F.O.C.U.S.

FIND · OPTIMISE · COORDINATE · UPGRADE · START AGAIN

Stop improving everything.
Fix the one thing that governs it all.

IAN LARSEN

A NEW BEGINNING · V2

FRONT MATTER · I

About This Book.

First up, of course I used AI to help me. I used it to build the structure, to expand the characters, to review and scrutinise my writing, to research deeply the arguments I put forward, and, lastly, to add a one-liner or two that made me smile.

The people you are about to meet — Mira Okafor and Priya Sharma of Halcyon; Sam Reyes and Noor at the hospital; Alex Chen and his husband Theo — are a synthesis of people I have met, worked and argued with, admired, respected and been frustrated by. I made them up, assembled from thirty years of real patterns, and I used the AI to help me draw them out on the page. Their stories are a synthesis of my experience and observations, and reading about them will certainly be more interesting than being dragged through my memories. Their numbers are illustrative — honest to the shapes I have seen, but there is no Halcyon to audit and no hospital to ring. If you recognise Mira, Sam or Alex anyway, that is the point. You work with them under different names.

And Dani — my inseparable co-author, leading my AI team of Dani (co-author), Frances (editor) and Ruth (publisher).

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FRONT MATTER · II

Acknowledgement.

I am deeply grateful for:

The five steps at the heart of this book began with Eliyahu M. Goldratt and his Theory of Constraints work, made popular in his book *The Goal* (1984). He taught the world that every system has a constraint, and that the way to improve the whole is to find it and focus there. Anyone who thinks seriously about getting more done is working in his shadow, whether they know it or not. I know it.

Clarke Ching took Goldratt's steps and rephrased them for the rest of us as FOCCCUS — Find the bottleneck, Optimise it, Coordinate, Collaborate and Curate everywhere else, Upgrade it, Start again — in *The Bottleneck Rules* (2018). FOCUS is Clarke's acronym with the three C's folded into one letter. When I told him what I was building on his foundation, he didn't just give his blessing; he gave advice, encouragement, and his time. That is the kind of man he is, and this book is better for it.

The team at WiseTech Global, where I have had the privilege of seeing how a truly great business can be built with dedication, logic and focus.

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THE OPENING SCENE

The Wall.

Sprint forty-seven ended the way sprints end at Halcyon: with a retrospective, a packet of chocolate biscuits, and a wall of green.

Mira Okafor stood at the back of the room and watched her own dashboard the way you watch weather. Velocity: steady. Burndown: textbook. Cycle-time percentiles: within tolerance. Forty engineers across six squads, every ceremony observed, every metric the colour of money. Her org, by every number on the screen, was a machine.

That morning the chief financial officer had asked her a question with none of those numbers in it.

"What did we actually finish this quarter?"

He had learned not to say *ship*; that word meant something narrower than he intended. Finish, as in: done, live, making a difference, off the list. Mira had opened her mouth with the confidence of a woman holding six dashboards, and closed it again. The migration was 90% done and had been for nine weeks. The billing rewrite was in review. The mobile release was waiting on the platform team, who were waiting on security, who had asked for changes that were themselves now waiting. The truthful answer, and she was an exhaustingly truthful person, was a long list of things at ninety per cent.

"We're busy," she'd said. "I know," he'd said, and it was the way he said it that followed her around for the rest of the day. Not an accusation. A condolence.

So at four o'clock, when the squads assembled for the retro, Mira did something unprofessional. She turned off the projector.

"New format," she said. "One time only. I want every piece of work we currently have open — every story, every ticket, every 'quick favour,' every thing anyone in this room is expected to finish — on this wall by half past. One sticky note each. And I want it under the column for where it *actually is right now*, not where the tool says it is."

Someone asked what the columns were. "Whatever we actually do to work," she said. "In order." It took them four minutes of arguing to agree on seven words, which was its own small diagnostic: **Intake · Spec · Build · Review · Test · Release · Done.** Then forty engineers emptied their heads and their backlogs onto a conference-room wall.

It took twenty-five minutes, and it was not quiet. There was laughter, of a kind. There was the discovery of eleven items in two versions. There was one sticky that just said "the thing for legal??" and nobody would claim it.

Then the room went quiet, because the wall had a shape.

