

E79: How Laura Castaing Gets Stuff Done

Alexis Haselberger: Today we're doing a little experiment here on the podcast. I love a good experiment. So what is it? In addition to our short weekly episodes, I'm going to start sprinkling in a few interview episodes with real people just like you, sharing what works and what doesn't when it comes to doing more and stressing less. You've heard me say it a million times, but there's no right way to do things because we all have different lives, different brains, and different real world constraints. In fact, there are so many ways to get things done. So instead of just me today, I've got a special guest with me on the podcast, and I invite you to join us for a conversation about the nature of productivity itself, including, of course, some practical tactics that you can steal for yourself. Welcome to the Do More Stress Less podcast. I'm your host, Alexis Haselberger, a time management and productivity coach. In every episode, I give you actionable, practical tips to help you learn to use your time in a way that feels good to you every day. No more hustling, scrambling, or struggling to keep your head above water. So let's dive in and soon enough you'll be doing more and stressing less. Today on the show I am so excited to talk with Laura Castaing. With a background in operations and startups, Laura Castaing is a coach and thought partner to founders, CEOs and executives at key inflection points in their lives. She helps people get mental clarity and navigate big life changes. And today, she is sharing with us how she manages to do more and stress less in her busy life. I thought she would be the perfect person because not only is she a colleague, an amazing coach for founders and CEOs and execs, she's also a friend, so I know she's not going to judge me if things don't go exactly as planned. And let me just tell you, we've already had some technical difficulties today. And she is also a client, someone who has graduated from my Time Well-Spent program. So I thought she would be the perfect person to talk to here today. And Laura Castaing, welcome.

Laura Castaing: I'm so happy to be here. This is really fun.

Alexis Haselberger: Awesome. I am very excited. I was so excited when this popped up on my calendar today, even though I know we planned it and talked about it. It's always fun to see you on the calendar. Okay, I want to get into it. Can you give us a little snapshot about your life professionally and personally, so we know what you are balancing?

Laura Castaing: I think right now—it's summer in New York—and that's a fun breakdown of how I'm spending my time because it's pretty aligned with my values, which is not always in perfect alignment. Work is a standard thing. I do coaching and that's a good chunk of my week. Outside of that, I've been prioritizing friends, family, connection. I'm playing volleyball two or three times a week. I'm seeing my niece—she's spending the night on Saturday night for the first time by herself. My mom is moving to town in a couple of weeks part time. So it's

a lot of work stuff, friends and family stuff. I have projects in my apartment I need to do. I have some trips I'm planning. That's the breakdown right now and just enjoying summer.

Alexis Haselberger: I love that you're including so much that's not just work. That is the fun stuff. Your niece spending the night—that is fun. Your mom moving—could be great, could also have some challenges. So let's say you have a lot going on. As you probably know, I kind of hate the word “productive,” and I kind of hate the phrase “productivity coach,” even though that's what I call myself. That's not really my goal, to eke productivity out of every moment. But that's what people search for, that's what people talk about when they really mean, how do I get the things done that I want to get done? For you, what does a productive day look like? If at the end of the day you're like, “Yeah, that was a good day,” what does that look like for you and how often does it happen?

Laura Castaing: This has evolved over time. Right now I have two views. I have a traditional productive day where I think, “That was a really productive day” in the traditional sense. I wake up, do the full leisurely morning routine—meditation, shower, get dressed, feel fully put together, good breakfast. My apartment's tidy. Then I sit down and have a block of uninterrupted time to do a project for my clients. I'm writing a how-to guide, or maybe a newsletter, and it feels like I can accomplish one big meaty thing that can't get done in 15 minutes between meetings. In the afternoon I'll have calls—maybe three coaching calls—feel really good about those. I wrap up and have time to distill notes in a clean way. I button up how I organize my client tracker. I clean out my inbox so that around four or five I shut it down and close my computer, or I know what my next day is going to look like. Then I walk out the door and go play beach volleyball. I have dinner with my friends. After I come back, I shower, maybe watch a show or read a book, meditate, and go to bed. When I have these days I'm like, “That is such a traditional productive day.” But good lord, that does not happen all the time.

