articles

In this article, **=mc** Director Bernard Ross explains the art of using the 'burning platform' driver to create a sense of urgency and need for strategic change.

Create a burning platform

Urgent and important

In order for people to adopt a radical strategy change they need to feel it's important and necessary. So you need to think about how you will generate that awareness — and convey that it's *urgent* and *important*. Unfortunately this often involves creating a pain message. A *burning platform* is a very specific, urgent kind of pain message.

"Orchestrating pain messages throughout the institution is the first step in developing organizational commitment to (major) change."

Rosabeth Moss Kantor: former editor, **Harvard Business Review**

Burning platforms are very powerful drivers of strategic change. They are what happens when:

- There is a real and immediate crisis
- There is a limited number of difficult and challenging choices
- Each of the choices is irreversible
- Each choice has a high risk of failure

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The Management Centre (=mc) is a management consultancy working internationally to transform the performance of ethical organisations – charities, public bodies, INGOs, and cultural organisations.

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The phrase comes from a real incident dating back to July 6th 1988. On that date the Piper Alpha oil rig in the North Sea exploded — the result of a failure to check some simple systems that had worked faultlessly for the previous decade. The explosion in turn caused a massive fire. 167 men died — the largest number killed in an offshore accident.

The scale of the blast was immense: the flames from the blaze shot 90 metres in the air and apparently could be seen 100 km away. At first the workers locked them selves in a room in part of the rig — hoping the fire would burn out or emergency systems would kick in.

Eventually three men, realising this wouldn't work, made it to the edge of the platform, and stood staring into one of the world's coldest and roughest oceans. They had two choices — to stay where they were and hope for possible rescue from the flames, or to jump into the freezing ocean and risk almost certain death from hypothermia. Two men chose to jump — and they lived, despite being terribly injured, thanks to a rescue operation mounted by sea. The man who chose to stay put, sadly, perished, as helicopters failed to make it in time.

That story contains some powerful learnings about the need to respond positively and proactively to serious strategic challenges. It also offers a clue about how to communicate about such challenges.

First there is the idea of the *unacceptable option of staying the same*. The man who stayed put on the rig in the case study died essentially because he waited for someone else to help him. Staying the same — not going through the change — and hoping things will get better is to risk probable failure.

Second is the message that sometimes *radical, risky change is essential,* if painful. Against the odds the two who jumped survived, though they broke their legs in the process. It hurt, but the action they took gave them the very slight advantage they needed. Above all they took action.

So a burning platform is so serious that it requires action.

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Nokia's Burning Platform

Another famous example of a burning platform was that experienced by Nokia in 2011. Once dominating the market, other phone companies — Apple, Google, and Samsung had eroded Nokia's share. The CEO, Stephen Elop, sent a memo to all staff telling them that if the company was to survive, it had no choice but to join forces with Microsoft and move its products over from its own — superior — operating system to Windows 8.

Nokia on 'burning platform' warns boss

Nokia boss Stephen Elop warns staff that the firm must choose between being burned by competitors or taking a leap of faith

Charles Arthur, technology editor
guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 9 February 2011 16.56 GMT
Article history

A Nokia building in Helsinki. The Finnish firm is 'standing on a burning platform' according to its new chief executive, Stephen Elop. Photograph: Antti Aimo-Koivisto/AFP/Getty Images

Stephen Elop, Nokia's chief executive, has told his employees they face

His argument? Staying the same wouldn't work. Teaming up with Microsoft wasn't a great choice it was a positive choice, and unlike the company's present predicament, it offered some hope of success. (Though as we now know it didn't work. Microsoft closed Nokia. Burning Platforms are risky.)

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How to apply the model

What is the 'burning platform' in your organisation that requires urgent and courageous attention? What are the negative consequences of not changing? What should you do, even if it's risky?

Decide on the change you want to promote. Accepting that people will often only change when faced with a pressing challenge with potential negative consequences...

- idenitify one choice, acknowledge the challenges, and suggest what the possible advantages might be to risky action
- describe the status quo as a worse choice outlining the greater difficulties it involves and the certainty of failure

Use the table below to outline your strategic proposition. Remember to be clear who you are trying to 'sell' this to.

Think of a strategic change you want to create - what's the burning platform message?		
The burning platform	The high risk action choice	The even worse 'static' choice

This download is taken from Bernard Ross and Clare Segal's forthcoming book The Strategy Gym — being published by the Financial Times/Pearson in Summer 2015. The Burning Platform concept links strongly to change — and you can find out more about how to apply it it in change situations on the **=mc** programme **Leading and Managing Change**.

We can also help with consultancy on change, innovation and strategy. Or email **Bernard Ross, Director**, at b.ross@managementcentre.co.uk or call **+44(0)20 7978 1516**.

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