

LEADERSHIP HACKS



Clever Shortcuts to
Boost Your Impact and Results

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Introduction

The leadership dilemma—too much to do in too little time

Are leaders born or are they made? This is an age-old question many academics and researchers have struggled with. It's a question that has wasted millions of dollars—not to mention the millions of days lost sending sceptical employees to old-school leadership-development programs. CEOs, managing directors, divisional directors, vice-presidents and frontline managers can all repeat the theories that have been crammed down their throats by their HR departments. Many leaders I have worked with shared with me their frustration over the latest complex leadership competency model created to show them how they and their leadership teams are screwing things up—regardless of how their business is performing or how challenging the competitive environment is.

Leaders do not want to be perfect; they want to motivate their staff to do the best job possible in the shortest time possible. They're looking for practical approaches or techniques that they can use to improve their performance. They don't have time to attend intensive leadership programs that regurgitate leadership theory from the 1980s or 1990s. Much of what has been written about leadership tends to be overly

complicated and so confusing that you need a PhD to understand it. Many people — including university lecturers — are good at theory.

When I was working as an instructor at a university, I was amazed at how few of the professors had real-life experiences in what they were teaching. Many of them had never been in the ‘real world’ because they had spent their time collecting degrees and completing reviews of other researchers’ articles.

Leadership has changed. In the past, the pace of life and business was very different from today. Leaders used to have time. They had the luxury of spending their evenings and weekends thinking, and recharging their batteries, knowing that the rest of the business world was also on hold until the next business day. They didn’t have competitors leveraging new forms of technology to disrupt traditional markets. Leaders are now playing a different game and some of them aren’t even aware of it! Gone are the days of 5–10-year strategic plans, predictable operations and long-term employee loyalty. These are being replaced by short-horizon strategies, flexible operations that adapt based on the changing competitive landscape, and fighting to attract and keep the top talent. Some leaders are winning, while others are not.

Over the past 25 years I have observed and worked with a range of business leaders in the United States, Asia–Pacific and Europe across corporate industries, the government and the military, as well as frontline managers and small-business owners looking for strategies for improving their performance. Some have created incredible cultures and attained amazing results; others have stumbled. I’ve watched as businesses and governments wasted millions and millions of dollars trying to get their leaders and staff to lift their performance results using engagement surveys, statistical analyses, competency metrics and complex models.

I’m constantly looking for leadership approaches that work and can be used in multiple environments and businesses. So what is the secret formula — the silver bullet — to achieving more as a leader? I don’t think there’s one simple answer to this question. In fact, I often think this is the wrong question to be asking. We should be asking, ‘What are the leaders who are achieving more doing?’ and more importantly, ‘How do

they do it?’ That is the purpose of this book. My goal is to share with you the strategies and pathways that actual leaders are using to achieve increased results in less time.

The leadership dilemma is having too much to do in too little time. This challenge is not new to leaders. What is new is the speed with which they have to accomplish things—they need to get many more things done in much less time. They need to ‘hack’ their approach: to find methods and processes they can use to fast-track their approach to thinking, communicating and delegating.

Leadership hacks: a faster approach for a faster world

The amount of information available nowadays for planning, executing and tracking tasks is mind-boggling. It’s difficult to keep up with the speed at which information and business are moving in our technology-driven world. Let’s have a look at just some of the changes that have affected businesses, employees and traditional players. As you read through the scenarios below, consider the difficulties CEOs face when trying to create and execute a traditional business plan in these fast-paced environments.

The business environment has changed ...

- In 1910 the 10 largest businesses in the world were involved in constructing and selling products large enough for human beings to stand on (cars, aeroplanes and the like). In 2010 the largest businesses were predominantly associated with the creation and sale of invisible, intangible and handheld products.
- Although ride-sharing company Uber was only started in 2010, it’s estimated that today it’s worth \$70 billion—and it has very few employees and doesn’t own the vehicles that the drivers use. More importantly, the owners and leaders of traditional taxi companies didn’t see them coming until it was too late.
- Airbnb uses a technology platform that offers accommodation at over 3 million locations in 65 000 cities in 191 countries—all managed through its user-friendly website, and all without

owning a single property, hotel room or any of the overheads that come with them. Not bad for a company started in 2007 and now worth \$31 billion! This has changed the marketplace, with a 2017 Morgan Stanley report estimating that Airbnb will take 191 million hotel stays away from traditional hotels. This has changed the game for leaders in the hotel and leisure industries.

Employee dynamics have shifted ...

- Once again employees are disillusioned at work, with 87 per cent of employees worldwide either not engaged or actively disengaged at work according to Gallup's 2017 'State of the Global Workforce Report'. To keep this in perspective, this trend has continued since Gallup started its engagement surveys in 1997, showing that leaders continue to struggle with how to motivate and retain their workforce.
- In 2013, *Forbes* magazine published the results of a survey about who wastes the most time at work. It found that 64 per cent of employees visit non-work related websites each day. It also reported that more than 60 per cent of these employees admitted to wasting at least one hour per day on these websites—with Facebook contributing to over 50 per cent of this time loss. Even more surprising was the feedback received about the reasons for wasting time, which ranged from not being challenged enough to being unsatisfied or bored at work.
- The 2015 Future Leaders Index tells us that the next generation entering the workforce is already showing early signs of burnout with 82 per cent reporting they suffer from one or more physical health issues when they get busy and 76 per cent reporting one or more mind or emotional health issues when they feel overworked. This is leading to increased amounts of employee stress leave, resulting in millions of dollars in medical support being spent, as well as lost productivity and fewer people available to complete departmental tasks.

Technological advances are disrupting traditional players ...

- When Google was started in 1998 it could search 10 000 queries per day. At the time of Google's 2004 IPO announcement, it

was registering over 200 million queries per day. Now Google processes over 4.4 billion searches every day—or more than 50 000 searches per second. This has massively disrupted traditional print publishers, as well as anyone else who used to sell information (when was the last time you saw an encyclopedia?). An entire industry gone.

- According to the November 2017 Ericsson Mobility Report, 55 per cent of all traffic on mobile devices is in video format. They estimate that this will increase to 75 per cent by 2023 as a result of increased consumer demand. How many businesses are ready to move their content and communications to mobile video format in a quick time frame at low cost?
- Traditional automotive companies, which have in the past been leaders in transportation, have found themselves behind in the race to innovate, with Tesla proving that electric cars are more responsive and better handling than combustion engines, and they integrate the technology that consumers want, such as hands-free driving and increased safety. This has created a shift in the market that has automotive manufacturers scrambling, with many anticipated to struggle (just look at the value of their stock). According to a 2016 *Business Insider* article, by 2021, 82 per cent of all new cars built globally will be shipped with connected car technology.
- Morgan Stanley's recent 'Rise of the Machines' report analysed the automation of tasks across industries. The results led them to estimate that 45 per cent of workforce positions have at least a 70 per cent chance of being automated using robotics. This means shifts in business processes, technology platforms and the way staff operate. The report also estimates a cost savings of as much as 30–50 per cent once these computer programs or robots develop more cognitive abilities and perform more complex tasks. Which industries or tasks could this affect? Almost every industry, including data entry, customer service interaction, process improvement and back office tasks in industries such as manufacturing, IT, finance, insurance, legal, health care, government and utilities/energy. The better question is which industries will it not affect?

