

10 Things You Can Do

# Right Now

to Stop Overwhelm

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## *5 Things You Can Do Right Now to Stop Overwhelm*

*overwhelm* | ,ōvər'(h)welm |

Verb [ trans. ]

*To bury or drown beneath a huge mass*

- *defeat completely*
- *(often be overwhelmed) give too much of a thing to (someone); inundate*
- *(usu. be overwhelmed) have a strong emotional effect on*
- *be too strong for; overpower*

## *Stop Multitasking*

*multitasking* | ,mälti'taskiŋ; ,mäl,tī- |

Noun (Computing)

*The simultaneous execution of more than one program or task by a single computer processor.*

Have you had the experience of doing ten things at once and not completing any of them? Have you had the experience of doing ten things at once and not doing any of them well? I catch myself doing both of these things. And I inevitably have that uncomfortable sensation of overwhelm.

Overwhelm happens when we can't complete and when we don't do well. These questions run through our minds: "What comes first?" "Why can't I finish anything?" "Things are getting by me." "I don't have enough time." "I'll never get this done." "I feel like I'm drowning."

Multitasking is NOT a virtue. This word originated as a computing term, but a computer can run many tasks simultaneously and complete all of them without stress. Before computers, we didn't even have a word to describe doing many things at once. Sometime in the 1980's, it became not only a desirable trait but a sellable skill. "Hiring: The ability to multitask required."

It changed the way we work, but what it's really done is create a great deal of stress for the human system. Let's face it; in the long run, multitasking is no more productive than single tasking.

***Here is your challenge:*** Starting now, do only one thing at a time. Depending on the task, either work to completion or set a time limit. For example:

30 minutes of email, two times per day. For those 30 minutes, focus only on email and then turn it off.

Write an article like this one. Write for 90 minutes with one 10 minute break. No email, no phones, no interruptions.

Have a conversation with a co-worker. Have **ONLY** that one conversation. No texting. No Facebook. No interruptions.

Take one big, hairy task on your to-do list and finish it. Then take the next task and complete that.

Go for a walk without your phone. Eat a meal without reading. Play with your kids. Just play.

STOP multitasking. Be intentional about what you are doing and the sense of overwhelm will start to subside. You may still have too much to do. But your sense of task load will change and you will start to feel and be more productive and more focused. This is a powerful step toward stopping overwhelm.

## *Have a Meeting*

If your workplace has frequent extraneous meetings, this may sound like a complete time waster. In contrast, if you work in a place that never has meetings because they are considered unproductive, this may sound crazy. But there is a very specific way to have a meeting that will quiet the overwhelm, especially if you are a leader.

Create meetings that are solely for the purpose of strategy and support. If you do, they can be the most productive time you spend because they give everyone on your team a chance to explore whether the tasks they are doing support the goals you want to achieve. That is why a strategy meeting is a way to conquer overwhelm.

Here are the rules for having a meeting to conquer overwhelm:

1. You must invite everyone remotely involved. No one is too important, too unimportant, or too busy. The boss attends. Insignificant, part-time and virtual members of the team attend. If you want to conquer your overwhelm, everyone must be working smart. So be sure that everyone is there. Even if it is only you and your partner.
2. Create an agenda with only one **BIG** strategic item. Make sure that everyone knows about it in advance, not only so that people will arrive prepared, but so that the meeting itself isn't overwhelming.

Here are some examples:

- a. How will the team reach a particular goal?
  - b. How can work be split effectively?
  - c. What are our measurable results?
  - d. Who should be doing what?
  - e. How can we be better?
  - f. Is there a better way to solve a particular problem or issue?
  - g. Should we create or fix a system?
3. Be sure to set a time limit. (Half hour, one hour . . .)
  4. Be sure that there are no distractions. Land lines on voice mail. Door locked. Cells put away. Customers will wait.
  5. Have a meeting leader or moderator to keep everyone on topic

***Here is your challenge:*** Institute monthly strategy meetings. (Make sure these meetings are separate from any production meetings or huddles.) If the first one or two don't seem productive, don't give up. For many people, this is a new and possibly confusing activity and if so, they will revert to old habits. Assure your team that they are able to solve problems and make decisions safely and without repercussions. That means you must resist the temptation to solve all the problems and make decisions that undermine the process. After all, next month, there will be another strategy meeting when you can all review and evaluate any results.

If you are the leader and are personally overwhelmed, take a more passive role and let others take the more active role. As you gain traction, you will start to feel the weight of overwhelm become more evenly distributed. And that means, overwhelm will be replaced by team excitement. A little elbow grease in this direction will net you an amazing and powerful result toward ending overwhelm.

# *Ask a Well-Formed Question*

I don't mean ask Answer.com. I'm thinking about the way business leaders take on too much work because they don't feel that their staff can handle it. The most important thing that you can do to solve overwhelm is to ask a well-formed question.