A hundred and forty-five stickies, and they were not spread across seven columns. Intake held a dozen. Spec, nine. Build was respectable, thirty-odd notes, the healthy hum of a working org. And then, in front of **Review**, the wall thickened. Eighty-three of them, packed so dense they overlapped like feathers, some curling at the edges because, as became apparent when someone checked the dates, some of them had been "in review" for six weeks. Past that stage, Test held six and Release four.

Mira stood in front of it, and years of dashboards rearranged themselves into a single ugly fact. Her org was fast everywhere except one place, and that place set the speed of the entire company. Every green number she owned was a measurement of how quickly forty people could deliver work *into a queue*.

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"Who reviews these?" she asked, though she knew.

The room's eyes did the answering. They went, with the guilty synchrony of a school class, to Priya.

Priya Sharma. Staff engineer. Twelve years at Halcyon, the last four as the person whose approval meant something everywhere it mattered: the payments path, the data layer, anything touching an auditor. Priya, who was double-booked from nine to four. Priya, who everyone in this room had personally messaged the words *sorry to chase, but*. Priya, who apologised, in stand-up, most mornings, for being behind. Apologised, Mira suddenly thought, the way a bridge might apologise for traffic.

Three symptoms, if you knew how to read them, and until 4:55 that afternoon Mira hadn't. **The pile:** the deepest queue on the wall sat in front of one stage. **The chase:** every thread of urgency in the org routed through one person's attention. **The apology:** there was exactly one step in the whole system that somebody said sorry for, daily, as ritual.

The pile, the chase and the apology all pointed at the same square metre of wall.

Somebody said what half the room was thinking: "So Priya's the problem."

"No," Mira said, slowly, because she was working it out as she spoke. "Priya's the *reason we ship anything at all.* The problem is that we've organised everyone else as if her hours were infinite. Look at it." She put her hand flat on the thin, starved columns downstream. "That's physics. Everything we finish passes through that queue. Which means that queue is the speed of Halcyon. Which means —" and here she stopped, because the sentence she was about to say out loud was going to sound like heresy in a room that had spent three years being told to optimise everything, "— which means most of what we've been improving *cannot have mattered*."

Priya had not spoken once. She spoke now, and she did not sound grateful.

"Can I say something, since we're all looking at me." Not a question. "Forty people have just watched a room work out that I'm the reason nothing ships. And the fix is, what, you take work off my desk."

"That's roughly it," Mira said.

"Then hear the rest of it." Priya turned so she was talking to the room rather than to Mira. "About half of what's in that column is in that column because I'm the only one who reads it properly. Payments. Anything the auditors will want. If you clear my desk so I can go faster, you will get exactly the thing you're asking for. More items through review. And somewhere around March you'll get an incident, and nobody in this room will connect it to this afternoon."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Somebody's chair creaked.

"That's fair," Mira said. "I don't have an answer to it."

"No," Priya said. "You don't."

"So we don't do it yet." Mira looked back at the wall, at the eighty-three notes. "We find out which of those eighty-three actually need you, and we work out what has to be true for the rest to be safe without you, and *then* we clear your desk. If we can't work that out, we don't run this at all."

Priya thought about it. "That, I'll help with."

It cost the week two days and it was the most useful two days of the five.

Nobody ate the biscuits.

. . .

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Two hundred kilometres away, in a hospital three hundred beds wide, Sam Reyes is doing the four o'clock walk through the medical ward, counting a different pile. Six patients, medically ready to go home since morning, still in beds. Not because anyone is idle — Sam has never once, in a decade of operations, found the fabled idle nurse — but because each discharge waits on a final review that happens when the registrar surfaces from everything else a registrar does. Six occupied beds means the ward can't admit; means emergency holds its patients in corridors; means the ambulances queue outside; means, this morning, a regional hospital was told *no capacity*. The whole hospital moves at the speed of a signature. Everyone is working flat out. The building is full of effort. And the constraint is a stack of paper on one exhausted doctor's desk, and nobody, including, until this moment, Sam, has ever organised a single thing around protecting it.

