

CHAPTER 1

Get clear on what matters

Wouldn't it be lovely to say goodbye to the weight of overwhelm, the pressure of expectations and the barrage of busyness that wears you down? How good would it be to jump off the conveyor belt of chaos? But when? Seriously, who's got time for that? Do you get that nagging feeling that if you stop running — even for a second — life will swamp you in a deluge?

This sense of overwhelm comes from two places. First, we're overwhelmed because of our uncertainty about what to do next. Which decision should I make that will be 'right', how do I find balance, should I have red quinoa or white quinoa? (Seriously, even a quick trip to the supermarket results in many mini-meltdown moments!) Second, overwhelm comes from wanting to do it all. With so many options and so many ideas that we want to dive into feet first, we're burning the midnight oil and getting swamped in our own busyness.

Consumed by the sheer amount of what needs to be done, and underneath not really sure where we sit in it all, we can feel like we're doing it all on our own. For me, this is where my inner martyr turns up, stepping in to insist, 'I've got this', 'No, let me', 'I'll take it *all* on and just suck it up'. My inner martyr

definitely works solo — if you offer her help, she'll flatly refuse; get offended even. Then she'll storm off in a huff just to prove to you that she's got this. The louder and more frequent the huffs, the more she's telling you to back away (while actually silently screaming for help).

In the moments of feeling over it and stuck in a deep rut without a single off-ramp in sight, we cling to anything that will make us feel better. Busyness leads to bargaining, self-sacrifice and hours of researching how you can have a coffee-machine intravenously attached to you just to get through the day (or maybe that's just me). This is why we whisper to ourselves, under our breath, 'I've gotta get my shit together'. Maybe you shout it out loud. Regularly. Like hourly. Every. Day.

If you're nodding agreement, you're in the right place.

These whispers are your impetus for change. Change only occurs, though, when you are clear about what needs to change.

Let's check the pulse

Things can be different — and making changes doesn't have to be all about giving things up, regrets and caffeine by the bucketload. But the only way things will be different is if you first recognise where you're at, right here and now. It's time to look at what's really going on.

So, let's take some time to check our 'pulse'. Not your actual pulse; I'm sure yours is fine (a little hurried maybe, but still operating). Besides, the whole this-is-a-book-and-I-can't-actually-check-your-real-pulse thing kinda gets in the way. No, let's check the pulse of busyness in your world and its impact.

Take some time with a pen and paper and go through the following questions, rating yourself on where you currently sit on the described continuums.

The Boss of Busy scale

Where are you at? (Rate yourself from 1 to 10.)

1. How often do you take time out to hit the reset button for yourself?

1	10
<i>'Time out? That'll happen when I'm dead.'</i>	<i>'Every day is "me" day.'</i>

2. Do the people closest to you know what your no-go zones are?

1	10
<i>'I'm the master of saying yes when I don't mean it.'</i>	<i>'My boundaries are like the Great Wall of China — so clear you can see them from space.'</i>

3. If someone asks you what your strengths are, what is your response?

1	10
<i>'The only thing I'm good at is second-guessing myself ... I think? Um ... what do you think?'</i>	<i>'I can rattle off what I rock at in a heartbeat.'</i>

4. Do you know the things that really, truly matter to you?

1	10
<i>'I used to but they've become lost under the busyness.'</i>	<i>'At any given moment I know what's important.'</i>

5. How clear are you on exactly what your values are?

1	10
<i>'Family, health, happiness are my go-to boring responses.'</i>	<i>'I'm razor-sharp clear on my unique values.'</i>

6. Do the people around you know exactly what presses your buttons?

1 10
'I'm the enigma.' *'I'm the open book.'*

7. How mapped out are the goals you want to achieve?

1 10
'I've bought myself a planner, but it's gathering dust.' *'They're mapped out to within an inch of their lives.'*

8. How obvious is the next step you need to take?

1 10
'All I do is react to what's right in front of me.' *'What's next is clear to me and takes priority.'*

9. When it comes to planning your week or day, do your happiness and health make it onto the to-do list?

1 10
'They're always the bottom of the pile, last priority.' *'These things are the first in the calendar.'*

10. How visible are your goals and values?

1 10
'They're in my head, does that count?' *'They smack me in the face wherever I go.'*

11. How comfortable are you with failure?

1 10
'Failure is only for losers.' *'Failure is proof I'm pushing the boundaries.'*

12. Do you have people around you who both challenge you and back you?

1

10

'Does my goldfish count?'

