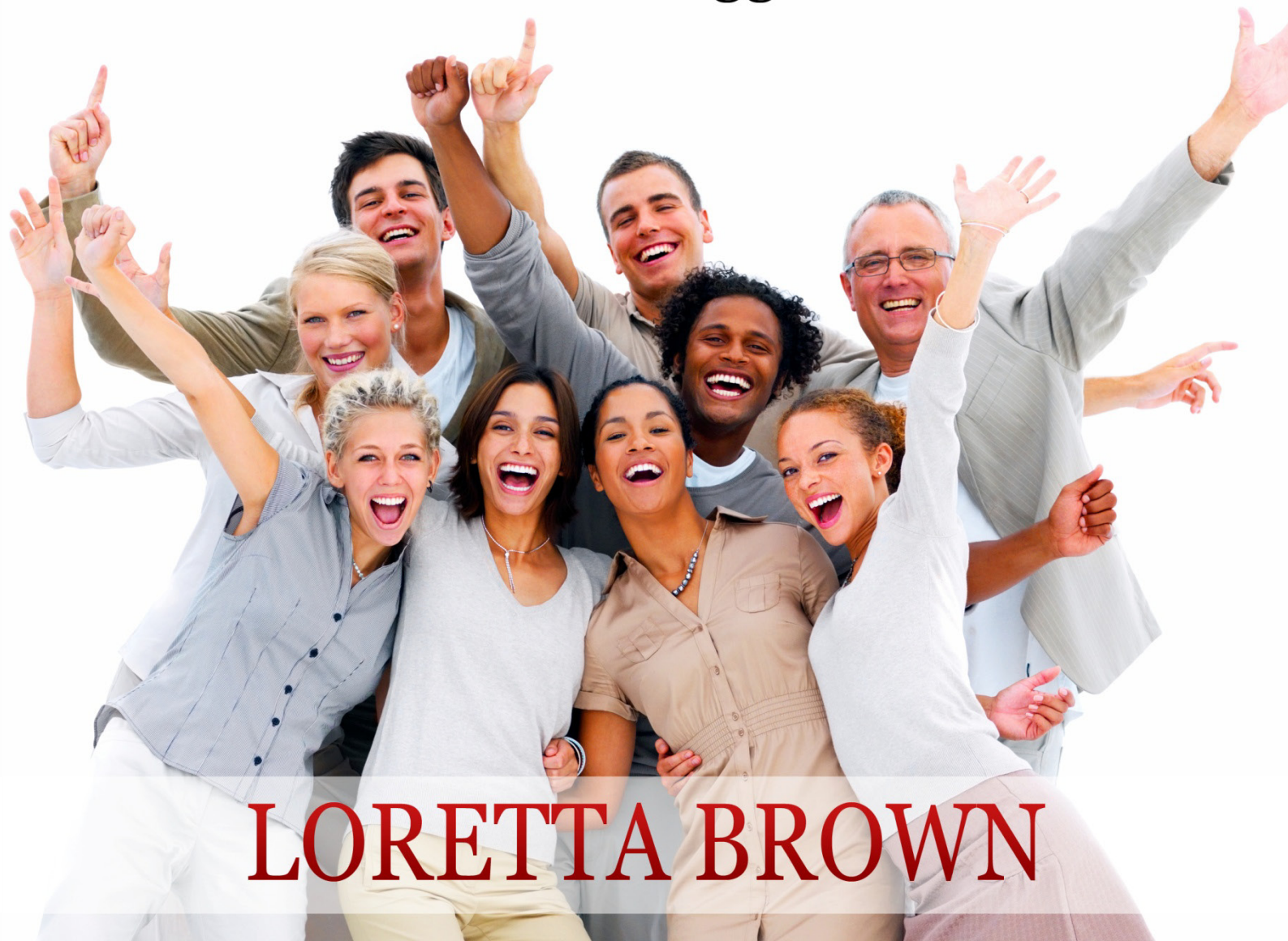


Beyond Busy!

Radical measures to enjoy life
more and make a bigger difference



LORETTA BROWN

Beyond Busy!

Radical measures to enjoy
life more and make a
bigger difference

For professional people, managers, leaders

- Stop feeling alone and guilty for not managing demands.
- Tell the truth about everyday work.
- Escape the frenzy trap and have a bigger impact.
- Get your fight back, revive your purpose and do things differently.

“ *It is not about time management!* ”

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Time for change!

Bold measures for getting beyond busy

People have too much to do. Most professionals cannot hand on heart, imagine continuing working this way for much longer. Something has to give. This guide is for the “normally exhausted”, anyone who has reached their limit and is not willing to carry on as usual. People are creating wonderful lives beyond busy, feeling new joy and having more impact too. Here you are offered some ideas, some rousing thoughts and some stories of real people.

Getting beyond busy may be the most important work you can undertake for yourself and for your leadership. Ordinary people change the world, each day, and step by little step. You can make the difference. A title isn't needed to lead. It happens by acting on everyday things and challenging what is not working. Regaining your own life will contribute to building new ways of working for everyone.

Being “too busy” can't be fixed by better time management, by just taking a break or by learning meditation. It can't be resolved by working harder or longer. Questioning, “should I stay or should I go” is often a red herring.

Bright people have tried lots of strategies to manage life better. Answers won't be found in a quick-fix bag of tricks. Getting beyond busy requires a more fundamental and radical reassessment of your direction and purpose. This guide offers a companion along side. Six bold pathways are presented:

1. Tell the truth about our ways of working
2. Create a courageous “pause”
3. Get some fight back
4. Discover your purpose
5. Craft new paths
6. Persevere

These pathways have helped countless people set the compass to create a life beyond busy. There will never be a right time to start. The opportunity is now.

About Loretta

I have studied and taught leadership, supporting leaders for decades. As a Leadership Coach I listen to the stories of professionals every day. Clients divulge the real costs on themselves and their families of our current ways of working. I also witness amazing progress in forging new paths beyond busy.

I have simplified life and I have long tracks of time uninterrupted. This has not always been so. Before I got beyond busy I couldn't see a way out. I was doing okay at work, but life wasn't working and I didn't know how to change it. On top of that I was deeply tired, like most of us these days. No extra resources left. The exhaustion that happens over years. I would collapse into bed as soon as I could. I couldn't care less about anyone else. We wouldn't go out anywhere or see anyone. Our lives got really small.

My journey to getting life right, to getting beyond busy, has been a personal healing, a career reevaluation and a rebalancing of priorities and goals. I have renewed myself whilst helping others to replenish. I know it is possible to enjoy life more whilst having an impact and making a real difference.

Here is your guide. See what resonates. You can start anywhere.

Truth telling... The tyranny of "too busy"

“ *You have to be able to see where you are,
in order to see where you want to be.* ”
– Loretta Brown

The whirling, chaotic, hiccupping, whizzing, backtracking,
stop-starting days.

High stimulus, constantly "on".

Distracted, pulled here and there.

Building up over time, year in and year out.

Burdens and deadlines. Straining and pulling.

No time to think... No time to feel...

Just the next task...

Get it done... get it done now.

This is urgent!

Reaching for the phone for
one last call.

Work to do at home, long
into the night.



