

DERMOT CROWLEY

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *SMART WORK* AND *SMART TEAMS*

URGENT!

**STRATEGIES TO
CONTROL URGENCY,
REDUCE STRESS AND
INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY**

WILEY

Whether through one of our chats, or through reading one of his great books, I have learned so much from Dermot about being more calm and focused and deliberate in how I decide on the right things to do and when to do them, and then get them done. Like everyone, I can easily fall into the urgency trap, reacting to what is always more demand than I'll ever be able to supply. But it's Dermot's advice and techniques that make this urgency whirlwind happen less and less often. As the world continues to change around us, businesses can't afford to give in to the urgency trap anymore. We all need to get more focused and deliberate on deciding the right things to do and when to do them, and then get them done. And Dermot's book, *Urgent!*, is the practical formula to help us.

Stacey Barr, strategic performance specialist, author of *Prove it!*

This latest offering from Australia's leading expert on productivity is his best work yet (and that's saying something ... Dermot's work as already had a profound impact on me and my team, and transformed how we work and how we work together). If you want to do more deep work, more meaningful work and have an impact, the key is taming urgency. As you'll learn, we don't want to eradicate urgency (as if we could) ... just get rid of unproductive urgency and fuel ourselves with the right kind of urgency at the right time. This book will show you how. You'll finish this book with deep clarity about what to do and energised to take action. This is the thinking person's productivity bible for the next decade.

Peter Cook, Chairperson of Thought Leaders, author of *The Thought Leaders Practice* and *The New Rules of Management*

Disruption requires us to deal with immediacy, but that does not mean everything requires urgency. This book explains the difference.

**Matt Church, founder of Thought Leaders Global,
author of *Amplifiers***

COVID-19 showed us that we can all work differently. It forced us to reassess what was urgent, what was important and what was a true crisis. Dermot Crowley's latest book *Urgent!* points out the 'inconvenient truth' of urgent work and how this leads to unproductive cultures. *Urgent!* shows us how to be less reactive and more productive by learning to moderate urgency.

Gabrielle Dolan, author of *Real Communication and Stories for Work*

Dermot has been guiding our team through 'Smart Work' and 'Smart Teams' for just over two years. The strength and clarity of his knowledge and personal work practices flow into his books and training, and our results have been transformational. Team members experience a much greater sense of control and ease in their work days, and together we have adopted a shared 'productivity' language and culture.

Lesley Mackay, GM Tasmania, The Smith Family

Told with genuine insight and a sprinkle of wit, never could this evidence-based study be any more timely and urgent than now, in this era of shifting and resetting workplace paradigms. An easy-to-follow playbook for business and government leaders and workers to make sense of what we do today but should be doing tomorrow.

Charles Miranda, author, editor and journalist



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DERMOT CROWLEY

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*For my brother Donal — a great man who was never in a
hurry but left us all too quickly.*

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About the author

Dermot Crowley's passion is productivity and helping individuals and organisations to work more productively. He has more than 25 years' experience in the productivity training industry where he has worked as an author, speaker, trainer and thought leader. He has run his own business, Adapt Productivity, since 2002. He is the author of *Smart Work*, published by John Wiley in 2016, and *Smart Teams*, also published by Wiley in 2018.

Dermot was born in Dublin, Ireland, and moved in 1993 to Sydney, Australia, where he now lives and works. When not writing books, you can find Dermot working with some of Australia's leading companies, as well as travelling the globe for his international clients. In between these engagements you will find him in the kitchen, in coffee shops and sometimes in trouble!

You can also find him at www.adaptproductivity.com.au.

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And of course, I should not forget you, dear reader. You have picked this book up and started reading it, even though you probably have many more urgent things to do. That is legendary! Enjoy.

A note from the author

June 2019

As I write this, I'm overlooking the beach in Monterosso, an achingly beautiful town in Liguria. Think rugged coastline, views to die for, painted villages and the home of pesto. The pace of life in Monterosso is slow — delightfully slow.

It might seem strange to be writing a book on urgency in such a non-urgent place. Right now, I have absolutely zero urgency in my world. I don't have any client delivery for another couple of weeks. My team have things handled very well back home. In fact, my most pressing issue right now is whether to have a beer or an Aperol spritz before dinner. And even that decision is not all that pressing — it's currently 3 pm.^{[1](#)}

But maybe the best time to start a book on urgency is when you are removed from it. When you can objectively think about how and why urgency arises and the impact that it has on our work and our lives. Perhaps it is the perfect time to reflect on the stories that we tell ourselves about how urgency is just a normal by-product of modern life; that there is nothing to be done about it and this is 'just the way it is around here'.

