Is 'busyness' really necessary...or did Leonardo Da Vinci have it right?

'The greatest geniuses sometimes accomplish more when they work less' **Leonardo da Vinci**

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Many participants on the Leadership Programme have shared a variety of successful techniques, practices and rituals that have helped them deal with the busyness of their lives.

It's a busy world out there!

'Blorft is an adjective I just made up that means "completely overwhelmed but proceeding as if everything is fine and reacting to the stress with the torpor of a possum". I have been blorft every day for the past seven years!' **Tina Fey**

On the first day of the Leadership Programme, we ask people to introduce themselves and to describe how it feels to do the job they are currently doing. A common theme is how busy people are, with responses along the lines of: 'I'm spinning plates all the time'; 'I'm tearing my hair out'; 'I'm caught inside a washing machine'; 'I'm in the middle and being attacked from all sides'; 'I'm constantly on the playing field and never up in the stands'...and so on.

There is no doubt that the world we live and work in is becoming more and more busy – long working days, multiple demands on our time, 24/7 connectivity through technology, constant distractions from vibrating smartphones with email messages, texts, social media, breaking news etc. The world is 'always on' and we feel like there are not enough hours in the day to get everything done. Our 'bandwidth' is being stretched but our productivity is getting bogged down. The lines between work and personal life have also become more and more blurred, and it feels as though there is less and less time for family, leisure and relaxation.

But is all this 'busyness' really necessary? Or are we being swept away in an unproductive (but strangely satisfying!) rush of activity and stress? Could we be more effective in the way we manage our time, energy and focus and actually accomplish more, as Leonardo da Vinci suggested, by working less?

This paper summarises some of the thinking on this subject, as well as some recommendations on how to make the required changes, and also shares some of the practical techniques, rituals and so on that Leadership Programme participants have shared with us over the years. We encourage you to reflect on these and think about changes you might need to make.

Our point of view is that it is possible to manage our time and energy more effectively and achieve a better balance. We have learned from many of our programme participants that by taking time out to re-think our work patterns and to develop new, personalised routines and rituals, we can achieve better balance and well-being in our lives, while also becoming more effective and productive. It is not possible for us to operate flat out all the time and expect to be at our best. We believe it is a worthwhile investment of our time to step back and re-evaluate our 'busyness'.

Work, leisure...or sleep?

'We live in a society that thinks work is far better than leisure – but when you really understand what leisure is, what it means to the quality of your life and relationships, leisure is really important. Without time to reflect, to live fully present in the moment and face what is transcendent about our lives, we are doomed to live in purposeless and banal busyness.' **Benjamin K Hunnicutt**

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Despite the predictions of John Maynard Keynes in the thirties, various academics in the fifties and even Richard Nixon in the sixties, things haven't exactly turned out the way that people expected, which was that, by the nineties, working hours and weeks would be shortening, people would be retiring by the age of 38 and that leisure time would be for everyone, not just the wealthy. Alvin Toffler, in his landmark 1970 book Future Shock, was closer to the mark when he predicted that modern technologies would change the degree of sophistication beyond our wildest dreams and that life would change faster and faster in every walk of life and that this change – a culture shock of the future, a future shock – threatened to overwhelm us.

Martin Moore-Ede (1993), in his book The Twenty Four Hour Society, saw a fundamental conflict between the demands of our man-made civilisation and the very design of the human body – designed to hunt by day, sleep by night and never travel more than a few dozen miles between sunrise and sunset. He suggested that we are focused on optimising technology and equipment, rather than optimising human alertness and performance. He maintained that there are nine switches of human alertness and that we should understand how to manipulate them in order to gain power over the human brain. The nine switches are:

1. Sense of danger, interest or opportunity

2 Muscular activity

3 Time of day on the circadian clock

4 Sleep bank balance

5 Ingested nutrients and chemicals

6 Environmental light

7 Environmental temperature and humidity

8 Environmental sound

9 Environmental aroma

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> We have no choice but to cram as much as possible into every day

The challenge to all of these, he says, is the human desire for comfort, which is not compatible with normal alertness.

