



Owning your time:

a conversation starter...

The problem

Bill Gates in a recent interview with Warren Buffet was heard to quip busy is the new stupid.

Reflecting on how careful Warren Buffet is with his time, Gates began to see that sitting and thinking should carry a much higher priority than filling his calendar. The latter he noted should not be a proxy for how serious he is about what he does.

Makes sense.

Busy is in the conversation of almost everyone these days, particularly in relation to work. What follows is usually a version of relentless pressure to deliver, multiple conflicting deadlines and little time to think; like being on a treadmill with the on switch stuck.

Underneath is a common frustration - there must be another way to work and live.

1.0

Why is this issue important?

World-wide there is a trend for us to be 'on' 24/7 compounded by the constancy of digital temptations.

It's not good for our health. A recent consequence is the World Health Organisation adding '*burnout*' to its official diseases list. With a focus on the workplace they note the demands of the job far outweighing the rewards, recognition, and times of relaxation, as the cause.

And it's not good for business. In 2018 Udemy undertook *research* into the level of distraction and consequent loss of productivity in workplaces in the United States. The following is summary of their findings:

- » 70 percent of employees felt distracted at work
- » The average employee lost 31 hours a month in meetings and was disrupted around 56 times a day
- » It took two hours a day to recover from disruptions
- » Most companies are only realizing 60 percent workforce productivity.

In our own world, this might show up as problems finishing work, a drop in the quality of what we are producing, longer days, working at the weekends, missing deadlines, and email overload.

Either way on a \$100,000 salary that's a \$40,000 opportunity cost.

2.0

Why are we struggling with busy?

A lot of reasons including our digital era and being human - warnings about the downsides of being too busy date back as far as 400 BC with Socrates observing 'beware the barrenness of a busy life'.

Much more recently *Peter Drucker* predicted it wouldn't be technological advances that fascinated historians reflecting back on our time, but the point at which a critical mass of the world's population had choice, totally unprepared to self-manage it.

It isn't difficult to see how insidious being busy has become and how easy it is to continue to leverage the human propensity for busyness at work.

A couple of examples.

01.
Job adverts

Looking for people who can work at pace seems increasingly prevalent and is all well and good if you are wanting to deter the unmotivated. However, it's worth noting that speed is also synonymous with burning the candle at both ends and killing pace.

02.
Management trends

Quick-wins
A quick-win in project terms is described as an improvement that is visible, has immediate benefit and can be delivered quickly after the project begins. A valid goal.

A warning however. The unintended consequences of quick-wins in an already over-committed workplace can, in the worst cases, lead to toxic environments (HBR).

3.0

How can we change?

Change isn't easy in a world where we are bombarded by others perspectives, and spoiled for choice. However, if we are genuine about correcting this imbalance we have to change. The old adage that the definition of madness is doing the same thing and expecting a different result rings true.

When we pare our work back to the most important, things start to feel less complex, choices become clearer, more deliberate and confidence increases.

Greg McKeown in his book *Essentialism*; the disciplined pursuit of less talks about this. He also makes it clear that the disciplined pursuit of less in the absence of courage is merely lip-service.

So, we need to be brave and ready. We also need to allow ourselves time to practice.

$$C(F) = R + C + P$$

Change is a function of Readiness + Courage + Practice

Readiness:

The status quo is no longer an option and we see an alternative (even if the details are a bit hazy)

Courageous

We'll always have reasons not to change and if we keep listening to them, or searching for a quicker-fix we'll stay as we are.

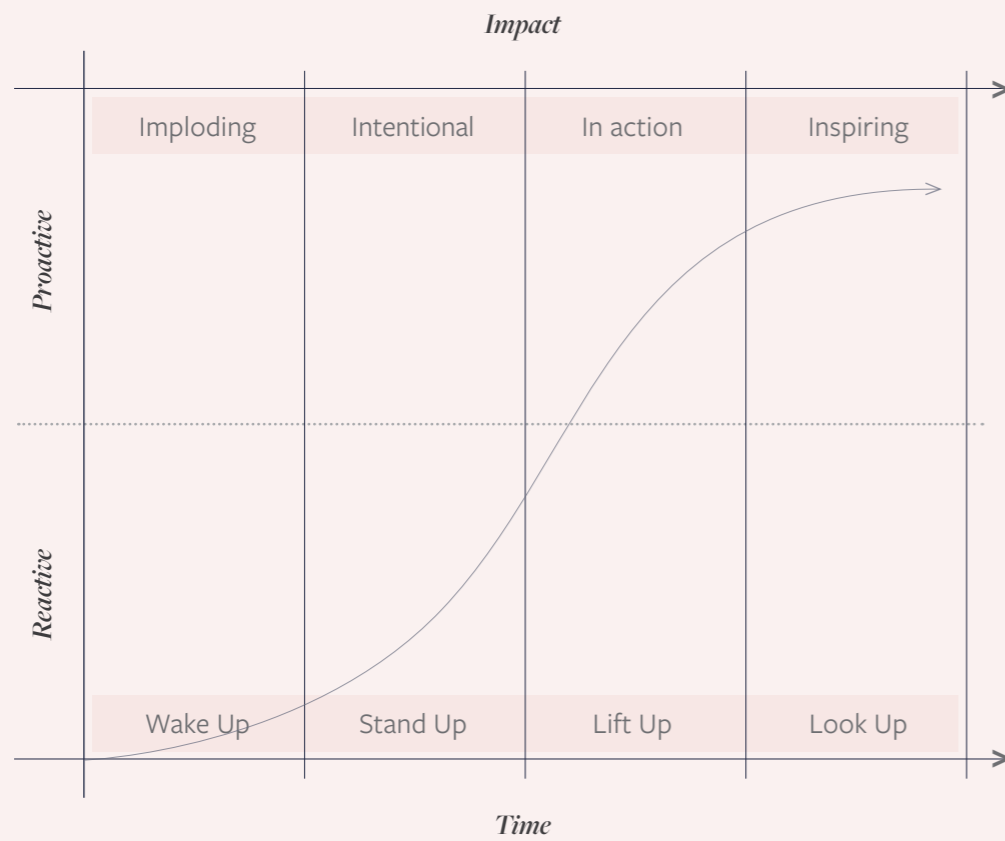
Practice:

We don't have to make it complicated, rather identify a few practical things that make the most difference and apply them until they become permanent.

