

Busy Isn't a Strategy

How to Shift from Activity to Real Momentum

By Françoise E. Lyon, ADM. A., Senior Strategic Advisor, Laulima Consulting

In nearly every organization I work with, the effort is there. People are committed. Calendars are full. Meetings stack back-to-back. Teams respond quickly, move fast, and stay “on” all day. The problem is that much of this motion—however sincere—doesn’t translate into outcomes.

We've created a world where being busy is often mistaken for being effective. It's not. Busyness is frequently a symptom of unclear priorities, misaligned incentives, and performance systems that reward responsiveness over results. When people are evaluated on activity, visibility, and availability rather than outcomes, the organization gets exactly what it measures: motion without momentum.

Busy isn't a strategy. It's a coping mechanism.



Motion vs. momentum

A useful distinction is this: motion is activity; momentum is progress.

Motion looks like updates, decks, check-ins, and status meetings. Momentum looks like decisions made, obstacles removed, and measurable movement toward a goal. Motion is often loud. Momentum can be surprisingly quiet.

I've seen this play out in a very concrete way.

At a former employer, we had a monthly meeting that was *supposed* to be a senior leadership forum—heads of five

departments, one hour, once a month. In theory, it sounded smart: alignment, shared priorities, fewer silos.

It slowly turned into the definition of organizational motion.

There was no agenda, ever. It was always framed as a “touch base,” which is usually code for “we’ll see where it goes.” The SVP running it was frequently late, and because there was no set structure, the meeting went in every direction. People started sending replacements—because it was hard to justify giving up an hour for something so unpredictable. Then it got worse: those replacements wanted their number two and three included “just in case,” and within a year, we had 15 people in a meeting originally designed for five.

And what happens when you put 15 people in a room with no agenda and no decision rights? It becomes a venting session. Everyone unloads. Nothing gets decided. The same issues return next month, dressed up in new language.

One moment still makes me laugh because it perfectly captures the absurdity. In one of those meetings, we discovered the institution had more than ten different types of envelopes. Ten. We spent half an hour debating which envelope we should use for a specific marketing campaign. And after thirty minutes of “discussion,” we still didn’t agree by the end of the meeting.

That meeting didn’t fail because people didn’t care. It failed because it had no strategy—only motion.

Why “busy” feels safe

Busyness is seductive because it provides instant feedback. You respond to an email, you feel useful. You attend a meeting, you feel included. You produce a document, you feel accomplished.

Real progress is different. It often requires saying “no.” It involves trade-offs. It forces you to prioritize one initiative over another—and accept that something won’t be done. That can feel risky. In many cultures, it even feels politically dangerous.

So instead, organizations stay busy. They do everything. And because everything is important, nothing truly is.

There’s another layer to this that many people don’t want to admit: sometimes “busy” isn’t about productivity at all. It’s about appearances.

Early in my career, a boss encouraged me to “show up early” to set a good example for my team. The intention sounded noble: leadership presence, discipline, commitment. There was just one problem—I’m not naturally a morning person. My most productive hours are in the afternoon and evening.

But I was ambitious, so I did what I was told. I started arriving earlier than I needed to, and because I wasn’t at my best yet, I would sit quietly and read a

book until the financial markets opened and the day “really” began.

Some of my team members handled it differently: they played video games until things picked up. And instead of asking, “How do we design a work rhythm that maximizes performance?” the underlying message was simply: be visible.

Not productive. Visible.

This is rarely just an individual behaviour problem; it is a design problem. If promotions, bonuses, and recognition go to the people who answer the most emails, attend the most meetings, or appear the most overloaded, then busyness becomes rational.

Managing human capital means asking a harder question: are we rewarding effort or impact? High-performing cultures make impact visible and measurable. They do not confuse time spent with value created.

The hidden cost of being busy

Busyness has a cost, and it’s larger than most leaders realize:

1. Decision paralysis

When too many initiatives run at once, decisions get deferred. Teams schedule “one more alignment meeting,” gather “more input,” or wait for “the right moment.” Meanwhile, time passes and opportunity shrinks.