Leon Kreitzman, a social forecaster who researched the 24-hour trends in society for BT and First Direct during the late nineties, also wrote a book – interestingly with the same title as Moore-Ede's – The 24 Hour Society, in which he observed the growth of global business operations, the impact on working practices and how people's leisure and shopping habits span the full 24 hours of a day (Kreitzman, 1999). He predicted a seamless total-hours society, which would relieve some of the time pressures on people and result in more efficient usage of office buildings, shops, leisure facilities, schools and so on. By his own admission, some of this may be a bit too much like science fiction and there are certainly divided views about 24-hour activity, but there are elements of what he was talking about that we can recognise today.

Benjamin K Hunnicutt, Professor of Leisure Studies at the University of Iowa, focused his writings on the history of work and leisure, with a particular focus on the rise of the 'culture of work' and the decline and trivialisation of leisure.

He noted that people in the modern world are so caught up in busyness and overwork that they have lost the ability to even imagine what leisure is (Hunnicutt, 1990). John P Robinson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, whose focus is on time-use research and the quality of life, had a different point of view, however. In his book Time for Life, (Robinson & Godbey, 1997), he explains research into time use, which shows that Americans have almost five more hours of free time per week than in the sixties, but that very few Americans realise this. He also observed time being used as a convenient excuse, 'Saying I don't have time is just another way of saying I'd rather be doing something else.'

Managing energy, not time, is the key!

'Energy, not time, is the fundamental currency of high performance!'

Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz

> We encourage you to take ownership of your time and energy and find good habits that will prevent the busyness and the mad rush to do everything now.

Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, who wrote a very interesting Harvard Business Review article called 'The Making of a Corporate Athlete', have been working with world-class athletes for thirty years and have transferred their learnings into the corporate world. They believe that the way to bring mind, body and spirit to peak condition is to learn that recovering energy is as important as expending it.

In their book, On Form, they point out how our rhythms are rushed and relentless and how we celebrate quick reaction, rather than considered reflection, assuming that we have no choice but to cram as much as possible into every day (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). In their view, the more we take responsibility for the energy we bring to the world, the more empowered and productive we become. As leaders, they see us as the 'stewards' of organisational energy and they encourage us to bring more positive energy to the workplace. They call the skilful management of energy, individually and organisationally, 'full engagement' and suggest adopting four key energy management principles:

1. Drawing on four separate but related sources of energy: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual

2. Balancing energy expenditure with intermittent energy renewal

3. Building capacity by pushing beyond our normal limits

4. Using positive energy rituals/routines for managing energy

They highlight the power of rituals – behaviours and habits that become automatic over time – that make it possible for us to be effective and build routines around. These include:

- *what and when we eat*

- *having regular times for exercise*

- *preparing mentally for meetings*

- *building in reflection time*

- *taking breaks*

- *spending time with family*

- *ensuring energy recovery time*

They encourage us to look honestly at how we are spending our energy now and to build a development plan grounded in positive energy rituals.

Tom Rath (2015), in his book Are you Fully Charged? points out that recently there has been an expansion in knowledge about the central elements of daily well-being, tracking people's experiences, emotions and feelings within a given day. This distinction between daily well-being and broad evaluations of life has led to different conclusions about the best investment of time and resources.

He sees three conditions that differentiate days when you have a full charge from other days:

- *Meaning: Spending time doing meaningful work throughout the day, making work a purpose – not just a place*

- *Interactions: Letting interactions give your days a positive charge and being '80 percent positive'*

- *Energy: Putting your own health first by eating/moving/sleeping well, building movement into the day, pausing before responding and making yourself smile as a way to relieve stress Rath (2015) believes that being fully charged makes you get more done and the charge carries forward, creating an upward cycle for all those you interact with. He encourages us to try working in highly focused bursts of about 45 minutes and then take a 15 minute break, even a 5 or 10 minute break will help get you ready for each 'sprint'.*

Work, love and play?

