

How to Go from “I’m Overwhelmed” to “I’ve Got This”

6 Ways to Reduce Stress & Take Control of Your Life

Your car wouldn't start this morning. You're behind on finishing the report that's due tomorrow. Your boss just called an urgent meeting for late this afternoon. Your daughter's dance recital is this evening. And on top of that, you haven't had a good night's sleep in a week.

That's it — you're officially overwhelmed, something all of us experience at one time or another. The mental and physical reactions are unmistakable: anxiety, helplessness, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath.

It's not uncommon to feel overwhelmed. As leaders we are often asked to do more with less, and the stakes get higher in a rapidly changing business environment. Our concerns at home can escalate at any time, too.

How do you find some peace? There are a number of things you can do to reduce the causes of stress in your leadership journey and minimize the chances for a pile-on. Here are six tips along with some steps you can take to help you move from "I'm overwhelmed" to "I've got this."



1. Accept that you don't have an answer for everything

Many times we feel overwhelmed because we want to maintain an appearance of having everything under control. But there will be plenty of situations for which you simply won't have an answer, especially when you confront new problems that require new solutions.

Start by telling yourself, "It's okay not to know."

But you can't end the sentence there, you must do whatever it takes to find out. Adopt the mindset of a learning leader, and role model this for your team, too. Welcome new challenges as a chance to grow and develop new knowledge and expertise. Remind yourself how empowering it will feel on the other side when you can say, "Now I know."

2. Win where it matters most

On many occasions you can determine what does/does not go on your list of priorities. But too often we allow our to-do list to become longer than it should be, in part because this makes us feel useful.

I remember a time in my career when I proudly showed my boss a list of more than a dozen goals I was planning to work on that year. His reply was to pick the top three and do everything I could do to ensure these were accomplished because they mattered far more than the others.

The lesson was clear – I needed to focus my efforts and deliver where it counts. Wiser leaders understand they can have a far greater impact by focusing on getting two or three crucial things done rather than a lot of little things.



Get clear on what really matters.

Assess your assignments and focus on the ones that support your organization's most important goals. Move everything else to a "later" list, negotiate for more time to address anything that crops up, or see if someone else has the interest, ability and capacity to handle something you can hand off.



3. Focus on what only you can do and give the rest away

Mastering the art of delegation is an advanced leadership skill that will prevent a lot of your stress. You may know how to do lots of things, but that doesn't mean you should regularly do them all, especially if it means you're routinely working late into the night and on weekends.

Like the point above, you must change your thinking about the value you bring to the organization and recognize that hoarding responsibilities is not healthy or respected. Leaders who empower others and get more stuff done through others are far more valued and promoted than those who hold tightly and try to control everything.

Focus on what only you can do and give the rest away.

What do you give away? Not just responsibility, but also all the good stuff that goes with it – authority, recognition, relationships, information, resources. The whole package. Once you've given away the things others can do, you've freed yourself up to focus on more strategic things. And as a bonus, you win back some time for your personal life as well.

4. Say “no” more often so you can say “yes” to the best

In your leadership journey, you'll be asked or enticed to do a number of things – serve on a volunteer board, take a leadership role for a special project at work, join an exercise group, attend a long list of social events, write a book, etc. But you can't realistically do everything well.



Develop a list of criteria to help vet opportunities that come your way and evaluate opportunities based on these things.

For example, what will help attract new clients or raise visibility for your organization? Could an assignment broaden your professional network? Also, instead of just saying “no,” consider saying “not now.” That might sound like this: “That commitment is more than I am able to make now. Please consider me again for future opportunities.” By saying no more often you create space in your life to say yes where you want to be your best.



5. Schedule unscheduled time for yourself

Some of the highest achievers I know block off their calendar with a “Do not schedule” planner every so often. Scheduling unscheduled time like this gives you some much needed buffer you will otherwise never capture if you don’t plan for it. These blocks of time, no matter how long or short, can be used in very productive ways.

Place a 30-minute or one-hour planner on your calendar twice a week

(or whatever you can reasonably block off). Set aside email and your phone. Use that time in one or more of the following ways:

- Think time to go deeper on a complex problem or to develop a new strategy.
- A chance to reflect on a situation you could have handled better and make note of a few things you will do differently next time.
- Seeking a mentor’s advice.
- Nurturing your network by sending an email to a colleague or friend.

6. Get some rest

As elusive as sleep might be during stressful times, you must try to get all you can. Science shows the benefits of sleep to include enhancing, among other things, your immune function, metabolism, memory and learning.



Obviously you will think and perform much better when you are rested. For example, I know that getting a good night’s sleep helps me give better presentations the next day. I can think on my feet much more effectively when I’m willing to get to bed sooner rather than staying up late into the night preparing.

Be more intentional about going to sleep earlier, especially when traveling or getting up for early-morning meetings.

If you keep your phone by your bedside, turn it over when you lie down so it doesn’t light up while you are trying to go to sleep. Make time for some regular exercise such as walking or running to help improve the quality of your sleep and minimize chances for sleep related issues.



I'm Elise Mitchell, a three-time CEO, leadership strategist, executive coach, business consultant, author, wife and mom. My passion is helping high-performing leaders achieve more.

Over the past 15 years, I've coached, consulted and trained leaders from a wide variety of industries ranging from non-profits to Fortune 500 companies. My goal is to inspire and equip you to lead at your best.

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What would you like to change?

Every leader has gaps holding them back. I work with clients to help them strengthen their leadership, resolve pressing business problems, and get the results they want.

This is achieved through three core services:



Leadership Development

Customized programs that equip you and your team to manage complexity, think more strategically and mobilize others



Business Advisory Services

Guidance and tools to help you address challenging business issues, from driving change to planning an exit strategy



Executive Coaching

Inspiring, results-oriented coaching using neuroscience and business insights to help you achieve your most important goals