This is just a small glimpse at how things have changed. The tsunami of information and new technology is flowing in 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And, as research shows, it's getting faster and faster. Leaders need to re-wire and hack their approach to leading their teams, to keep up with this new world.

Gone are the days when leaders had the time to analyse a year's worth of data and spend six months preparing a five-year strategic plan. The days of slow thinking and slow execution are gone.

So what is a leadership hack?

The word 'hack' has changed meaning over time. Initially, the *Oxford Dictionary* defined the verb 'hack' as 'to cut with rough or heavy blows'. According to Ben Yagoda of *The New Yorker* magazine, the noun 'hack' was first used at MIT in the 1950s to describe the act of adjusting machines (primarily electrical systems) in ways that were not common. This morphed into a sense of working on a tech problem in a unique or creative way. In the 1980s the word 'hacker' had a negative connotation, describing computer programmers who illegally gained access to early computer systems. Steven Levy's book *Hackers* described the positive and negative activity of these innovators in the field of technology. This promoted the term 'hacker' and brought it into more common language.

It wasn't long before the meaning of 'hacker' started to gain more positive connotations. Before the launch of Facebook's 2012 IPO, Mark Zuckerberg published a manifesto titled 'The Hacker Way', which provided a unique insight into the meaning of hacking. In this document he says, 'In reality, hacking just means building something quickly or testing the boundaries of what can be done'. He added more around his belief that The Hacker Way is about continuous improvement and finding ways to get things done better and faster—often by moving projects around people who are too comfortable with the status quo and unwilling to change. Given the importance of this approach, Facebook continues to run internal hack competitions to encourage employees to find shortcuts and improvements in their systems. Facebook takes pride in finding shortcuts that can be identified and shared with others so everyone benefits.

More recently, the word ‘hack’ morphed even further when technology writer Danny O’Brien coined the term ‘life hack’ to describe how computer programmers were creating shortcuts to make their lives easier. This, combined with the explosion of videos on YouTube, enabled anyone with a smartphone to share their hacks or shortcuts with others who could benefit from them. This has led to the sharing of a plethora of hacks, including life hacks, parent hacks, game hacks, political hacks, happiness hacks and—my personal favourite—a potato hack (which is actually based on a diet from 1849 that focuses on eating mostly potatoes to lose weight!).

Dictionary.com defines a hack as ‘a tip, trick or efficient method for doing or managing something’. It adds the expanded definition ‘to handle or cope with a situation or an assignment adequately and calmly’.

A leadership hack is anything that helps you accomplish more in less time. This can include:

- shortcuts that may not be commonly known
- simplified steps that make a task easier to do
- fast-track processes that speed things up
- any approach that simplifies and speeds up a task.

Simply put, leadership hacks are about identifying ways leaders can make a difference to the people around them and the tasks they’re confronted with. They are about being a leader who is admired by other leaders because of their ability to work smarter and more efficiently and by inspiring and empowering others.

Critical keys to hacking your leadership

So what does it take to be a leader admired by other leaders? What do incredible leaders do that inspires and motivates others to take action? And by ‘inspire’ I don’t mean getting people to do things because they report to you (and have to because of the organisational chart), but making them want to follow you because of who you are and your leadership approach.

As you can see in figure 1, to become the leader of leaders, the ultimate hack involves three main keys: mindset, approach and impact.

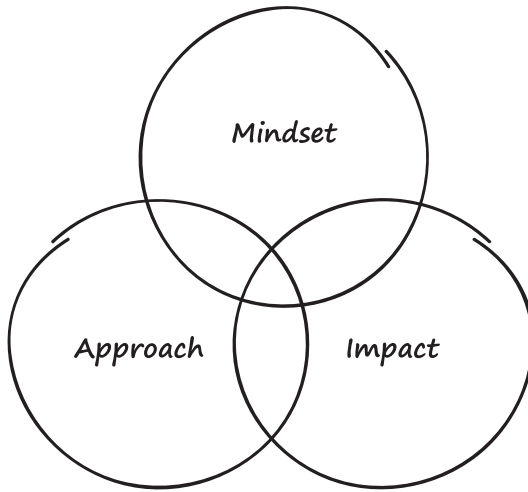


Figure 1: the keys to hacking leadership

Mindset

Your mindset is how you view yourself and the world around you. It's also about your beliefs and the values that guide you on a daily basis. This is your internal monologue and the moral compass that guides you as a leader and will influence your ability to hack your current leadership.

Now more than ever leaders need to be very clear and intentional about their mindset. In the past, leaders had plenty of time to think through different approaches to ensure they had a clear mindset on what needed to happen and how it should or shouldn't be done. Today this process has become more challenging.

In *Mindset: The new psychology of success*, Carol Dweck provides a brilliant insight into the importance of mindset. Her research has found that the views people adopt for themselves profoundly affect the way they lead their life. She identified two distinct mindsets that determine whether or not people are successful in adapting to the world around them. The first is the Fixed Mindset: the belief that your traits are set for life. This includes the idea that people are born with a certain

amount of intellect, personality and character that doesn't change. Dweck found these people felt the need to constantly prove their ability. The alternative is the Growth Mindset, which is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. This is all about learning from your mistakes and using those insights to grow to the next level. Dweck's research shows that people (especially leaders) who have a Growth Mindset are generally more fulfilled than those who don't because they are able to learn to fulfil their potential.

By examining your mindset (and sometimes challenging it) you can start to identify what may be limiting your ability to complete things that you want to achieve. In essence you may need to 'hack' your mindset to enable you to move forward and improve your effectiveness as a leader.

Approach

Approach is about what you actually do. It's about the steps you take as a leader to make things happen. This may include the action you take to improve your own productivity and save yourself time, or it may include the approach you take with your team to achieve business objectives.

As a leader you need to be proactive in your approach and the methods you use to achieve an objective. Imagine if we filmed you for a full week at work. The filming only focused on you: what you said, what you did and the tasks you completed. This would clearly show us the approaches you're taking—both positive and negative.

Leaders need to 'hack' their approach. They need to identify the shortcuts and strategies they can use to do more things in less time.

Impact

A leader's impact on the people around them is what separates the typical leader from the great leader. Anyone in a position of authority and power can boss around employees in an attempt to achieve results. However, incredible leaders have the ability to motivate and inspire their staff in a way that truly mobilises them.

