



# TIME LEADERSHIP

The board's role in productivity, people wellbeing,  
and burnout prevention.



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## The Context

Working too hard, doing too much, being too busy, is not a new thing. Cast back to 400 BC and you find Socrates warning ‘beware the barrenness of a busy life’.

Fast forward to modern day workplaces, people are struggling under the weight of relentless busyness with seemingly no alternative. COVID-19 has brought this into stark focus.

**People wellbeing is now top of mind for organisations wishing to retain talent and secure their organisation’s future<sup>1</sup>.**

### Why are we relentlessly busy?

There seems to be something inherent in the human DNA that has us predisposed to thinking, feeling, and being busy – wanting to please, pressure to perform, badge of honour.

Changes to the way work works, exacerbate urgency with more things to do than time allows - most of us are now our own travel agent, filing clerk and executive assistant working to job descriptions that are silent on that.

Peter Drucker predicted it wouldn’t be technological advances that fascinated historians reflecting back on our time, but the point at which a critical mass of the world’s population had choice, totally unprepared to self-manage it. Saying yes when choice is about saying no is endemic.

Staying focused in an always-on-internet-connected environment has become a lost art with our concentration down to a slither<sup>2</sup>. We hardly pause between meetings and deliverables, leaving little time to think deeply about important work that progresses strategy.

And very few of us have been taught how to work sustainably – sizing, planning, and prioritising what is most important with a laser sharp focus on getting that done despite distractions.

All this feeds our love of easy, fun work that is quick to do and delivers a tick-hit - ‘another thing off our to do list that we feel good about’, but when we think about it not in a way that is deeply rewarding.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2021/08/04/the-future-of-work-is-worker-well-being/?sh=289c3ff14aed>

<sup>2</sup> Cal Newport, Deep Work.



## The Impact

Not paying close attention to how we work is bad for people and business.

The World Health Organisation placed 'burnout' on its official diseases list in 2018. With a focus on the workplace, they noted the demands of the job far outweighing the rewards, recognition, and time off to relax, as the cause.

In 2022 businesses in Aotearoa New Zealand are being urged to change the way they control workload following concerning research by Auckland University of Technology:

- 35 percent of respondents had severe burnout but only 4 percent put themselves in that category – many don't know they have it.
- too many businesses respond to resignations by doubling the workload from departing staff onto a now smaller team.
- burnt out workers are five times more likely to be considering resignation.

European research into productivity and wellbeing<sup>3</sup> reveals the following:

- A German study comparing long (two hour) and short (40 minute) commutes with levels of happiness found the satisfaction difference was so great it would take a 40% pay rise to compensate for the longer commuters' unhappiness.
- A study by the Institute of Psychiatry in London found persistent interruptions at work caused a 10-point drop in the IQ of the person being distracted – twice the decline found in studies on the impact of marijuana use.
- Using the time-tracking productivity app DeskTime, Draugiem Group found the 10% of employees with the highest productivity had regular breaks; 17 minutes for every 52 minutes worked.

In the current COVID environment this recent HBR article on moral injury is a sobering reminder of the impact of inequities in workplaces and the need for organisations to act swiftly as the pact between employers and employees changes.

On cue, The Great Resignation with borders opening and the opportunity for people to move away from what is not right in organisations and towards what is<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The Four Day Week by Andrew Barnes

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6952050965231341568/>

# The good news

## The right side of busy

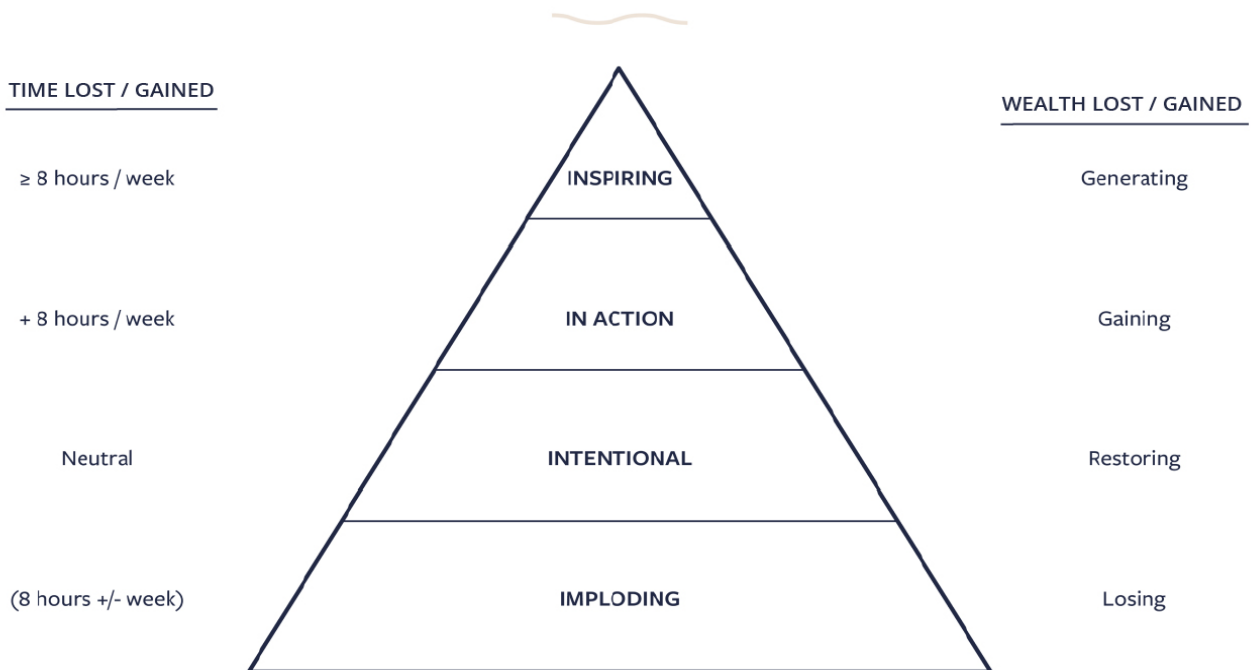
It is entirely possible to get on and stay on the right side of busy - in good times and challenging times.

