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**SPECIAL
REPORT**

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THIRD EDITION

BUSINESS STRATEGY

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2014**

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Leadership

Turning fear into focus

To create success, leaders must shift from burning platform to burning ambition, argues **Dr Peter Fuda**



“I have learned that we are standing on a burning platform. And we have more than one explosion – we have multiple points of scorching heat that are fuelling a blazing fire around us.”

– Stephen Elop

In February 2011, the incoming CEO of Nokia – Stephen Elop – issued his now famous ‘burning platform’ memo to staff, including the sentence above, which was quickly leaked to the press. And just in case staff still didn’t get the message, he goes on to say that “we poured gasoline on our own burning platform... Nokia our platform is burning.” Of course, Elop probably felt very justified using this kind of metaphor and language given Nokia’s poor performance over the past few years. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, Nokia continues to struggle, and Elop is not the most popular CEO in town.

In my experience, Elop is not alone; the burning platform metaphor is perhaps the most pervasive in the world of business. It was coined by consultant Daryl Conner more than 20 years ago, and popularised by Professor John Kotter of Harvard. It comes from the true story of Andy Mochan, a worker on the Piper Alpha oil rig when it exploded in July 1988, killing 167 of his colleagues.

In the story, Mochan is awoken by the explosion. He runs up on deck to see that the platform is on fire. He is now faced with a choice; does he stay on the platform and burn alive, or does he jump more than 150 feet into freezing water? As the flames engulf the platform, he makes the split-second decision to jump. Somehow, he survives the impact and is rescued by a boat before freezing to death. When asked why he jumped he replies “better probable death than certain death”.

This is an amazing story of survival amid tragedy, but I have several practical issues with the burning platform metaphor as it applies to business change and transformation. The first issue is that it implies fear and extreme urgency are not only necessary, but somehow desirable motivators for change; the implication being that in order to change, we all need to have our backsides on fire.

COMMITMENT NOT URGENCY

From interviews I have seen recently, Conner intended the burning platform to be interpreted as a metaphor for commitment not urgency. Unfortunately, the power and danger of metaphors is that they are autonomous and uncontrollable.

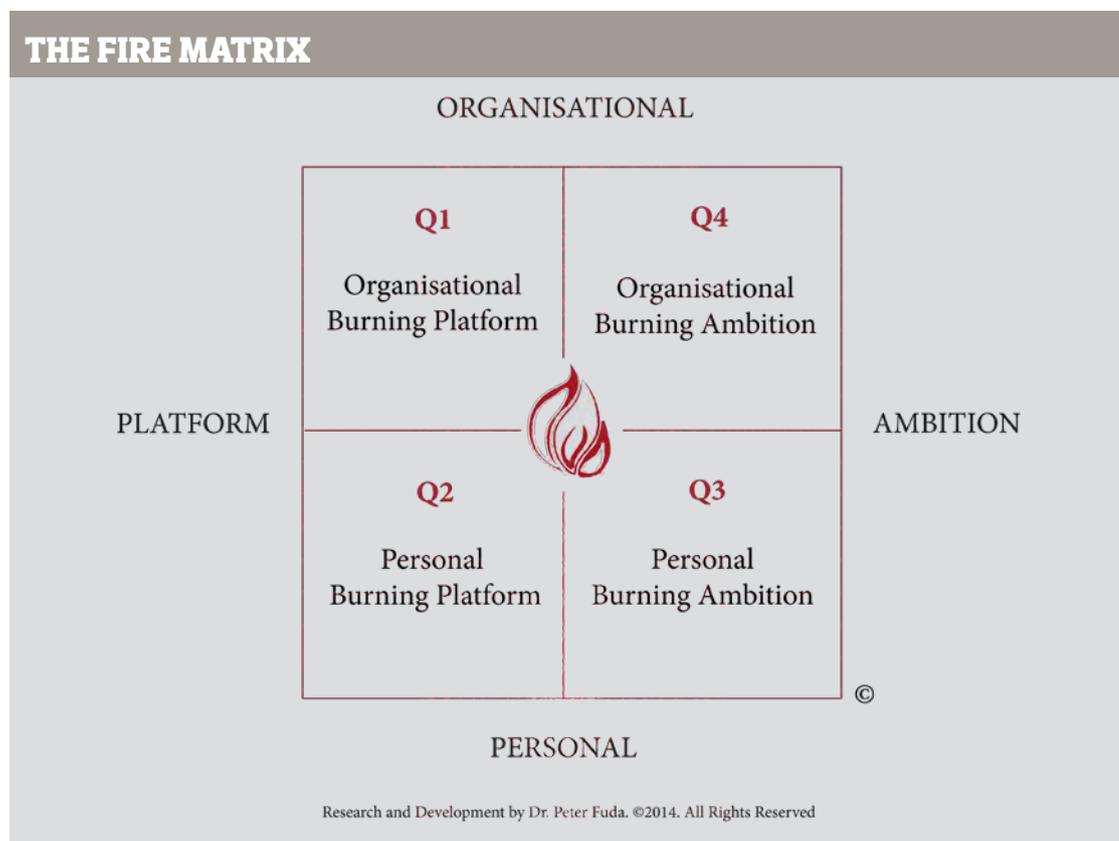
The mental picture most people create when they hear this metaphor involves fear and anxiety – not commitment, and anxiety is the single most contagious human emotion. It encourages many physical and psychological consequences, none of which I have found particularly conducive to change – either personally or in my work.