'My tribe are on speed-dial.'

Remember as you take yourself through these questions: no-one is going to know your answers. This is one of those places where you don't have to respond based on what you think you 'should' say or what others would expect from you. Shake that off and go through the questions again with an honest lens. No bullshit; warts 'n' all truth. Focus especially on the areas that make you wince with awareness because they've touched a nerve — now is the time to stare that reality in the face. These should become your personal focus points throughout the rest of the book.

They've sold us a lemon

For a long time we've been sold the magic pill of productivity. It'll combat overwhelm quicker than a rattlesnake's strike, we're told. This 'ere elixir will cure yer arthritis, bronchitis, cellulitis and any other 'itis you may have. It's snake oil for the stressed soul.

We've been told that we just need to learn time management skills to be more efficient and be able to get more done in a shorter amount of time. But it's a hoax. A massive myth you should stop buying into. It's not that time management strategies don't work; it's that they work when you're already good at time management. The results of this three-decade-old directive are now clearly evident in how people are feeling: overwhelmed. And that's despite there being some fantastic productivity tips and tools out in the market.

Back in the 1980s we were also sold that multi-tasking was the key — that is, being able to do not just one thing but five things at once. We needed to diversify our skills. This may have been a great idea for workplaces, but it was a terrible idea for our brains. Research is now finding that our brain is incapable of multi-tasking. Instead of attending to multiple tasks, our brains have been shown on MRI scans to be rapidly switching between two tasks. In this rapid attention splitting, our brains get fatigued and we experience a lag in reorientation when we come back to a task. If you've ever been absorbed in something and then gotten distracted, you'll have experienced how tough that initial moment of getting back into the task is. When we think we're multi-tasking we're actually not really doing any of the tasks well.

Tied in with our orienting response system, this multi-tasking uses up a lot of juice — have you ever had those days when you've been juggling a million balls, yet feel like you've achieved nothing? On the other hand, how good do you feel after a day when you've had a singular focus on something important? It's energising, isn't it? With the multi-tasking myth buried, the considered approach is now all about the power of mindfully being fully present in the one thing that we're doing.

'But surely, Ali,' you may say, 'the answer to me getting on top of things is to get cracking, and be more productive?' Look, I know we've been drinking from that well for a long, long time, but perhaps I can shift your thoughts by looking forensically at the word 'productivity'. In the word's definition, we find the key to why it is not the answer to our overwhelm. Productivity is defined as a per unit measure of efficiency.

This definition makes sense back in the Industrial era where what many people did was work in factories with the goal of getting more of the exact same product out the door in the same amount of time. A productivity guru's dream. The focus

was on having machines (and people) work more efficiently so there was more productivity in the same amount of time.

The truth is in this current world, however, not every email is created equal. Not every phone call that we make is the same. The goal is not to do more emails. The goal is not to spend the whole day on the phone. The goal should be about the quality of the conversations we have. It should be about connecting with the right people, at the right time, in the right way — that opens up doors for us. It's not about getting more done in a shorter amount of time because, as evidence shows, that just leaves us exhausted at the end of the day, collapsing on the couch, with the only looming possibility being that we have to get up and do the exact same thing tomorrow. The cold, hard truth is that strategy trumps productivity hands down.

Interestingly, through further exploration of the definition of productivity we can view the actual origin of the word 'produce'. And it's killer. Damn thing stopped me in my tracks, and since then, I've related this to thousands of people in presentations at various conferences.

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Produce comes from the Latin *prōdūcere*, which means to bring forward, bring forth or bring into existence. So 'to produce' means 'to bring into being'.

As I read those words, something shifted in me. It resonated to my core. Because 'bring into being' can relate to any work or activity you are doing. Playing with the kids isn't about being productive, but about 'bringing into being' their growth and development. Spending time on a spreadsheet for a project is about 'bringing into being' accountability and structure to get

the job done. ‘Bringing into being’ is about creating something that wasn’t there before, something that is unique because it’s got your fingerprint on it. To me, this dovetails perfectly with the intent of this book: the need to gain clarity on purpose and step forward with progress.

Typically when I ask people about their goals, hopes and dreams, their response isn’t about doing more — it’s about doing better, leaving a legacy. And what they want to do better wholly centres on what they are trying to bring into being. The thing that wasn’t there before.