MICHAEL

Michael told me he has a 6-month-old baby! This was only after describing his enormous workload, the crazy hours. Most weekends are spent in front of his laptop trying to keep up. Unable to focus, Michael said he didn't know what to do first anymore. He spent an entire morning approving travel claims because it was something tangible, that he could actually finish.

Michael is a talented and astute young man. He has tons of potential. He wants what is best for his wife and son. He said it had crept on him. At the beginning, it had seemed manageable. But slowly Michael said he became consumed by demands. The recession came. He felt very responsible for the people in the company. He thought about resigning.

Michael's wife, Anna, is at home with their baby. She will be returning to work this month too. Michael says that Anna is ambivalent about going back to work. They need two incomes to pay their large mortgage. Michael has no idea how they will cope once Anna is back at work. Michael doesn't know if he can keep going and yet he believes he can't stop.

MARGARET

It was obvious that Margaret is used to doing the work of several people. Utterly competent, hugely experienced and usually unfazed by challenges. Margaret had progressed fast, surprising herself and her family with her senior roles. Strong and healthy all of her life, it is unthinkable to Margaret that she would fail in any way.

But over the last six months things have begun to change. As well as forgetting things and not being able to meet simple deadlines, Margaret described how she is liable to just burst into tears. She has found that even doing undemanding tasks feels like climbing a steep mountain. She works evenings and most weekends but is still unable to keep up.

This month to her shock and embarrassment, Margaret's boss initiated a performance conversation and for the first time ever she is questioning her capabilities and future. Margaret tells me she is overcome with it all and has no idea how to proceed. She can't possibly work any longer hours and she can't see how she will meet the new targets her boss has set for her.

Overwhelm

“ *The price of anything is the amount
of life you exchange for it.* ”

– Thoreau

Telling the truth about our lives is always the first step to taking new steps forward.

Obligations, reminders, schedules, activities, targets and deadlines are rendering influential people silent. Professional men and women are occupied. Filled up. Crammed to the brim. Rushing from meeting to meeting.

Family and friends are banished from the central waking hours. Never seeing home in the daylight for months. Unfailingly getting sick on the first week of annual leave. This is the acceptable world of work.

A psychologist's brochure presents the symptoms for recognising depression and acute anxiety. It says, "Have you experienced any two of the following?"

- ☐ More than two periods of depression that last more than a week
- ☐ Feeling anxious all the time
- ☐ Feelings of not managing life as you should
- ☐ Difficulty in relaxing or sleeping
- ☐ High blood pressure

Did you tick a box? Most professionals accept these symptoms as an unsurprising fact of life. Feeling too busy at work isn't caused by a low tolerance to stress. Incrementally the busyness fatigue seeps in, compromising focus and stealing the joy in life. These are not isolated cases. It is the experience of many at a scale never encountered before.

Leaders and managers accept that work is busy and chaotic. Professionals know how to work whilst constantly interrupted. But for Margaret and Michael and so very many other professional people, real overwhelm has entered their world. The "epidemic of busy" has relegated thoughtful and true strategic work to the edges. A tactical and

operational focus rules the day at every level of organisational life. Building up over time, “just coping” has become normal.

The reality of life at work for men and women today comes down to half drowning or leaving. And leaving is not an option for most. What we are facing together goes far beyond work life balance techniques. It is a crisis that is threatening the well-being of individuals, families, of organisations and communities.

The myth of coping

“ *We are working far beyond human scale.* ”

– Brene Brown

Some will brush off the idea of a “too busy” epidemic. “I’m doing fine, get a grip! We are in a global recession for goodness sake!” All of us like to think we are managing the demands. People can rely on youthful resilience for a good long time.

Some “copers” have stripped back their lives to almost nothing beyond work. No family, any friends or outside activities. It isn’t sustainable forever. Are we destined to cast off senior leaders? Using up people, letting them fall away like a relay baton change. Senior people rarely last in a role for more than a couple of years. Disposable leadership adopts a short-term perspective, giving priority to quick and visible gains.

Leaving to go to a new organisation is often an attempt to escape an untenable scenario, a hoped for better situation where it will be easier to rise above the torrent. A fantasy indeed. The serial leadership pattern hides the costs and preserves the appearance of coping. Look more closely. Coping (let alone thriving) is often a temporary experience. This is not just executive exhaustion or burnout. It is more widespread than that. Work/life balance is a near impossibility. Work productivity strategies have little relevance for most. Few people are talking about it publically, only admitting the challenges to spouses, therapists or good friends.

Having it all and having nothing

“ *We are now living at a time when all cycles
and systems of life are out of balance.* ”

– Carolyn Myss

The people I work with are the very, very advantaged. Occupying top roles, educated, capable and successful. Financially well off, prosperous by any standards. Having choices and options, amazing freedoms and many opportunities.

And yet so few would describe any ease and delight in their wealth or their lives. Quiet inklings that things are way out of balance and huge doubts drift in when people are finally quiet. A suspicion that how we are living isn't viable, that something different is needed.

Other people become depressed, feeling powerless and hopeless to change the situation. As well as medication for depression, alcohol and drug and consumption, addiction has become the norm amongst our brightest minds. Passive aggression is standard culture in our work communities.

With privilege comes responsibility. But until we are able to get clear of the tyranny of busy we cannot fulfill the promise and responsibility of our privileged position.

Busy is killing leadership

“ *What is the most insidious interruption to a
rebellious leadership message? Becoming too busy.* ”

– Loretta Brown

People tell me that they want to make a real difference, but they feel unable to move in any direction other than surviving. As well as undermining individual resilience, “busy” is killing leadership.

Professionals simply do not have the space in their day to step back and consider what matters most. At a time when the world needs powerful voices for change, those of us who are most well placed to influence, are buried alive with a calendar full of minutiae.

Leading new possibilities, challenging the status quo and making a stand for what you believe is tough at the best of times. But leading in the midst of a life stretched to the edges with demands is impossible for all but the most resolute.

I have watched passionate and dedicated managers and leaders slowly get bogged down, drowning in expectations and ultimately surrendering their dreams. The workplace culture of busy has slowly rendered previously robust and energetic professionals impotent. Any quest for change and leadership hope is muffled.

Other leaders, especially women, leave influential positions attempting to gain some semblance of balance. Stepping back from professional life to protect what is fundamentally important is an option. But there are big costs to individuals and to leadership. In choosing survival, the voices of strong and well-adjusted people are silenced.

Current leadership is not meeting the expectations we held for widespread change. Leadership development is a mega industry. There is always the next best idea for the harried professional. But leadership development falls on deaf ears when people are working over capacity.

When people do find the time to invest in development, they arrive at programmes relieved to be getting a breather, but anxious about work piling up. Heads are spinning from the rush of past weeks. Half an ear is lent to the proceedings, but one eye is still watching the inbox. Fresh ideas temporarily inspire, but once Monday 9.00am comes the best-laid plans die under a barrage of "urgent".

This is a wider epidemic

People blame themselves. Overburdened executives feel ashamed of not coping, trying to out-do the exhaustion. Tenaciously returning from leave with renewed determination to get on top of things, only to be overwhelmed within a few weeks.

Beyond Busy!