'The richest and fullest lives attempt to achieve an inner balance between three realms: work, love and play' Erik H Erikson

Brigid Schulte, a journalist, wife and mother, has written a book, Overwhelmed – How to Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time. She shares how she has learned how to move from the chaos of being stuck in a storm of swirling 'time confetti' to moving closer to 'time serenity' and concludes that for a rapidly increasing number of us, having enough time for work, love and play is becoming further and further out of reach (Schulte, 2014). She refers to this as 'the overwhelm' and also believes that the most leisure-time-starved group in society are working mothers, who have to keep up with much of the housework and childcare, along with everything they have to do at work. Her view is that companies are not recognising the greater equity between men and women in the workplace and the need for both partners to share parenting and family duties, while furthering their careers.

Schulte sees one of the main causes being that many workplaces continue to reward the 'ideal worker' – first in, last out and never turns work off, even on vacation – and how this is in direct conflict with how most of us can, or want to, work. With fast-emerging technologies keeping us all tethered to work, the ideal worker is now expected to be on call all day, every day and suggests that no matter how much we do, we can never be that ideal worker, so the ideal worker should be 'retired'! She observes that 'the overwhelm' can become a badge of honour for people, even a competitive advantage and challenges us to decide whether we love the bragging rights of being busy enough to live in a debilitating whirlwind of activity or whether we want to make a change.

Schulte suggests that a better understanding of the neuroscience of how humans work best would help – pulsing between periods of intense concentration of typically no more than 90 minutes and breaks to recharge. She believes we can also help ourselves if we 'unplug' – setting reasonable parameters for technology and communication and stopping the cycle of responsiveness that makes work feel intense and unending. She also mentions how sitting with a smile on your face for three minutes will shift your biochemistry and send a message to the nervous system that you are not in danger.

Always-on – and overloaded!

'Business is about people, not technology. Therefore it is central that human skill, inquisitiveness and ingenuity is fostered and not replaced by digital devices, software and data' Rikke Duus

Alvin Toffler (1970) predicted that rapidly accelerating technological change would result in humans exceeding the limit of their ability to process the information they need to make effective decisions – he called this 'information overload'. Jonathan Spira (2011), the author of Overload!, describes how information, which used to be the cornerstone of productivity, is fast becoming its death knell. How the hundreds of emails, voicemails, texts, tweets and so on that we receive every day are causing a decline in productivity whereby we have no time left to get work done and our work–life balance is destroyed. In his view, we should be thinking much more carefully about **which emails we send/ forward, whether we actually need to be sending them at all and also about how frequently we take time out to read and respond to emails**.

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There is no doubt that the world we live and work in is becoming more and more busy.

I came across some articles on this subject posted on two of the leading telecommunications companies – BT Business and Virgin. The BT articles (undated) questioned whether always-on should mean 'always at work' and suggest that while it might be the reality of modern life and good for business to be available to customers all hours of the day, individuals and business owners need to get a balance. They share views and approaches of a variety of business leaders, which included:

- *making time for things you enjoy doing outside work*

- *having one day of the week with no technology or social media after 8pm*

- *not checking emails until half an hour after starting work*

- *turning phones off at night*

- *sharing out-of-hours tasks involving customer service, emails, tech support and the like across your team*

- *having firm guidelines about finishing times and email etiquette; for example, not having to respond at night*

The Virgin articles (Coleman, 2016; De Abreu, 2016; Huffington, 2016) focused on the effect of technology on our well-being. It highlights the encroachment into our social hours, the disruptive nature of emails and notifications and the effect on stress, productivity levels and sleep patterns. They suggest certain disciplines and rituals like:

- *scheduling digital downtime*

- *checking emails only a few times a day*

- *creating rituals around transition to sleep*

- *not staring at bright screens before going to sleep*

What do 'unbusy' people do differently?

'What if I hadn't worked so hard? What if...I had actually used my position to be a role model for balance? ...Who's to say that, besides having more time with family, I wouldn't also have been more focused at work, more creative, more productive...?' **Eugene O'Kelly, former CEO KPMG**

A blog by Optimise Consulting (2015), called Busy? So what, stresses the importance of understanding the purpose of the business, team and own role, executing it effectively and stopping doing anything that does not serve that purpose. In their view, rigorous prioritisation of your focus is the key.