My question for you is: What are you bringing into being? What are you creating that either wasn’t there before, or is different because you are doing it? What has your fingerprint on it in a way that no-one else could do? What are you bringing into being that has your DNA on it? What’s that thing you want to create?¹

Your creation could be something tangible like writing a book, planting a herb garden or getting a finisher’s medallion at a half-marathon. Or perhaps your creation is less tangible, but no less important. It might be a ritual to bring you closer to your children, working on your mindset to further your career or perhaps it’s dreaming up a way to surprise and delight your partner. Tangible or intangible, these things are art. They fill your soul with light. They are yours to create; to bring into being. Remember: it’s simply not about how we can get more done in a shorter space of time; it’s about what it is that you can step into.

But we need to navigate a few roadblocks along our way to bringing our best to the world. The biggest one? Our fear that it might not work.

1 Okay, that was more than one question; I got on a roll.

What if I fail?

This is the point when we start searching for a guarantee. We start thinking, *If I'm going to bring into being something that is new, that hasn't been created yet, something that I'll be putting my reputation on the line for, it had better be good. No. Perfect. Otherwise, what's the point?*

This fear permeates our thinking. What sits behind the fear is the belief that if we're going to produce something and bring it into being:

- » it has to be perfect
- » it can't be judged, criticised or pulled down
- » I have to do it all on my own or else it doesn't count.

Talk about piling on the pressure. Let's put these beliefs under the microscope.

First, when you are bringing something into being, waiting until it's perfect is a brilliant procrastination tool. Through the lens of perfectionism, we hold ourselves back, obsess about the details that often don't really matter, or sometimes not even start in the first place. The world is moving too fast for us to wait until we reach perfect. The notion of perfect is elusive anyway. Becoming okay with the discomfort of producing, and sharing what you've produced before it's perfect is key to living a Stand Out life. In fact, it's a requirement. Sometimes what you produce connects and resonates with others because of its imperfections. We bring things into being in order to serve others, and recognising this can help you overcome your fear of it not being perfect.

The second sabotaging fear is of being judged, criticised or pulled down. When we bring something into being we want to ensure that we get five-star reviews every time. Guess what? You won't. When you put yourself out there, when you rattle the cages, others will judge, maybe criticise, perhaps even pull

you down. The more you stand out, and the more that you produce in life, the more you'll be in the firing line.

These words cut deeply, and they can bring forth our deepest fears. However, this critique and finger pointing often has very little to do with you, and usually says more about the other person and what they feel uncomfortable with.

Remember this: criticism is unavoidable when you produce, so stop waiting for a time when criticism will go away. People will have their opinions, and people will have their say. This doesn't make your courage any less, nor your impact any less important.

The third sabotaging belief is that to produce something, to put our name to it, we have to own all of it. It's our job to do every single part of the process — otherwise, we can't claim it. This is our internal martyr.

All the great things that have ever been achieved, and the people who we believe are successful, all have a trail of people behind them who support them. The belief that we have to do all of it is one that needs to be shed.

**FAILING IS OKAY. REGRET BECAUSE
YOU NEVER STARTED IS NOT.**

'So what if I fail?' When that question pops up, confront the sabotaging belief and remember that in order to bring into being that thing that you need to create, nowhere is it written that it has to be perfect, it has to dodge criticism, or you have to slave it out on your own without any help.

Failing is okay. Regret because you never started is not.

Meeting the two drivers of change

Working with individuals, teams and organisations through transitions and change is the common thread that ties together the different paths of my career, and this I know: change is hard.

How we transition through periods of change can make or break us. Those who lose their way in the transition through change often are stuck and stagnated.

Losing your way through change comes about because of two main reasons:

1. You lose sight of the bigger purpose.
2. You stop making progress.

These challenges give us the clue to the two main drivers for change. Our ammunition to strike back at busy. But first, have a think about the following and the feelings they bring up:

- » How do you turn up at work when you are stressed and under the pump?
- » How do you respond to that team meeting that drags on longer than it should?
- » How do you turn up to your family, friends or kids when you are feeling like this?

It's kinda like the next person who comes within a 5-metre radius could get their head bitten off, isn't it?! Seriously, what are they even doing??

Compare these feelings to when you are feeling calm, able to breathe and your coping cup (yes, that's a technical term) is full.

How do you turn up at your work and with family now?

While the situations are the same (you're damn busy), what you bring to the situation drastically changes not only your experience but also the impact you have on others.