Some people wonder if their fraught work life is a consequence of aging. Others think they are having a midlife crisis or question their mental health. Most professionals don't have time to reflect on anything at all, just keeping their heads down, glad to reach the end of the day without failing in too public a way.

Being too busy is not just an individual issue. It's not only a consequence of an economic recession. This is a widespread social issue. Normalization is the process of making bewildering things seem normal. Everyone has got good at ignoring the little messages that tell us we might be collectively heading off course. The point of balance has been lost and no one knows how to get it back.

Telling the truth can paint a dismal picture. But acknowledging the reality is vital. It is a necessary step that will provide the impetus to make strong changes.

Tell me your story. What is your life like? Is it working? Are you looking for a path to a life beyond busy? Let's begin...

Create a Courageous Pause

“ *To find the real path we have to go off the path we are on now... take a good look at the life we have created.* ”
– David Whyte

I'll just get through this quarter...

Maybe this summer I'll get a break...

I just don't seem to be able to get rid of this nasty cold.

God, I feel so tired.

But I am lucky to have my job. I have to provide for my family.

We can't afford to take a risk. Others rely on me.

There are so few opportunities.

This is good enough; we are lucky compared to many.

Maybe things will be different one day... Maybe when I have paid off the house...

When I get a promotion, things will be better.

It is so busy, I am so busy...

Another day...maybe



MEL'S EXPERIENCE

Mel said that she must be the opposite of most people. She has stopped rushing. Step by step, she tells me how she has allowed herself to let everything go. Her days are as spacious and empty as they were when she was a child. She is now waking to the morning light, not to an alarm. She hears morning noises that she has never heard before. A cup of tea is her morning routine, breakfast an event.

Months before, Mel had struggled to take a pause from her work. She was petrified of losing connection with other people, falling out of the loop. She worried about missing out on important stuff, being forgotten about. It was a battle to sit still and not to rush around creating projects. Mel rearranged the furniture a number of times. But after a while she realised that she was sitting still for longer. She told me about her favorite chair, by the window. She laughingly says she has turned into an old woman in an old people's home. But I have never seen her looking so good. For the first time since I met her, her eyes are not bloodshot. Mel is looking around for the first time with clear eyes.

A pause.

Things have often got so out of balance that an initial pause is needed to temporarily unhook from the day-to-day routines. This is a potent way to prepare for strong and meaningful change. If you are serious about getting beyond busy you need first to stop! Not a holiday, or just a rest. Not dropping out or running away. "A pause" is a deliberate creation of some time to reflect and regroup. Anything less is fiddling round the edges.

Of course taking time right now is inconceivable.

Ripping away from the current demands is an improbable suggestion for busy people.

"I am inundated, this is the busiest time of the year".

"I have the such and such projects that have taken three years to build, if I leave now, it will fall over".

We are diligent hardworking and responsible people, holding significant roles. People rely on us. We carry important pieces of the puzzle, critical to the success of the venture. We believe in what we do and are deeply committed to our work.

It will feel simply wrong from the very first moment. Everything inside will scream that this isn't the right time and this is a bad idea.

"When x project is finished."

"When my partner retires."

"When my first child goes to school."

There will always be something important to finish, but a good time will never come.

Failing to make changes continues the sliding, slithering, downhill run towards compromised performance. Overburdened people start to fail. Determination is needed, be deliberate and intentional about beginning the change process. A pause will set the foundations to reengage at work more cleverly.

This is NOT a long weekend...

Will it take a day or two? A true pause can't be crammed into a long weekend. Creating quiet spacious time is a big thing. A proper gap needs to be prepared for. Anything less than two weeks is not enough time. You could need a longer time frame. This might sound outrageous in the middle of a normal life, but what is the alternative? Half coping, half drowning? You have to be ready for genuine change.

Taking annual leave or unpaid leave is an obvious choice. Other people have cleverly booked themselves an "innovation sabbatical" or some "strategic research" at the end of a conference or event. One woman requested a secondment to a special project and then took several months off before going back to her old role. A man decided to relocate to an office in another country and took a chunk of time to manage the move.

People take months off before starting with something new. They have believed in the need for time so much they are prepared to fund it. Paying themselves to take the space.

Tapping into the survival instinct is important to push through with plans for creating an opening. There are lots of different ways if the intention is strong. A cunning plan is required.

“But I will go completely crazy doing nothing!”

“Boring! This is unproductive and lazy.

I am useless like this. If I stop I might not ever start again.

I am hopeless even for an hour on my own!”

“I can’t let myself have this, I can’t justify it.”

Unhooking is uncomfortable. Like a spinning top that continues to whirl long after the release, heads are crammed with all manner of urgent bits. Nighttime dreams of work continue weeks after dropping. Pausing from decades of fast paced effort is hard for a busy, competent person. Yes, this process is tough.

“What will people think? They will say I have lost it! My reputation will be shot. I’ll never be taken seriously again or never get another opportunity.” These are natural concerns.

There are many ways that reputation is put at risk by continuing to struggle on. It can start by shouting at someone important. Foggy, reactive thinking is common in overstretched decision makers. Too many people start drinking to relax, and lose track of the impact. The inevitability of increasing illness takes people away from work and earning.

And guilt! “Why should I have this time? There is so much to do. I have let other people down. How will they cope? Who will do what needs to be done? This is such an indulgence! What a load of new age bollocks, there are starving people to feed!”

Witness all the wild minded, bouncing, ricocheting thoughts. Watch your restlessness. Be curious. What is your mind going to do next? Therapists for decades have recommended, “lean into the discomfort”. Pausing for a while is a difficult and messy endeavor.

Scribble feelings in a notebook, get them out. “I feel uncomfortable, ungrounded, out of center, unsure, unconfident. Tentative, timid, not powerful. Disconnected. What shall I do? Will I fade away...?”

Beyond Busy!

Watch the addictions. "I want a snack, a beer, a burger. To go shopping, to call that guy, to go for another run. Turn on the TV. Surf the net. Take a nap. Phone a friend. Have another snack!

Rediscover what "gradual" means! What if things were not instant, urgent and now? What does plodding feel like? Have I ever experienced a completely empty day? Try just listening. What can you hear around you? Quieting down. Slowing. Decelerating. Unhooking. Calming. Be kind to yourself as you sit. As you walk around the block. As you unhurriedly prepare a meal.

And then drop further. A time to turn inward and question everything. It is not only rest and recovery, it as a necessary journey of self-reclamation. A period of re-acquaintance with yourself. You became distant in the midst of it all. Tearing away from the daily grind introduces us to ourselves again. A space is created. A space where something different can begin to grow. A new attitude can start to surface.

The adventure to life "beyond busy" has begun...

Get some fight back: Arouse rebellion

Rebellion /ri'belyən/ ...the action or process of resisting authority, control, or convention.

This is just the way it is – this is reality.

If you want the rewards then this is what is required.

This is just what everyone has to do.

It has always been this way.

It's too risky.

It is too big for me to change.

I can't make a difference.

I don't know how to change things. It is too much.

Don't rock the boat.

SARAH

Sarah is mid thirties, bubbly and vivacious. She has a senior role, loves her work and is good at it. Sarah is destined for more leadership roles. She has two children of 2 and 5. Sarah says she has always had amazing energy and that she never really gets too tired. But lately Sarah told me she has had enough. She feels frayed at the edges.