From an individual perspective everyone has their own descriptors of how it feels to operate in this way – being ahead of the game, onto it, nailing it; and not – feeling cyclonic, smashed, on a treadmill.

In the model below, moving up the levels by working differently, brings a feeling of control, freeing up time to prioritise important work, that can be delivered to a standard that work deserves. Wellbeing gains flow from that.

Applied across an organisation productivity and profitability lifts as wellbeing collectively improves.

### The Right Side of Busy



*“Put your oxygen mask on before helping others”*

Reflecting on the model and the examples in the assessment framework below, where are you typically positioned? Where would you like to be? What is the main obstacle in your way?

| Impact      | Measures   |   |
|-------------|--|---|
| Inspiring   | 25%+ productivity / time<br>80%+ non-urgent work                           | Long term planning, mentoring, coaching, influencing, strategically nimble, new opportunities.    |
| In action   | 10-20% lift in productivity /time<br>70%+ non-urgent work                  | Prioritised, quality work delivered, proactive forward planning, process and quality improvement. |
| Intentional | Productivity / time restored<br>50% non-urgent work                        | Workload sized, priorities identified, meetings manageable, space in diaries, 'home on time'      |
| Imploding   | 20%+ drop in productivity / lost hours<br>Less than 20% of work non-urgent | Missed deadlines, email overload, extended hours, back-to-back meetings, rework, reactive.        |

### Time leadership is a team game

There is a great deal individuals can do to defeat the busy culture and work effectively<sup>5</sup>. When there is organisational commitment to addressing systems, culture and behaviours that are perpetuating the relentless pursuit of more, everyone begins to enjoy the benefits.

Enter the board.

<sup>5</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/09/how-to-defeat-busy-culture>



## The role of the board

*'People's tolerance of organisational nonsense has reached its limits, and a deeper desire for meaning and belonging has swelled' HBR, February 2022 Carucci and Praslova.*

Individual effectiveness needs organisational leadership. And leadership starts with the board.

As it carries out its work boards have a moral, legal and ethical obligation to keep people safe, productive and well. This includes workloads that are realistic, ways of working that are efficient, effective and safe, and incentives to support positive, lasting change.

Good governance systems, policies, processes, and behaviours – the disciplines of good governance - are the go-to for boards to ensure they are authentically accountable for organisational performance and as part of that people wellbeing and the prevention of burnout.

Good governance supports focused discussions and decisions that allow the board to lead by example while supporting and holding management accountable for delivery. This means prioritised, appropriately resourced strategies, monitoring, evaluating and reporting on progress, and swift action when issues emerge.

Applied across organisations, governance and management workload oversight and proactive support is an antidote to inefficiency, ineffectiveness, unachievable delivery expectations and organisational burnout.

It is the board's role to focus on leading the development, implementation, application and regular review of good governance disciplines if they are to make a meaningful difference to their own work and the work that is delegated by them to others to carry out.

To get started the following model and subsequent examples are three areas boards can focus on to plan their work and work their plan, with artefacts that will be well known to many.

## The role of the board



### Accountability

A board has full time accountability for organisational performance in a very part time capacity. Boards are also being held to account by a wider range of stakeholders (legal and moral owners) and for a wider range of deliverables (financial, environmental, social, governance) than they once were.

They are expected to do that with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion, following the law, and looking well ahead to see what is coming in an ever changing environment in order to appropriately adapt. Many in the not-for-profit world do this without remuneration and with limited and sometimes no management resource.

In order to be effective a board has to get organised, think in advance about what it wants to do, and make time to do it.

Boards leading by example:

- Being specific and focused about why their organisation exists, the change it wishes to make for its owners / community and how it will know it has achieved that: **outcome focused measurable statement of intent.**
- Saying how it wishes things to be done and how work will be delegated in advance – **board policy**
- Providing sufficient time, money and resources to deliver impact: **aligned planning, budgeting, resource allocation, key performance indicators.**
- Regularly monitoring, evaluating and reporting on strategic progress; **board work plan, strategic risk assessment, stakeholder engagement.**





## Balance

Time is a precious resource and it is not renewable. Time leadership is about balancing conflicting demands and making timely choices and decisions in a complex working world that are seen and experienced by others as equitable.

