and we're valuing it over the thing that we are urgent about, so the thing we're trying to change. Leaders are the world's worst for wanting it both ways. We want to grow, and we want to change, but we can't stop that, or we can't do that, and they want to keep on doing everything and add this other thing to it. What purging these low value added activities does is focuses you. It reminds me, I used the ship metaphor earlier, I'll use the metaphor of moving across the country. I've done that a couple times. You get rid of a lot of crap when you move across the country.

Brian: I should move across the country, Chad. There's no doubt.

Chad: You will get rid of a lot of stuff. That's just the metaphor for an organization. Organizations accumulate a lot of stuff. Not just physical stuff, but initiatives, programs, activities.

Brian: I love what you're saying. I know that one of the key topics, if I go to a conference and, I'm there as a coach, people can grab me. One of the topics that comes up so often is, "I need to be more productive, so help me think about how to be more productive." I've done this long enough that that is just this huge red flag that says, "What do you need to stop doing?" Let's start figuring out the value of what you're doing and make some suggestions. Another one that jumped out at me was this idea of externally oriented, and I know since I've been really aware of this sense of urgency stuff, a couple leaders I've coached just recently, I just had this tremendous awareness that they were not externally oriented. This does also, I think, it also goes with aimed at winning. They weren't sure what the win was, and especially in church work, a lot of times, for instance, keeping people happy almost feels like a win, keeping some peace instead of this external orientation.

It's not just church, it's almost all industry, that we get so caught up in the personnel and the process, and we forget about what we're really trying to achieve which hopefully, I think in almost any situation, a life change for somebody. It will make a difference in somebody's life. This is the key to a Steve Jobs, right? He didn't invent the phone. He changed people's lives, and he kept the focus on that constantly.

Chad: And I think that that idea of externally oriented, he was always thinking, "How is this going to be received?" I've done a lot of coach training in the Silicon Valley area, so we've had people who worked at Apple, and one of my favorite stories, this is second hand, I'm assuming this is true, but when the first either MacBook or iMac, one of those, was shipping, he came out and said, "Man, that's the wrong color of white box." I mean all of these, they were on the truck, they were getting ready to go out to the stores, or wherever they were going to be shipped from, and he says, "No, that's the wrong color of white box."

Now, if he's internally oriented, he says, "Well, our team worked so hard on that. It's going to be so much work. Boy, that's really going to be a bad day for somebody. It's just not worth it." In some ways, this is kind of customer service, that kind of thing, but it's one aspect of externally oriented. He's not concerned about how much work it's going to take internally for the organization. He's thinking about who do we serve? He's externally oriented all the time, and again, the people I know who work with him

said he's a real butthole, but still, he aimed that jerkness toward the people out there, and we all have iPhones now because of that.

Brian: Yeah, and it's got one button on it which got so much push back of, "It's just too hard to put one button on it to make it do everything," but he was thinking constantly about the consumer experience. There's so many organizations I work with that I wish were thinking along the lines of what would make a difference. The truth is, unless the leader is externally oriented and keeps this sense of urgency about what we're trying to accomplish before the followers, they will not feel that urgency, and so, you have to, as a coach, as you're coaching a leader, not only bringing awareness to the leader about what it is... I think in the church world, we don't like the word winning for some reason. I don't know, somehow it got convoluted for me to think, "I don't like that word," but what are we trying to achieve? What's the point? What's the end game? It's never about making money. It's never about being stable. It's never about these things. That's not a true sense of urgency. It's about somebody's life changed. Somebody's life is better because of what you're doing, and you're able to bring those stories, so where I wanted to go is there's this idea in *Sense of Urgency* where one strategy that he has, or tactic, I think he calls it, is bringing the outside in, so you're constantly wanting to find ways to bring this outside story inside of your organization.

Chad: Wow, that's neat. I think that's a good place to point out, we used Steve Jobs as an example of being externally oriented. He was notorious for assuming he knew better than the customer. I want to be clear. He wasn't surveying people to find out what they wanted and then producing it for them, but that's not what externally oriented means. It does mean knowing the world, or your customer, or who you serve so well that you're guided by that, and it's fueling the sense of urgency, so that the urgency is headed toward serving them, so this idea of being in communication with people outside your organization. I kind of get this picture of, "Take your eyes off the paper, and look up. Look around." Boy, if you're not intentional about that as a leader, you just become so myopic as an organization that you don't change, you don't grow. The mission's not built.

