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Business Playbook

Three strategies for when you're feeling overwhelmed at the helm

Premium content from Business First - by Mary Ann Masur, For Business First

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As a leadership coach, there's one challenge I hear more than any other. Whether I'm working with a business owner, executive, manager, rising star or entrepreneur, the refrain is the same: "I'm overwhelmed."

It's no wonder. These days, professionals at the helm have more on their plates than they can possibly say grace over. Many are trying to keep up by putting in longer hours, working at a nearly frenetic pace and taking less and less vacation. Just recently, in fact, CNN dubbed America the "no vacation nation" after a Reuters poll found that just 57 percent of U.S. workers use all of their vacation days compared to nearly 90 percent of French employees.

It's unlikely of course that the pace of work will slow down anytime soon. And although some companies are trying to help employees find a better balance between work and life, for the time being, learning to overcome overwhelm in today's business environment is largely up to the individual.

In a way, that's very good news. It means you have the power to learn how to be more effective and fulfilled in whatever environment you're currently working.

So with that in mind, here are three of the most popular strategies I share with my coaching clients to help them maximize their effectiveness.

Ask "Who?" not "How?"

Many business people I coach are lone rangers. Some think they are the only ones who can get the job done – or at least get it done correctly. Others don't want to impose on

their colleagues or staff who already are overworked. These mindsets are so ingrained that it never occurs to them to ask for help.

Granted, asking for help requires trust, letting go of control and relinquishing the need to do it "our way." But learning to change your internal dialogue from "How will I ever get this done?" to "Who can best help me get this done?" can truly be a transformational shift in thinking.

Here's an example. One of my clients, Ted, is the president of a commercial real estate brokerage firm. With 18 urgent tasks on his to-do list, he was overwhelmed, wondering how he would ever be able to get everything on his plate finished. As a result, he wasn't making meaningful progress on anything.

By shifting the thinking from "how" to "who," we were able to narrow his list dramatically.

First, we prioritized the items that only Ted could do as a result of his role, knowledge or unique capability. Next, we determined who he could ask to own and lead the other projects. By the end of this exercise, Ted's list was down to a manageable five tasks.

More importantly, however, as we spoke, Ted's energy increased and he became enthusiastic about the remaining items on his list that he now owned. He felt positive and more in control rather than dragged down.

Break tasks into chunks

Running a marathon requires a lot of training. However, walking a quarter mile is manageable. We have to start somewhere, and breaking projects into smaller tasks or time frames allows us to get in the race.

A physician client used this approach in creating guidelines and policies for a clinic he was opening. He felt overwhelmed at the prospect of creating this policy in addition to his other responsibilities. First leveraging the strategy above, he partnered with another physician and together they divided up the responsibilities.

Instead of either person having to create policies for the entire project, they split the table of contents in half, cutting his workload by 50 percent.

Next, the physician used the table of contents as a way to break down the task into projects within a project. He assigned himself a deadline for each chapter so he could experience a sense of accomplishment as he went.

Get it all out of your head

Our brains weren't designed to be filing cabinets or self-storage lockers. They were designed to think. To create. To contemplate.

If you're trying to store information about what you need to remember and what you need to do in your head, then you're wasting an awful lot of precious brainpower. We all

lead busy lives and have multiple roles, and your growing list of responsibilities can create a swirl in your mind, not to mention anxiety.

Instead, train yourself to put everything you need to do, want to do or have to remember down on "paper" — whether offline or online. By getting it all out of your head, you can see tasks more clearly, put them in perspective, prioritize and delegate appropriately and, most importantly, create room to think clearly.

Take 15 minutes now to write down everything you can possibly think of that you need to do, want to do, would like to do or don't want to forget about. No matter how little or seemingly inconsequential, be sure to write it down. After applying Guideline #1, step back and prioritize a manageable list.

Clients have told me that after doing this exercise they feel lighter, as if a burden has been taken off their backs. After creating a list of the to-do's, Phil, a physician client said to me, "My 50 pound knapsack just went down to 20 pounds!"

Try putting at least one of these strategies into practice this week and you'll no doubt create greater control in your day, maximize your energy and increase your focus.

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