Alexis Haselberger: You and me both.

Laura Castaing: I think for a couple of reasons. I love those days, but there's something so buttoned up about it that I don't love—there's not much spontaneity when it's so perfectly planned one thing to the next. That's not my personality. I've also found a lot of value in days where I spend two hours reading, reflecting, journaling, cleaning my apartment, or just sitting and chatting with someone—just not being productive in the traditional sense. I can feel very productive not having achieved much in the material world, but maybe having a cool personal insight and taking care of my body. That can feel really good too.

Alexis Haselberger: It's not about the quantity of things. So often people ask me how many things should I get done, how many things should I put on my task list for tomorrow? The real answer is I have no idea. Some things are big, some are small, your energy might

fluctuate. For myself, I've been getting better at this. Last week, one of my friends called me; we were chatting for a bit. I realized I had blocked a big chunk of work, but I've been trying to prioritize connection, and we were having a good conversation. I made the pivot mentally: I'm going to let this conversation go for as long as it wants to go. I talked to her for an hour and a half. In my pre-cancer days, I probably would have been a little pissed off at myself—"I planned to do this work, and I didn't do this work." There's so much in naming it in the moment: it's not that I've gone off course; something came up and I decided to prioritize that over the "work."

Laura Castaing: I love that. That's also an evolution of what you view as productive and how you want to spend your time, which is your whole ethos: are you spending your time the way you want to spend your time, whatever that means? Who decides that? I love the idea that you can feel productive without much to point to that other people would label as productive.

Alexis Haselberger: I think about it sometimes when my kids were babies and I was on maternity leave. I'd go the whole day doing stuff nonstop, and if I got to the end of the day and the dishwasher had been unloaded, that felt pretty damn productive, because the reality is I kept people alive outside of that. Looking in, I could imagine judging myself—"Wait, that's all? You got the dishwasher unloaded?"

Laura Castaing: It's interesting. Even the idea of being judged on productivity is a human-made, make-believe thing. The concept of "you should feel okay with yourself if you've been productive" is made up.

Alexis Haselberger: It's really about how you define it for yourself. Is being "productive" even how you want to relate to your life in the way you've been taught? Going to bed and thinking, "I wasn't productive today," is something I've had a lot of issues with and evolved over time, because it used to be driven by "What am I getting done? Have I met my deadlines? I'm behind." That's a recipe for unhappiness.

I blame the fact that we are all steeped in late-stage capitalism and the Puritan work ethic for this, because it's made up by people who want to extract labor from us.

Laura Castaing: 100%. It's made up by people who don't have our best interests at heart. We've all been sucked into this, and it's hard to pull ourselves out of it.

But we can keep trying every day.

Alexis Haselberger: Thinking about that, what's one mindset or one practice that's really shifted the way you think about things or the way you engage with the work we need to do—because even if we don't want to live to be productive, we still have to do things. When

you think about your time—what you have to do and what you want to do—what's one thing that has made a significant difference for you?

Laura Castaing: Can I cheat and give you two because they're related? One of the biggest things over the last decade: about nine years ago I quit working in traditional startups. That was the period where I was working 70 to 90 hours a week, and my productivity was all day, every day—wake at 7 a.m., bed at 11 p.m.—work-rooted. One of the biggest mindset shifts was resetting over time—over years—what is worth spending my time on? How do I want to spend my time and align that with my core values and the life I want to be living now and down the road? I love the phrase—I'll butcher it—“How you spend your days is how you spend your life.” If I live every day like today for the next 40 years, at 80 I could look back and say, “That's the life I lived.” I carved out much more time for friends, family, personal growth, health, because those are how I want to spend my life. That let me let go of other potential “productivity” things if they didn't align with that, and feel better about it. I don't have to be writing a book right now. I don't have to be making \$10 million right now, because that's not necessarily the life I want. That's the meta one.

The more micro one is related to *4000 Weeks*, the book I recommend to everybody. You're never going to get it all done. I used to pile everything on my to-do list, adding and adding and thinking I had to get it all done, just reorganizing it all. Over the years: it's never about a maximalist “do everything.” I re-orient monthly, weekly, hourly: what are the core things I need to work on? What are the one or two things I need to do to move those forward? Everything else I have to let go. I'll write lists and a week later throw them out because I'm starting over with what's relevant today. That's been huge.