In our research and practice over the past 12 years, while we have found that some urgency helps motivate leaders to commence a journey of transformation, it is not what enables them to sustain their journeys over time. What we have found is that aspiration is a far more important motivator; sustainable change requires the fire of a ‘burning ambition’.

Beyond the burning platform/burning ambition dichotomy, there is an additional nuance to the fire metaphor that became starkly evident in our research: a leader’s motivation is most powerful when it encompasses both organisational and individual reasons for change. The Fire Matrix, outlined below, enables us to explore the effects of these motivational forces on a leader’s ability to transform. Let’s take a quick look at the four quadrants.

“Sustainable change requires the fire of a burning ambition”

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LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE: BANKWEST

Bankwest head of broker sales Ian Rakhit talks to MPA about effective leadership styles

In Rakhit's eyes, the best leaders adapt their style to suit the audience and the opportunity, and this is no different in his business to anyone else's.

"Broadly, I employ a more authoritative style when setting 'what' we want to achieve but I will change to a more consultative style when considering 'how' we will achieve the goal," he explains.

It's vital, he says, to understand the motivation of each individual and use your leadership to bring out the best in each of them.

"I've always believed you must surround yourself with winners. If a member of the team doesn't want to be there or cannot deliver what's required, you should let them go, for their sake as well as for the good of the team," he says, adding that taking the time to know the team on a personal level can be the difference between being an inspirational leader and a manager.

It's also important, says Rakhit, so take time to celebrate achievements, but don't linger too long on a job well done – or missed goals, mistakes or errors.

Also central to successful leadership are resilience and drive, he explains, noting that becoming a true leader means being ready to make the tough decisions.

"It's not a popularity contest but you still need to spend time with each person and understand them as an individual," he says.

In terms of leadership mistakes, Rakhit suggests the most common ones are a lack of follow up, setting goals that aren't measurable, having an insufficient understanding of the task and the associated activities.

"Leaders need to be clear with goal setting and take time to clearly explain the 'why' or the 'how to' of the goal," he says. "Basic principles and tasks such as reviewing progress frequently and following up agreed actions are mandatory."



QUADRANT 1: ORGANISATIONAL BURNING PLATFORM

Consistent with Kotter, we found that leaders are readily able to list the problems and issues that have motivated them to undertake a transformation effort. Time after time, we would hear statements like 'our financial trajectory is poor', 'our competitors are more aggressive', 'our customers are squeezing us', or 'our staff engagement is at an all-time low'.

Over the last couple of years, I have discussed this quadrant with large numbers of executives all around the world. As a result of these discussions, I

have come to understand the pervasiveness of the burning platform: leaders often operate from the belief that nothing significant happens without a crisis. Leaders also need to justify large investments of time, money and resources to their stakeholders when undertaking a transformation effort, and an organisational burning platform seems to provide a compelling way to do just that.

But my most important observation is that the use of the burning platform is more often a sign of limited leadership capability, than it is a sign of a genuine and urgent crisis. It is much easier to scare the life out of people, than it is to inspire them with a compelling vision of the future.

QUADRANT 2: PERSONAL BURNING PLATFORM

When I partner with leaders on their quest for more effective leadership, they gradually begin to open up about their personal fears, challenges and insecurities, represented by the second quadrant of the matrix. For example, they say things such as, 'my reputation is on the line – I'll look really stupid if I can't build a company of substance', or 'every day I try out a different approach, but nothing seems to work', or 'I'm physically exhausted; I can't keep going like this'.

I have learned that the personal motivation for change is often concealed beneath more obvious organisational forces. In an attempt to live up to pervasive notions of the 'heroic leader' and avoid looking weak, senior executives will bury or otherwise disguise their personal motivations for engaging in a transformation effort.

In the earlier stages of my consulting career, I didn't probe deeply into a leader's personal fears and concerns, partly because they didn't offer them up easily, partly because I didn't want to risk losing the consulting engagement, and partly because I suspected they would emerge over time as we built trust in the relationship – which is what usually did happen.

What I now understand is that respectfully probing into a leader's personal fears from the very first interaction is actually one of the fastest ways to build trust in the relationship. Perhaps more important, it allows leaders to quickly shift away from hiding what they fear most and toward realising their deepest personal ambitions.

QUADRANT 3: PERSONAL BURNING AMBITION

It is in the third quadrant of the Fire Matrix, the personal burning ambition, that I have found a leader's commitment and personal accountability for change really begin to accelerate. Quadrants 1 and 2 are about running from a fire; quadrant 3 describes a fire that burns inside. As Stephen R. Covey once said, "Motivation is a fire from within. If someone else tries to light that fire under you, chances are it will burn very briefly."

