

The Busy Leader

Busyness is everywhere. Nearly all the leaders I meet in business, in academia and in the public sector are *chronically* busy. Not busy occasionally, when under pressure, but busy *all the time*, every day, as a matter of course.

A few of them are so overwhelmed that they have become accustomed to living with sleep deprivation and anxiety. And whilst some cling to a faint hope that when the latest reorganisation, market disruption or economic shock has settled it will be easier; most are just looking for better ways to cope, to use their time more efficiently, delegate better and manage their agenda more proactively. Their focus is on managing their time and tasks, and the time and tasks of others.

There are consequences of this state for the leader, their health, happiness and effectiveness. There are consequences for others too – for the people they lead and the people they love, for the health and resilience of our organisations. And it's not that leaders don't recognise those – they just seem unable to get away from the idea that somehow, somehow they **'should' be able to do all of this work and more. Oh, and have a great 'life-work' balance, be a perfect parent and exercise regularly too, of course!**

That idea is mistaken, I believe. And possibly dangerous. It is mistaken because it doesn't take in to account the way that the minds of human beings work, and it could be dangerous because it can trap you in a cycle.



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In effect we become overloaded, not because we are 'taking too much on' heroically but because our brains don't have time to absorb and learn from all the inputs they receive – we have no recovery time. As a consequence we are not making good decisions including about where and how to focus our attention and presence. We are so busy managing the **INPUTS** (time and task) we've lost focus on the **OUTPUTS**. And because we work in organisations full of people doing the same thing we get approval for 'being busy' and we fear the consequences of being seen to be 'doing less'.

Psychologists, neuroscientists and others have studied busyness for a while (not to mention philosophers for far longer) and can tell us a lot about how to manage this better. Everyone is different, and will need to manage energy and focus differently, but top tips include:

1. Manage your 'busy tasks' like email in chunks and don't let them seep in to the rest of the day. It's a real mistake for example to do a few minutes of email just before a conversation which needs your full attention and focus. And if you do get up early to 'clear the decks' use that time for thinking tasks not doing tasks.
2. Schedule chunks of time for the 'big tasks' that **need** your focus or which you really care about. And try to set yourself achievable goals for those chunks that give you a sense of progress and reduces anxiety.
3. Even if you are someone who enjoys thinking about work out of work - 'a positive problem solver' rather than a 'worrier' - you still need regular switch off time. Preferably every day. Definitely every week. Your ideas will be more creative and innovative when you do.

4. Manage yourself and your team by *impact not input* wherever possible. Celebrate achievement and creativity not busyness. When someone humble-brags about how busy they are, ask them what they are doing to reduce that.

Coaching and Mentoring can really help leaders to break out of the busyness trap. At the simplest level, coaching and mentoring provide a validated break from busyness, a scheduled time for reflection and a critical thinking partner skilled in making that time useful. Great Coach-Mentors can help leaders to escape more permanently, and to be a catalyst for changing the busyness culture in their whole organisation. They do this by:

- Challenging limiting beliefs and assumptions that prevent leaders from breaking free
- Increasing self-awareness and confidence in making choices about where and how to focus
- Supporting healthy habits of critical reflection and balance
- Challenging leaders to see the real impact they are having and supporting them to make changes in how they are 'being' as a leader that are both authentic and effective.



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