

# The Advisory Alliance

**60-Second E-mail™ – April 27, 2006**

## ***Where Have All the Burning Platforms Gone?***

*In this month's 60-Second E-mail™, we look at the concept of the burning platform, what it is, why it's used, and how its relevance and impact have changed in recent years.*

In the '90s, it seemed that if you wanted to get anything substantial done within your company, you had to create a burning platform. For those new to the concept of a burning platform, its specific origins are uncertain. Some attribute it to the Piper Alpha oil rig catastrophe, a massive explosion and ensuing fire that occurred July 6, 1988 in the North Sea off of Scotland, killing 167 of 229 men. All those who survived had jumped into the Sea from a height of more than 100 feet. When asked by the media how he got the courage to jump, one survivor replied with the equivalent of "Given the consequences of staying, what choice did I have?"

The essence, therefore, of a burning platform is to create a reason for change that is so compelling for those hearing it, reading it, etc., that they will have no alternative but to accept it as the right thing to do. Jumping into change will not be an act of courage, but will be an act of conviction and almost common sense. Inherent in the concept of the burning platform is the assumption that people are naturally resistant to change, that inertia is incredibly powerful, that people believe and feel that "more of the same" is better than something new and different, and so on. (Which is an interesting assumption. Having done extensive work in a fashion-related industry, I witnessed people changing willingly every spring and fall to adopt a new look, a new "this is who I am". No one needed a burning platform to tell them it was time to change. Change was embraced; it was almost natural.)

Unfortunately, some misinterpreted the burning platform concept as a rationalization for their leadership behavior: there was no point in coddling people; they had to be shocked into action if you wanted change. You had to create a burning platform. But as we all know, at some point repeated shocks and threats of shock start to lose their motivational force. Eventually they lose impact and people become immune. Burning platforms seemed to have had greatest impact when the world was a bit more stable, when work and change wasn't as 365/24/7 as it is today. Ironically, it seems that in today's world of greatest change the burning platform has been rendered a bit outdated. This is not to say that people don't need or shouldn't feel the need for change. The blatant impact of globalization, the omnipresence of outsourcing, and the resultant loss of jobs underscore that people need to change and will continue to need to change. But how you go about getting them to change, itself, has changed.

It is interesting, though not too surprising, when I meet with people (especially those in their 20's) I hear how the impact of the burning platform has begun to wear off or is irrelevant for many of them. They've either heard it before, or they've become so immune to the turmoil of constant change in their lives that they either refuse to "jump" or they've lost the conviction that it will do any good. In clinical terms, they begin to develop learned helplessness; they learn that their jumping doesn't necessarily lead to their

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survival: "Last time, they told me to jump, I jumped, and I still \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank: "lost my job", "got outsourced", "got transferred", "got fired", etc.)

And so in many respects the Piper Alpha story is a suitable origin for the concept of the burning platform. Ultimately, the operator of the platform was found guilty of having inadequate maintenance procedures. Essentially, the company contributed to the existence of its own burning platform. Similarly, it's important for leaders who feel they require a burning platform in their organization to ask themselves why they need it, and what have they done or not done to create the need for it. People *will* change for the right reason. And like with fashion, it's best when it fits and feels natural. But frankly, too many people have too many asbestos suits hanging in their closets from past burning platforms. Perhaps it's time for a change.

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Until next month, best regards,

**David**

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