

Top 5 blog posts

What Really Helps When You're Overwhelmed

A couple of my executive coaching clients are going through a situation that you've probably experienced, too.

They're feeling overwhelmed and frustrated — so much that they can't bring their key leadership skills to the table at work. And, what's worse, they can't see a way out.

What I do with these clients — and what I want to help you do with this post — is show them that there *is* a light at the end of the tunnel.

When you are used to being a high performer who rarely (if ever) fails at anything, being in this place of overwhelm can be unnerving. Sometimes it's hard to know where to start when you're trying to escape it. With my coaching clients, I use an approach that helps make things feel a little more manageable.

The first thing to realize is that you'll need to address the situation on two fronts:

1) Envision how you want your life to be different from the overwhelmed state you're in right now. If you did the [life wheel](#) and [visioning exercises](#) in one of the recent blogs, you have some great information to help you do this. You can return to these exercises any time you need to refocus.

2) Now think about what you can do to improve things in the short term. Don't worry about solving everything right now. Just identify the first one or two steps that will start moving you towards what you want personally and professionally.

Now let's break things down even further. For most people I've found that the first couple of short-term steps are often the same:

1) Set some [boundaries](#) to create more capacity in your life. Start by identifying just one or two things that you will stop doing. You may already know what those are, and just may need to find a way to say no in a way that works for you.

2) Your next step is to reinvest that added capacity. If you're in a place of feeling overwhelmed, the best use of it is usually [self-care](#).

Remember that if you're not taking care of yourself, you can't be there for anyone else. Women often have a hard time getting to this conclusion. But here's something interesting I've noticed in my work as a coach: The farther along women are in their careers, the more they recognize that self-care is a core leadership skill. Sure, experienced executives may get overwhelmed from time to time, but they've accepted the idea that we can't go nonstop — and they practice it. Science backs them, too. Did you know there's actually no difference in [productivity](#) between someone who works 55 hours per week and someone who works 70? Spending some time on self-care instead of working will actually make you *more* productive.

The next time you're feeling overwhelmed, take some time to catch your breath and go through the exercises in this post. Please also consider sharing this post with anyone else who might need these strategies right now, and subscribe to my newsletter (scroll to the bottom of the page to sign up) for a steady supply of tips that will keep you calm, centered and at your best.

How to communicate negative stuff in a positive way

One of my clients reached out to me recently because he is unhappy with his new job. He hasn't yet developed a strong relationship with his boss and doesn't want to come across as whiny. He is struggling with how to have the conversation, especially since he isn't ready to throw in the towel.

Keeping a positive tone in a difficult, high-stakes conversation like this one is a key leadership skill. In my work with this client, we talked through several strategies that can make a big difference when you're in a situation like his.

Use Positive Language

When my client and I first talked about his unhappiness with his new job, this is what he told me:

- "This role isn't what I was expecting. My skills are underutilized, and I'm bored and frustrated."
- "I'm not sure where this experience is really going to lead me or my career."
- "I want a better relationship with my boss, but he is so different from other bosses I have had. My last boss was so supportive. I'm not sure where I stand with this one."

Sharing this information with his boss using words like the ones he used with me seemed risky, given the situation. After all, this is a conversation that will set the tone for my client's relationship

with his boss. The choices he makes about how to handle the conversation will have a ripple effect throughout his time at this company.

That's why I gave my client this strategy: **Even if you're feeling negative, share it in a more positive way.** The easiest way to do this is by first clarifying your underlying intent. In other words, stop and ask yourself what this is really about for you.

Here's how my client used his intent to communicate the situation to his boss:

- "I value my relationship with you and the company, so I want to be transparent about what is going on for me."
- "I want to more fully utilize my skills to support the business and have a bigger impact. Here's where I see an opportunity. ..."
- "I am committed to the company and want to better understand the career path."

Can you see how those words would land very differently with his boss than how he originally described the situation to me?

Focus on How You Want to Show Up

The second way to find the right words is by focusing on how you want to show up vs. how you *don't* want to show up. For example, if you want to come across as proactive and positive vs. whiny and negative, what words, tone and body language would convey that? Practice speaking out loud and in front of a mirror so you can make sure these three things are in sync.