Alexis Haselberger: I have so many thoughts about what you just said and I love it all. What you said is actually the biggest barrier most people I work with have when they come in: they think there's a way to Tetris everything together to get everything done, and they're failing because they haven't figured out the way yet. Getting past that belief—accepting what you have done, accepting that you're never going to get it all done. We could all work every day, all day, for the rest of our lives and still have more work tomorrow. If you can't accept that—if you're unwilling to accept that—you can't get to the important stuff. You keep operating like, “Let me get the little stuff done and then I'll have time for the big stuff.” That's a huge shift people have to make to feel good.

Laura Castaing: I want to credit my mom for part of this—the whole concept of rock, pebble, sand. Do you ever talk about that in your coaching?

Alexis Haselberger: I do, a lot. The parable of the big rocks. Do you want to give people an overview in case they're not familiar?

Laura Castaing: You should correct me, but the concept is: you have an empty glass jar and piles of sand, pebbles, and rocks. If you fill the jar with sand first, then add pebbles and then rocks, not everything fits. If you put the rocks in first, then the pebbles and shake them so they go between the rocks, and then the sand and shake it so it goes between everything else, it all fits. The flaw is it implies you can fit everything in, but the main thing I love is it asks: what are your rocks, and how do you get those in first? For me, my rocks are: am I sleeping properly? Am I eating properly? Am I getting time with the people that matter most? Am I taking care of my clients? Am I paying my bills? I put those on my calendar first—Maslow's hierarchy. Then do I have time to do the extra newsletter or go to a concert? When I was in business school I called my mom freaking out because I was trying to do everything. I had overpacked and overscheduled myself. She said “rocks, pebbles, sand” and sat for an hour doing the exercise with me. It flipped everything.

Alexis Haselberger: Amazing. And there's so much sand. Email is sand. Often in coaching we talk about end-of-day planning, end-of-week planning. It's hard to build even though it's incredibly important because it always feels like there are 50 more emails to answer. Time and again, when I work with someone I say, “Test it for a week and see the difference. If you want to go back to emails during that time, do it.” Every time, they say it's so much better. Days go better when you're planning for the rocks and fitting that stuff in, then saying, “I'll get to as much sand as I can.”

There's something else to touch back on about your first mindset shift: our days are our lives. How I spend every moment of every day is the accumulation of what my life will look like. A few years ago, I heard a question: if you are doing exactly what you're doing now in five years, will that feel good to you? Is that the life you want? When I asked myself that—peak pandemic—I had 41 one-on-one clients. It was overkill, but I felt like I needed to help everybody. That's when I decided to make the Time Well Spent program, because if I'm draining myself for other people in five years, that will not feel good. It's important to have touchpoints—yearly, monthly, weekly—to ask: is this actually working for me?

It makes me think of when I worked for other people. Back then I used a rubric to think about whether I liked my jobs. Every company's mission is somewhere on the evil-to-good scale. If I'm between neutral and good, I'm using my brain in a way that feels good, and when I get home I don't feel like shit, that's a good job. Those were the checkboxes. It's not the highest-order set of things I would have thought about, but it was a nice rubric: if one of those is off, I need to change something.

Laura Castaing: I love the rubric. Even having one is telling—you figured out a way to measure if something works for you. It's self-aware. It's easy to be in the working world for five, ten, fifteen, twenty years, doing it because of inertia—opportunity into opportunity—life

happens, and then you wake up and it doesn't align but you're not sure why. That's often when people are shooting for a goal instead of optimizing the day-to-day experience. We think, "When we get there, everything will be better." If you don't like the path to getting there, you might not like what it's like to get there.

I think a lot about the fantasy of the outcome. In my late 20s, I was in startups post-business school. My career direction wasn't set, but I thought, "I'm in operations—maybe I want to be the COO of a startup." That created a North Star and gave me direction to ask what skills I want to learn. In hindsight, that's a poor fit for my interests in a number of ways. There were parts of the jobs I loved and parts I didn't. It's like throwing a thing over there: "When I'm there, I'll be happy." I think there's a different way: look at the fundamental parts of your days and how you like spending them, then reverse-engineer where in the world you can go do that, versus starting at the end goal and saying, "If I get there, I'll be happy." What are the underlying pieces I like, and where can I apply those regularly and meet my practical needs?