Sure, we all get stressed from time to time. Busy takes over and sets up camp — ignoring our subtle hints to pack its bag and leave. Unless we've got some strategies to combat busy, the bugger keeps winning. The key to finding out what these strategies are lies in these two drivers of change.

DRIVER 1: CONNECTING TO PURPOSE

The first driver for combating busy is having a sense of purpose — that thing that lights you up, that's important to you, that you can't not do.

We do so many things in our life that are just automatic, where we're going through the motions — for example, parking in the same zone at a shopping centre every time we go there (regardless of whether the shop we want today is at completely the other end).

When we lose sight of purpose we are doing what everyone else is doing because we believe that's what needs to be done. What I hear from individuals in organisations who have disconnected from the 'why' is statements that involve, 'just because'. Why do you have a team meeting every Tuesday at 8:30 am? 'Oh, just because it's what we've always done. It's just the way things are done around here.' This important disconnect from why meetings and why this time has two causes: time fades the original intent because you haven't come back to why this is important, and there wasn't a strong enough purpose in the first place (it's just what other organisations do).

Simon Sinek is an American author and speaker whose TED Talk and subsequent bestselling book *Start with Why* skyrocketed the conversation about the power of connecting to purpose. Sinek suggested when individuals and brands focus on their why first, and share this with others, they inspire others. Connection and trust happen fast when we share our stories of 'why'.

Having a sense of purpose sits on a continuum (see figure 1.1). Up the higher end of the continuum is where we 'know why'. We have a clear reason and that reason leaves us with a certain strut and purpose in our step.

Down the lower end of the continuum is where there's 'no why'. We're going through the process because it's what we

think we ‘should’ be doing, or it’s what other people have done, so it must work.

NO WHY ————— **KNOW WHY**

Figure 1.1: purpose continuum

We can have a clear sense of purpose in certain areas of our life but not in others. For example, you’re ready to run a 10-kilometre event because that’s a clear part of your fitness goals, but when it comes to financial goals you’re just paying off the house because that’s what needs to be done.

While purpose is important, purpose alone doesn’t get us to where we want to be. Having only purpose is like coming up with a bunch of New Year’s resolutions and then waiting for the universe to kick into gear and deliver them for you. It’s not until we get into action that stuff starts to happen.

DRIVER 2: MAKING PROGRESS

It’s key, then, that the second driver for change is making progress. One of the unhealthiest places people can be is when they are feeling stuck, and when working with clients in a clinical setting, I witnessed this time and time again. This feeling builds when we believe that tomorrow is going to be exactly the same as today, and that’s when despair sets in.

Nothing is more frustrating and demotivating than feeling like you are working hard but not getting anywhere. Perhaps you have a great idea but get too distracted. (Oh look! A sale is on at Pillow Talk. Why, yes, actually we do need one-million thread count sheets to add to our overflowing sheet cupboard; that’s exactly what’s missing from my life.) So distracted that we don’t deliver on the big stuff. So screw the sheets. Break it down and start getting some forward momentum.

Progress also sits on a continuum (see figure 1.2, overleaf). At the higher end of the continuum is where there’s ‘no

wear’ — as in, no wear and tear. This is when you put in effort and it repays you back tenfold. It’s those times when the work seems frictionless, you have the right conversations with the right person and things just fall into place.

Down the other end of the continuum is where we’re going ‘nowhere’. It might be that we’ve got a mountain of great ideas — maybe we’ve even got some really, really cool plans — but we just haven’t got round to even starting on these ideas because life is so busy. Or we are putting in the effort, but it just feels like we’re hitting roadblock after roadblock. That’s just like something else coming up and getting in the way, and we feel like we’re stuck in that space.

NOWHERE ————— **NO WEAR**

Figure 1.2: progress continuum

Once again, while progress is critical, without a sense of purpose progress on its own is a bit like watching *The Bachelor* — there’s a whole lot of activity and drama but no real point.

Magic happens when we combine the two — purpose *and* progress.

So in those quiet moments when you just wish you had your shit together, rather than reach for more productivity, seek to produce — to bring something into being that didn’t exist before. And when you do seek to produce, look at it through the lens of the two drivers for change: purpose and progress. Because when we are clear about purpose, and we are moving forward, we unleash full boss-mode on busy and put it in its place.

In the next chapter, we’ll explore how these two drivers interact and the four states we can find ourselves in when they do.