Even though we can delegate to our staff, we may still “have to do it ourselves” or “have to manage everything.” Asking a well-formed question addresses the primary means to shift the burden and get your staff to “take the next step” or “think for themselves.”

Let's first look at why people don't “take the next step or “think for themselves.” Generally speaking, there are about seven reasons why not, and they are always emerge from the following areas:

- Lack of a clear job description
- No understanding of measurable results
- A misunderstanding of their authority
- A lack of understanding of time constraints
- A need for more information or resources
- A need for more skill or knowledge
- A need for more support

Do not guess the nature of the problem. Find out what the issue is and then work together to solve it. The people you work with may not even know how to articulate it. You must build the trust and the language that will allow you to get to the real issue behind the issue. And it's very important for you make this an enquiry and not a critique.

***Here is your challenge:*** Pick a person with whom you've been frustrated and who you feel is creating more work for you. Sit down with them and ask them some well-formed questions. Be sure that your questions are not snide, self-serving, or angry. Avoid the Why questions. Those will bog you down in the defensive excuses you both have. When preparing your questions, start with How and What. Such as:

- What could we be doing better?
- How could we move you to a higher authority level?
- What resources or information do you need to be better at this task?
- How can I support your success?

Most people do not want to fail. Most of us thrive on providing valuable contributions. When you ask a great question, you help others to think about an issue rather than your fixing everything yourself. Fixing everything yourself is the creator of overwhelm. Next time you catch yourself fuming and overwhelmed, ask a well-formed question.

## *Ask for Help*

It almost sounds too simple. I saw a client in complete melt down, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders, light up when it was suggested that she ask for help. Mind you, at first, there were a million reasons why NOT to ask for help. “There is no one to ask.” “It will make me look weak.” “They can't possibly help me.” In a way, everything in this report are tactics to ask for help. However, nothing surpasses the request, “I am overwhelmed and I need some help.” Even “I will become overwhelmed if I don't get help” is an adequate request.

***Here is your challenge:*** Who can help you? Is it a co-worker? An employee? A family member? How will you ask? Will you go to the staff strategy meeting and ask? Will you find a quiet minute to catch someone or make an appointment? Is it a request over dinner tonight?

How powerful would your request be if you just ask for help with a well-formed question such as “How can you help me?” “What would you be willing to do?” Allowing others to figure out the way they can help will further release you from overwhelm in that you don't have to come up with the solution. Again, people want to contribute in a valuable way. When you truly allow them to contribute in their own way, it is a win/win for everyone.

I have repeatedly been amazed at the resourcefulness of others at helping quell someone else's overwhelm. Do yourself a favor. Don't tell people how they can help. Simply ask for help and let others show you what they can do.

## *Become a Leader*

What's important in this "to do" is the shift you must take in your own thinking. You must move from thinking about being successful and about all that you must do (overwhelm!) and start to think about how you can help another person be successful and allow them to do it. This is the critical shift we make when we decide to lead instead of manage other people.

The first step is to be very clear about who you are and where you are going. Also known as: your mission and your vision. This may not be as easy as it sounds. You will have to think deeply, or even rethink deeply about why you are on this planet and what you plan to accomplish. It doesn't have to be complicated but it does need to totally resonate with who you really are.

If you want to be a true leader, you will soon realize that you cannot accomplish your life's purpose alone. You need other people to travel with you, and you will have to explain your purpose so that they can choose to travel with you or not. You may have to tell people your purpose over and over again. Their success depends on completely absorbing and understanding your purpose, so much so that it becomes theirs. There should be no ambiguity. They can only be successful when they can answer the questions "Who are we?" and "Where are we going?" Of course, first you need to answer those questions for yourself.

Once you have clearly communicated your mission, vision and purpose, your role will start to change from a manager of people to a visionary and a coach. Start to spend more time blazing the trail, designing systems, and coaching. By definition, coaching means that you ask great questions, think strategically, and ask for help. This type of leadership can happen anywhere and at any level. It is respected and valued. Ask anyone.

### ***Here is your challenge:***

- Think about and develop your clear and compelling purpose. Here are some great ones I've heard: "We are the trustworthy guides in a complicated and changing landscape." "We are the most accurate when accuracy is required." "We change the lives of all the people we touch in this specific way." "We put the puzzle together for our clients so they don't have to." "We conduct the orchestra of diverse players." "We are a conduit of great ideas." "We get the money so that you don't have to." "We change the world by doing this."
- Tell people again and again what it is so that they can decide that they want to be a part of it.

