

Urgent!

What's in it for me? Harness the power of urgency to reduce stress and increase productivity.

Urgent! It seems like everything is these days. In the modern, technology-driven workplace, feeling like we need to do it all now has become the norm – and it's toxic. Unnecessary urgency is harmful in the long run, causing stress, burnout, and inefficiency. But here's the catch: not all urgency is bad. In some cases, it's needed in order to get things done quickly or to drive progress. And in the same way too much urgency can lead to destructive outcomes for morale and productivity, too little urgency can result in lethargy and stagnation. These blinks outline how to achieve a healthy middle ground. With savvy insights and actionable advice, they show how to leverage urgency to reach your goals, cut stress, and drive success at both personal and organizational levels.

In these blinks, you'll learn

the difference between productive and unproductive urgency; what urgency and ice cream have in common; and why being less reactive and more responsive will boost your performance.

Senseless urgency hurts your well-being and productivity levels.

You're a hard worker. You take pride in being an effective team member and doing your job well. And sometimes, you feel like a chicken running around without a head. Yes, no, maybe so? Research published in the 2018 Journal of Applied Psychology reveals that 40 percent of Americans experience anxiety during their workday, and 72 percent say it affects their work and personal lives. Technology, without a doubt, plays a big part. The level at which we're now all connected has resulted in a constant flow of information and a pace that's impossible to keep up with. To meet these urgent demands, we're always busy, always panicked, always rushing to deliver – but never truly effective. This inevitably leads to burnout, and a blow to our physical and mental well-being. It also results in missed deadlines, rework, and attrition – all of which are costly to business. The key message here is: Senseless urgency hurts your well-being and productivity levels. But guess what? Many of those things marked “urgent” are just like the emperor and his new clothes – that is, they're not what they seem. The Oxford English Dictionary defines urgency as “importance requiring swift action.” But in today's workplace, “urgent” has become synonymous with anything slightly time-sensitive – whether or not it's important. This unnecessary urgency creates stress and distraction, which is why it's called unproductive urgency. There are two types of unproductive urgency: fake and avoidable. Fake urgency can be self-inflicted, like reacting to a message you know wasn't actually urgent. Research shows that even a brief interruption takes up to 20 minutes to recover from. Other times, it's external; your colleague has sent a series of emails with subject lines escalating from “urgent” to “URGENT!” to “REALLY URGENT!” He knows if he's loud enough, he'll get what he wants. Then there's avoidable urgency. That's when there's real urgency – but only because something

could've been avoided and wasn't. This results from things like procrastination, disorganization, overcommitting, or poor time management. In both cases, say goodbye to your planned workday. It's time to call urgency's bluff. To help mitigate your own potentially unproductive approach to urgency, the author proposes "The Urgency Playbook" – a set of ten principles and strategies that are sprinkled throughout these blinks. First up: Don't cry wolf. In other words, don't act as though something's urgent if it's not. Save urgency for when it's truly important, time-critical, and unavoidable. With email, for example, imagine there's an urgency token system: you get five urgent requests per month. When you run out, that's it – unless you want to get eaten by your colleagues!

Cultivating a proactive mindset can help control the kinds of urgency you accept and propagate.