Alexis Haselberger: That's a smart way to look at it. Maybe it's reverse-engineering—a bottom-up approach instead of a top-down goal. That means letting go of what's drilled into a lot of us—doctor, lawyer, engineer, CEO. Kudos to you for realizing the thing you were shooting for wasn't the thing you wanted, and that you learned valuable skills in the process.

Laura Castaing: One last thought. It's hard to let go of the dream when you don't have anything else secure to go to. The brain isn't programmed to just disconnect and leap. People can still hold the dream—"I want to be a COO"—but take it a step further: do I want to spend time reflecting on this? Do I like how I'm spending my days? If yes, keep chugging. If something feels off—constantly stressed, not spending time the right way, don't love the job—you can hold the dream while doing the bottoms-up approach: reflect on values and why you want that job. What about current and past jobs do you love? What about your personal life? Reveal the underlying pieces and get to know yourself, then ask: once I know myself, how does that align with the job I thought I wanted, and what other jobs could I compare it to? It feels less heavy when it's not married to one future goal. As long as I have these core pieces, I'll be happy.

Alexis Haselberger: What I'm hearing is it's not an either-or. This comes up often in job searches where someone is unhappy but not ready to quit, so they won't start looking. You can be stuck a long time that way. You can do both. It's a lot of work, but not realizing there are dual paths keeps us stuck.

Laura Castaing: We don't live in a society that trains kids and young adults to explore careers meaningfully. We don't teach how to job. We don't teach how to reinvent yourself. In an age of AI where everything is changing rapidly and will keep changing, you need the skill of aligning what matters to you with the world. That exploration is a skill set that hasn't been

taught and will become more relevant—you'll have to pivot more frequently than ten or fifteen years ago. It's empowering to do that. You can parallel-track: "I'm here; I'm not quitting; I'm going to do exploratory work." The skill gap matters because people default to LinkedIn—check job descriptions, get demoralized, close it, and stay. LinkedIn is set up for job hunting, not job exploration. Productivity-wise, there's so much you've taught me—and I've learned—about how and when to parallel-path so you don't burn out trying to do both.

Alexis Haselberger: Right, because you can't do both as a full-time job. That's not going to work.

That makes so much sense. If you're going on LinkedIn to job hunt, that's top-down: start with the job and ask where do I fit in, versus "What skills do I have and where does that go?" Okay, segue: we agree we can't do it all, but we can have multiple paths going at the same time. For you, how do you decide what not to do—what makes it to your to-don't list?

Laura Castaing: I'm not great at this. My tendency is to have a million ideas and want to do them all. The disciplined way I do this goes back to the mindset shift. I try to keep a high-level view of my North Star for a year. I don't do resolutions, but I outline what would be cool to say at year-end. It used to be practical things—X revenue, Y project. Now it feels more like: I feel differently, I feel good about how I spent my time. I do that yearly, and it creates a grounding where mid-year I ask, "Have I made progress on the bigger goal?" If yes, I feel better saying, "I didn't get to a bunch of other things—no big deal." Then it breaks down to what I want to do this month. In really good months I'm disciplined, especially for work. Growing my business requires certain activities: have I published two newsletters? Have I reached out to people I care about? Have I treated my clients with as much care as I could? Inspired by you or our friend Danielle, I have a "what I'm not doing" list: I'm not creating a lead-gen tool for my website; I'm not going after venture capital this month. The best I can do is draft a plan rooted in my priorities and draft what I'm not doing. But there are days I'm like, "I really want to do this thing," and I do it. It's never perfect.

Alexis Haselberger: No, it's never. Maybe that's what I should have called this podcast: It's Never Perfect. I feel strongly about this: when I talk to people about planning, we think planning is about Tetris-ing things into the calendar. In fact, at least 50% of planning is consciously deciding what you're not going to do, so when those things come up, you don't have to weigh the decision in the moment. You've already decided: these are the things we're not focusing on so we have time for the other stuff.