It hit Sarah recently that she wants change. She had to leave a pivotal meeting at work, one that could make or break her position in the team. She had got a call from the school. Her little boy, freshly in year 1, had managed to soil his pants and was waiting half-cleaned in the sickbay. Sarah arranged with her husband to coordinate the afternoon. Together they juggled the pick-up, the clean up and the meetings they both had for the rest of the day. She laughingly told me she had rushed back to her meeting, realizing later she still had a plastic bag filled with soiled pants in her business bag.

Sarah is fed up. She is more than fed up! She comes to our meetings laughing and slightly wild-eyed. She says that this is insane! Sarah says she is not prepared to choose between her work and her family anymore. She won't compromise her potential either. Sarah isn't sure what she is going to do yet, but she is damn sure that things have to change. I can see that Sarah is ready to fight for her life!

Ordinary Uprising

Resolute, Unapologetic. Insist. Declare. Audacious.

These are fighting words. Words not common at work. The fighting spirit has disappeared. Enthusiastic people have their passions channeled into sensible desk jobs, into the administration of organisations. Any fight remaining is made acceptable through time-framed objectives. Submerged by busy, everyone is tired and rebellion has vanished.

Rebellion happens on TV news, in a foreign country. Not in Williams road, around the corner. Never part of Monday morning management meetings. We are ordinary. Everyday people. Dependable. Playing the game and mostly following the rules. Being responsible, sacrificing to get ahead. Good citizens, taking care of our families. Working hard for the future. Doing the best we can. We are not the rebels.

Expectations for balance have plummeted since the economic meltdown. Any wins for flexible working arrangements have been undermined. The drive for growth is uncontested and any argument for balance is seen as naive. In this context the spirit of rebellion feels far way. Keep heads down, play safe and just get things done. Be sensible.

But we are busy to breaking point and things aren't improving. Compliance and excessive hours aren't a guarantee of job security. Good performance doesn't provide immunity in a downsize. Just playing the game might be more of a risk to you and to the organisation too. Something different has to happen.



When is the right time for making changes? What moves and shakes things up? Do we let life roll along as it is and stay quietly struggling? Do we wait until we have no choice but to react? Good enough is not enough. Is this how you want your life to be in 10, 15 or 20 years? Would you be fine for your son and daughter to work at this pace? Can you fathom life continuing without a change? There are limits. It is time.

Overwhelm is not a personal failure

Individually, people ask themselves “why do I feel so overwhelmed, have I failed?” or “how can I survive this or escape?” Time management also focuses personally. You need to make better decisions. You need stronger self-discipline. Questioning how we are living, as a society isn’t part of the conversation.

If this is everyone’s struggle, a wider social issue, then better questions are, “how is what we are experiencing part of the wider situation at work?” And “what is not working about the way we live and work in this generation?” Maybe working habits that are considered “normal” are unfeasible. Let’s declare the current ways of operating unworkable!

The time for rebellion by ordinary people is here. Spikes of frustration and anger are mounting in a widespread call for change. Remember when we believed in making a proper difference? When we had the innocence to question how things worked. When was the last time you felt passionate about anything?

It is not enough to just struggle from day to day! Don’t stay quiet. Work and leadership is too important. “No more! It is time to change... insist! Test it out. Experiment with how the spirit of rebellion feels. What would you say if you knew we were part of a global shift in the way we work and live? What are our rights as individuals, family members and community members? What else might be possible?

We are ready.

Beyond troublemaking, blaming or fault finding

“ We stopped looking for others to tell us what to do, we stopped whining about how bad things were around us and began thinking about how we could leverage our experiences to make things better. ”

– Mintzberg

Feeling resolute and speaking up is not an invitation for blame. It is easy to hold others responsible for busyness and overwhelm. “If only “they” weren’t so unreasonable”. “If he/she would just be more realistic”. “This organisation is sick”. Listen to anyone complaining and the ubiquitous “they” sneaks into the conversation. Why don’t “they” do something? How did “they” let this happen?

Unfortunately the grass isn’t any greener anywhere else, including self-employment! The attitude of “busy” is deep-seated across entire cities. It is no one’s and everyone’s fault. It entails taking absolute personal responsibility for ourselves and the world as we make it. Beyond the game of faultfinding and right and wrong there is another way. Rather than a rebellion “against”, this is a rebellion for new ways forward. This is an uprising in support of life, communities and the planet.

If it is to be – it is up to me! And us...

A rebellion for ... ?

None of us know really what the future will look like. There isn’t a map to follow anymore. No one has the right answer. A single leader can’t point the way ahead. A fresh future is emerging in a myriad of ways. Right now you don’t need to know what it looks like in detail. Change starts with a new attitude.

Revolution, or just plain old change, always begins with a shift in thinking. Noticing thoughts and habitual behaviors is the beginning and it takes practice! The attitudes that enable us to continue working in overwhelm are deep seated. There are clues in our language, in the words that we hear ourselves and those around us saying.

Beyond Busy!

"I'll get through" till Friday".

"I'm surviving".

We'll hold out till the next quarter".

Age old sayings slip off the tongue almost unnoticed:

"Back to the grindstone".

"Through the fire".

"It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it"

The workplace is full of expressions of endurance. Accept. Seek permission. Agree. Accommodate. Compromise. Another step further than tolerance is disengagement. Corporate investment in engagement strategies is monumental. Failure of these policies only serves to reinforce that motivation is an inside job. Are you engaged? Watch your feelings of wilting acceptance, complacency and detachment. "I'll just get on with it."

"No one can make a difference, this is the way things are."

How often do you accept being bored and feeling numb? Small acts of self-betrayal happen on a daily basis. "Just implement. Don't ask questions. Don't take risks. Become invisible." Thoughts of giving up are life sapping, destroying optimism and forward momentum.

It is always a choice, we make the decision. Introducing a rebellious spirit creates a whole different stance. Instead of "holding out" – other thoughts can grow. A rebellious attitude fuels questioning, challenge and creativity.

Start questioning

Question! Work conventions discourage too many questions. At school, questioners' were labeled as difficult. Obedience and compliance were and are still rewarded.

Work projects are driven by "when?". When does this need doing by? When should it be finished? Standard practice has us scurrying to meet a deadline without fully

understanding where the work fits within a wider picture. Bright people try to come up with a quick response to a non-negotiable demand. Fast paced, busy work ensues.

The first question to ourselves should always be “why?” What is the thinking behind this idea? What is the bigger goal? Why now? Being able to effectively challenge takes practice. We have a right to ask questions and to expect convincing answers.

Challenge more

“
*The manager accepts the status quo;
the leader challenges it.*”

– Warren Bennis

Challenge. Resist. Oppose. Disagree. These words conjure up images of difficult people. We are trained to be nice, to smile and be pleasant. Dissent is discouraged. A smooth surface of consensus belies underlying disagreement. Corridor conversations are rampant, few people willing to stand out or risk isolation.

Make a stand. Speak up for a new and different way forward. Join with others to challenge big decisions. You might not have the top job, or feel you have enough status to speak up. It doesn't matter just offer a contrasting view. There is more room to move than we might think. This doesn't mean hostile or antagonistic accusations or personalised criticism. Carefully thought through and well articulated arguments work. Even without an immediate solution we have the right to slow down proceedings, to ask for clarity and to express concern. Refuse to play small and safe. Take a deeper breath. Feel some energy returning. Just in time. Rebellion for life and leadership beyond busy is surfacing...