Paula Davis-Laack (2015), in the Huffington Post highlights seven things that resilient people do differently. She believes that creating a 'practice of resilience' can help us become a better version of ourselves and includes:

- *building high-quality relationships – to build support, recognition, trust and relaxation*

- *managing stress and avoiding burnout – knowing how we spend our energy and taking time to refill the tank*

- *being authentic – working in accordance with our values and strengths*

- *understanding meaning – the motivational value and impact of our work*

- *being mentally tough and flexible – tracking thoughts and emotions under stress to minimise counterproductive patterns*

Ron Friedman (2016), writing in Psychology Today, identified nine overarching themes for navigating the accelerating informational landscape and achieving peak performance. He includes:

- *managing your own time – finding a balance between work we initiate and responding to other's requests and blocking out time to work away from email*

- *viewing busyness as a lack of focus – wasted energy*

- *intentionally leaving important tasks incomplete – to continue thinking and to uncover solutions rather than rushing to finish*

- *making a habit of stepping back – finding breakthrough ideas by temporarily removing ourselves*

- *having a plan for saying 'no' – too many commitments dilute our priorities*

- *doing things today that make more time tomorrow – automate or delegate activities that are not a good use of your time*

Dr Travis Bradbury (2016), writing on LinkedIn, highlighted findings from interviews with successful people about their number one secret to productivity. Highlights include:

- *focusing on only one thing – knowing what will have the biggest impact and working on it for one or two hours each morning without interruptions*

- *not using to-do lists – undone items cause stress and insomnia, so schedule everything on your calendar*

- *making it home for dinner – there's always more that can be done, so allocate time to the other things you value*

- *using a notebook – writing everything down as the thoughts come to you*

- *practicing a consistent morning routine – rituals that nurture body and mind*

- *seeing energy as everything – view food as fuel, sleep as recovery and breaks as opportunities to recharge*

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There are nine switches of human alertness.

What our participants tell us

'I went away from the programme and practised and practised again, until it became a habit.' **Carl Smith**

We start with Carl Smith, who had a very special story to tell about how coming on the Leadership Programme had helped him make some positive changes to his life:

Carl's story

Carl is a senior director in a busy manufacturing company. When Carl came on the programme he had, in his own words: '…let myself go to a bad place both mentally and physically'. He was working long hours, doing everything himself, being aggressive and short-tempered – he was stressed, lacking confidence and was physically out of condition. He admits to not really wanting to come on the programme – he was feeling nervous, insecure and stressed about it – and at first his fears were amplified, he really didn't want to be there. As the week progressed, he could feel a transformation occurring, thanks to the programme content he was being exposed to, the feedback he was receiving about himself and most importantly the support of his fellow participants and tutors. He started to feel empowered and enabled. He began developing new techniques to control his behaviour and decided to make some significant changes to his work–life balance and physical condition. He committed himself to some daily/ weekly routines and rituals, which have resulted in him having more free time to spend with his family and also to go to regular gym sessions with his wife. Carl has highlighted some of the things he has put in place that have created a better work environment for him:

- *I lost five stone and I feel fitter and happier than I've been for a long while.*

- *I stop working generally at 12:30 and have lunch and stretch my legs or play chess – structured downtime.*

- *I walk around the site at least once a day. This allows me to speak to more people and helps lift my spirit.*

- *I manage confrontational situations differently – I count to 10 before I respond.*

- *Because my natural reaction is normally very fast. I'll even leave the room, if I feel the need to.*

- *I produce weekly work priorities broken down into daily plans. This makes me focus on the right things, the important things and helps me avoid being dragged into issues that should be solved by other members of the team or are actually not important.*

- *I delegate once 'precious' activities I used to think only I could do. All I do now is review the submissions, give feedback and any further actions if necessary.*

- *I've always believed that I'm an honest and trustworthy person who doesn't want to let people down. Due to this I've often over committed my time to things that are really not important or close to being impossible within the time frame. Now I don't commit to anything without considering the impact it will have on me. I check before I commit.*

- *When I have difficult conversations with someone, it is done with changes in tone and direct dialogue – no shouting. I also always build in time to reflect on my handling of the conversation afterwards and think about ways to build on what went well and what could have been done better to improve the behaviour.*

Carl tells us that the above actions have created more time for completing key objectives and allows him to leave work at around 16:30, significantly increasing the amount of time he spends with his family. He says 'I can't remember the last time I worked 12 hours, and because I'm working less hours and still achieving my targets, I feel better and recharged.'