While fear may provide the initial spark for action, aspiration is a far more important motivator

The motivation behind a personal burning ambition is evident in statements like 'I want to live a big and authentic life', 'I want to increase my health and happiness', 'I want to align my work with a strong sense of purpose and meaning', or 'I want to fulfil my leadership potential'.

When leaders shift their focus away from what they want to avoid toward what they want to achieve, they experience a dramatic shift in energy – away from insecurity and perennial urgency and toward a calmer and more purposeful disposition. This in turn makes it possible to apply a more deliberate and disciplined effort toward realising those ambitions.

I have found that burning ambitions provide far greater leverage than burning platforms to keep leaders on track. All of the 'transformed' leaders I have worked with faced days when it just felt too hard, where they encountered opposition, or where they were consumed by short-term pressures that demanded immediate attention. Clarity of personal ambition allows leaders to reorient their focus in spite of these competing pressures, and allows them to accept short-term pain in the pursuit of longer-term gain.

LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE: AMP BANK

AMP Bank head of sales and marketing Glenn Gibson explains that there are a range of leadership styles that you can employ



When asked which leadership style brings the best out of people, Gibson explains that there simply isn't an answer to that question.

This is because the leadership style you employ will need to be tailored to the experience and personality of each of your team members.

"Sometimes staff just need direction, so you just tell them what to do," he says. "Sometimes you need staff that are collaborative, that actually want to have their input and need to feel like they're contributing – then you work to that as well."

He explains that there's quite a change in mindset that brokers, or anyone who steps up to management level, need to adopt when they take on staff.

"The hardest thing in regard to that mindset is letting go. I've spoken to a number of brokers about this in particular in depth," he says.

One of the issues to confront, says Gibson, is that your staff are going to make mistakes. But allowing them to learn from their mistakes is a natural part of the growth process.

In terms of dealing with this big change in mindset, Gibson says that he's a big proponent of speaking to business coaches, mentors or even just trusted friends who work outside of the mortgage industry and can offer a fresh perspective.

"When you're talking to someone and saying you're really busy, doing this and that, and then somebody says to you 'why do you do all that?' and you can't answer them, it's just another reminder that you've got to let go," he says.

"And I think there is really no other way of getting around that mindset unless you actually do it."

LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE: ING DIRECT

When it comes to leadership, you can't take a one size fits all approach, explains ING DIRECT head of broker distribution Mark Woolnough



Woolnough believes that leaders can let themselves down by not adapting their style to each individual in their team.

"Make sure you can relate to all of your people and understand how they think and what they're looking for in terms of success at work," he says.

Importantly, he adds that another key part of leadership is understanding that it's not all about you.

"A leader is the person at the front, but I always say to my team 'I am accountable to you rather than you need to be accountable to me'," he says.

"Because I'm the one that is responsible for ensuring that you're resourced to be successful, that you have the tools, that you have the opportunities, that you're being developed and that you know that there's a supporting culture and a learning environment."

It's important, therefore, to be open to asking your team for feedback on your own performance, and how you can represent the needs of your team.

And it's important, he adds, to remain authentic and humble when you make the transition to a leadership position.

"Someone once told me a very simple phrase that I've never forgotten, that when you step into these roles always begin with the end in mind," he says. "So always know what it is you're driving towards, and set your objectives and then begin from there."

QUADRANT 4: ORGANISATIONAL BURNING AMBITION

Leaders' personal ambitions are transcended by the lasting impact they wish to have on their organisations, their customers, their industries, and their communities. Leaders saying things like, 'I want to leave a legacy of a growing organisation', 'I want my successor to be set up for even greater success', 'I want to transform our industry', 'I want to revolutionise the customer experience', or 'I want our organisation to go beyond financial performance to societal contribution' are all expressions of the motivational forces at play in this quadrant.

Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, speaks about the power of purpose when it transcends the individual: "Autonomous people working toward mastery perform at very high levels. But those who do so in the service of some greater objective can achieve even more. The most deeply motivated people – not to mention the most productive and satisfied – hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves."

My core insights from the Fire metaphor are threefold.

- First, shifting from a burning platform to a burning ambition is critical. While fear may provide the initial spark for action, aspiration is a far more important motivator. Sustainable change requires the fire of a burning ambition.
- Second, it is vital for a leader to articulate not only the organisational reasons for change, but to delve deeper and establish very compelling personal motivations for change.
- Finally, the Fire, or the why, is an integral part of how leaders transform. As Friedrich Nietzsche famously said, "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." In other words, if the flame goes out, all other factors become redundant.

So, how do you tap into your burning ambition? Asking yourself these questions is a great start:

- What does success look like for me?
- What gets me out of bed in the morning?
- What do I want to be remembered for?

If you find yourself in a Nokia-like situation, and these questions seem too ambitious, you can always turn fear into focus by asking this simple but powerful question: what is the best outcome from here? **MPA**