Revive Purpose

“*The fact is, my brain isn't on business as usual;
it is on business as it could be.*”

– Susan Scott 2010

What is it all about?

A nagging feeling... that this isn't it.

I never thought it would turn out this way.

Where should I be? What am I here for?

What next? What do I really want?

I have forgotten what is important.

I want to do something that really matters.

Is this it? Is this my life?

Here we are with another year passing by. And another...

I know I don't want to carry on that old way but I am not sure where I am headed now.

If only I knew what was next for me.



Purpose

DAVID

David was crazily busy over the past 5 years. So many aspects of the business consumed him. When David realised he consistently wasn't on his game at work he negotiated a 6-month "sabbatical". David's success record meant that the company wanted to hang on to him if they possibly could.

David knew he needed time to think. Over the first weeks of his leave, He had got lots of jobs done around the house. He always enjoyed playing golf and he appreciated reading the entire paper uninterrupted. But after the initial pleasure of having space, David said he felt blank. He wasn't excited by anything and was frightened by the long empty days ahead. He considered returning to work.

When David approached me, his goal was to find a new career path or business that would excite him. He couldn't understand his lack of drive. David also suspected that a new job wouldn't really do it for him either. Although he hated himself for being so unfocused he wondered if he needed to find a whole direction. He raised his eyes whenever he mentioned this, laughingly referring to his "breakdown". David also berated himself about even asking questions about fulfillment, when he had life so good. He felt guilty that it wasn't enough. He wished he could suddenly know what it was that was missing. He wanted a fresh focus and then he wanted to get on with it. And quickly!

What's it all for?

Rushing along in a blur of activity and outward motivation feels in control. Accomplishing targets is applauded and gives good quick highs. Goals are ticked off adeptly, until one day the "what's it all for" question catches up and knocks the wind out.

Being busy makes it easy to forget what it's all for. The chaos of everyday crowds out a sense of meaning or true direction. When busy day-to-day survival is the priority, significance takes a back seat. Dreams are submerged under the ceaseless inbox.

We all know people who have experienced a crisis and made changes because of it. Big life upheaval often follows a health diagnosis, a marriage break up or the loss of someone close. Crisis is the common catalyst for making changes. But this is reactive, accommodating life until external events get our attention.

To consciously decide to make changes without the prompt of a crisis is unusual. Rediscovering the "why" of work and life will strengthen direction and provide a genuine focus for your next steps. Purpose is the x-factor. Reviving purpose is the

boldest measure leaders can take to help rise above busy. It is not necessary to leave your current job or reassess your entire career. But you do need to understand what is most important to you and what you are prepared to fight for.

“Just tell me what I should do...”

Some lucky people know exactly what they are meant to do with their life. But most of us are mystified. How on earth do I know what it is I should be doing? A specific vision isn't possible at the beginning. We can't decide what we are going to do next and then just do it. Parker Palmer, a top management consultant, says it is more likely that we move chaotically and unceremoniously along, sometimes escaping, sometimes avoiding, and sometimes failing. In his case, life didn't offer a way forward, but that way closed behind him. Direction is forged when things begin to crumble and not work anymore. Sometimes it doesn't look pretty.

The process of discovering purpose can't be hurried. Finding the “why” is a longer study, evolving continually as we develop and grow. It is elusive. If only we could wake up one day and know exactly what we are here for.

High performers are good at setting a predetermined objective and driving towards it. Not afraid of hard work, pushing things aside. We can ride rough shod over ourselves in order to achieve a target. The “meaning question” starts with not having answers at first. Uncertainty doesn't feel good to competent people, but let yourself be directionless for a while.

Goals often arise from the external things we think we need or should want. Things that might make us happy. Courage expert and top researcher, Brene Brown warns that the answers are never found in more money, more accomplishments, more power, more perfection, more security, more “better than”.

Driving for goals that are disconnected from a deeper purpose feels hollow. It looks productive, but is empty. Goal achievement is straightforward with discipline and single-mindedness. What is much harder is taking the time to work out what is most important.

Where do I start? Back to basics

“ *The things that matter most must never be at the mercy of the things that matter least.* ”

– Goethe

When reassessing life – go back to basics. What is important? Things like food on the table, a place to live, people around that we care for and love. So much becomes inconsequential when the bigger purpose is up for question. Focus on the things right in front of you. Simple, unassuming, everyday things. Things we might have rushed past before and never noticed or appreciated.

What really has meaning? A loved one, a child? A first cup of tea, the silence in the morning? The sunlight on the trees in the middle of the day? The sound of rain on the roof. The sound of the waves. Falling asleep. Reading a book. Gently washing up. The smile of a stranger.

Michael Bungay Stanier says that in order to say yes to something we have to say no to other things. What could drop away? What could you do without? Time really is the new wealth. De-clutter the diary from needless stuff. Sort. Reduce. Toss out. Streamline.

Drop any negative voices – preserving image is for busy people

Searching for more meaning won't provide immediate pats on the back. If you feel you have to put on a show or keep up appearances it will be harder. People might think you have lost the plot for a while.

Test out new things, following your nose. Speak when you don't know what you are going to say, and be amazed what comes out of your mouth. You may have no patience for idle chatter and everyday banter about busy things. You want the real talking to start, the magic moments when people really open up and share themselves. Track down things that light you up. Connect with people who are less busy and more alive.

The voice inside can be ferocious. "I must be mad, where is this all heading? This feels like leaping off a cliff, with no place to land. I just want to get back to normal. There is no such thing as nirvana, I had it okay, this is too hard."

We all know about "the shoulds", that disease that got us into trouble in the first place.

I should be more sensible, not so selfish. I should be more realistic and just get on with things. "Can't" is another voice to drop. "People can't have everything. You can't have a life filled with meaning; you are a provider and a parent!" The voices are strong. Ask yourself where those messages came from. Do these negative ideas belong to part of yourself that you no longer need? And then just push on through. Replace the negative thoughts with new fresher ideas. I could, I can and I will!

Listen to the inklings

Suspend being practical and rational! Fresh direction doesn't arrive in a nice neat package. Insight comes more tentatively; whispers at the back of the mind. Notice things you haven't paid attention to before. Sights or sounds pop out, triggering a feeling or placing an idea in your head. Never fully formed, but offering little clues, pricking interest.

Another capability is required now, different from the drive and push of goal setting. It involves listening more, returning back towards ourselves. Small new ideas begin to trickle in. Find the edge of what has been invisible up to now. You might be not quite sure of the full shape of it yet. Know that something is brewing. Don't rush. Be receptive. Open up. Observe. Feel.

Fish your feet

Purpose doesn't need to be big and important. Start with what is in front of you. Sniff around the place like a dog following a new scent. Start with enjoyment. What are the better parts of your day? What do you look forward to? What gives you energy right now? If you could do anything with no constraints what would you like to have a go at?