But while something urgent cropping up seems unlikely for me now, that could change at any moment.

I could step on a piece of glass on the beach and end up in the emergency ward. (I hope I won't, but it is possible.) I could get a call from a client chasing some information I had promised but forgot to send. (I am confident that won't happen!) I could be asked to join George Clooney on his

boat on Lake Como if I can just get there by 8 pm tonight. (I am positive this won't happen.)

Many things could arise that would create urgency in my world, but while I would like to be able to respond to any of these situations, I do not feel the need to be in a reactive state 'just in case' they do. And if they do happen, I would hope that I'd deal with the situation with the appropriate level of response.

This subtle but important difference between responsiveness and reactivity is what this book will explore. It may require a shift in mindset for you, or even a shift in culture for your organisation. But both these things can be done — with a little effort. Unfortunately, sometimes we can feel we are powerless to change things in our workplace.

Due to the increased pace of business, and the constant flow of information, many of us have adopted victim mindsets when it comes to urgency. We become the victims of urgency and feel there is little we can do to reduce the reactivity in our workplace. We just accept it as normal. But there is plenty we can do, both at a personal productivity level and at a cultural level within our teams and organisations.

Not only can we do something about the urgency that drives most of our time and effort, we absolutely *must* do something about it.

Urgency, or more accurately the toxic urgency that comes from acute and chronic periods of reactivity, is one of the most destructive forces in any organisation. It can derail productivity, sap morale and burn people out.

They say that people don't leave organisations; they leave bad managers. Well I believe that they also leave bad cultures, and permanently reactive cultures are hard to live

with for long periods. So I would like to help minimise this reactivity.

But here is the challenge. Urgency is also a useful tool, and without it, we would struggle to gain traction with important initiatives, deliver client work on time or meet business obligations. Most senior managers use urgency as a lever to drive work forward, and would potentially resist having people like me come in preaching a slower, more casual way of operating.

But the solution to this problem is not to take an opposite extreme position and slow right down; the solution lies in dialling down the urgency to a more sustainable level. A level where the urgency is neither acute (very strong) nor chronic (very long). A level where urgency is a useful tool that can be used in a measured and purposeful way, by everyone in the team. This is what I call moderated urgency, and I think you will find it a useful concept in many areas of your life.

Don't you feel that life has got crazy busy, both at home and at work? We are always rushing around from one place to another, one meeting to another, one email to another! We are constantly distracted by our screens and the stream of updates from the people around us. As a society we don't relax like we used to — and yet can we truly say that this increase in busy-ness has delivered better outcomes? I don't think so. The urgency problem is not the cause of all of this, but it is definitely a central theme. This is why I felt compelled to write this book.

So if urgency has become your new normal, then this book is for you. If your team or organisation constantly operates in a reactive haze of deadlines, last-minute meetings and fire-fighting, read on and give a copy of this book to your leadership team. If you are inspired to do great work, but feel constantly frustrated by the issues and supposed crises

that crop up every day, I hope you take hope from this book. I encourage you to take some small steps towards creating a less reactive, yet more productive workplace for you and your colleagues.

Phew. A lot of thoughts for my little brain. Time for a swim and another one of those excellent spritzes, I reckon. I'll enjoy that while you enjoy the book. Take your time with it, though. There's no hurry.

April 2020

As I put the finishing touches on this book, we are all coming to terms with the severity of the Coronavirus crisis. We are dealing with living in self-isolation and having our personal and professional lives completely disrupted. This is an event that has touched every one of us, and completely changed how we live, work and think. The COVID-19 pandemic has given us all a new perspective on what is truly urgent.

This is a situation that I did not foresee when I was sipping my drink in Monterosso. It is a situation that none of us could have foreseen. While a highly-trained professional would have planned for something like this, everyday workers like you and I could never have conceived of this happening outside of the movies, and therefore could never have been expected to plan for it.

For some of us, the crisis has thrown our world into chaos and has meant we have had to deal with many urgent and unexpected issues. Our priorities a month ago are not the same as our priorities today. And that is part of what this book aims to help you with: how to respond when truly urgent things demand your attention.

But I believe that something else is happening in the minds of millions of workers around the globe that will have a lasting impact on our relationship to urgency. As we now

try to do our work in a totally different mental context and physical environment, many of us are resetting.