The trick is to identify ways to 'hack' your impact on people. It's about adapting your leadership to create a culture where your staff want to

make things happen—not for money, but because they believe they’re making a difference and that their contribution matters. Regardless of the organisation, a good culture creates this feeling of unification. In looking at the research, it’s clear that it’s the leaders who set the tone of an organisation or office and the impact that this has on the staff. By ‘hacking’ your impact on others you can become a leader others admire and will follow.



I have yet to work with the perfect leader. Nobody is perfect. However, from years and years of working with leaders, I have observed that when they get their mindset, approach and impact in perfect alignment, amazing things start to happen. The purpose of this book is to help you ‘hack’ your leadership so you can achieve greater things in less time. This book is full of ideas and practical tasks that you can use to make things happen more quickly and easily. On reading this book, some leaders will realise they need to ‘hack’ their mindset. Others will realise that it’s about ‘hacking’ their approach or their impact on others. Regardless of where you as a leader find yourself, there will be a number of practical strategies or hacks you can take to improve your impact and your results.

To keep things simple, I’ve divided the book into three types of leadership hack.

Part I reveals personal hacks that you can use to boost your leadership as an individual. This includes hacking your productivity, use of technology and communication platforms.

Part II discusses one-to-one hacks that you can use to increase your leadership performance when working with individual staff members. These include communication, delegation and coaching hacks.

Part III identifies a number of team hacks that you can use to increase your leadership performance with others, most commonly in an organisation, department or team. These include hacking team meetings and a range of team mobilisation shortcuts.

Spread throughout these three parts I have included a range of case studies on various incredible leaders. I have worked with many of these

leaders and had the pleasure of seeing firsthand the brilliance in their approach and how they deal with their people.

I have also included self-hack exercises that you can use to help integrate the concepts and hacks described in the chapters.

The way you adapt your leadership will open up new realms of opportunity. Use this book as a fast-track guide to help you identify smarter ways to improve your impact and your results by hacking your leadership.



Chapter 1

Distractions and productivity

Before jumping into examining leadership hacks, it's important to talk about the distractions that slow leaders down or stop them from looking for ways to hack their leadership approach. Over the 25 years I've been working with leaders, I've noticed a number of emerging patterns and trends that stop leaders from being more efficient.

By understanding these trends and patterns you can make a conscious choice to start changing the traditional way you operate in relation to your mindset, approach or impact. This will enable you to be more effective and to have a more positive impact on your work and the people you work with.

There are five common distractions, or obstacles, you need to overcome to ensure you don't get sidetracked from using shortcuts and hacks that can benefit you. Three of these are internal—that is, they're within your control—and two are external—that is, they're environmental and harder to control.

Internal distractions

Internal distractions are fully within your control to manage. If you have self-awareness, you have the ability to do something to reduce or eliminate these internal distractions. If you don't have this higher level of operating you may lose traction and not have enough energy or time to achieve as much as you could if you removed or controlled these distractions.

Lack of energy

With business moving as fast as it does today, most leaders have a very busy schedule. Many of my CEO and director clients spend their days on tasks that fit into a number of critical categories. I worked with the CEO of a large multinational who was so busy that he had to have two full-time personal assistants just to keep up with all of the activities, events and communications he was required to stay across in his role. This also meant that most of the time his calendar was filled with activities as varied as role tasks, organisational activities, board and stakeholder events, government and industry events, innovation and R&D events. In addition, he was travelling all the time and spending nights in hotels after dinners or other events to continue positioning himself as an accessible leader. I worked with another CEO who hadn't slept in his own bed for 55 days in a row due to global travel commitments and activities. When I checked in with him on how he was feeling, the only word that came to his mind was 'exhausted'.

I can remember spending over 100 nights in hotels myself in a very busy year of work. I was in the top per cent of flyers for Qantas (earning almost 400000 frequent flyer miles in a year) and achieved top loyalty status at a number of hotels. As a road warrior I had reached a new level of rhythm — travelling quickly and being very focused with my time in the air and on the ground. The challenge was, of course, maintaining this pace. After so much time in the air and on the road, and being exposed to many different people in closed conditions, my immune system crashed. I ended up getting a terrible cough that went into my chest and turned into walking pneumonia, forcing me to stay in bed. It took me almost a week to get back on my feet and a couple of weeks to

get my energy back to where it needed to be. The only way to maintain a faster pace is by finding a way to sustain your energy and health.

The flurry of constant activity and the need to be switched on all the time takes a lot of energy—and this is what limits many leaders from achieving as much as they could. When you're constantly physically and mentally taxed, your energy drains and your effectiveness diminishes.

The Huffington Post's Anne Loehr reported in 2014 that the Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute (HPI) had been researching what leaders can do to gain an edge. Over the past 30 years HPI has identified strategies for improving the performance of leaders based on how they manage their energy. They viewed and compared today's leaders to elite professional athletes. A professional athlete may have a career span of seven to 10 years, work four to six hours a day and spend 90 per cent of their time training before a game. In contrast, the HPI views a 'corporate athlete' as having a career span of 30 years, typically working eight to 12 hours a day and spending 10 per cent of their time training, which means they have very little time to recover and revitalise their energy. The HPI looked at a framework for developing the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions of leaders with a view of them maintaining optimum performance. Without having a method for maintaining their energy, they believed many leaders were starting to lose their edge.

There is no set way to maintain or recharge your energy because it's a personal thing. I know of one CEO who schedules fortnightly massages to help her relax and recharge. When I asked her how she makes this happen she said that she has her executive assistant block out the time as if it was any other meeting. She finds taking this time for herself allows her to recharge and keep her energy maintained.

Former Apple CEO Steve Jobs was almost obsessive with walking. He used this as a form of stress management and he often held meetings while going for a long walk. Personally, I enjoy going to the cinema to help me recharge. I started using this as a hack when I spent a lot of time travelling. After a full day of work with a client and then continuing to work at my hotel for two or three hours afterwards I needed a break and going to watch a movie really helps me. When the lights are turned down and mobile phones switched off, I can escape the pressures and

constant communication. When I emerge two hours later, my energy is often much more positive than it was when I started.

You have to reclaim energy and time to ensure you don't burn out because without energy, everything else begins to falter. So any hacks that give you more time to recharge your batteries will assist you in maintaining higher performance levels.

Wrong mindset and self-doubt

As we've already seen, it's essential to be aware of your mindset (and it's something that continually needs to be hacked). Being in a growth mindset is important because it ensures you recognise the need to be flexible and to keep learning even when you make mistakes.