Whether asking questions, having strategic meetings, asking for help or single tasking, make it all about this purpose. Everything comes back to high-level and uplifting thinking. How and what you do all is driven by your vision and purpose. Overwhelm starts to disappear; in its place is focus. This focus will help you eliminate everything that isn't truly creating success and moving you toward your vision. Most importantly, you will not be alone.

Loneliness is the friend of overwhelm. Togetherness is its enemy. Leaders create togetherness.

## *Five More Things You Can Do Right Now to Stop Overwhelm*

### *Become a Coach*

One of the important steps in shifting from overwhelmed manager to inspired and inspiring leader is to become more of a coach. If a sports analogy works for you, then look at it this way: the coach doesn't play the game. When coaches do a great job of allowing the team to be their best, there is very little for them to do during the game besides taking notes and asking questions later.

Let's compare the difference between management and coaching, whether in sports, the workplace or the family.

First, what we think when we think of a manager:

- Having all the answers
- Doing it themselves
- Micro-managing (giving others little authority)
- Creating arbitrary goals
- Always being the expert
- Being in charge of quality and evaluation
- Making all the decisions that impact others
- Protecting their turf
- Relying on detailed policies and written manuals

Now, the primary characteristics of a coach:

- Asking great questions
- Helping others solve problems.
- Allowing people to learn from mistakes.
- Providing information and support

- Allowing others to set goals
- Helping others to become capable experts
- Allowing everyone to be in charge of quality
- Being a resource
- Providing clarity about the purpose and the measurable results

In my coaching training, it was explained to me like this: “If you are talking too much, you are working too hard.” For me as a coach, this was so powerful because it forced me to remember to ask questions and then shut up. Whether in a group setting or one-on-one, the same idea is true. Stop overwhelm by not working so hard and allowing others to do some heavy lifting. You don't do anyone any favors when you do their heavy lifting for them. In fact, people shut down the best part of themselves when you do it for them. You now have a new job: Making others successful.

### ***Here is your challenge:***

Meet with one person who you think can do more or better.

- Discuss the Seven Rules of Alignment outlined in the Ask Questions section.
- Ask them some great questions about their growth.
- Ask them some great questions about what they need to support their commitment.
- Bite your tongue if you are tempted to tell them what to do or how to solve something.
- Wait for their answers.
- Agree to a time when you will review their results.
- Let them do it.

When you cross the manager/coach divide, your job becomes simple and overwhelm will subside. Why? Because you aren't doing everything anymore. You aren't coming up with the solutions. You aren't driving the conversation. You aren't playing the game. You are the coach.

## *Implement the 90-10 or 50-10-50 Rule.*

In *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Leohr and Tony Schwartz wrote that athletes give 100% of their energy and then need 100% renewal. They say that whether you are training for a triathlon, releasing a new product line or getting through a workweek, you should only exert 100% of your focused energy for a short time. In their estimation, that is about 90 minutes. After 90 minutes have passed, you must do something to renew. They observe that what is required is a balance of energy, the right amounts of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual activity. Therefore, your renewal should take the form of a change in activity.

Here is how it works: If you are engaged in a physical activity, after 90 minutes take at least 10 minutes to engage in an activity of a different nature, say – reading or meditation or prayer practice. If I am doing a mental activity like I am right now – writing this paper – I should stop and engage in another activity. For us sedentary creatures, that means usually something physical. So I stop every 90 minutes to do 15 minutes of yoga stretching or to eat something. It is that easy. If I had been engaged in an emotionally involved activity such as coaching, my break could be something else.

When I started the Product Launch Formula, Jeff Walker called his version of this energy renewal The 50-10-50 Rule. I loved this because it also adds up to 100 minutes. (90+10=50+10+50) BINGO.

***Here is your challenge:*** In order to stop overwhelm, be sure to renew on a routine basis.

- Set your timer for either 50 or 90 minutes, whichever appeals to you.
- When that timer goes off, take ten to fifteen minutes to do something else.
- Walk around the block. Eat a healthy snack. Stretch.
- Pray. Read.
- Have a conversation with someone you like.
- Have this planned in advance so you don't waste your renewal time thinking about what to do.
- Make sure that your renewal activity balances your work activity. Don't balance writing with checking email, for example. Working out can be balanced with checking email.

The days of “time management” are over, thank goodness. Now it is necessary to think in terms of energy renewal and when you do, overwhelm will start to disappear. I love my days when renewal is built-in. I now hate those days that require a singular, nonstop energy, and have learned to eliminate them as much as possible. Even travel days can be fun and productive if I remember the rule. Reward and balance yourself with renewal.