Do nothing?

We run the risk that bit by bit the way we work starts to eat away at our peace of mind.

The following framework maps out an approach to move from reactive to proactive, from imploding to inspiring.



by thinking differently.

Stages

- 01 *Imploding* ————— Reacting to what comes in, feeling disorganised, little autonomy, fighting fires, multiple conflicting demands, missing breaks, missing deadlines, multiple interruptions, email fatigue; **waking up.**
- 02 *Intentional* ————— Working smarter not harder, reducing the urgent and focusing more on the important, starting to plan, meeting deadlines, having breaks; **standing up.**
- 03 *In action* ————— Thinking before acting, delegating, negotiating, medium term planning, developing relationships, proactive problem-solving, time-value balance; **lifting up.**
- 04 *Inspiring* ————— Long term planning, focusing on the few things that make the most difference, coaching, mentoring others, expanding networks, new opportunities, role model; **looking up.**

by thinking differently.



Two roads converged in a wood and I – I took the one less travelled by and that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

In order to change we may have to find ourselves a pathway less populated.

I learned this when I came close to burning out some years ago. With what are now official WHO symptoms - anxiety, exhaustion, withdrawing from friends and family – it was time to work differently or I wouldn't be able to work at all.

I started down the equivalent of a road less travelled working out how to move from *wake up* to *look up* by trying things out and making mistakes. And I learned some things...

- » **Understanding** what's driving our behavior can be a catalyst for change.
- » **It is important** to take responsibility ourselves.
- » **Time to think** leads to more considered choices.
- » **Re-calibrating** when things start to feel a bit out of control becomes automatic with practice.

For those getting started a useful model to unpack the reasons we find ourselves in situations like mine and others, is the Five Whys.

The goal is to determine the root cause of a problem by repeating the question "Why?". Each answer forms the basis of the next question.

Once you understand the cause (and in some cases, causes) it is easier to work out what actions to take.

The following is an example. I've used my experience and you can use yours. Take your time. You may find you want to do more than one.

Problem – I'm feeling overwhelmed, burnt out	Problem -
<i>Why (first why)</i>	I'm too busy reacting to everything.
<i>Why (second)</i>	I'm not in control of my work.
<i>Why (third)</i>	I don't know how.
<i>Why (fourth)</i>	I haven't had any training.
<i>Why (fifth) – Root Cause</i>	I've never made it a priority

Small steps

Learning something new can be made easier by taking small steps. Over time they can lead to big gains.

A good start when we're feeling out of control is to get organised. As simple as this sounds when we start to take control of our time we learn an interesting paradox - the more we let go of control the more in control we are.

Below are five simple things to help anyone get off the treadmill of busyness if they want to. Undertake this exercise with the compassion needed when doing something for the first time. Remember this is a marathon not a sprint.

Sometime ahead of your next working week:

1.0 | Develop a long list

All the things that need doing in the next 40 working hours, pro-rata for part-time; meetings, projects, admin (reports / filing), correspondence (emails). Don't forget lunch.

2.0 | Develop a shorter list

Think about whether these things are a must do (these stay on the list), must do but not in the coming week (pop these on next week's long list), must do but someone else can do them (delegate), don't need to be done at all (remove from the list). Avoid worrying, trust this process.

3.0 | Estimate time

Be generous about how long each task on the shorter list will take to get done. Close enough is fine.

4.0 | Allocate time

Put each task in the calendar, remember travel time and prep time for meetings. Do step 5 if there isn't enough time for everything.

5.0 | Refine

Keep going back to (2) until you are happy you have the essentials locked in.

A bonus exercise

1.0
-

Reflect on insights

2.0
-

Note one thing you might do differently for the next week.

3.0
-

Give yourself a small treat for taking a small step.

**Who knows, you may look up
and find yourself on the road
less travelled.**

About the Author

What makes us unique as humans are our personal battles and triumphs. They mould us into who we are in each lived moment. Experience our tutor, insights our reward.

Mine have lead me here. Helping emerging leaders realise their potential by taking ownership of their time – light-bulb moment by light-bulb moment.

The mother of two awesome young adults and forty years of leadership experience in a range of sectors I've learned that paradoxically we need to slow down to speed up. This creates space in our minds to choose with discernment. From there we find confidence and peace-of-mind.

For those wishing to know more head to <https://www.juliehoodadvisor.com/>. Take your time. You'll find recent musings, a bit more about my background and the outline for a mentoring programme I am currently offering.

And in the meantime, I'll leave you with a quote from one of the wisest women I'd love to have known...

Never mistake knowledge for wisdom. One helps you make a living; the other helps you make a life

Eleanor Roosevelt.

A handwritten signature in a cursive script that reads "Julie". The letter "J" is large and loops around the "u", and there is a horizontal line under the "ie".

I'd love to hear from you!

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