Too often, self-doubt gets in the way and starts to stall your progress. This can show up as an inner dialogue guiding you when you're in your leadership role. If these voices start creating doubt, it's easy to start second-guessing what needs to be done. This in itself creates a distraction that can take you off track. Rather than making decisions that are the best for the business, you may allow fear to get in the way, and this can delay important actions that should be taken.

There's a famous quote by Henry Ford that helps me be more aware of the thoughts that are going through my mind—both positive and negative: 'Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right.' This quote succinctly defines what can happen internally when you get distracted by the opposing voices in your head.

I remember working with a young manager who was struggling with her sense of self-worth and value. She was one of the most talented and gifted experts in media and communications and some of the projects she had worked on and coordinated from start to finish were very impressive given her young age. While she was in the midst of a role reassignment, we worked together to help her start looking at what her future career prospects might be. In one of our first coaching sessions, I remember her struggling to identify the value and benefit that her leadership was providing to her team as well as the rest of the financial services company that she was marketing communications manager of at the time.

She could not see the amazing talent she had because the voices in her head were questioning her abilities. We created a list of the projects

she had initiated that had been successful over the past six months. As she started recalling all of the initiatives she'd created, coordinated, executed or managed, the list started to spill over two full pages. I was even surprised by some of the new projects she was overseeing, which were cutting-edge for her industry and country at the time.

In discussing where these doubts were coming from, we started identifying some common themes. Unfortunately, one of them was the lack of support from her boss, who was too busy with his entire division to give her any direction or feedback. After a few one-on-one coaching sessions she was off and flying at even greater speed and started to get noticed by the CEO as well as visiting executives from other regions. This led to her being headhunted and transferred to the company's world headquarters in Europe to oversee the global marketing and communications strategy ... all from a moment in time where she took control of her mindset and stopped letting it control her.

This is a common trend among many CEOs I work with. When you reach a senior level it can be a very isolating and lonely place because everyone is looking to you to have all the answers and make the right decisions. If your mindset isn't kept in check it can start distracting you from the great things you can accomplish.

Time fillers and the biological need to be busy

We seem to be wired to believe that if we're not constantly doing something we're wasting our time. We've become so highly strung that we need to be busy all the time. And worse still, leaders get caught on a treadmill where it doesn't matter what they're doing—as long as they're busy at it.

This is the 'busy syndrome', a widely held belief that by being overly mentally and physically active we're moving in the right direction and accomplishing more.

In the 1970s and 1980s many people had a bucket list—a list of things they wanted to do before they died. Often, it would include three or four big items they hoped they'd be able to do one day. This may have included a big overseas trip to somewhere they always wanted to visit, seeing their children married, or finally paying off their mortgage and being debt free.

Over the past 20-odd years the number of items on the bucket list has changed. It's no longer enough to have three or four items—many people have up to 100 items on their list. This rush to experience what life has to offer is linked to the psyche of human beings, who feel they need to get busy or they'll miss out.

Across the workplace, both leaders and staff will tell you they're 'very busy'. The list of tasks to be accomplished continues to grow and people feel the pressure to keep up. The 2015 Australian Future Leaders Index created by BDO and the Co-op identifies this new culture of busyness. It describes it as a modern-day phenomenon within developed societies whereby individuals have a sense of having too much to do, being overcommitted, constantly rushed and possibly overwhelmed as a result.

Their research shows that 65 per cent of future leaders aged 18–29 feel busy either all the time, very often or quite often. Even more interesting is that 61 per cent of those surveyed like being very busy. This report also brings in social commentator Tim Kreider's views that busyness is a personal choice and that many people are addicted to busyness because they dread what they may have to face in its absence.

As human beings, we have natural psychological and biological habits or addictions, and being busy can be one of them. We get a buzz out of getting things done, regardless of the importance of the activity—and this can become an addictive response that leaders crave.

Every time we complete a task such as sending an email, we naturally feel a sense of accomplishment. However, we know there's more to this. As human beings, our brain is wired to stay focused and active. The challenge can be when dopamine, one of our key neurotransmitters, starts leading to addiction.

In a way, doing trivial tasks becomes a way of self-medicating, allowing us to feel a sense of accomplishment. In a famous experiment completed in the mid 1950s, brain researchers James Olds and Peter Milner placed small electrodes in the brains of rats to stimulate the part of the brain that released dopamine whenever the rats pressed a lever in their cage. The rats became so addicted to this stimulation that they eventually ignored everything else—including food. They continued

to press the lever—up to 700 times an hour—until many of them collapsed or died from exhaustion or starvation.

Essentially, we—as human beings—are wired the same way. So, leaders need to ensure they don't fall into a pattern of just being busy at completely random tasks that are actually distracting them from important activities. Regardless of your level as a leader within an organisation, a key skill is the ability to manage your time and productivity on the necessary activities at the right time.

External distractions

External distractions are ones that you can't control. For many leaders this is a fact of life. Part of the role of any leader is to deal with internal and external situations and be able to effectively assess them to identify a successful way forward.

Technology and how it overwhelms

Focusing on what's important is becoming harder due to the constant barrage of digital information and technological overload. Leaders are being distracted by things that are not relevant or important. It's estimated that, on average, we have 4000 thoughts per day flying in and out of our minds. This makes it extremely challenging to focus on any one thought for a period of time before technology introduces another random thought to distract you.

In his book *Focus: The hidden driver of excellence*, Daniel Goleman calls this the era of unstoppable distractions and argues that we must learn to sharpen our focus if we're to contend with, let alone thrive in, a complex world. The revolutions in the internet world—both physical and digital—aren't the real distraction. The real distraction for leaders is the unending access to multiple choices that these platforms offer. The human mind works best when it has a manageable number of decisions to make at any given time.

When we're provided with too many choices—too many options at the same time—it starts to overwhelm our brain. Multiple choices become multiple distractions and make it harder to focus on what's important.

Neuroscientists agree that the decision-making network in our brain is not always effective and doesn't prioritise when overloaded. This means we're even more open to distractions as new interruptions and information start overloading our brain. Human brains do have the ability to process this information — it just makes it more challenging to sort the trivial from the important information, which takes energy and can increase frustration.

In *The Organized Mind: Thinking straight in the age of information overload*, Daniel Levitin looks at the processing capability of the conscious mind. It's believed that physiologically we have the ability to process 120 bits of information per second. It takes 60 bits of information per second for us to understand a person talking to us. This makes it very challenging for our brains to process information if another person is talking to us at the same time. As Levitin describes it, the challenge is that the bandwidth in our mind limits the amount of information we can pay conscious attention to.

So how can we get our brain to cope with this digital overload of distraction? We either have to find a way to limit or reduce the interference, or we need to find a way to increase our effectiveness. We need hacks to shortcut and manage technological distractions.

Interruptions that steal your time

Another common distraction is interruptions because they take away precious time. These include interruptions from staff and work colleagues, as well as suppliers, customers and any other area that may distract your flow and use of time and slow you down as a leader.