And in a city that could be yours, at 11:40 at night, Alex Chen is looking at a wall of a different kind: a calendar, glowing on a laptop in a dark kitchen. Tomorrow has eleven meetings. His actual work, the strategy document that the next promotion and lately a certain amount of self-respect quietly depend on, has been "in progress" for five weeks. At 11:43 the laptop pings. The boss, one line: *any chance you could give the board deck a once-over before the 9:00?* Alex types *on it* inside forty seconds. From the doorway, on his way up, his husband Theo — his business partner too; they roast coffee out of the garage on weekends, and the roastery's website has been a fortnight away since March — says, "It's twenty to twelve. When's the site going to get done?" "Two minutes," Alex says, to both, and means it, and the deck takes fifty. The strategy document does not come up. Neither does the website. Alex is not lazy. Ask anyone at the company and they will tell you he is one of the most responsive people in it, and that is the whole trouble. Responsive to everyone is how you end up finished with nothing. Somewhere in that grid of polite blue rectangles there is a queue, and everything that matters is at the back of it.

One software org. One hospital. One person. Three walls with the same shape.

. . .

On Mira's Friday, the migration that had been 90% done for nine weeks went live. I have spent thirty years standing in front of walls like this one; who I am, and why, is at the back of this book. What that week cost her, who objected and in exactly which words, and why those objections turned out to be the most useful thing she collected: I will get to all of that. You do not need any of it to build the wall.

RUN THIS TODAY

Take a wall, a pad of stickies, and the people who do the work — thirty minutes.

1 Agree the five-to-nine stages every piece of work passes through, from request to done, in your own words. Write them across the top.

2 One sticky per currently open item, placed under the stage where it sits *right now*, being worked or waiting. No tool exports. Heads and backlogs, emptied honestly.

3 Stand back. Ask three questions. Where is the deepest pile? Whose attention does everyone chase? Which step does somebody apologise for daily?

Where the answers agree, you have found what governs everything you finished this year — and everything you didn't. If they disagree, trust the pile.

Keep the photo. It is the "before" picture your first win's case will open with. The five-day protocol for that win — and the ten plays that run it — is free: register your team at **focus4life.com** and the F.O.C.U.S. Guide lands in your inbox.

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START HERE

The 10-Minute Version.

I have always loved a book that gives you something to latch onto early, something you can use before you have decided whether you trust the author. So here is everything, compressed: the argument, the method, and enough instruction to run it yourself. If you read this and nothing else in the book, you will still be able to run it.

One thing before I start. I have spent most of my career in manufacturing, mining and utilities, and you will find almost none of that here. Eli Goldratt already wrote that book. *The Goal* did the factory, and did it well enough that people still hand it to new hires forty years later. I am not trying to repeat it. I am trying to extend it — into software teams, logistics operations, hospitals, agencies, and your own working week.

Busyness

Everyone is busy. Ask anyone how they are and that is the word you get back, usually with a small note of pride in it.

Everyone is also improving. Most organisations I walk into have a genuine improvement programme, often several, run by people who are good at their jobs. The tools get better, the processes get tidier, the training happens.

And the amount of finished work coming out the other end barely moves.

A century of management thinking rests on an assumption that almost nobody says out loud: that improvements add up. Improve ten things by ten per cent and the whole must get better by a significant amount. That assumption is false, and it is one of the most expensive false beliefs in modern work.

The one fact

In every organisation I have ever worked in or worked with, the work moves as a sequence of dependent events. Somebody requests, somebody decides, somebody builds, somebody checks, somebody releases, in whatever names your industry uses for those steps.

And in any sequence of dependent events, at any given moment, one step governs the pace of the whole system. It does not influence the pace. It controls it. We call that step the constraint.

> **An improvement anywhere except the constraint is an improvement in nothing but morale.**

Speed up a step that feeds the constraint and you have made the pile in front of it deeper. Speed up a step downstream and you have made a starved step hungrier. Neither one arrives any faster, because the constraint sets the arrival rate. That is why multiple genuine, well-executed improvements can result in very little of note.

The good news is the same fact from the other side. If improvements off the constraint round to zero, then improvement *at* the constraint pays out across the whole system. One improvement in the right place beats a hundred anywhere else.

Three myths worth killing early

A balanced system is a good system. It is the most fragile thing you can build. With no slack anywhere, every fluctuation lands on the finish date.

Efficiency and utilisation are good everywhere. They are good in exactly one place: the constraint. Everywhere else, chasing utilisation manufactures queues.

An hour lost anywhere is worth the same as an hour lost anywhere else. An hour on the constraint raises throughput for the entire system. An hour saved anywhere else is a mirage.

The method

Five steps: Find, Optimise, Coordinate, Upgrade, Start again. That is the whole acronym, spelled out once — F.O.C.U.S. Here is how long each step actually takes me.