Have fun. The whole culture conspires against enjoyment. Hard work is our inheritance. We know how to do the tough grind, put our needs aside and delay

Beyond Busy!

dreams. Instead, play with ideas more and avoid getting sidetracked by wondering how it could ever happen. The practical side of us will immediately halt new thoughts: "Nice idea, but that would never work". Peter Block advocates that the answer to "how?" is always "yes". You can get to the how later as you begin forging new paths. Suspend the action steps for now.

Trust that out of the haze some clarity will arrive. Not all at once. Little pieces become better defined. Fragments come first, whilst the rest remains foggy. Hold those fragments. Know they will make sense eventually. Don't rush. You are coming towards yourself. Have faith.

And soon, without big announcement things will take shape. You turn around and almost imperceptibly something new has become part of your life. Your questions have changed. Your orientation is slightly different. You are finally in home territory.

It grows. It builds. This is your life and you begin to more clearly know what you want. You begin to be gripped by some things, more than others. You can see another future emerging. It is time for taking a new path. One that is less busy and more impactful. Your life (and your leadership) has become an affair of the heart.



Make a New Path. Business not as usual!

“ *We want a plan, a programme a blueprint. We want a double-decker bus, a schedule and a tour guide. We want order and control and a telescope into the future... but it is just one foot in front of the other, on a road your intellect may never understand, but your heart will never doubt...* ”

– Tama Keives

What if?

We could possibly...could it work?

We know the vision... but it feels a long way from here to there!

What first? Where on earth do I start?

This is so new. I don't know what it should look like.

This has never been done before.

I wish this dream came with an instruction sheet!

Why am I not clearer? This feels like driving in the dark.

This feels enormous – is it just too big?

What will people think when we don't know what to do next?

This is hard.

What now?

REBECCA

Rebecca had been clear for some time now, she knew what she wanted. She could see it really clearly, almost taste it. But when Rebecca arrives to see me she was feeling at a loss. She explains that her organisation is one of many in an established mature industry. Most managers around tell her there is nothing new under the sun, that they have seen it all and they know what works and what doesn't.

Rebecca says that her ideas raise eyebrows at work. Everyone is so busy trying to keep making sales, but that sales have been getting harder to achieve every year. Rebecca is frustrated that no one wants to talk about it. She says that people are full of excuses why her industry is different, that cash is short and that there is nothing that can be done but to work harder.

Rebecca has some grand ideas. She gets so animated when she talks about what is possible. But she is stuck. She realizes that the old way wasn't working but she didn't know what to do next. She isn't sure how to start, but she feels much more confident to keep pursuing the ideas. She is making a new path...

Having a renewed sense of purpose doesn't mean knowing what to do next. There is a huge gap between a new aspiration and the current reality. Mobilizing new things is tough.

A normal tendency is to get really busy again, running fast towards a new goal, slipping back into old habits. The challenge is to create new possibilities, without recreating the crazy, busy world of work. Whole different perspectives and ways of working are required when forging new paths.

Everyday courage

No grand actions are required; we just need to begin speaking up about what we care about" Meg Wheatley

This is precarious work. Managers like tried and tested ways forward and yet leading is focused on catalyzing entirely new possibilities. Few of us are prepared to grapple with what this really means. Although we flirt with the idea of innovation, it scares most people to death. Leading means going places that never existed before, and trying out unusual, untested things. It requires unlearning a whole lot of things that have worked well in the past.

Leadership has always been connected with courage, a heroic image, the all-knowing champion. Courage is not claimed by normal people. Bravery is left to those others, the adventurous go getting types. Not to us in ordinary life. We let ourselves off the hook.

Everyday courage is an optional extra.

"I might, maybe, perhaps."

"When the washing's done..."

"If I get a chance later in the morning."

"Maybe tomorrow" triumphs over "do it now".

Courageous everyday action is a decision. Stay put and feel around for the next best move. Being tentative must be one of the least rewarded conditions in organisational life. To admit to being uncertain and unsure are usually grounds for a departure conversation. We like decisive people at the front of our group. It takes true bravery to move forward without knowing exactly the target, without knowing all the answers.

Renowned Corporate Poet, David Whyte encourages us to embrace our faltering selves. It is sometimes necessary to be tentative. Being too certain isn't helpful during exploration. What might seem like hesitant stumbling is essential groundwork for the next breakthrough. Tell people that we don't have the answers – yet.

Step off the well-trodden path...

Leading requires scrambling into unfamiliar ground. The way forward is often hidden; obstacles get in the way. It is impossible to control or predict what might happen at any step. It might be muddy and a bit messy. You make a plan and it never goes to plan. The way hasn't yet been cleared.

The skills, processes, and tools that worked before might help a bit, but will not be enough to take you into new paths. Let go of what you know. This is the territory of the beginner, the new learner again.

We think that we should know ahead of time what steps are required from beginning to end. But we make the path as we go. Take one step at a time. Begin where you

are. There isn't a list to check off. You don't need to have the full picture in sight. Just move forward and then look around. See what else comes into sight. Don't wait for permission. Step out. Find yourself in places you don't usually go. Talk to people you don't usually talk to. Do something you have never done before.

Make “thinking time” sacred!

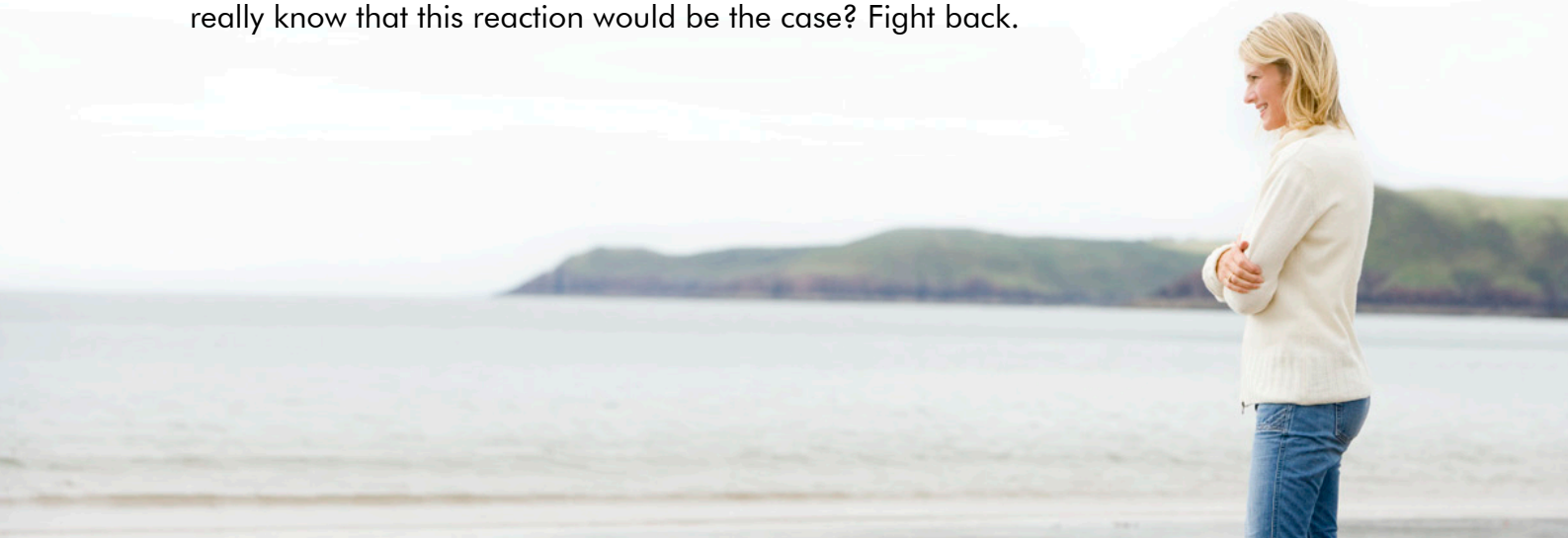
“*Too much reflection and nothing gets done, too much action and things get done thoughtlessly.*”