Urgency is like ice cream: it's easy to eat, addictive, and might ruin your appetite for dinner – in other words, the important things. And, like ice cream, urgency has lots of flavors. In addition to the destructive, unproductive kinds of urgency, there's also reasonable, productive urgency – issues that couldn't be planned for and require swift action. Maybe you've just heard about a dream opportunity, and the application deadline is tomorrow. Or maybe your company's undergoing a regulatory investigation, and you've received a request from higher-ups for a report. Productive urgency can be an amazing way to create traction and momentum – and it's the only kind of urgency you should accept. Here's the key message: Cultivating a proactive mindset can help control the kinds of urgency you accept and propagate. Just as you should limit the kind of urgency that you accept, it's crucial to be mindful of the urgency you're generating. No matter your role, your thoughtless actions could throw a wrench into another person's day. That brings us to the Urgency Playbook's second and third principles: use urgency with care, and avoid creating unnecessary urgency for others. These principles are closely related. They both involve making a proactive workstyle your go-to MO. When you work proactively, you act in ways that maximize benefit – and minimize harm – to yourself and others. Changing ingrained habits and behaviors is hard, but it all stems from your awareness and outlook. To start, there are a few mindsets you can focus on developing. First, plan ahead – because "failing to plan is planning to fail." This applies to both work and your personal life. Next, be someone who pays it forward. This means considering the needs of your colleagues. Are you working in a way that makes their lives easier? Strive to do it right the first time. Rushing leads to mistakes, which leads to unnecessary rework. It can seem like you don't have time to slow down, but you'll save time if, as the old carpentry saying goes, you measure twice and cut once. Always prioritize by importance, not urgency. To not only survive but thrive amid today's information overload, you have to sift through competing priorities and concentrate on the important stuff first. Try to minimize procrastination. Procrastination often happens when a task is time-consuming or complex, or when there's no external pressure. Mobilize yourself by finding someone to hold you accountable. Finally, think several steps ahead. Like soccer players passing the ball, make sure you're in tune with your team so you can anticipate future moves in reactive situations.

Implement a proactive system to

manage your work effectively and boost productivity.

Consider your current productivity system. Is it forcing you to work reactively instead of proactively? Say you receive an email alert; it's not urgent, but it's insistent, so you compulsively react. This is first-minute reactivity. Then there's last-minute reactivity, like when you tell yourself you'll deal with an email later – only to forget about it and then have to scramble with what's now become urgent. In the process, you derail your priorities and subject others to unnecessary pressure. Sound familiar? The trick to maximizing your productivity is to operate in the proactive zone. This is the timing equivalent of Goldilocks's porridge: not too soon, not too late – just right. The key message is this: Implement a proactive system to manage your work effectively and boost productivity. The Urgency Playbook's fourth principle – tell them when you need it by – ties into this. Staying in the proactive zone involves being clear on timeframes. So when requesting work, always state the deadline, and make sure your team does the same. Now, get ready to transform your current system into one that's more proactive. Start by organizing all your commitments in a single location. Maybe you use a digital calendar for your meetings – but are your to-dos scattered throughout an app, notebook, and your head? Combining your tasks and appointments through a simple tool like MS Outlook or Gmail gives you better visibility and control of your work. Next, manage your activities by time. This involves either blocking out a specific timeframe in your calendar or committing a task to a certain day. Sorting by due date is the norm – but it contributes to a last-minute mindset. Consider sorting according to your desired start date instead. Be sure to highlight three critical priorities every day – and fight for them. You'll gain focus and perspective by doing this for just ten minutes every morning, and one hour at the start of each month. Remember to balance your time. That might mean capping your weekly meetings so you have enough time for priorities and administrative tasks. Last but not least, turn off email alerts! Do you really need to know every time an email comes in? The answer is, of course, no. And your productivity suffers because of the unnecessary distractions. For truly urgent matters, tell your colleagues to give you a call or communicate in person. Your workstyle influences those around you – especially if you're a leader. These are all basic changes, but if they're done consistently, they'll have an enormous impact on everyone's productivity.

Urgency dials can be adjusted to manage competing priorities and deadlines.

Here's some irony for you: The author was writing a book on urgency, and time had become a matter of, well, urgency. His due date had seemed reasonable back when he'd set it, but then he'd bought a house. Suddenly, he was dealing with a move and finding it difficult to write. Instead of panicking, he emailed his publishing editor to check if there was any leeway. And there was! By simply asking the question, he negotiated urgency. This is an example of how a constraint – in this case, time – can be adjusted to lessen pressure and get things done. In addition to the time “dial,” quality, scope, budget, resources, and risk can also be used to moderate urgency. The key message here is: Urgency dials can be adjusted to manage competing priorities and deadlines.