Find. Locating the constraint takes me no more than a couple of hours, even in an operation I have never seen before. Three symptoms rarely lie: where work queues deepest, whose attention everybody chases, and which step gets apologised for every day. Where they disagree, trust the pile. With the plays in this book, and a wall, it should take your team less than half an hour.

Optimise. I always start the same way: pick up the work sitting in the constraint's queue or inbox and move it somewhere else. I mean everything except the work only they can do. It is very quick. A couple of hours at most, and it usually returns more capacity than anyone expected, because that capacity was already there and already paid for.

Coordinate, Collaborate, Curate. Three things, all in the constraint's service. Coordinate the team so everyone is working to the constraint's pace rather than their own. Collaborate so the constraint never runs out of work and is never blocked from finishing the work it has. And curate the backlog in front of it, so that everything arrives in the right condition, ready to be processed, and the constraint never wastes a minute choosing its next item or going looking for one. Done properly this takes a day or two to set up and then it simply runs.

Upgrade. When somebody comes to me asking to buy capacity, I ask two questions. Have you actually done the first three steps? And even if you have, is the constraint still the constraint, or has it moved somewhere else while you were working on it?

This is the expensive step, and more than the money, it is the time. Even if all you are doing is hiring one person, it is weeks or months to find the right one, then weeks or months more before they are up to speed and adding anything to the constraint's output. So why would you start here, when a find and an unload can give you a win this week? No principle there; just what I have watched happen, repeatedly.

Start again. There is nothing to do in this step except go back to the first one. The constraint moves when you fix it, which means the question — what governs this system today — has to be asked again. What I have come to understand over the years is that these five steps are not a project but your continuous improvement process, all wrapped up in one loop.

Your first win

The method comes with a protocol, and it fits in a week: five days, one team, one constraint, one play, one number. Monday you find and you pick — the wall in the morning, the play in the afternoon, and the play comes with its number, which locks before anything else happens. Tuesday you change nothing: you measure the week as it already is, with the exact count you will use on Friday, and that is your before-number, taken on an ordinary day. Tuesday will feel like the wasted day of the five. It is the one

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that makes Friday's number worth believing. Wednesday to Friday you run the play, and Friday closes with the after-number, the one-page case, and one final question, asked out loud and recorded: *do you want to go back to how it was before?*

Either answer is legal, and one line of why goes in the case either way. A team that keeps the change has made a decision no dashboard can fake; a team that reverts has given an honest answer to an honest question. And the answers add up: across every team that runs this, the share who chose not to go back is the proof the method stands on.

The plays are in the F.O.C.U.S. Guide — free when you register at focus4life.com — each with the symptoms that tell you it is yours, the number it comes with, the three agreements that make it real, and an honest note on when not to run it.

What counts as a win is a measured change in the one number you locked on Monday. What never counts: utilisation went up, everyone felt busier, a dashboard got built. And a measured zero is a perfectly good first result. It usually means the constraint was misidentified, and the second run is quicker for knowing it.

The one thing I cannot give you is a sentence from whoever runs your area: *for five days, this team may decline work that conflicts with the run.*

Fair warning

This method offends people. It says most improvement effort was spent in the wrong places, including effort you may have led. It asks for visible idleness from people whose self-worth is their busyness, and it tells the efficiency dashboard it has been measuring the wrong thing almost everywhere. Those fights are predictable, and later in the book I hand you the scripts for them.

The lineage, said plainly: this is the Theory of Constraints, worked out by Eliyahu Goldratt from the 1970s onwards and tested since across factories, hospitals, project offices and software teams. My contribution is the ordering. Goldratt's movement taught the theory and told the story first, and then you got to learn and experiment to get your outcome. I would rather you got the result first and came back for the theory with the context of a win.

Close the book. Block out the five days. Stop improving everything. Fix the one thing that governs it all.

YOUR FIRST F.O.C.U.S. — FREE · PILOT COHORT 01 IS OPEN NOW

Register your team at **focus4life.com** — two minutes, no fee — and the F.O.C.U.S. Guide arrives by email: the ten plays, the five-day protocol, every worksheet. Run the week, record your honest before/after — zeros welcome — and become a **Founding Contributor**: the full book free the day it ships, and your name in its acknowledgements.

And pass this on. This part of the book is free for anyone — sending it to the busiest person you know is how the movement moves.

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