Alexis Haselberger: I have one more, maybe two more questions for you, and then we need to wrap up, even though I could talk forever. Part of my goal with this podcast and my work is not only to help people feel better about their time, but also to normalize that it's not easy. We're not always on an upward trajectory. We're not always feeling at our best. For

you, what's the one thing—the skill—you struggle with and keep coming back to? Maybe you're getting better, but it's your Achilles heel.

Laura Castaing: I'm going to talk about work, but this applies to many areas of my life. My Achilles heel: I have dreams of what things should be. I know in my gut enough to ask, "What would I need to do to go after that dream?" A simpler example: I have a dream of what I want my apartment to look like. I like fiddling with my apartment. "Interior design" in the loose sense of making a home feel like the one you want to live in. I know the steps I'd need to take to achieve that dream. My constant challenge: I overthink, I get into analysis paralysis, I worry about my budget, I get distracted by a million other things, and I compare myself to one of my sisters who's actually done interior design. If she had my apartment and dream, she'd get it done in two weeks—my dream done in two weeks. For me, it's going on a year and a half. I'm fiddling—maybe putting wallpaper up somewhere. It drives her crazy. So I live with this feeling of having the dream, knowing what to do, and for various reasons not doing it, or doing it slower. It's fascinating—why the brain constantly has the dream, knows what to do, doesn't do it, and then punishes itself for not doing it. It's a human annoyance.

Alexis Haselberger: Thank you for sharing that. My little theory: it's just not the thing you prioritized, and that's okay. You can't do everything. When you listed your big rocks earlier, designing your apartment wasn't listed. The problem isn't not getting it done as fast as you'd want; it's beating yourself up about it when you don't. I'm going to give you the challenge of talking to that punishment voice when it comes up.

Laura Castaing: Really good.

Alexis Haselberger: Last question because we both need to go. Where can people find out more about you and your work? Is there anything you want to tell us about—who you like working with or anything exciting coming up? If there's anyone listening who might benefit from working with you or knows someone who might, where can they find you?

Laura Castaing: I love it. I hope you'll share my website somewhere because my last name is hard to spell.

Alexis Haselberger: Me too.

Laura Castaing: My website is probably the best place to go if you want to get a sense of who I am. In terms of what's coming up: I'm prioritizing one-to-one work with people. I'm not releasing a class or any major thing right now. It's finding people at an inflection point who want to realign their pieces. I work with CEOs and founders and senior executives of typically smaller businesses—startups under 200–300 people—also solo entrepreneurs and

people who are very successful, high-achieving, maybe mid-30s or 40s, waking up and feeling something isn't fitting in their career or work. They have time or interest in exploring what it would be like to realign the pieces and feel like they love how they're spending time at work and in life. I would love discovery calls with people; if it fits, great. I love helping people and figuring out a way to work together. If it doesn't fit, I love pairing them with other coaches and resources. I like helping people feel like they don't have to stay in that feeling of "something's off." They can feel a weight lifted and start to see how they can move forward. That's one of my favorite things to do.

Alexis Haselberger: Amazing. If that sounds like something you could benefit from, go to Laura Castaing's website—it will be in the show notes. She has a newsletter you can sign up for to get a feel for her. Laura Castaing is the person I call whenever I'm feeling like I don't know what to do or what direction to go, and I have swirling thoughts I need help making sense of. Laura Castaing is the master distiller of that stuff. I go to her personally whenever I need that kind of help.

Alexis Haselberger: Thank you so much for being my first guest on the Do More Stress Less podcast. I really appreciate it. It's just fun to see your face. Thank you so much and we'll talk soon.

Laura Castaing: This is a blast. Thank you so much.

Alexis Haselberger: And that's a wrap on today's episode of the Dumber Stress Less podcast. If today's episode resonated with you, I've got a little something else you might want to know about. I want you to check out my free class, three secrets for always having enough time for your work, your family, and most importantly, yourself. It's short, it's practical, it's packed with strategies you can use right away, and it's free. You can grab your spot at the link in the show notes or at <https://www.alexishaselberger.com>. See you next time.