– Mintzberg

When to act and when to wait? Creating new paths requires both action and reflection and the magic is knowing which is required and when. Being thoughtful at work is not credited as essential work. People tend to reflect outside of working hours. In the car, whilst walking or biking, in the shower. But creating proper unstructured time for thinking on the job is as important. Schedule regular occasions for stepping back from people and tasks. Claim this time and believe in its importance. Fight the belief that working is “doing” all the time.

Take a morning or a good couple of hours in the afternoon. Go where you think the best. Is it walking? Is it sitting somewhere in nature, or staring out of the window? Make sure you are uninterrupted.

“I couldn't do that! Wandering around doing nothing? Not in my world, you don't. You have no idea of the demands I am facing. My boss/reports would think I was slacking off.” The excuses and unhelpful judgments flood into our minds when we push the boundaries of acceptability. Ask yourself “is this really true now”? Do you really know that this reaction would be the case? Fight back.



Let go the pressure for a decision or conclusion. Allow your attention to free flow. Ideas are never what they appear at first. Like little seedlings that are easily crushed, let your thoughts sit untouched and unfiltered. Know that the process of insight is at work. Give yourself the luxury of time for ideas to percolate. Sleep on things. Your actions will feel more spacious and you will have more substance to contribute and be less reactive.

Some work is practical, everyday action, solid implementation and operational. But watch when you prioritize just the action. Get better at asking what is big picture work and what is important task work.

Connection *is* action! – Leading together.

Creating new paths is better done together. In the busy epidemic, relationships fall off the edge. Leadership researcher, Susan Scott says that leading and innovation requires not just having a business conversation but a human one. The push and pull of moving each other forward. Not behind one leader, but leading together. Creating partnerships.

It begins and ends with speaking up about the things that are really important. Accomplishing tasks is secondary. Too often the cry is to stop talking and just do something, but real dialogue is how we find our way into the future.

Have everyone in the room. People from all parts. Get everyone's voice heard. Validate their contribution. Watch when the conversation goes too safely practical. Drop your façade; your truth telling will enable someone else's. Get emotional! Get personal. Be vulnerable, especially if you are in a powerful role.

Challenge each other. Listen more. Question the status quo. What else is important beyond business as usual? Be prepared to be surprised by your own and other people's ideas. Changes in the relationships are in fact a new path.

Get into the mystical groove

Making new paths requires a little bit of magic beyond the everyday, beyond the purely practical and rational. Do things that bring an expanded awareness. Where do you have your best insights? What is your intuition telling you?

Creating new paths is full of contradictions and paradoxes. A strong sense of trust and belief in things beyond ourselves is needed. Many successful leaders rely on faith and guidance from places unseen. It is valuable to be able to ask for help. It doesn't matter if you are not religious, just offer up a wish, and send it out beyond the office, past the trees and off into the sky: "Please guide us to the next step". "Give me strength to discover the new ways forward"

Breathe! You are creating new paths.

Keep going! Persevere

“ *A jug fills drop by drop.* ”

– *Buddhist quote*

The time is now.

This is my destiny and responsibility.

I want to keep going. I believe in this so much...

But I am tired... It feels a bit endless.

No one understands what I am on about...

I wish I could just be finished.

It's too much... I must be mad to want to change things.

Who do I think I am to believe I can make a difference?

All that inspiring stuff was fine as an idea.

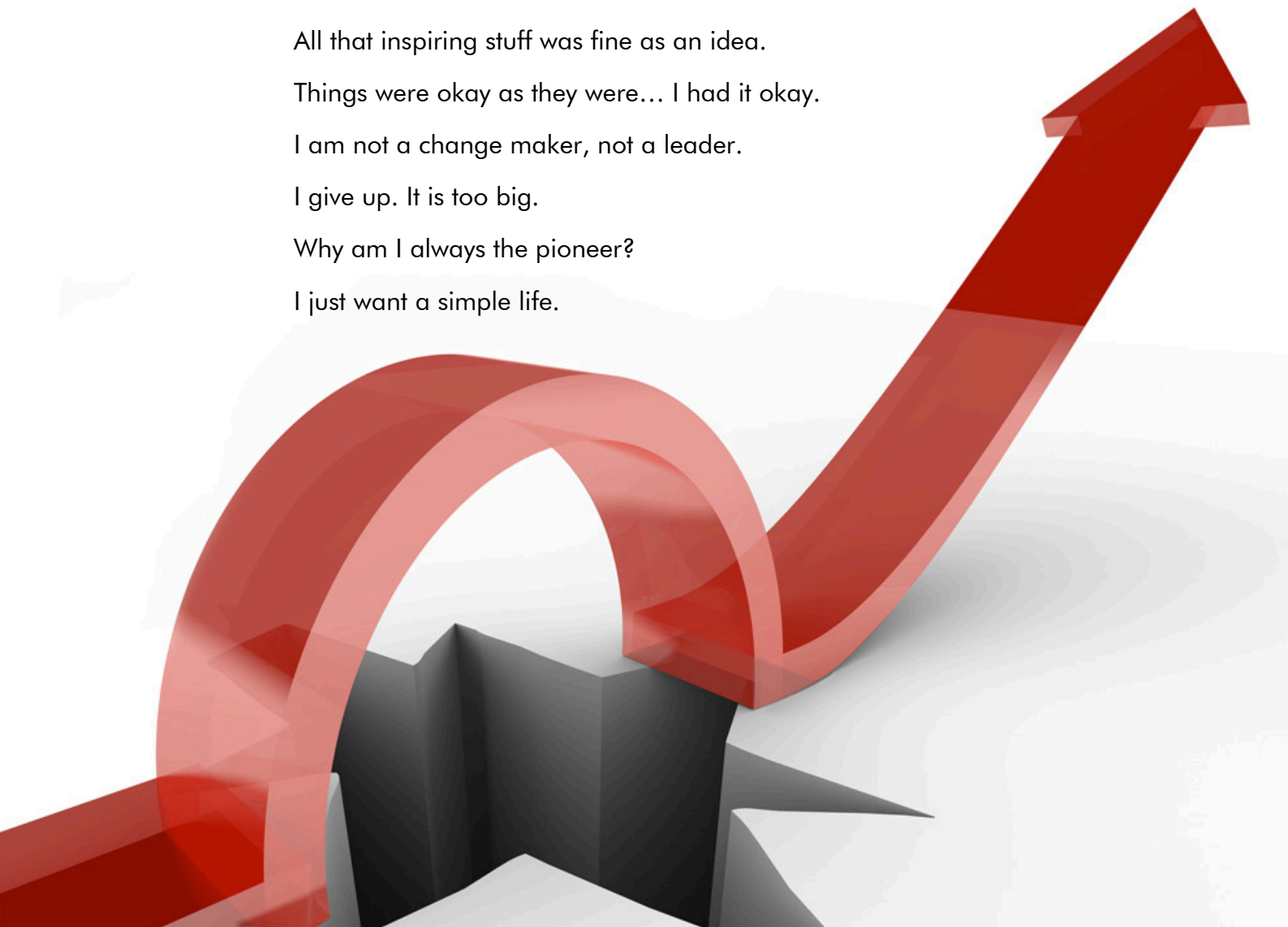
Things were okay as they were... I had it okay.