Work on the Relationship

Finally, consider one of these options to develop a stronger relationship with your boss over time:

- Pay attention to what he cares about and how he communicates. This helps you position things more effectively.
- Ask others whom you trust, and who know him well, how to best engage him.
- Get to know him as a person.
- Tell him how to best work with you. Many leaders have a hard time figuring this out on their own, so make it easy for them. For example, tell him what management style works well for you (hands on or hands off) and the most effective communication approach (e.g., direct, face-to-face, etc.) and ask what works best for him. This will allow the two of you to co-design your working relationship.
- If he doesn't give feedback, offer your own self-assessment and ask him what he thinks.

I've shared a lot of different ideas here. Which one resonates most with you? I challenge you to pick a strategy and get started. Let me know how it goes!

Early morning habits of successful people

There is one thing that distinguishes successful people. They get a lot done. And while we all have several balls in the air, these high performers seem to have exceptionally high output. So...how do they do it?

A recent article in *Inc. Magazine* shared several nuggets that you may find useful. As you might expect, how you start the day can set the tone for how much you accomplish. The most successful people begin by focusing on their top priority, and science gives us more insight into what works about this practice. A well-known psychology professor from Florida State University found that willpower is like a muscle that becomes tired when overused. So, mornings offer a fresh boost to the willpower muscle, enabling successful people to focus on their most critical goals first.

Take a look at the other early morning habits that successful people exhibit, and notice which ones you currently put into practice.

- Wake up early
- Exercise or meditate in the morning
- Work on a personal passion
- Spend quality time with family
- Network with friends and advocates
- Develop plans or strategies
- Catch up on current events
- Make a list of things for which they are grateful

How do you want to set yourself up for success each morning? Do your days currently begin with a mad dash or do you show up with purpose and a specific plan in mind? This is so critical to success that I have dedicated a module to Getting the Right Work Done in the [WOW! Women on the Way to Peak Performance Program](#)SM (full and Lite versions). Listen to the quick 30-minute audio to learn how to focus on the three critical areas where you can make the biggest business impact this year, and how to manage distractions.

To accelerate your results and impact, invest your time intentionally each morning. Consider implementing one or two of these habits I've listed and investing in the [WOW! Program](#)SM audio to make sure you're applying the right tools for a more successful you.

Making awkward feedback easier

Whether you're a new manager or veteran executive, there's a certain kind of employee conversation that never seems to get any easier. I'm sure you've been faced with it: An employee

has a behavior, habit or mannerism that's giving people the wrong impression of her or diminishing her effectiveness. It's not a performance issue, but it affects how the employee is perceived. And she probably doesn't even realize she's engaging in it.

I've worked with clients who dread these conversations and put them off. They're worried that their feedback will be misunderstood, that they might damage the relationship or create needless drama. To help them take action, I remind them that as difficult as this kind of feedback can be to deliver, they are offering it out of genuine concern for the employee and a desire to help her succeed.

Here are three simple steps that can make these conversations easier:

1. Start with your intent

Remember that you're having this conversation because you care about the employee and want to help her remove an obstacle that's holding her back. You can always acknowledge that this is an awkward situation for both of you, but that it's important to talk about the behavior. If you were in her shoes, you would want to hear the feedback. Expressing compassion and your own vulnerability can create a stronger connection in the moment and may help defuse the tension.

2. Communicate the impact

Help the employee understand her behavior by identifying it, providing information on when and where you've noticed it occurs, and sharing its impact. For example, maybe her sour expression surfaces primarily in long meetings with a key stakeholder group. Talk about the effect, from what you see or what you've heard from others. "I know this isn't what you intend, but I've heard others say that your facial expressions sometimes leave them with the impression that you are resistant to their ideas."

3. Be part of the solution

Offer ideas about what she should do more or less of. Sometimes it can be very powerful to ask the employee to focus on how she wants to show up in the interaction. In other words, by helping her identify what she does want others to notice or take away from their interaction with her (e.g., openness to ideas), she may stop engaging in the other limiting behavior.