In the 1970s and 1980s leaders had closed-door offices so they were able to reduce any interruptions and external interference that may have stopped them from getting things done. This changed in the 1990s when companies started moving to the open-plan office. Suddenly, everyone was sitting next to and across from numerous other people who were also busily completing their tasks, or trying to have a discussion with you, or bringing their burnt lunch back to their desk to fill the air with annoying smells, and apologising for pushing their numerous three-ring binders off their half-wall shelf only to land on your keyboard while you're typing.

If you analyse these external distractions, they fall into the common categories of what we can see, what we can hear and what we can touch—or more accurately how the surrounding environment can affect a leader's focus.

The most obvious external distraction is what we can see. When a staff member walks into your office space or someone rushes past you and it catches your eye, you subconsciously take a look to see what or who they are. This can be useful if it's your boss and they want to have a conversation with you; however, activities and movement in other parts of the open-plan office can have a negative impact on some people's ability to concentrate.

What we hear can also be a distraction. The ringing of a phone, the slamming of the photocopier drawer or the loud conversation of the person in the next cubicle can all make it difficult to think critically and work efficiently.

The third external distraction involves how we touch or feel the environment around us. I once had a co-worker who was always cold because her desk was not located near any windows and was positioned directly under the air-conditioning vent. To compensate, she constantly turned the office thermostat to a warmer setting to feel more comfortable. This resulted in most of her colleagues sweating and having to constantly drink water because they were seated next to the windows, which let warm sunlight flood across their desks.

Any of these external distractions, although quite trivial, can slow you down and start to create issues.

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With the faster pace of business, any distractions — including the simple ones— can combine to magnify their effect. And all of these trends are taking leaders off path. Overwhelming distractions limit their ability to get things done. But there are practices that can be implemented to change this pattern. The key for any leader is to be aware of these common distractions and to develop strategies for eliminating or managing them. Once the distractions are out of the way, it's time to hack your productivity.

Productivity hacks

In order to accomplish more in less time you'll need work on your productivity. There are numerous books and resources available that provide techniques for increasing your productivity and improving your time management.

Dr Stephen Covey is one of the founding fathers of the personal productivity movement. His book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* was revolutionary: it offers people a way of becoming more effective by identifying and following seven simple practices. Dr Covey emphasises that this can be achieved by using desire, skills and knowledge to change your behavioural patterns.

Ken Blanchard's bestseller *The One Minute Manager* also offers a range of easy strategies that managers can use to be more productive with their staff. It received a very strong following because it identified three simple secrets managers can use to be more effective:

- *one-minute goals*: these are goals that you write down so they are clear and memorable. They should take only one minute to read
- *one-minute praising*: this is about praising a staff member when you 'catch them doing something right'. The aim is to praise them, in one minute, at the moment when what they do meets your expectations
- *one-minute reprimands*: these involve managers letting staff know immediately when they make mistakes—focusing any criticism on the work, not the doer—and within the same minute telling them that you value their skills.

These are very powerful strategies for improving productivity among your staff.

Analysing your approach to time management

Many leaders ask me how they can improve the management of their diary or calendar. Often, there's no one-size-fits-all approach.

In my years of working with leaders I've found that how you manage your time and productivity depends on whether you have a left-brain or right-brain dominance. 'Brain dominance' refers to the fact that people have a natural preference for processing information on one side of the brain.

LEFT-BRAIN DOMINANCE

People with a left-brain dominance are logical and linear. They write lists and prioritise their time using diaries and other resources.

One of the leading left-brain, time-management strategies to gain worldwide recognition was the Franklin Planner. Initially based on the advice of Benjamin Franklin and developed by Hyrum Smith, the Franklin Planner focuses around using planners to manage day-to-day activities and scheduling.

The Franklin Planner is a very simple, yet effective, way to help people organise their day. It originally consisted of drilled, loose-leaf pages in different sizes—but, of course, these days there are apps for it. First, you list the number of tasks you have to accomplish, to ensure that nothing is forgotten. Next, you prioritise these tasks using a ranking system. The ranking system divides tasks into categories depending on their importance. The most important tasks are labelled 'A' tasks. The next category is labelled 'B' tasks, and the final category is labelled 'C' tasks. Within these three categories, it is also recommended that you prioritise individual tasks numerically. So, you organise the A category of tasks by number one, then number two, and so on, in the order you completed the tasks.

This is a good system if you're a left-brain, analytical leader who is organised and functions around lists and linear tasks.

RIGHT-BRAIN DOMINANCE

The alternative approach to time management is using more of a right-brain or creative approach. This approach is used by individuals who are more flexible about how to get things done. I find that these leaders will quite often leave blocks of time open for creatively thinking about new trends, solutions and initiatives they can follow without using a formalised list and prioritisation process.

In fact, I know of a number of managers who have tried using lists and more formal prioritisation methods only to find that they frustrated them and reduced their effectiveness. Instead, these managers use their intuition or instincts to stay abreast of the tasks to be completed and they keep track of them in their head or they use their diary to assist

them. Rather than using lists, a number of them will schedule blocks of time during which they can catch up on the projects or tasks that they need to complete in a more organic way. Although this is not as structured as making lists, I have found that managers use this method very effectively.

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Selecting which bias you have can assist you in identifying which productivity methods you should use to increase your efficiency.

## **Improving your productivity**

Leading productivity expert Dermot Crowley wrote one of the best books on productivity I have come across: *Smart Work*. In this excellent book he looks at how to improve your productivity by managing your inputs—your incoming work; your actions—what you spend your time on each working day; and your outcomes—what you want to achieve. To be more productive, he suggests a range of activities that you can use to centralise your actions (which generally involves an electronic calendar and a task system), organise your inputs (which looks at how work arrives at your desk and how you can allocate your time and attention) and realise your outcomes (which ensures you're keeping your activity in alignment with the bigger goals and objectives). If you'd like specific strategies on how to increase your productivity from a time-effectiveness lens, I highly recommend the methodologies that Dermot provides.

As we have already seen, one of the most important methods for becoming more productive involves monitoring your use of time and ensuring you're not getting led astray by distractions. One of the best methods for examining your effectiveness is to look at your current leadership approach.

### ***Mind mapping***

Mind mapping is a technique that can be used to capture the thoughts in your mind and transfer them onto paper so the information can be easily seen. This enables you to start identifying patterns and hierarchies that you can use to help organise your thoughts.

Tony Buzan is credited as the inventor of mind mapping and is an expert on the brain and memory. He is the author of over 100 books including *Use Your Head: Innovative learning and thinking techniques to fulfil your mental potential* and *The Power of Creative Intelligence*. Buzan believes that this process accurately mirrors how the brain shifts from one idea to the next. I'm now going to show you how you can use mind mapping to help you hack your productivity, using the example of a young executive I coached.

