

TOO BUSY TO LEAD WITH PURPOSE?

Being a purposeful leader, and creating a purposeful team, seems like an obvious requirement of the role. What's the point of leadership if it is not leadership to a purpose? How can a team be high performing if it doesn't know what it's for? But the reality of many leaders' working lives is days so full of activity that it is easy to lose track of what is really important.

When your week consists of back-to-back virtual meetings and you have urgent presentations and reports that you must prepare, when reporting on performance is taking up too much time to allow you to debate how to create performance, when communicating with stakeholders around the world is stretching your working day and your e-mail box fills up faster than you can empty it, it can be difficult to carve out the time to reflect on why you are doing what you are doing, and how to regain your balance to focus on what is really key.

The impact of this for organisations is a loss of strategic focus and sub-optimal delivery on purpose. Strategic outcomes, and the transformational changes that might be needed to deliver the future, get buried under the weight of transactional 'urgent today' issues.

The impact for individuals is often a sense that for all their effort they're not achieving anything that is meaningful to them or that will have a real and sustainable impact for the organisation.

The impact for teams can be a sense of dissolution. When we don't know what we're a team for, when we lack a shared sense of commitment to purpose, the motivation to come together and the strength of the bonds that keep us together are weakened.

When we are working with individuals and teams as coaches and mentors our clients are often very well able to articulate their lack of time to focus on what is really important, and the problems it causes. But finding a way out of it can seem impossible, a catch 22 situation in which they don't have the time or the energy to work out how to create space and regain focus.

Traditional time management techniques fall down when everything appears to be urgent and everything is important to someone somewhere. Clients often hope that changes expected at some future point will cause the level of activity and 'busyness' to decline; the reality is that unless individuals and teams break the cycle it might continue indefinitely. So the first step has to be to create space.



How you spend your time is a choice. It may not feel like it, but experience tells me that you have more agency than you have space to realise. It will not be an easy choice, but it is a choice. Try turning the question around - instead of asking 'how do I find time to fit in space for me, and for reflection without overextending an already long working day?' ask yourself the question 'having made time for me, and time for reflection what time is left and what do I choose to do with it?' That does mean confronting reality – making decisions about what you are NOT going to do and about how you need to communicate and negotiate with others about that choice. And if senior stakeholders don't want to hear about the choices that must be made it can take real courage to have those conversations.

This isn't a problem that you can pass down the line, but it is also not one you need to solve alone for your team. There's little point creating space to become a purposeful leader without ensuring that you also have a purposeful team. But you can really build the purposefulness, performance and cohesion of your team when you work together to really understand the context and systems that you operate in and figure out to how best to deliver on your joint purpose.

Einstein is reputed to have defined Insanity as continuing to do the same thing and expecting a different result. But sometimes the action that has to be taken to get out of an insane situation is uncomfortable, difficult, or feels risky. It's your choice. Carry on as you are or take action to make a purposeful difference.



- 1 Start by making the space to make space – ideally 45 minutes a day, at minimum 2 hours a week. Schedule it, defend it, use it to:
 - a Reflect on what you need to do to really deliver on your purpose as a leader, and what you are going to have to not do to make time for it.
 - b Identify the resources that you have which will help you to deliver on your aim to be more purposeful, and add to them. Whether it's your EA, your spouse, a trusted team member, a team coach or a mentor engage others to support you.
 - c Check your clarity on the purpose of your team, talk to stakeholders about how they see it and what their priorities are.
- 2 Set up time to work with your team to identify purpose – get clarity about
 - a Priorities and goals
 - b Ways of working and culture
 - c Roles and responsibilities
 - b Resources and capabilities
 - e Context – the stakeholders, systems that you work with and in

Once you have your sense of clarity there may be difficult conversations to be had with senior stakeholders. You will need to tackle those thoughtfully, working with your team, your coaches, mentors and advisors to prepare. Remember that your stakeholders too may be caught in their own busyness trap, how can you work with them to help you both deliver more purposefully? By working with your team and your stakeholders to face into the conflicts of priority, you can negotiate ways of working that allow you all the space to work with purpose.

Like a lot of the important things in life being a truly purposeful leader isn't complex theoretically, but it isn't easy to do consistently and with skill. It can take courage, and it will take humility and resolve. You won't get it right every day, but if you make the space to reflect and use the resources you have to learn you can get it better every day.

Talk to Diane about how she can help you to take action now, and make a purposeful difference.
Email her today diane.newell@theo cm.co.uk