Brian: I was just coaching a leader on this very topic. I specifically wanted to coach on a sense of urgency, and it's such a big topic. The key one was this externally oriented. I could tell quickly this leader was not thinking external. So, you think about the hourglass. For an hour conversation, let's say it was an hour conversation, for 45-50 minutes, I just kept pressing on this idea of think out farther, farther outside your organization, and what's happening because... It's interesting, after we were done coaching, this client said to me, "I thought you were probably taking me the wrong direction because you kept staying on this one thing, but once I turned the corner, I could see exactly why you led me," and we're not supposed to lead people, but I just kept pushing him on this external orientation, and he finally, at the very end, he's like, "I got it." I'm so glad I stayed there.

Chad: For all the coaches who are listening and thinking, "Well, that does sound leading." The distinction here is not that you saw something externally that you wanted him to see. It's a category. It's look outward and see what you see knowing that he's going to see something valuable, but not knowing exactly what it is.

Brian: I had no idea what it was. In better coaching terms, I kept him in the top of the hourglass, which is creating awareness. I kept him in the creating awareness phase until almost the end, and I'm glad I did

because coaching, it's so easy to step into, "Okay. What are you going to do? We've got to make sure we have enough time to solve your problem, but I didn't solve his problem. I just kept pushing awareness. That's a great distinction. We can't go through all these. The one I want to, we don't have time, but the one I want to focus on here, just as we end, is the last one says, "All by focusing on the heart and not just the mind." He's just making this clear. I see this all the time, and I know you do too with your leaders that you coach. People do not change their mind because you point out facts to them. I can give you an example.

I work with a young leader who has a lot of probably teenage, college-aged people working for her, and she can go in and say, "You need to stay off your phones while you're working not only because you're not supposed to, but because we work with children. As parents come in, they see that," and how effective do you think telling these people the truth is? It's not effective at all. You've got to get to the heart, and get that picture of, "We are investing in children's lives. We have some time with them right here. This is going to add up for them. This is going to tip them over into some goodness in their life." You've got to keep that heart stuff right there. I find, Chad, that a lot of leaders just can't get that straight in their mind.

Chad: I think it's helpful to say, Kotter's not saying, "Focus on the heart, not the mind." He's including the heart, not just the mind. Something I came across a week or so ago, I thought this guy said it so well, although I can't remember who it was.

Brian: It was me.

Chad: It probably was, but he said it's not that people are rational. It's that people are emotional, and then they use their reason to back up the decision they made emotionally, and you can see this in politics where product preference or whatever. We make our decisions based on emotion at a deep place, not just, "Oh, I feel sad, or I feel whatever." Just deep emotional place, and then we logic our way to justify the decision we've already made. So, your notion, what you said about you can tell people the logical, factual truth, and they will not change because you haven't gotten to the place where the decision is actually being made which is at the emotional place.

So, I think that one of the reasons that Kotter starts this change initiative with a sense of urgency is inherently emotional. There's this notion of, "I've got to do something now, and if we don't do something now, something bad is going to happen." Maybe this is a good time to mention, if you are familiar with Steven Covey and his time management grid, he talks about urgent and important. Covey says to do the things that are important and not urgent. Don't ever get trapped into only doing the urgent stuff. I just want to be clear, this isn't the same thing. Kotter's not saying there needs to be a sense of urgency picking up every telephone that rings, answering every email that dings, every knock at your door, always being so responsive to it.

Brian: No, those may be low value added activities.

Chad: That's exactly right. He's saying if you want to get people moving in a change direction, they better feel it, and you're not going to talk them into it. They've got to feel it, and I think you're right Brian. This is where a lot of leaders either they come up short, or maybe they feel like this is manipulative.

Brian: That's exactly what I was thinking. I think they think it feels manipulative, and it can be. All of this stuff can be manipulative. Statistics, facts can be manipulative, right? There's this sense that they have to engage. As you press the awareness farther and farther out about what the life change is in somebody's life because of what we're doing, that's where you get that sense of heart.

Chad: When we coach leaders in the church, getting to the heart is one thing. I think when we're in business, we might think, "Oh, well no. In business, we don't work with emotion." Oh, yeah you do. You work with people. People have emotions, they are emotional creatures. We need to be on the lookout for that as coaches and don't shy away from it.

Brian: You see that in marketing as well. I think it's the Papa Murphy's commercial where they clear off the table, and they actually eat at home. It's the idea of, "I know you don't want to cook," but the heart value of having everyone around the table, that's a heart. You can't explain that. Facts wise it doesn't work. Chad, this has been a great conversation, and I just want to say to our listeners, thanks for listening. All the information that we shared today is from John Kotter's book, *A Sense of Urgency* which is a follow up to his classic book, *Leading Change*, and these are two great books, in my mind, to have in your library, and we thank you for joining us. You can find more out about us by going to coachapproachministries.org and downloading our free eBook *The Beginner's Guide to Christian Coaching: How to Have Powerful Conversations that Really Make a Difference*. We'll see you next week.

[Outro Music]