## ***Hacking your activity***

I once worked with an up-and-coming young executive, Jan, who was being groomed for a future role as CEO. In one of our regular coaching sessions she mentioned how she was starting to feel overwhelmed in her new role, and that the tasks that were coming across her desk were starting to slip away from her. I remember the look on her face when I asked her about her current use of time. 'I'm not someone who wastes time. That's why I'm in this role and have received praise over the past six months—because of my ability to get things done.' She was clearly not impressed with me asking about her use of time!

### **HACKING PRODUCTIVITY USING AN ACTIVITY MIND MAP**

With the use of a mind map, I took Jan through the steps that would help her hack her productivity.

#### **1. Map your current activity**

I started by asking Jan to share with me the activities and tasks she had focused on over the past week. I then wrote a description of her current role on a sheet of paper and circled it. Next, I drew lines radiating out from the circle and labelled them with the main activities and tasks she had identified (see figure 1.1, overleaf). It was immediately clear that she was incredibly busy and was taking the new role very seriously.

Some of the activities were subtasks of other main tasks, so we grouped them into common areas. Other activities were spread out

(continued)

## HACKING PRODUCTIVITY USING AN ACTIVITY MIND MAP (CONT'D)

a bit more broadly and included items such as ensuring more office supplies were ordered, as well as organising and attending various team meetings with her staff. (I find that the more senior the leader, the broader the activities tend to be.)

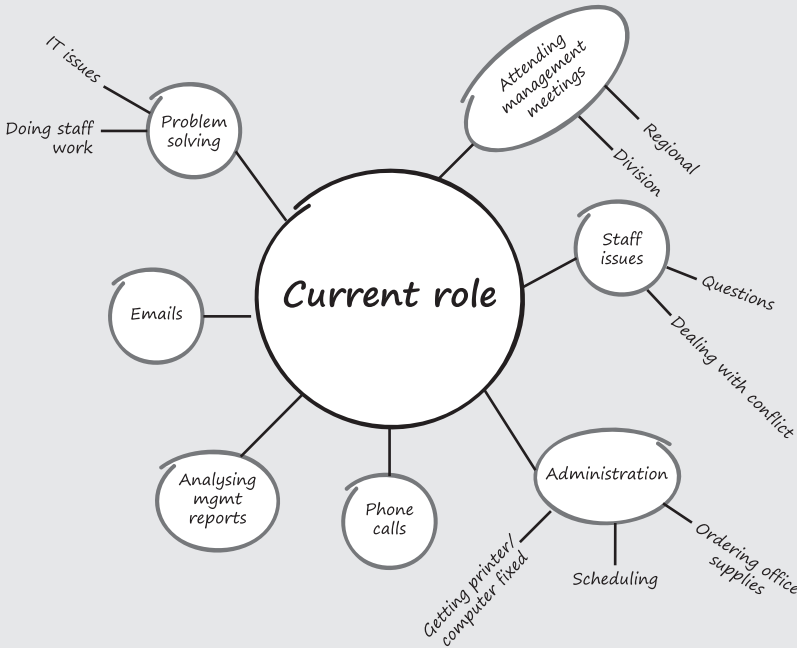


Figure 1.1: a sample activity mind map

### 2. Estimate the amount of time spent on each activity

I asked Jan to estimate the amount of time she had spent on each activity or task over the past week (shown in figure 1.2 as percentages). This was a bit of a challenge for her because she was unsure how long she had spent on each activity – which was part of the problem! She also found that there were different levels of activity, with some actually being smaller subtasks to help her complete a larger part of her role.

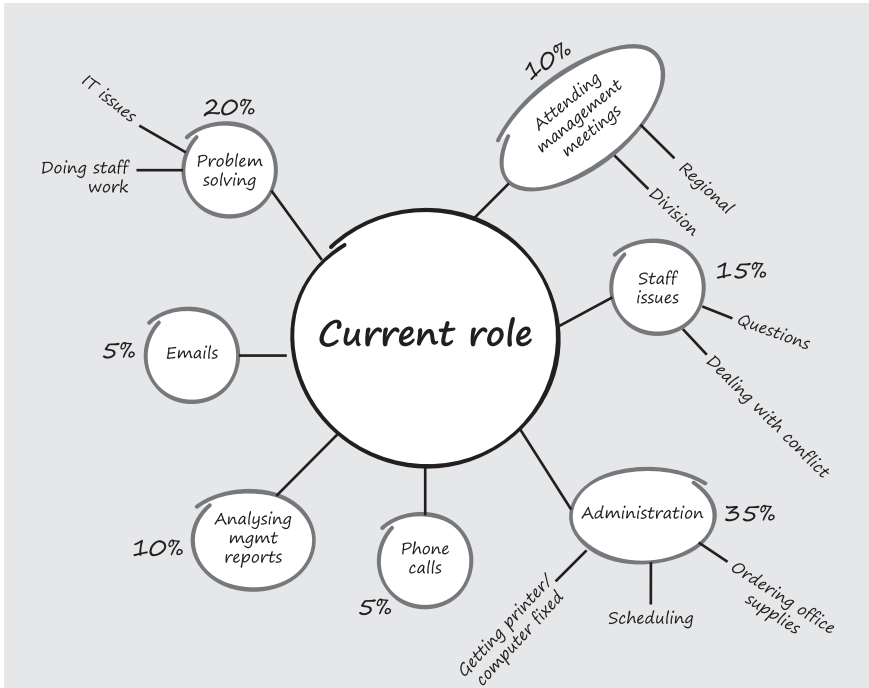


Figure 1.2: activity mind map with times shown in percentages

### 3. Identify the amount of time you work 'on the business' versus 'in the business'

The next step was to get Jan to categorise the areas of current activity. Rather than just grouping them under her main responsibilities, we used a smarter approach that looked at the types of activity based on a concept from Michael Gerber's best-selling book, *The E-Myth Revisited*. The concept that Gerber made popular – and that has been embedded into the psyche of many people in business – is, 'You need to work on your business, not just in your business'.

Simply put, 'working *in* the business' includes activities and tasks that relate to the everyday operations and function of any business. These are the things that need to be done on a regular basis to ensure things are running properly. They include the day-to-day firefighting and problem solving required to keep a business operating – such as answering customer phone calls, processing orders and ensuring that stock on the selves of a retail store is organised in an easy way for customers to find.

(continued)

## HACKING PRODUCTIVITY USING AN ACTIVITY MIND MAP (CONT'D)

'Working on the business' involves the strategic activities that need to be performed. These are activities that help set you and your staff up for future success and they can include having one-on-one coaching sessions to help develop your staff's skills, working with your staff to develop a strategic plan, and anything else that will benefit you and your organisation in the future, as well as predicting future market or consumer trends, and research and development of new products.