We believe that Carl never lost his courage – he temporarily misplaced it. He faced up to his issues and stopped them swamping him. Then through trusting himself and others, things became easier. It encourages us that the

Leadership Programme experience often helps leaders like Carl make significant breakthroughs that last.

The most obvious change we noticed about Carl when he returned to Henley for the follow-up module was the physical change in him. He had lost five stone and was almost unrecognisable! But Carl sums up this transformation in his own words; he says, '**The physical changes in me are a reflection of the mental changes in me.**'

You can read more about Carl Smith's journey and see his physical transformation on the Henley Business School website at henley.ac.uk/leaders under case studies.

We start with Carl Smith, who had a very special story to tell about how coming on the Leadership Programme had helped him make some positive changes to his life:

In addition to Carl, many participants on the Leadership Programme have shared a variety of successful techniques, practices and rituals that have helped them deal with the busyness of their lives. Here are a few of them, some of which may resonate with you:

Creating space to pause and reflect

- *My days were so busy I could never pause to catch a breath! I decided to break up my days, weeks and months to create spaces for reflection, preparation and/or recharging. This would include morning and afternoon break times and a proper lunch break Once I'd decided where and when those spaces would be helpful, I inserted them into my online calendar as a "template", with the involvement of my PA, so that nobody could book meetings or calls in those spaces and I could recharge.'*

- *'I attend many meetings during the day, mainly back-to-back, which I found left no time to follow through on agreed actions or prepare for the next meeting. Meetings regularly overran. My solution was to block off 15 minutes between meetings to*

create space for reflection/preparation – and be disciplined about sticking to this. These precious 15 minute blocks of time are loaded into my calendar and cannot be interrupted or booked by anyone.'

- 'I used to use my tube ride to work for checking emails and I found that this often put me in the wrong frame of mind at the start of the day. I now leave the Blackberry in my pocket and only check emails once I have got to the office and I use the tube ride to think and reflect.'

Protecting our time

- 'I was being swamped by requests for impromptu discussions by my team members and colleagues and this was causing a major diversion of my time away from my own priorities. I decided to be more selfish with my time –

- I bought back my own time by (a) not always saying yes to requests for discussions – being more thoughtful about this and (b) when agreeing to a discussion I limited it to 15 minutes. However, I made this a positive intervention by declaring and making public this approach and making a commitment to give my full focus during that time in return for specificity and clarity about the purpose and required outcomes.'

- 'I found it difficult to do quality thinking or preparation of proposals/papers due to the interruptions and distractions around the office. Now whenever I need quiet time to do this I either do it at home and come into to the office later, or I allocate a full day to this away from the office or, if I have to be at the office, I move to a separate room or quiet space where I can't be found or disturbed.'

- 'I had a bad habit of storing up work for completion over the weekend, which took four or five hours out of my weekend and had a negative impact on my family life. I calculated that this was the equivalent of one afternoon, so I blocked out every Friday from 1pm and made this the "weekend" time – no meetings or discussions could be set up during this "sacred" time. As a result, my "weekend work" was completed by the end of Friday, leaving a clear weekend and a fresh start on Monday.'

Recharging our bodies

- 'I had got out of the habit of exercising regularly and knew this was having a negative impact on me. This was confirmed by my lifestyle assessment during the programme. The best time for me to exercise was first thing in the morning, so I developed a routine of exercising at a nearby gym for an hour before work three days per week. I told people at work that I was doing this, so they knew that on those days I might be in a bit later.'

- 'I was spending all my days at work, even eating lunch at my desk. I needed to get away and have some time for myself. I now walk over the road to buy lunch and eat it there and I find that this routine helps me relax and makes sure I get out of the office.'