After that, it's a matter of finding tactics that work for her. That could mean using a visual reminder like a note with the word "open" on it, so she can see it during her meeting and pay more attention to her body language. If an employee is receptive to it, offer to help her monitor the behavior. That could involve giving a cue when the employee starts to engage in the distracting behavior during a meeting or setting aside time for feedback after the meeting.

This week, consider whether there's an awkward conversation you've been putting off and decide how you will approach it with the mindset of helping your employee succeed. While it may be a difficult moment for both of you in the short term, ultimately you will find that it strengthens your relationship and builds trust in the long run. Remember, small steps lead to big results.

Why your underperformer isn't changing

Have you ever been frustrated with a team member who isn't performing as you need — and who's showing no signs of changing?

I've seen this issue come up several times lately with my executive coaching clients. And I've noticed that as frustrated as leaders are in this situation, sometimes they aren't giving employees the honest advice and specific feedback they need to change. They might be worried about damaging the relationship, or they think that an employee should "just know" what to do.

You can take an approach, though, that helps the employee (and keeps your relationship healthy) while getting you better results. Here's the process I advise for leaders who are dealing with a "stuck" employee.

Look at Your Mindset

Think about how you've been engaging with this employee. What role are you playing in the current situation? How are you enabling it to continue as it is? For example, I've noticed that when a leader starts showing frustration or micromanaging, it can put his team member in a place of fear and self-doubt. That can make it much more difficult for the employee to make change happen. What would help you get centered so you can address the situation in a more constructive way?

Set Clear Expectations

Sometimes leaders assume an employee should know, without being told, how to handle an assignment. Then they're disappointed when the employee doesn't read their mind and meet all of those unvoiced expectations. You'll do more to boost the employee's performance when you delegate with clear expectations. Spell out the deliverables, define their decision-making authority, and specify how often the employee should check in and any other key parameters of the project.

One of my clients has a boss who's discouraged by her performance but doesn't communicate expectations. He gives her assignments to test her capabilities — but doesn't tell her this upfront, or let her know what skills he's looking to assess or build. That approach hasn't served either one of them well. He would improve his effectiveness if he communicated at the outset, "I'm giving you this assignment to see how you'll do and where I need to coach you, to help you be successful."

Give Specific Feedback

Think about whether you're offering the employee tangible, specific feedback. Are you communicating regularly about what's working and what's not? If you want her to make a shift in a certain area — say, being more strategic instead of tactical — are you letting her know this and explaining why this would help her succeed?

I teach my executive coaching clients a two-part formula for giving feedback. This approach gives the employee useful information she can take action on and keeps the emphasis on performance and results instead of personal criticism.

As objectively as possible, tell the employee what you observed her doing. Share facts without interpreting them.

Describe the impact of those actions. Your goal is to help the employee understand what she did and how it affected others. For example, did the actions she took (or didn't take) lead to a missed deadline? Misalignment of goals? Wasted time?

This week, apply at least one of these ideas to help a team member grow and improve. You'll find more ideas on giving feedback and helping your team members develop in Building a Strong Team, part of my [Leadership EdgeSM](#) series. And you can get a sampling of the team-building advice from the [WOW! Women on the Way to Peak Performance ProgramSM](#) in the [WOW! Highlight AudioSM](#). Start taking some small steps and you'll see big changes with your employee.

Neena Newberry is an award-winning executive coach, speaker and author. [A former Deloitte executive](#), Neena excels at simple, proven solutions to achieve unprecedented business and career results. Over 75% of her clients get promoted, and she gets rave reviews from clients such as AT&T, Shell, Sysco, United Way and the George W. Bush Presidential Center. Neena has been honored by the [Dallas Business Journal](#), the [Stevie Awards for Women in Business](#), the Global Excellence Awards and HR.com, among others, and has made numerous media appearances. Get started with [products and services](#) that work: [Show Up. Step Up. Step Out](#), the [Leadership EDGE SeriesSM](#), and the [WOW!SM](#) suite of products. Subscribe to [THE EDGESM](#) to access strategies her clients use, and connect with her on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).