

0325-86

FLIGHT 0325 / ROW 16 / SEAT 30
PLANE, THERE ARE TWO
WAYS TO CATCH A

by Seth Godin

FLIGHT 0325 - ON TIME



The first method of catching a plane, which happens to be more common, is to leave on time, do your best to park nearby, repeatedly glance at your watch, and then start moving faster and faster. By the time you get to security, you realize that you're quite late, so you cut the line ("My plane leaves in ten minutes!" you shout). You walk fast. As you get closer to your gate, you realize that walking fast isn't going to work, so you start to jog. Three gates away, you break into a run, and if you're lucky you barely make the flight.

The second way is to leave for the airport ten minutes early.

The easiest way to deal with change and with all the anxieties that go with it is not to deal with it at all. The easiest thing to do is to allow the urgency of the situation to force us to make the decisions (or take the actions) that we'd rather not take. Why? Because then we don't have to take responsibility for what happens. The situation is at fault, not us. The beauty of the asymptotic curve is that at every step along the way, running ever faster for the plane is totally justified. The closer we get, the more we've invested ourselves. The more we invest in making our flight, the easier it is to justify running like a lunatic to make it.

Years ago, I published a directory of law firms. No fewer than 70 percent of the firms sent their payment the night before it was due, by FedEx. Eight of the firms sent their payment by messenger—at an expense that was equal to about 10 percent of the entire cost of their listing. Obviously, there was

no need to waste all that money. Law firms spend millions every year on last-minute deliveries because, like most of us, they confuse urgent with important.

Urgent issues are easy to address. They are the ones that get everyone in the room ready for the final go-ahead. They are the ones we need to decide on right now, before it's too late.

How can you tell if you're too obsessed with urgent?

Do senior people at your company refuse to involve themselves in decisions until the last minute?

Do meetings regularly get canceled because something else came up?

Is waiting until the last minute the easiest way to get a final decision from your peers?



Smart organizations ignore the urgent. Smart organizations understand that the most important issues are the ones to deal with now. If you focus on the important stuff, the urgent will take care of itself.

A key corollary to this principle is the idea that if you don't have the time to do it right, there's no way in the world you'll find the time to do it over. Too often, we use the urgent as an excuse for shoddy work or sloppy decision making. A quick look at Washington politics (under any administration) is an easy way to understand how common this crutch is. No responsible business (or diligent family) would spend money and resources the way our government does when faced with an "emergency." Urgent is not an excuse. In fact, urgent is often an indictment—a sure sign that you've been putting off the important stuff until it mushrooms out of control.

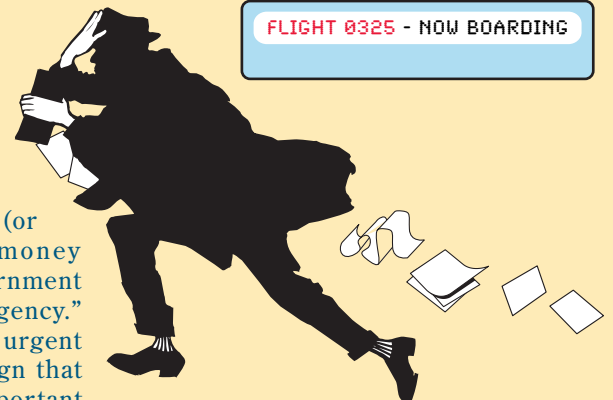
You will succeed in the face of change when you make the difficult

decisions first. It's easy to justify running for your plane when it's leaving in two minutes and you're only five gates away. It's much harder to justify waking up an hour early to avoid the problem altogether. Alas, waking up early is the efficient, effective way to deal with the challenge. Waking up earlier may seem foolish to the person lying in bed next to you, but when you enjoy the benefits of a pleasant stroll to the gate, you realize that your difficult decision was a good one.

Organizations manage to justify draconian measures—laying people off, declaring bankruptcy, stifling their suppliers, closing stores—by pointing out the urgency of the situation. They refuse to make the difficult decisions when the difficult decisions are cheap. They don't want to expend the effort to respond to their competition or fire the intransigent vice president of development. Instead, they focus on the events that are urgent at that moment and let the important stuff slide.

A quick look at the gradually failing airlines, retailers, and restaurant chains we all know about confirms this analysis. They're all content to worry about today's emergency, setting the stage for tomorrow's disaster. Better, I think, to wake up an hour early, make some difficult decisions before breakfast, and enjoy the rest of your day.

FLIGHT 0325 - NOW BOARDING



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