I am not a change maker, not a leader.

I give up. It is too big.

Why am I always the pioneer?

I just want a simple life.



STUART

Stuart was going along fine, but today he arrived looking agitated. He tells me that he spent several hours on the web trying to action bits and came up with nothing for the time. He realised he was getting tangled in the day to day again, only dealing with the urgent stuff and being interrupted. He said he puts hours aside to work on goals, but that progress is slow and he feels guilty and unproductive.

When I suggest that he break it down to little pieces he snorts. He knows how to go one step at a time, doing just one thing towards the vision. We have been through this. It is just that today he hasn't got much energy and his vision feels too far off.

Stuart tells me that he feels fed up. He is mired in the everyday world again. It seems too hard for Stuart to get his head up again, far enough to remember what it was that he is aiming for.

As we talk Stuart can see that he is losing momentum. He expected things to move faster. This is a lull in the forward movement. Today Stuart is asking himself if it is worth the bother. He has momentarily lost sight of his dreams.

Persist

You've got some fight back and simplified things. You are more aware of your purpose than ever before. Following a deeper vision you are making progress.
... And life still carry's on.

Everyday demanding and complicated life.

The sun still rises and sets.

There is little praise and any results are hard to see.

It isn't a straight line from actions to positive outcome.

Work remains confusing, convoluted.

It is easy to be stalled, to get off track.

If it were easy, things would change overnight and leadership wouldn't be necessary. Getting beyond busy is dogged persistence. It isn't enough to rely on purpose to drive everyday leadership action. Keeping above the detail and sustaining meaningful work requires perseverance. Leadership is a continuous exercise in showing up.

Remind yourself daily

Life beyond busy is a daily commitment. This adventure isn't a one off choice, made in the moment and then finished. It is a way of life. Ongoing. Setting intentions each day is a wonderful habit to get into. What am I doing this for? What steps am I taking today?

Write your guiding purpose out. Hang it somewhere you will see it throughout the day. Every activity, task, project, conversation sits behind your core purpose. It is a great way to know what to prioritise and what to let go.



There are always cycles where we feel more motivated and productive. Let the cycles come and go, and regularly revisiting the "why" will help you keep the focus alive and growing.

Maintaining good day-to-day resilience habits is mandatory for professional people, but so easy to forget. Keeping up the exercise routine and good nutrition is essential to maintain wellness and preserve resilience.

What are the daily habits that keep you healthy and thriving?

What do you know works for you? What sustains?

A walk every day, even if for only 10 minutes?

Fresh water. Some sunshine.

An inspiring book or poem.

Laughter and touch.

A little nap?

Nourish yourself and the work can then continue.

Allow fed up!

“ *Any idiot can face a crisis – it's day-to-day living that wears you out.* ”

– Chekhov

It is usual for leaders to collapse sometimes, feel frustrated and lose sight of the goal. To fail, to lose hope, to want to give up. It is ok to feel this way. Expect it. Rhythms and cycles are necessary.

Achieving balance is only possible by going out of balance for a while. But be careful. Busy is not the solution to despair. That was how the big mess started. Don't push blindly on. It doesn't have to be finished all at once. Allow things to drop and to carry on without you for a while. Wait. Start again.

All is well. It is all in order.

Be ready for when the time is right.

The fire will come again.

Rationalize Rationalizations

Negative internal voices have to be continually fought. Our minds create rationalizations that are astoundingly clever and believable. Even mundane procrastination can take us off track;

“That cup of tea that I left half finished, I would like another one now”.

“My window is so dirty, I can hardly see through it”.

And another morning goes by, and another.

When we truly commit to a project and get closer to success, the more extreme excuses start up. The thoughts are sly, slipping in just below our attention. Murmuring in a half awakened ear. Charading as a voice of reason, of wisdom.

"This work has been done before, others do it better than me".

"What makes me think I have anything to say?"

"Who do I think I am to be pushing for change"?

It is hard to know if the judgments are offering good logic, preventing mistakes and protecting us from making a grand fool of ourselves. Generally it is just sabotage and negativity. Everyone has these thoughts.

Keep going.

Powerful partnerships prevail

Persevering on new paths is always a collaborative venture. Working on things together doesn't just happen without attention and effort. Maintaining partnerships will help you and everyone to keep going, to carry on. Structure time together that is unhooked from doing. Have regular check ins. Ask each other;

Where have we got to?

What is going well?

What changes would help us move forward? What improvements can we make?

Are we being true to the vision?

As well as working with others we need to keep protecting ourselves from others too!

Am I responding to other people's agenda's and losing track of my own?

Is the work I am currently doing really someone else's?

Am I keeping my sights on what is most important?

Keep learning, gather wisdom.

“ *Leaders are more powerful role models when they learn than when they teach.* ”
– Rosabeth Moss Kantor

Continual learning will help us stay beyond busy and moving towards new possibilities. Learning is not just the province of the novice or the beginner. Learning is life-long. When challenges come up – and they will! **Ask yourself:**

“What am I on the edge of learning?”
“What is the REAL challenge here?”

The answers are always inside us. Listening to that inner voice will offer up insight and patience when it is most needed. Scribble some notes. See what you might say to yourself. What gems of wisdom are just underneath? Find every occasion to check in with your own true voice. Conclusions don't need to be reached; just connecting back inside is enough.

Smile

Learning to be happy whatever is going on is an art form. Sometimes things go well. Sometimes things fail. At times we have to surrender. To let go of the expectations and watch what happens next.

Discontent is a bad habit. Look for what is working. Celebration sounds a bit exhausting when we have been working hard, but applaud when things do go well. Catch yourself when you are in flow and marvel. Every time you notice you are less busy and more focused – congratulate yourself and others.

Start now – get support!

“ *If we are facing in the right direction,
all we have to do is keep on walking.* ”

– Buddhist saying



This guide is an appeal for leadership by ordinary, passionate and well-rested people. Competitive advantage and “alive” executives go hand in hand. This is true for every industry; every large corporation, every tiny business or self employed person. The spirit of rebellion is bringing a new way of thinking and working, just at the right time. Getting beyond busy is your most important development goal.

A strong and confidential sounding board is essential as you make new decisions and create new pathways at work. It is too easy to default to old behaviors when working under pressure. A good supporter will help you make a real difference and to enjoy life more too.

Tell me your story.

What are you trying out?

What are your hopes and fears?

What do you need to do first to create a life beyond busy?

Contact me to set up a Beyond Busy session at
Loretta@coachingmentoring.co.nz or visit
www.coachingmentoring.co.nz.