Like volume knobs, urgency dials can be turned up or down to get the balance right when managing a pressing issue or looming deadline. If time is at stake and isn't negotiable, the five other dials can be adjusted so you don't run yourself, or your team, into the ground. We all want to deliver quality work. But dialing up the quality required might put pressure on the deadline. Sometimes good enough is good enough – and 80 percent perfect on time is better than 100 percent delivered late. In manufacturing, the motto is “You can have it fast, cheap, or good – choose two.” Then there's scope. Adjusting scope involves discerning which components are truly necessary to the task at hand. It's also balancing the workload of your team members to make sure they can focus on the critical deadline. Next, consider your resources. If your team is bending under pressure, either bring in more resources to assist, or ask others who aren't working at capacity to help out. Conversely, you can remove resources to increase urgency. Your budget can speed things up or slow them down. Having more money might mean you can outsource work to external parties or services, so get an idea of the providers that could be used if needed. Finally, there's risk. Raising it might mean cutting a few corners so you'll be faster. But if you're risk-averse, you might need to create a high level of urgency in order to meet the deadline. Don't let yourself get forced into making split-second decisions – especially regarding important issues. If they want a quick verdict, the answer is “No.” The same is true in reverse. Remember, we're all busy, and any request you make may compete with others' existing priorities. So don't always expect instant service – that's the fifth principle in the Urgency Playbook.

To defend against external urgency, you can either Respond or Absorb.

Now you know how to be more personally proactive – but how do you deal with urgency running rampant in your team? Well, that's one of the hallmarks of high-caliber leadership: knowing how to moderate urgency and leverage it to get the right stuff done at the right time. The goal is to keep your colleagues in an active, productive zone. The Urgency Playbook's sixth principle outlines an easy step you can take to start moderating urgency in the workplace: use appropriate tools for urgent requests. Email is used for everything, and, as such, is not an appropriate tool to convey urgency. Make sure you have an effective communication method for when something truly urgent comes up. Here's the key message: To defend against external urgency, you can either Respond or Absorb. Say there's a critical incoming issue or opportunity, and you need your team to step up and address it in a timely way – you need to increase productive urgency while defending your people against unreasonable asks. The key here is to be responsive, not reactive, which is principle seven in the Urgency Playbook. The difference between responsive and reactive is the difference between measured and knee-jerk, deliberate and instinctive, calm and stressed. Responding doesn't mean delaying things. It just means putting down the pen and briefly reflecting before signing. Or being mindful and purposeful when interrupting others – principle eight in the Urgency Playbook – so you don't cause unnecessary distractions. When you respond to an issue, you're actually taking a bunch of smaller actions in sequence. You're pausing to acknowledge this as a moment of possible reaction, and evaluating to understand what the issue entails or why it's relevant. Then you're prioritizing to consider the opportunity cost if you switch activities, and deciding on the best course of action. These are also habits you can instill in your team. One of the benefits of pausing is that it allows you to probe assumptions. When you react blindly, you risk assuming

the work is urgent – and forgetting about the negotiating option. Maybe that incoming task involves a lot of fake-urgent busywork. Your role here is to recognize and absorb the urgency to prevent it from causing problems or panic for your team. Instead of immediately diverting your team to the task, make the other party justify its urgency first. Ask why the issue’s urgent – or whether it’s really urgent at all. If you do this politely and firmly, people will see that you’re focused on what’s important. Of course, you also have the urgency dials to negotiate with here!

To drive internal urgency and build momentum, you need to Mobilize the troops.

