



Issue #5: What the world's first female CEOs can teach us about the late night work loop

The Leader's Brief: Commanding with Care

June 2026 Edition | *Bridging Technical Data and Strategic Vision*

Dear Network,

When we look at the history of leadership, we often look at names etched into modern corporate skyscrapers. But if we dig a little deeper into the archives of heavy industry, global commerce, and deep-tech innovation, we find the blueprints of true operational command left by the pioneers who built the floor.

As I've been talking to engineering and project managers this month about reclaiming their calendars from chaotic, back-to-back meeting loops, a fascinating historical parallel came to mind.

If you think your modern corporate calendar is high-stakes, imagine navigating international wartime blockades or guiding a complex medical device company through a massive public listing without sacrificing your strategic focus.

The Global Trailblazer: Barbe-Nicole Clicquot (1805)



Long before the modern acronym "CEO" even existed, Barbe-Nicole Clicquot took over her late husband's failing wine house in France in 1805. She didn't just manage it; she revolutionized the entire industry. Facing intense wartime blockades across Europe, she risked everything to illegally run her product through enemy lines, single-handedly inventing new production techniques that are still used today. She was, by all operational definitions, the world's first truly global female CEO.

The 2023 film *Widow Clicquot* shows how she defies the French norms at the time, available on Prime.

🧠 The Australian Pioneer: Catherine Livingstone AC (1994)



Closer to home, we look to Catherine Livingstone, who made Australian corporate history in 1994 by becoming the first female CEO of a listed ASX company. She took the reins at **Cochlear**—a deeply complex, high-precision biomedical engineering company. She didn't just manage the data; she successfully transitioned the business from a niche technical operation into a globally listed market leader on the ASX in 1995. She mastered the exact leap many of you are making: moving from technical complexity to executive

command. In Jan 2024 she was awarded Companion of the Order of Australia (AC)

🧠 The Core Shift: Time as an Operational Asset

Here is the question I want to pose to you today: **How did these pioneers manage to drive massive strategic growth while balancing immense structural and operational pressures?**

Barbe-Nicole Clicquot fought off corporate raiders and international wartime inflation.

Catherine Livingstone navigated the high-stakes intersection of medical technology, global regulatory approvals, and public markets.

The one thing they absolutely did *not* do was spend 8 hours a day sitting in unproductive, indecisive meetings, quietly answering emails under the table while someone read off a PowerPoint slide. They couldn't afford to and emails and Power Point did not exist. They understood that their time was an operational asset, not public property.

In heavy engineering, defense, and high-pressure tech sectors today, I see brilliant leaders falling into the "After-Hours Execution Loop." They give away their 9-to-5 to back-to-back meetings, and then only find time to actually do their *real* strategic work after hours when the rest of the corporate world logs off. Unless you work in a global company as most do and the world does not log off.

This isn't sustainable leadership. It's firefighting.

🔧 The Work-Applied Framework: Reclaiming Your Calendar

To command with care, you must first care for your own capacity. If you want to transition out of the engine room and into true strategic oversight, you need to implement three hard boundaries next week:

- **The Meeting Audit:** If a meeting lacks a clear objective, a structural agenda, or a direct reason for your unique technical presence, decline it. Treat your calendar like a strict project budget.

- **Block out "focus" time in your calendar:** 45 minutes a day to do truly focused work, turn off your Instant messenger and your phone to silent.
- **The 50-Minute Rule:** Stop scheduling default 60-minute blocks that run over and cascade into delays. End 10 minutes early to give yourself and your team space to transition.
- **The "Next Steps" Protocol:** Never leave a room without a clear ownership matrix. Who is doing what, by when? Clear accountability eliminates the need for a follow-up meeting to discuss the last meeting.



Nikki's Bookshelf: Recommended Reading

"**Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less**" by Greg McKeown

Why it's a must-read for technical leaders this month: Many managers confuse being "productive" with running themselves ragged. McKeown challenges the corporate myth that you have to say yes to everything to be a good leader. Instead, he provides a highly disciplined framework for auditing your commitments, eliminating the non-essentials (like those endless status-update meetings), and removing the execution friction for your team. It's the ultimate tactical guide for moving out of the 11 PM work loop.

See my post this month on prioritisation [Eisenhower Matrix](#)



View from the Ground: Moving North

On a personal note, I am marking an exciting new chapter for *Commanding with Care*. After years of working alongside the brilliant automotive and heavy engineering minds down in Melbourne during my Ford years, plus 5 years remote working from Sydney (a COVID move), I am officially relocating and setting up headquarters in **Brisbane**.

Queensland's defense, aerospace, and heavy technology sectors are growing at an incredible pace right now. I am looking forward to plugging deeply into the local Brisbane ecosystem and helping a whole new cohort of technical experts make the transition to executive leaders.



Scale Your Impact This Quarter

Are unproductive calendars, lack of team delegation, or a high-pressure launch pipeline keeping you working past midnight?

My **New Leader 90-Day Acceleration Program** is designed to build real-time, floor-applied habits that protect your time, elevate your executive presence, and drive hard operational results without burning out your team and yourself.

If you are ready to reclaim your focus, set up a strategy call with me [Strategy Call](#)

Until next month, lead with clarity.

Nikki McNicol

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