- 'I find it really useful to get away from my desk a number of times each day and to walk around my floor and up the stairs to the other floors for a stretch, to catch my breath and to talk to people. I feel better when I come back.'

Managing meetings

- 'I was pretty bad at managing meetings and never finished them at the scheduled time. I realised that this was disrespectful to team members who had other meetings to attend, as well as to the people in the next meeting that I was then arriving late for – and that this created stress for everyone. I discussed this with my team and we agreed to appoint a timekeeper for each meeting, who would notify us when we were halfway through and when there were five minutes left. It gave us more discipline and we found that eventually the timekeeper became redundant because we made sure that we finished on time more often. I also did this in one-to-one meetings, where I was also bad at sticking to the scheduled time, by always asking the other person to be the timekeeper.'

" Many workplaces continue to reward the 'ideal worker'

- *'I received feedback that I could be quite intimidating and overbearing in meetings. When I explored this further people mentioned that I didn't listen to them and would often raise my voice and lean forward, which resulted in them being reluctant to put across their point of view. I wanted to change this and to ensure that I gave people a chance to add their ideas and thoughts without feeling intimidated and to make sure that I listened more.*

- *Two things really helped me do this – firstly, whenever I felt myself taking over a conversation I would lean back in my chair and take a few deep breaths. This stopped me talking too much and switched me into listening mode. Secondly, I asked people to tell me when they felt I was being overbearing, gave them permission in fact, which worked well and helped me learn more about myself.'*

Working less

- *'I had been working up to 80 hours a week for a number of years and tried to be the one doing everything, especially the important things. I made most decisions and didn't really listen to my team's ideas – I just told them what to do and get on with it. During the programme, I realised that I had lost my connection with my family and I wasn't putting any trust in my team. I took a decision to get my family back by working fewer hours and delegating much more to my team and place my trust in them. I'm now working 50 hours or less per week and am spending much more time at home with my family. My team say I am much more relaxed and calm, that I listen to them more and they feel empowered. We've aligned tasks to individual strengths; we've aligned our diaries; we block out times for reflection and fun; and we have regular debriefs to discuss successes and improvements, with an 80/20 focus on positives.'*

Hopefully you will find the recommendations of the various writers mentioned in this paper, Carl's story and the examples above a useful reference for you as you think about habits and rituals that will work for you.

So what should be done? We say banish busyness – stop, right now, take a breath and do it!

'Time is power – don't give yours away' **Brigid Schulte**

We need to recognise that our life is our life and it's not a race. The only person who is stopping you is you. We know through our own and many participants' experiences that there are some fairly simple things that can be done to improve effectiveness and balance. All it takes is the intention to slow down and some discipline.

Imagine that one day you have rushed to an early morning meeting, but it doesn't happen and seeing as you are there anyway, you end up in a meaningful conversation with a colleague who you don't often have time to talk to, which helps move one of your projects forward. How many similar opportunities do we miss out on every day?

Also, next time you are sitting at your desk late in the evening desperately trying to finish off a piece of work or reply to all your emails, ask yourself a question I learned to ask myself after many years of wasted late nights spent not achieving that much: 'Should I keep flogging away at this and not achieving much, or should I go home and live to fight another day…refreshed, energised, more productive and maybe even more creative?'

So we encourage you to take ownership of your time and energy and find good habits that will prevent the busyness and the mad rush to do everything now. Develop your own plan for change, commit to it and practise it until it becomes a habit.

I went to my gym today and when I walked in there was a large poster in the entrance, which had a beautiful photograph of a tasty looking salad on it, so I assume it was advertising the club's new food menu. What struck me about it though, was what was written underneath the photograph – it said: '**It's all about balance…and choice**', and I thought that would be a perfect thought to leave you with!

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We questioned whether always-on should mean 'always at work'

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Graham also runs his own independent coaching practice, which focuses on individual and leadership development, building on his many years of experience coaching senior leaders in the corporate environment. He has a BA Hons in Industrial & Organisational Psychology and is a Graduate Member (MBPsS) of the British Psychological Society (BPS).

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