You may have concluded that the way you had been working was a bit unrealistic and unsustainable. Now that you cannot physically meet with others because of self-isolation requirements, you may have realised you were spending too much of your time in meetings anyway. As you work from home rather than the office, you may be surprised at how focused you can be without the constant interruptions of an open-plan workspace. And as you focus on the critical activities that you need to do to help your business survive, you may have realised that so much of your time pre-COVID-19 was spent reacting to things that may not have mattered much after all.

We are currently going through the greatest challenge of our time. As you read this, hopefully we have passed through the worst of the crises. But I have no doubt we will still be dealing with the aftermath. I am personally devastated by what has unfolded. But I am also very optimistic that once this is over, we will have reset in many ways and will be open to new ways of living and working. So, here's to a brave new world, one that is just a little less reactive, and a little more driven by what is truly important.

Dermot Crowley

Note

- ¹ I ended up having an Aperol spritz, and then a beer. At 4 pm. Is that bad?

Introduction

How does urgency affect our work and results? What causes so much urgency and reactivity in our workplace? Why has the pace of business accelerated so much over the past few years? And how do we learn to use urgency purposefully to ensure we deliver meaningful work in a timely way, rather than running around in a panicked frenzy? These are all questions we need to explore if we are going to harness urgency to drive us forward, instead of struggling against a headwind of constant urgency that makes progress harder than it needs to be.

Urgency is a reality in our modern workplace. But of course, not all urgency is within our control. Nor is all urgency bad; some things are impossible to plan for. Most of us are working in roles with many moving parts, balancing everyday issues with more complex initiatives. It's complicated.

Consider a project. A project is a proactive endeavour that in a perfect world would have minimal urgency associated with it. If you are clear about the outcome to be achieved, and you plan the project well, and you estimate the duration of each activity effectively, and everyone does what they need to do when they need to do it, and you have no unexpected issues or delays, and you are not distracted by other work or issues, and nobody gets sick, and the world decides to work with you and not against you, then you might sail through the project with minimal urgency and reactivity. But that is unrealistic. Life is messy. Projects are complicated. People are busy and overwhelmed.

Urgency, when used appropriately, can create traction, build momentum and get things done. Urgency helps us to

overcome inertia and complacency. But if used inappropriately, it can also distract us from other important priorities, waste time and resources, and burn people out.

We have to expect a certain amount of urgency in life. I'm not suggesting we can eradicate urgency, but we can minimise *unproductive* urgency. This is the urgency that could have been avoided in the first place. The unnecessary urgency that creates stress and slows work down. The urgency that can become a toxic part of your culture, and then become the norm.

Why are we in so much of a hurry these days?

My father, also named Dermot Crowley, was the head accountant for the ESB, or Electricity Supply Board, in Ireland. It was a senior role, but it never seemed to be a busy one, at least not by today's senior executive standard.² Dad had a big office, and I loved visiting him with my mum when we were in the city shopping before Christmas, or when we were going to a show or the movies. This would have been in the 1970s, when I was about eight years old.

I remember being led into his office by his secretary, and it seemed like a whole floor to me. It was huge to a small boy, with a big desk and a meeting table. My favourite thing in Dad's office was his cheque-signing machine. Because he had to sign every wages cheque in the organisation, he had a machine that printed his signature onto the cheque. (This was in the days before personal computers.) The signing machine was kept in a huge safe in his office, and it was all very James Bond to me.

Despite the impressiveness of the surroundings, Dad never seemed that busy, and was never in a hurry! He always had

a clear desk, and always had the time to meet us for lunch. In fact, he always took lunch. Later on, he would have lunch in the staff canteen, but when I was really young he would drive home for lunch (about twenty minutes each way). He would start work at 9 am and be home by 5.30 pm, which must have meant he left the office at 5 pm.

Imagine that nowadays! A senior executive who starts at 9 am and finishes at 5 pm, and has time for lunch each day! It seems impossible to most. But back then it was a different time. It just wasn't as busy. People did not have the same relentless pressures on them. They didn't attend as many meetings. They certainly didn't have the volume of emails to contend with on top of everything else.

What has happened over the last few decades? Are our priorities so much more important now? Are things so much more urgent now because business has changed? Or have we changed, and just allowed the pace of business to get faster and faster, and told ourselves stories about how this increased pace has led to better outcomes?

To my mind, urgency has increased in our workplaces because of one crucial innovation that has changed the way that we work and the way we live. *Technology*. In my father's day, computers were just coming into the workplace, but in the form of large mainframe systems in big rooms, not laptops on each desk. But of course, today's workplace is radically different because of technology.

Technology has sped the world up, and this shows itself in numerous ways:

- communication technologies such as email have shortened the time it takes to communicate a message to others
- the ability to easily communicate across geographically spread offices means that someone is always working