2. Fragmented attention

Context switching is expensive.

Every time a team jumps from one priority to another, it loses speed and depth. Work becomes shallow. Quality declines.

3. Exhaustion without impact

High performers don’t burn out from effort—they burn out from futility. Few things demoralize a team more than working hard without making progress.

4. A culture of constant responsiveness

When urgency becomes the default setting, the organization becomes reactive. The loudest voice wins. The latest issue dictates the agenda. Strategy becomes a slide deck rather than a discipline.

5. Talent misallocation

Your best people get trapped in low-impact work. Instead of deploying top talent on the few priorities that move the needle, organizations spread them thin across everything. Over time, high performers disengage or leave—not because they worked hard, but because their work didn’t matter.

What creates real momentum

Momentum doesn’t come from doing more. It comes from doing the right few things exceptionally well. It requires three elements: clarity, alignment, and execution rhythm.

1) Clarity: Make choices visible

Most leaders believe they have priorities. But if you ask ten people what the top

three priorities are, you'll often get ten different answers.

Clarity is not a list of initiatives. Clarity is a set of choices the organization agrees to protect.

Here's a simple test: Can your team name the three outcomes that matter most this quarter—without opening a document?

Outcomes, not activities. "Launch a new platform" is an activity. "Increase conversion from X to Y" is an outcome. "Run more campaigns" is an activity. "Generate \$__ in qualified pipeline" is an outcome.

When clarity is real, it becomes easier to decide what not to do. And what you stop doing matters as much as what you start.

These outcomes should not live only in a strategy deck; they should show up in objectives, scorecards, and performance reviews. When individual and team goals are explicitly tied to a small number of shared outcomes, alignment stops being theoretical and becomes operational.

2) Alignment: Move from consensus to commitment

Organizations often confuse alignment with agreement. In reality, alignment is commitment—even when not everyone agrees.

You don't need every leader to love every decision. You need them to support it and execute it.

Commitment is reinforced through incentives. If leaders say a priority matters but continue to reward people for unrelated work, the organization will follow the incentives, not the speech. Alignment becomes real when compensation, recognition, and career progression are linked to the same few priorities.

3) Execution rhythm: Replace updates with progress

Many teams have weekly meetings that focus on status. The problem is that status isn't progress.

A momentum-driven rhythm is built on three questions:

- What changed since last week?
- What's blocking progress?
- What decision do we need now?

The meeting becomes a tool for unblocking and deciding—not reporting. And if no decisions are needed? End it early.

Over time, this rhythm becomes part of performance management. Teams are not judged on how detailed their updates are, but on how quickly they remove blockers, make decisions, and move key metrics. Managers shift from information collectors to momentum enablers.

A practical reset: four actions for the next 30 days

If your organization feels busy but not moving, here's a simple reset you can run in the next month:

- 1. Pick one measurable outcome per team**
Not ten. One. Make it real and measurable. Ensure everyone knows it.
- 2. Remove or pause one initiative**
Demonstrate that focus is not a slogan. It is a decision. Make "stopping" a leadership behaviour.
- 3. Fix one recurring meeting**
Give it an agenda, a clear purpose, and decision rights. If it still doesn't create progress, cancel it. A meeting without outcomes is not alignment—it's theatre.
- 4. Adjust one incentive**
Identify one metric, bonus condition, or evaluation criterion that currently rewards activity over outcomes, and change it. Even a small shift signals that focus and impact—not

busyness—are what get rewarded.

A final thought

The organizations that win over time aren't the busiest. They're the clearest—and they build their human capital systems to reinforce that clarity. They separate motion from momentum, reward outcomes over activity, and deploy their best people on what matters most.

Effort is not the issue. The strategy is.

And the most strategic thing you can do this quarter might be the simplest: do less, better—align your people to it, reward progress on it, and finish what matters.

Françoise is a Senior Strategic Advisor at Laulima Consulting, where she helps forward-thinking organizations navigate disruption, uncover blind spots, and accelerate growth.

*For more information contact us at
info@laulimaconsulting.com*