## *Develop a System*

*system* /'sɪstəm/

*Noun*

*A set of connected things or parts forming a complex whole, in particular  
A set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an  
interconnecting network : the state railroad system | fluid is pushed through  
a system of pipes or channels.*

Are you overwhelmed with reinventing your wheel each and every time you have a particular task? Be honest. It is easy to find yourself doing even though it sounds completely ridiculous. If you are not the type of person who is enmeshed in systems each day, this task can be difficult. And truth be told, even people involved in, say, computer or production systems can be completely blindsided by communication systems. On the other hand, those who concentrate on communication systems may have mayhem within their production or organizational systems. The question is, what system will you create and what will that system look like?

Here are some common systems that I don't often see in the workplace (just add the word system after each item).

- Electronic document filing
- Sales Conversion
- Marketing
- Performance Evaluation
- Recruiting and Hiring
- Compensation
- Decision Making
- Training and Development
- Goal and Measurement Setting
- Social Media Integration
- Product Delivery
- Budgeting
- Pricing
- Product Placement

- Strategic Thinking
- Research and Development
- Quality Control
- Customer Service

Which system or lack thereof is driving you crazy? What system, if implemented, would create a benefit that will impact your overwhelm?

***Here is your challenge:*** Identify one life-changing system that you could create today and start implementing immediately.

What could you have to do to make this happen?

- Gather your team for analysis, brainstorming, planning and commitment?
- Research best practices?
- Gain skills, knowledge or information?
- Buy tools or resources?
- Create new habits?
- Get support?
- Just do it?

If it is simple, you will be able to move ahead quickly. The more obvious it is to you, the easier it will be to create your new system. Even if you believe that you don't have the time to create the system, I want to assure you that the time you spend will richly reward you. If the system you need isn't readily obvious to you, get help. In working with many business owners, I've seen many a smile as a new system is implemented.

The profound idea that Edward Demming gave us and Michael Gerber popularized is this:

“Systems run the business and people run the systems.”

This is the path to having a business that runs without you and, even if that isn't your mission, it will surely conquer overwhelm.

# *Automate Something*

When I post on my blog, it sends that post to Facebook, Linked In and Twitter and makes it available for my newsletter. When I “like” something on Facebook, it’s also available for my newsletter. When I write a newsletter, I have dozens of posts and “likes” to use and I preprogram the next four or five email blasts. In my marketing system, half of what I do is automated. And there is still more marketing I want to automate.

Now I am automating some of my customer service systems with auto response emails.

I have a goal to automate the delivery of some of my products. I have a goal to automate the production of some of my products. I have a goal to automate delivery of added value components for my clients.

What can you automate? There is so much code out there to help us automate electronically. There is so many tools available that automate a variety of marketing, project management, CRM, or manufacturing systems. Many of the activities we engage in can be automated. But, somehow, we just never get around to implementing them.

## ***Here is your challenge:***

Identify a series of activities that you believe can be automated.

- Set aside some time to research the best practice or tool available to accomplish your task.
- Decide if you would rather learn about it yourself or have someone else do it.
- Using the Seven Rules of Alignment, look for a volunteer on staff to handle the task .
- Outsource any part of this – from research to implementation - if necessary.
- Enjoy the time savings of your new process.

The next time you catch yourself saying how time consuming your process is, think automate. The time you will spend making it happen is time well spent. Automation will enable you to spend time on more important strategic items that can seem out of reach. That out of reach feeling is a feeling of overwhelm. Do you believe that automating something will help alleviate some overwhelm? I think so too.

## *Outsource Something*

I am such a big fan of elance.com. Even though I want to give work to people I know locally, I often find it faster and simpler to let my fingers do the outsourcing. Whichever way makes you feel best, here is the point: You don't have to do or even know how to do everything!

I'm going to repeat that because leaders have told me many times that they need to know EVERYTHING that happens in their business. You do not!

You are an expert, just not an expert in everything. Just as you cannot do everything, you also can not know everything. And let's say for a minute that you do know everything. That's overwhelming. So do yourself a favor and outsource it. After all, it is the most scaleable model available. Pay for what you need when you need it.

### ***Here is your challenge:***

Identify a project that you don't want to do.

- List this job on elance.com or odesk.com. (Where ever. I don't get any fees for this.)
- Set aside 90 minutes to choose the best candidate for your job and gather the materials they will need and bid the price.
- Let them deliver.
- If you don't like the work, quit them and find someone else.
- Watch that flyer, website, Fanpage, eBook, financial statement, article, newsletter, software program, etc. pop into your inbox.

If you have ongoing, administrative projects, you can also use virtual assistants. You will have to vet them just as you would any freelancer. You want to see samples of their work and get recommendations, and must decide if you like working with a freelancer nearby or a team overseas. (Or any combination.)

Tim Ferris, the author of *The 4 Hour Workweek*, claims that he can run his whole business this way with very little attention. I'm not sure if that is really true. But one thing I do know is true: once you get in the habit of outsourcing, you will decrease your sense of overwhelm. I'm logging on now.