

The secret of how to work better, not busier

No matter what changes you make, if you feel busy, you'll always be busy



Jill Walker

Powerscourt Hotel is in one of the most beautiful parts of the country. Serene, quiet, inspiring... the perfect place to take a step back and reflect.

Back in January 2017, I made my way to those Wicklow surroundings to do just that – take some time to reflect on and plan my business. Very quickly I realised that I was spread too thin – the real challenge was to create the space and time I needed to do my best work.

Tough decisions were made as I ruthlessly began figuring out ways to create personal and professional space. A number of services were stopped, tasks were outsourced, admin support was brought in and my whole business was redesigned and streamlined. By the end, I had taken out around 30 per cent of my business.

Fast-forward several months. I was just as busy as ever. This was a huge “aha” moment for me. I realised that no matter what changes I made, as long as I felt busy, I would always be busy.

What being busy does
Being busy is addictive. It feeds our ego and we get an adrenalin rush – it validates us. But how does being busy negatively affect us?

My research shows that being busy is almost always detrimental to creativity, the ability to focus, the ability to prioritise at work and even the quality of work we do.

Being busy also affects time for important, long-term projects at work (90 per cent), the time a leader has to develop their team (87 per cent) and their ability to see the bigger picture and think strategically (90 per cent).

On a personal level, 92 per cent said being busy affected the time they had for important things in their life, 92 per cent said it affected



their ability to switch off, and 89 per cent said it affected their sleep. So, we've seen what busyness can do, but what then can we do about it?

Change the busy mindset

It all starts with your mindset. The first step is to *decide* to no longer be so busy. Wanting it or hoping it will go away is not enough. And then stop telling yourself how busy you are! Whenever I would get that busy feeling, I would say to myself, “I have all the time and space for what's important.” Any kind of calming mantra that allows your brain to calm down and function better will work.

Two hours' 'white space' per week

Leaders need to create regular space for quality, long-term thinking. A simple action like scheduling one or two hours' “white space” each week can start a positive spiral and have dramatic effects.

Do the important stuff first

Many people try to get all the minor tasks out of the way so they

can ‘concentrate on the important stuff’. This can quickly become like shovelling snow in a blizzard. You'll never get to there, or at least it is very rare. So do the important stuff first.

Create buffers

There was a leader I once worked with who, while a strategic thinker, kept coming across as unfocused in meetings, spending too much time going off on tangents and getting distracted. The reason? They spent their time rushing between meetings and never gave themselves space in between to think about and plan the next meeting.

A solution to this problem, and a great way to get out of the spiral of busyness, is to create ‘buffers’ between meetings. In a perfect world this would be as long as an hour, but the realistic advice is to create at least 15 minutes in between meetings, or start meetings at 15 minutes past the hour.

Research also shows we chronically underestimate the time it will take to complete a task. Another easy time buffer is this: any time you estimate how long a task will take, add on 50 per cent.

Mono-tasking, not multi-tasking

Multi-tasking is also a killer of productivity. Neuroscience shows a significant cognitive cost and reduction in efficiency when switching between tasks – and that includes simple distractions such as looking at a ping notification from your phone.

So, while we all juggle multiple tasks and priorities, at any one moment in time try to focus on just the task in hand.

This will have a significant impact on how much you get done each day.

Strategic subtraction

One of the key things a leader must do is to decide what not to do. Jack Dorsey, chief executive of Twitter, says he must be the “chief editor” of his organisation, deciding what to cut rather than adding to it.

It can be hard to let go of something you care about or have been working on for a long time, but the measure of a leader is the ability to strategically subtract and make those tough choices. As Stephen King, the best-selling author, famously once said: “Kill your darlings.”

Working better, not busier

For leaders today, it is too easy to become locked into the day-to-day of what we do, to become addicted to the busy world around us. However, the characteristics and habits that being busy brings are exactly those that will hinder the long-term sustainability of a leader's performance.

By creating space, both physical and mental, around you, our minds can detach from the day-to-day and begin to work more productively and effectively towards those things that really matter both professionally and personally.

We need to start working better, not busier.

As for myself, while I still have moments where I feel the addictive pull back to the old busy ways, I can honestly say I'm in a place where I really can focus on what's most important in my work and in the rest of my life. A few simple steps can make all the difference.

Dr Jill Walker is a psychologist, speaker and executive coach, and was speaker at an Advant-edge session delivered to IMI members and guests. For more on IMI Member events, visit imi.ie



Coaching is on any manager's key list of skills

Coaching vs mentoring: two sides of the same coin

Coaching and mentoring draw on shared experiences to further the connection between experienced staff and their younger colleagues



Andrew McLaughlin

There is a great deal of joy in learning when it's done right. As children, we all had the teacher who stood in front of the classroom, told us to take our textbooks out and then went through the lesson by rote.

No imagination, no engagement, no connection.

This is not the case when we talk about coaching and mentoring. Both are development techniques that use personal bonds to make learning stick, bringing views from the outside in to challenge preconceived assumptions of the individuals involved.

One thing to remember – that I have discovered through personal experience – is that this whole engagement with people is joyous. There's a huge amount of satisfaction in it, and that for me is one of the dominant themes when we talk about coaching and mentoring.

Humans desire connections

One of the most fundamental aspects of human psychology is our desire, closely approaching a need, to connect with other people. It elevates our thinking in almost every way and will both support and challenge our worldviews, which is crucial for critical thinking.

The first thing I'd say is talk to strangers because everyone in the world knows something more about something than you do.

In today's modern world, however, we are being increasingly encouraged to distance ourselves from one another, primarily through digital means.

Even phone calls between colleagues have been replaced by chat channels, and we find ourselves busily multi-tasking tasks that seem removed from any human activity.