The slope’s incline was very steep, and the author was struggling. If he lost his footing, he knew the drop was several hundred meters to the bottom. He’d decided to climb Carrauntoohil, the highest mountain in Ireland, with his son. Only trouble was, the author had a deadly fear of heights. Their guide knew this. He’d kept a watchful eye on the author as they ascended, offering gentle encouragement. But as they neared the top, the author began to panic. He fell to his knees. Then, all of a sudden, he heard shouting: “GET OFF YOUR KNEES, DERMOT. YOU WON’T GET TO THE TOP ON YOUR KNEES. COME ON, MAN.” Was this his same soft-spoken guide? The author took off, running the final stretch to the ridge. As he collapsed, the guide came over, shook his hand, and gently said, “Well done, I knew you could do it!” This push and pull tactic was an exceptional display of the mobilizing power a leader can wield when it comes to driving urgency. The key message is this: To drive internal urgency and build momentum, you need to Mobilize the troops. Maybe you want to increase the sense of urgency within your team to tackle a critical internal priority. To mobilize others into action, you’ll need to communicate deliberately and clearly. That starts with demonstrating that you care about the task and committing fully when it’s truly urgent – number nine in the Urgency Playbook. Your proactive work system will ease the burden of shifting existing priorities to clear space for the new one! Or maybe you want to build momentum for a new, longer-term project. It’s easy for people to think they have infinite time when the due date is six months in the future. If mobilization doesn’t happen early on, you risk suddenly coming face-to-face with a heap of avoidable urgency. So set accountable deadlines. Be discerning here; too many deadlines, or false ones, might push your team into the reactive zone. Instead, cultivate a culture of accountability. There are two ways to do this. First, Friday means Friday – don’t let your team slink past the deadline unnoticed. Second, allow negotiation – be open to discussing the deadline if they don’t think Friday will work. Being “allowed” to question the why of a task – as opposed to a “just do it” culture – is important. It can empower and motivate your team by making them more personally invested. Another way to inspire action is by acknowledging, and rewarding, phenomenal efforts on urgent deadlines. Maybe that takes the form of a thoughtful gift or a team dinner. Sometimes even a sincere “Thank you” is enough.

Defusing urgency loops allows your team to refocus on the real priorities.

Paramedics never run or hurry. They're taught to move purposefully and calmly, even in the most dire emergencies. This ensures two things: it gives the paramedics time to assess the situation, and it communicates leadership in what's likely a charged environment. Managers need to make sure they act in the same purposeful, calm way. You should strive to foster and drive a culture of proactivity instead of allowing others to get caught up in urgency loops – states of frantic activity in which everything seems more acute and critical than it is. The trick is to defuse these urgency loops before they get out of hand so your team can regroup and focus on their true priorities. The key message here is: Defusing urgency loops allows your team to refocus on the real priorities. In a leadership role, your behaviors are visible to – and influence – everyone on your team, so it's vital that you model what you wish to see in others. Part of leading by example is doing what you say you're going to do – the final principle of the Urgency Playbook. That means delivering on your commitments and promises, or reaching out and negotiating if you can't. Set yourself up for success by being realistic with yourself when it comes to planning and promises. Another way to defuse urgency is to make time for your team. At one of the author's workshops, a participant recalled an old boss: "No matter how busy he was, he always had time for you." That magical-seeming ability takes a lot of effort in reality. But making yourself available can do wonders when it comes to inspiring your team and keeping them focused. Sometimes, the best way to reset a person in a state of panic is through a good ol' slap in the face – in a figurative sense, of course! This "panic-slap" acts as a circuit breaker in their thought patterns. Instead of a physical slap, come up with a sign that indicates the panic-slap has been dealt. This can inject humor into a tense situation and signify that it's time to pause and reassess. Finally, when the going gets tough, you can help your team refocus their efforts by "getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony." In other words, mentally retreat in the midst of action and ask yourself what's actually going on. This mechanism ensures you respond rather than react. As with any mindfulness activity, this requires practice. Be kind to yourself in moments of failure, and reward yourself when you notice change. Take your time – there's no rush.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is: In today's fast-paced workplace, many things are made out to be urgent – when they're really not. The key to working in a sustainable, successful way is to recognize and reduce unproductive urgency while seeking out opportunities to maximize productive urgency. By becoming aware of reactive traps, both internal and external, and training ingrained behaviors to be more proactive, you'll find that you can moderate urgency to your – and your team's – advantage. And here's some more actionable advice: Check your language. Using "ASAR" – that's "as soon as reasonable" – instead of the ubiquitous "ASAP" might seem like an insignificant shift. But language is a powerful tool. When you ask for something to be done "as soon as possible," you're aggressively asking people to shuffle their other commitments and push this work to the forefront. ASAR is a gentler, more trusting approach; it allows others to make the call about how to integrate the work into their existing priorities. Of course, an instant reaction is necessary in some cases, but the trick is to be discerning in your choice of words. This will set the tone for how you and your team deal with urgency – and contribute to either a negative or positive work culture.