To help Jan understand the tasks she had performed over the past week even better, I asked her to add the label 'on' or 'in' next to each task, depending on whether it was something that needed to be attended to immediately or something related to setting up her department and her staff for success in the future (see figure 1.3).

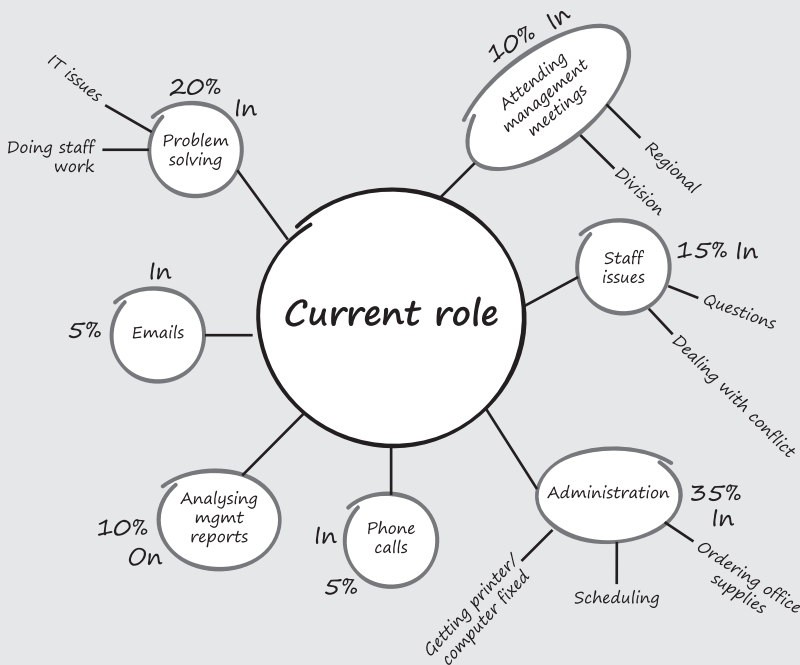


Figure 1.3: activity mind map showing time and business focus

At this point Jan could clearly see the pattern she was falling into. Of all of the tasks that she had worked on in the past week almost 90 per cent were 'in the business' activities. She realised that many of these tasks were quite trivial and could easily be completed by her staff. She was only doing them herself because she wanted to be in control and was so focused on being busy that she wasn't aware of which tasks she should and should not have been doing. (Jan also didn't know how to effectively delegate – we'll discuss delegation in chapter 4.) This also meant that the important, but non-urgent, activities that needed to be addressed were being ignored because she was so busy firefighting things that should have been fixed or improved in the past.

#### **4. Map your ideal activity**

To refocus on the activities Jan should be focusing on, we mapped her ideal role activity on another piece of paper. She identified a number of areas she had not focused on recently that she believed were critical to her role, and we added these. We also removed several trivial tasks she was currently doing. This time Jan estimated the percentage of time that she should be focusing on each task to be more effective in her role. She also reallocated the percentage of time that she wanted to spend working on the business, with most of the related activities involving the coaching and development of her staff, as shown in figure 1.4 (overleaf).

Often, the activities relating to your current and your ideal roles will be the same and only the ideal percentage or amount of time spent on each activity needs to change. This is often a good reminder that you need to dedicate more or less time to certain activities to start hacking your approach. By double checking the amount of time you as a leader are spending on the business, you ensure that your focus is in the right area. As a general rule of thumb the more senior the leader, the more time should be spent 'working on the business'. It's not uncommon for a CEO to spend 75 per cent of their time in this area given the largest part of their role is generally about setting things up for growth and opportunity in the future, and trusting their leadership team to oversee the 'working in the business' activities.

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## HACKING PRODUCTIVITY USING AN ACTIVITY MIND MAP (CONT'D)

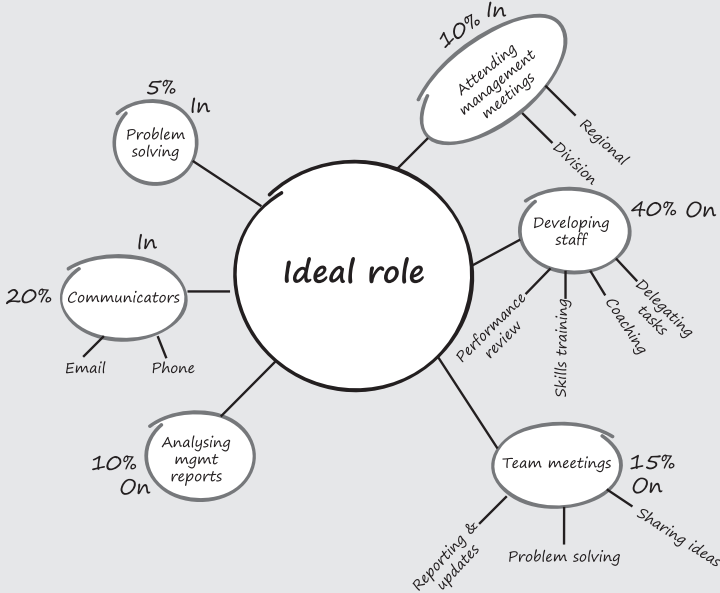


Figure 1.4: an ideal activity mind map showing time and focus

### 5. Create a transition plan

The final step in understanding where Jan was losing time was to place the current activity role map and the ideal activity role map side by side to identify the areas that needed change. This made it very easy for her to see what she needed to do. To complete the experience, we created a transition plan (as shown in table 1.1), that included a list of the tasks she was going to delegate to staff as well as how she was going to allocate time in her diary to ensure she started working on the tasks she needed to attend to. This plan also included the steps Jan would take to ensure that her staff would pick up these responsibilities and were provided with the skills to complete them.

**Table 1.1: transition strategy table**

| <b>Task</b>              | <b>How</b>                                                                          | <b>Who</b> | <b>When</b> |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Ordering office supplies | 1. Create supplier list<br>2. Create process<br>3. Delegate                         | John       | 1 May       |
| Fixing IT equipment      | 1. Identify internal IT fix process<br>2. Clarify how to communicate<br>3. Delegate | Sue        | 5 May       |
| Scheduling               | 1. Write process<br>2. Train<br>3. Assist for three weeks                           | Bruce      | 1 June      |

**Over the next couple of weeks of working her transition strategy, Jan started to achieve a new work rhythm and to feel on top of her role. She had just completed a big step in ‘hacking’ her time – being aware of where she was losing time and using a process to reallocate her focus.**

At first glance, mapping your activity and use of time seems very simple. Taking the time to map the activities that you should be doing and the time allocation is also straightforward. The challenge for most leaders is that they don't take the time to step back from their day-to-day activities to look objectively at whether they are being as efficient with their time as they could be.