And when we remove emotions from a task, we largely remove the brain's ability to remember and learn from it.

When it comes to coaching and mentoring, this human emotion and engagement are inherent in the process.

They are methods of learning and self-learning that are hard to match because they address so many of the core needs of a human mind.

When and where
My advice for mentors is never to say, ‘do this’ or ‘this will work for you’.

Rather, say ‘I did this’ or ‘this is what I experienced’, and leave it up to them whether they can draw from your experience.

For mentoring then, it is about sharing experiences.

On the other hand, a coach's role is to facilitate the thought process of the other person, so you would much more rarely share your own experience. It may, indeed, muddy the waters of their thinking, as humans are prone to draw conclusions from other people's experiences that aren't applicable.

We are all coaches and mentors

Coaching sits right at the centre of any manager's key list of skills and it's something you do every day. If you cultivate it to its fullest degree, your career and other careers will benefit hugely. In the final part of your life, it's about passing the torch, and mentoring is a hugely satisfying way of passing that torch.

Both subtle parts of the same art, mentoring and coaching are some of our most powerful tools to make learning and development impactful on both the teacher and pupil.

At its heart, mentoring is about sharing experiences between two people from different ends



Talk to strangers... everyone in the world knows something you don't

of the spectrum while coaching is about drawing out the answers from another.

Learning is joyful, particularly when we do it with – and through – other people.

Individuals and organisations looking to make learning stick and to develop individuals as both people and professionals, should be using coaching and mentoring as core pillars in their strategy. By knowing and applying the subtle differences between the two, a leader can do the thing that great leaders do: create stars around them.

Andrew McLaughlin is a programme director on the professional diploma in executive coaching and the professional diploma in organisational behaviour. For more on IMI executive development programmes, go to imi.ie

Putting leadership today in context

In a changing world, nothing happens in isolation



Colm Foster

Context is king. This is particularly true in an unstable and rapidly moving environment. Every decision, every strategic plan, every change of direction, must be done within the context of the world it is happening in.

What's more, as our systems become more integrated with each other, our decisions often have unintended consequences.

Business leaders must then ask themselves: does this unstable complexity make stable planning almost impossible? Can there be a stable model for leaders to follow in an unstable ecosystem?

For Marco Mancesti, research and development director from IMD and a speaker at an IMI Talent Forum event this year, the key for leaders in such uncertain times focuses on understanding the opportunities and challenges within the “sys-



temic”, “people” and “self” layers operating in their organisations.

Systemic dynamics

The VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world creates systemic, complex challenges for leaders and their organisations. In years past, change may only have affected one part of the organisation, requiring focused attention on a specific aspect of the organisation.

Nowadays, in the VUCA world, leaders need to consider the systemic consequences of change and disruption on their organisations.

Mancesti believes that these systemic challenges are exposing traditional leadership styles and organisational strategy. The old three-step process of planning – define

a goal, agree and plan, and execute – has become too simplistic.

“This model where you define your goal, you agree your plan, and then you execute it... it was all fine because there was basically enough space for everybody in the business and, provided you had a decent product and a reasonable strategy and decent implementation, you would be successful,” said Mancesti. “Now, things have changed, because things are changing all the time.”

Consider the context

More than ever, leaders need to consider the business context and the external environment. Mancesti maintains that the VUCA world requires leaders to think differently

about change and strategy.

He proposes a new context-centric model which requires leaders to think about the internal and external challenges in their environments. According to the model, there needs to be an alignment between the different parts of the system for it to be effective.

Leaders need to think about strategy differently by placing ‘context’ at the centre of their strategy; thinking of it as more dynamic and a need for an alignment across the organisation. By doing so, leaders should be asking themselves questions about how this shapes their overall strategy.

“If the context is at the centre, how does it shape the overall goal of the company? And can you stay with the

same goal all the time? And if your goal changes, are you adapting the indicators, the goals, the measures, to the incentive systems? What about the strategy? What about the risks?” asked Mancesti.

In a context-centric system, Mancesti advises being contextually mindful does not mean continually changing strategy, but it does mean recognising that the pertinence of the strategy needs to be reassessed more frequently than before.

Leadership dynamics

Leaders, according to Mancesti, must understand “their self” to understand how their actions are related to time and to their inner being.

Leaders must have a mindset to understand how their actions and decisions are often related to time, whether that is the present moment, past or future, or the “intemporal”. They must also be aware of one's connection to the body/to emotions; to the mind and a connection to one's higher purpose in driving actions.

A leader's connection to the mind is the most important connection to make the right decisions for now and the future. For leaders, it is about balancing the connections of self, to try and understand what's happened, and when it's happened so that they can rebalance and to make sense of it.

Mancesti argues that for leaders, it's more about the disruption-fit leader, rather

than the future-fit leader, in which leaders are characterised by three traits.

1. Leaders should be “top-notch sensors”, understanding their selves and having a connection to their “self”.

2. The disruption-fit leader is “a master of informed accelerations” having the knowledge to be able to seize opportunities when the context allows.

3. The disruption-fit leader is “obsessed in finding the opening in every context acceleration”. While the strategy may change more quickly within this model, it adapts to the context and allows the organisation to adapt more readily to opportunities and challenges within the environment.

The disruption-fit leader

The VUCA world presents challenges for leaders and organisations, and what has worked before necessarily won't work again.

“One thing is for sure, in a world that is changing so fast and which may impact organisations so brutally, the leader needs to be pretty grounded and solid,” said Mancesti at the end of his Talent Forum. “It's the sprint that's exhausting.”

Marco Mancesti, research and development director at IMD, delivered an IMI Talent Forum Session for members and human resource professionals. For more on IMI events, go to imi.ie/events. Dr Colm Foster is director of executive education at IMI