



BETTER NOT BUSIER

Dr. Jill Walker | Transformative Executive Coach, Psychologist and Speaker

IMI Membership Event | Advant-edge Series | 6th March, 2019

Powerscourt Hotel is in one of the most beautiful parts of the country. Serene, quiet, inspiring... it is the perfect place for a business owner to take a step back and reflect where they and their organisation is going, to find a new direction.

For Dr. Jill Walker, one and a half days were planned to be spent in the Wicklow surroundings to do just that – figure out the future.

In this great open space of countryside Jill very quickly discovered where her reflections were taking here – the space she needed to do her best work. Writing the word 'space' on the board, she began to ruthlessly figure out all the ways she could create space in her personal and professional life.

Without it, her work and the business she'd been running for 17 years would suffer. She had become spread too thin.

Tough decisions were made. Services her business offered was discarded, admin support was brought on, websites were redesigned, and current staff were retrained.

In essence, she took out around 30% of her business. Fast-forward several months?

'I was just as busy as ever' said Jill at the outset of her Advant-edge session. 'It actually shocked me. I couldn't understand it. The reality is our relationship with being busy is a tricky one, a deep-rooted one, and not something that's easily changed.'

What Being Busy Does

Being busy is addictive.

We get adrenalin rushes when we tick an item off a list, and our ego is satisfied by being seen as busy – it validates us – but how does being busy negatively affect us?

Jill's research shows that being busy is almost always detrimental to creativity, the ability to focus, the quality of work we do, and many other factors. Furthermore, being busy will always affect time for important, long term projects at work (50%), the time a leader has to develop their team (46%) and their ability to see the bigger picture and think strategically (44%).

On a personal level, 57% said being busy effected the time they have for important things in their life, 54% on how present they are with family and friends, and 42% said being busy effected their sleep.

'So, we've seen what busyness can do, but I don't want you to all walk out of here depressed!' said Jill. 'What then can we do about it? It's all very well saying we shouldn't be busy, and know ourselves how detrimental it is, but is there a way to be less busy in this world?'



What can leaders do to stop drowning in unnecessary tasks and focus on what's important?

Better Not Busier

The first step is actively creating time not to be busy. Jeff Weiner, CEO of LinkedIn, makes sure that he has between 90 minutes and two hours of unscheduled time in his diary every day so 'he can think, he can plan, he can prepare...'.

Fionnuala Meehan, Head of Google Ireland, leaves the office every day at 5pm. She is quoted as saying 'I couldn't possibly do the job without switching off at night. You need clarity and calmness. That's the advice I give everybody.'

These highly successful people had created space in their busy lives. As Jill said 'creating that little bit of thinking time creates a positive spiral and improves you as a leader. This is not a choice between work and everything else – it supports doing your work better.'



What then are those concrete actions leaders can take to work better, and not just busier?

'It begins with that decision to be not busy' said Jill. 'Wanting it is not enough. And that extends to your language – I even stopped using the word 'busy'. And whenever I got that busy feeling, I would say to myself 'I have all the time and space I need'.'

After the mindset shift of proactively becoming less busy, and not letting your mind slip into the false comfort of being busy, there are a number of practical tips for leaders to follow to become less busy and more impactful in the work they do.

2 hours "white space" per week

Leaders need to actively create space for long-term thinking. Like the Jeff Weiner example above, if a leader cannot get quality thinking time, they cannot operate properly as a leader.

'It does not have to be dramatic things' said Jill 'but actions like creating this white space (even 90 minutes a week) can have dramatic effects. And do think about the environment – it might be at home, it might be in Starbucks... just think about the best place for you.'

Do the important stuff first

Rather than getting all the secondary tasks out of the way (often so you can 'then concentrate on the important stuff'), reverse it and simply do the most important things first.

Often professionals will attempt to answer all their emails, or tick off a few items on their to-do list to create the space in their mind to focus on a major task – only for a succession of minor tasks to crop up again and force the mind away from strategic work.

'It's like shovelling snow in a blizzard' said Jill 'you'll never get to that time – or at least it is very rare – that everything is cleared. Do the important stuff first.'

Create buffers

Jill gave the example of a leader she worked with who, while a strategic thinker, kept coming across as unfocused in meetings. Rather than being decisive in their decision-making, they spent meetings exploring tangents and musing on possibilities.

The reason? They never gave themselves space in between meetings to think about the subjects of the meetings. Rather than giving each meeting the space they required, this person would jump straight from meeting to meeting, never taking stock of any situation.



'So, of course they came across as indecisive. They were coming to each meeting evaluating the challenge in their own minds rather than being where they should be at that point – working on a solution with their teams' said Jill.

A solution to this problem of being caught up in the day-to-day whirlwind is to create 'buffers' between meetings. In a perfect world this buffer would be as long as an hour, but the realistic advice is to create at least 15 minutes in between meetings (a piece of advice from the Advant-edge audience was to start meetings at quarter past the hour).

Mono tasking not multi-tasking

'Research shows we are chronically bad at underestimating the time it will take to complete a task.' said Jill. 'The simple advice is this – anytime you estimate how long a task will take, add on 50%. If you think initially it will take a day, estimate a day and a half.'

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

Jill gave the example of BaseCamp in the US, who have stopped using instant messaging applications within your organisation to reduce these distractions. Mono tasking is not then about simply having one task to do, but rather focusing on one task fully even though it may be one of a multitude you have to tackle eventually.

'With emails, try to get some discipline on your habits' Jill advised. 'Check them at specific times of the day, and at times when it will be useful. Even that 'quick check' we do before meetings or leaving the office... we are not able to action them at those times and will probably have to read them again – inefficient.'

Strategic Subtraction

One of the key things a leader must do is to decide what not to do. Jill gave examples of senior leaders and their philosophies around this. Huggy Rao, of Stanford University, said it was the ability to 'reduce the cognitive load'. Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, says he must be the 'chief editor' of his organisation, deciding what to cut what they are doing rather than adding to it.

Stephen King, the author, famously said 'kill your darlings'.

'It can be hard to let go of something you've been working on for six months' said Jill 'but, in reality, the measure of a leader is the ability to strategically subtract and make those tough choices.'

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 are able to detach from the day-to-day and begin to work more productively and effectively towards those things that really matter both professionally and personally.

As Jill put it, we need to be 'better, not busier'.

**“In the war
against the cult
of speed, the
front line is
inside our
heads”**

Carl Honore,
In Praise of
Being Slow