**CASE  
STUDY**

**Leanne Coddington**

CEO, Tourism and Events Queensland

After finishing high school, Leanne Coddington decided that she wanted to get into the world of hospitality. The opportunity to

*(continued)*



**CASE  
STUDY**

travel and work across a range of hotels was so appealing that she went to university to earn a degree in Hospitality Management and started her career with a small hotel in Canberra that went on to be the first of the Rydges Hotel Group. After completing her traineeship, she moved to the pre-opening team of the Hyatt Hotel group in Canberra commencing in the role of Materials Manager — the first female ever to hold that position in the company.

After a time in Canberra, Leanne was intrigued by Human Resource Management and moved into a junior role at the Hyatt on Collins. This allowed her to start learning strategies that she could use to help work with staff as well as starting to motivate and lift the performance of others. She was also fortunate to be involved in the transformation of Melbourne’s Hyatt on Collins to the Grand Hyatt, which was a major redevelopment and tested her skills and abilities to manage a workforce that was going through change.

Shortly after completing this major hotel transformation, Leanne decided to start a family and moved back to Queensland. Very quickly she yearned to continue her involvement in hospitality and she was hired as Hospitality Instructor at a private training college helping to prepare the workforce of the future.

Leanne then joined Tourism and Events Queensland (formerly Tourist and Travel Corporation and Tourism Queensland), which is a state government body that is responsible for lead marketing, destination and experience development and major events agency. It is responsible for developing strategy and commercial partnerships with industry operators to showcase and deliver Queensland experiences, packages and products to key target markets across Queensland, Australia and the world with a goal of achieving \$30 billion in annual overnight visitor expenditure by 2020.

It is also known for its worldwide ‘Best Job in the World’ project, which it launched in 2009. This is widely regarded as one of the most successful tourism campaigns of its kind. It broke new

ground for social media and offered one lucky candidate a six-month dream job as a caretaker for the islands of the Great Barrier Reef. It was so successful that it generated 35 000 applications from over 200 different countries and is estimated to have generated more than A\$430 million in global public relations value. The campaign made Queensland an international destination and showcased the Great Barrier Reef as a topic of discussion—and a desirable holiday location for people around the world. It generated 8.6 million website visits with over 55 million pages visited—and more than 200 000 website hits within the first 24 hours!

During this Leanne was overseeing partnerships with industry and was one of the judges for this hugely successful program. This role required her to increase her productivity and actively build relationships with various industries to identify what they could do to assist them, which ultimately led to Leanne being appointed as CEO.

During her time as acting CEO and then as CEO, a range of major issues have hit Queensland and she and her leadership team needed to get creative and move fast to remedy these. The 2010–11 Brisbane floods and Cyclone Yasi in 2011 had to be countered with proactive global campaigns reassuring the world that Queensland was still open for business to allow a quick recovery based on tourism dollars, which were critical in getting things turned around. Leanne and her team have worked to host ‘mega-famil’, which are large events that host media from all around the world to let them see (and report on) the wonderful locations across Queensland that are open for tourism. As a true leader, Leanne reinforces that it was a total team effort that allowed them to turn around a potentially disastrous situation in an extremely short time frame.

To enable Tourism and Events Queensland to remain proactive in numerous markets around the world, they have over 150 staff located in 13 different locations around the world, including Brisbane London, Los Angeles, Munich, Auckland, Beijing,

*(continued)*

**CASE  
STUDY**

Shanghai, Taipei, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul and Singapore. This also requires Leanne to be productive and efficient with her time as she spends quite a lot of time travelling around the world to support these partnerships in numerous locations. To enable her to get more done, she stacks her trips back to back to allow her to concentrate this time away in one time frame. She also has a solid philosophy of trusting her people on the ground in the different markets to understand and plan the events. When she visits, she always ensures that there's a 'cheap and cheerful' local dinner event with her team for her to reconnect and touch base in person and also to acclimatise to different environments before the scheduled events and partnership meetings begin.

To stay productive when she returns home, Leanne also tries to find ways to unwind and relax by taking time for herself (and her family) in simple ways that recharge her energy. This often includes some family time on the verandah having quality conversations as well as walking to help manage stress and the pressure from travel and office activities. Regardless of her travel and business schedule, Leanne has found a range of productivity hacks that she uses to keep her feet firmly on the ground.

# SELF-HACK

## Activity mapping to increase productivity

To stay effective and efficient, leaders need to regularly 'self-hack' their approach to their work, in order to ensure that they're focusing on the things they should be doing, rather than being distracted. Here's a summary of the hacks you can use to achieve this.

### Hack 1: Map your current activity

- Write your current activity in the middle of a piece of paper and draw a circle around it.
- Write down the activities you've been focusing on over the past week (or two weeks if that's easier). Don't simply write a list of tasks from the top of the page to the bottom – this can tempt you to think linearly and not fully visualise the range of activities. Create a mind map by drawing lines away from the circle containing your job title and writing one task or activity at the end of each line, in a circle.
- As you draw your activity mind map, you'll find that some tasks are subsets of a category. For example, these activities could all be combined under the heading 'Departmental meetings':
  - meeting with sales
  - meeting with marketing
  - meeting with operations.

### Hack 2: Estimate the amount of time spent on each activity

- Estimate how much time you spent on each activity or task by either counting the hours or working out the percentage of time you spent on it. Remember: you can only have 100 per cent of time or 40–50 hours per week (or more depending on your role!).

### Hack 3: Identify the amount of time you work 'on the business' versus 'in the business'

- Label each activity as 'in' for 'working in the business' or 'on' for 'working on the business'.

#### **Hack 4: Map your ideal activity**

- On another piece of paper, write your ideal activity in the centre and draw a circle around it. Next, draw a mind map with lines radiating outwards from the circle and write the activities that you *should be* focusing on. Make sure you remember to capture the 'working on the business' activities. If possible, try not to look at the mind map of your current activities. You want to be able to step away from what you've been doing and be objective about where your focus should be.
- Now estimate the amount of time you should ideally be spending on each activity.

#### **Hack 5: Create a transition plan**

- Now that you have identified what needs hacking, you need to establish how you're going to do it and who can help you. Write down all the activities and tasks you're currently doing but shouldn't be and identify who you can delegate these tasks to.
- Make sure you use a process to effectively delegate. Take the time to communicate what's needed, how to perform the task and how you can assist your staff member to complete it. If you find you have a large number of tasks that need to be handed off, don't give all of them to the same person at once as this could overwhelm them. Map when you're going to delegate each task using a transition strategy like the one in table 1.1.
- Hacking your activity is something you should do at least a couple of times per year to ensure you're being as productive as possible. For senior leaders this is also a good exercise to do with your direct reports to help ensure they're focusing on the important aspects of their role.