A board and its members have more demands on time than the amount available. They can do anything but not everything with the time they have. How they use their time sets the tone for others.

It's about workloads focused on the right priorities, so saying NO in order to say YES to those, and helping management do the same. It's about balanced board membership that recognises the benefits of diversity and allows time for the inclusion of all voices. It's about balancing productivity, profitability and well-being in a way that sustains people and organisational success. Being balanced takes time, practice and commitment.

Boards leading by example:

- Board members balancing their commitments – **arrive on time, prepared, considered contribution.**
- Balanced board membership – **diverse and inclusive**
- Board workload achievable – **meeting rhythms and disciplines**
- Fairness and equality - **resource allocation, recognition and rewards**

## Culture

Culture eats strategy for breakfast<sup>6</sup> is a reminder of the importance of a board agreeing up front, and demonstrating by example, ways of working that are fair, equitable, and wellbeing based.

These are values based discussions and decisions. The board needs to know that the values of the organisation support the culture it wants.

Without it all the planning in the world will end up under par on execution.

Boards leading by example:

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<sup>6</sup> Now agreed not to be a Drucker quote

- Look - **deadlines under pressure, recurring mistakes, relitigated decisions**
- Address - **busy as a badge of honour, unfettered delegation**<sup>7</sup>
- Liberate – **technology. reduced reporting, decision making**<sup>8</sup>
- Measure – **outcomes, burnout, turnover**
- Research - **four-day week**<sup>9</sup>, ‘stay’ interviews, paid sabbaticals
- Train, support and reward – **time management, work free holidays.**

## Questions for boards

Good boards regularly check in on how they are performing. This can be done at the end of each board meeting as well as through informal and formal reviews. The following questions are prompts for boards who are genuine about doing things differently to create better wellbeing outcomes for themselves and those they serve and protect:

- Do we typically do everything we say we will do when we say we will do it?
- How high are the levels of trust in our organisation? Where do we go to see it in action?
- Is it ok for us to say NO so we can say YES to our priorities? Does the board speak with one voice on that approach?
- How do we know if our people are burning out?
- How do we know we are working effectively?
- What are we pretending not to know or see?
- What do we need to learn?
- How do we know what’s important?

The board effectiveness model in Appendix One can be used by boards to benchmark current ways of working and identify changes that when implemented will deliver valuable productivity and wellbeing benefits.

### The two most underutilised tools in our toolbox for spotting issues...

Eyes and ears

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix One Board Effectiveness Model

<sup>8</sup> Humanocracy by Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.4dayweek.com/research-prof-jarrold-haar-quantitative-research>

## Appendix One

### Board Effectiveness Model

|             |   |   |
|-------------|---|---|
| Inspiring   | <p>25%+ increase in productivity / time</p> <p>80%+ work non-urgent and important</p>     | <p>As a director leads by example, highly organised and prepared, has time to understand broader environmental perspectives for the organisation (site visits, reads widely), mentors &amp; coaches others, thinks deeply, listens more than speaks, focus on workload &amp; wellbeing, holds self and others to account.</p> <p>Highly focused board &amp; management, well-resourced and monitored strategies, innovative wellbeing culture &amp; policies (paid sabbaticals, working from home, stay-interviews, 4-day weeks, reverse mentoring, workload / burnout surveys), make hard choices / priorities, prompt action to address wellbeing variances, held up as role model.</p> |
| In action   | <p>10-20% lift in productivity / time</p> <p>70%+ work non-urgent and important</p>       | <p>As a director manages own time, applies effective governance disciplines, speaks to progress discussions, makes time to learn, has time to step up (chairing committees and boards), supports prioritised board &amp; management workload / wellbeing.</p> <p>Continuous monitoring &amp; prioritising of deliverables (BAU / projects), proactive capacity planning / staff up ahead of time, board performance surveys. supportive wellbeing policies, address issues (overload / burnout), director training (including subcommittees), high wellbeing radar.</p>   |
| Intentional | <p>Productivity / time restored</p> <p>50% work non-urgent and important</p>              | <p>As a director arrives prepared, focused questions, attends all meetings (on time), learns and applies governance role, avoids adding to management / board workload. Wellbeing radar.</p> <p>Outcome focused measurable, resourced strategy, BAU / projects sized, achievable agenda, efficient processes (technology solutions), reduced board packs, relevant information from management, timely decisions, achievable annual board plan, policies for board and management wellbeing and workload.</p>   |
| Imploding   | <p>20%+ drop in productivity / time</p> <p>&lt; 20%+ of work non urgent and important</p> | <p>As a director, unprepared and or misses meetings, distracted (cell phones), reactive responses, lack of clarity on role, unrealistic expectations of management, speaks more than listens, busy as a badge of honour.</p> <p>As a board, focused on management busyness, reactive urgency, long meetings &amp; action lists, large board packs, uninterrogated information, no prioritisation or sizing (BAU / projects unmanageable), delayed &amp; relitigated decisions, no wellbeing focus / radar. Risks emerging (high turnover/HSE issues)</p>  |



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