

What Great Leaders Do to Feel Less Overwhelmed

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A Deloitte **survey** of approximately 2500 executives in 94 countries found that **overwhelmed leaders and employees are a global concern with implications not only for those leaders, but for their organizations as well.**

Multinational organizations operate in a "sun never sets" workflow as they offer continual service to their clients. Our 24/7 technology-

enabled connectivity means **leaders** are always 'on call' to answer queries from within their organization or from external customers.

Given that leaders are exposed to these demands and 24/7 requests, it is widely accepted that **focus and discipline are what differentiate peak performers in any endeavor from their counterparts.** A plethora of useful books have been written in recent years on the topic of habit development and focus. Books such as 'The Power of Habit' by Charles Duhigg, 'Be Excellent at Anything' by Tony Schwartz and 'The Progress Principle' by Teresa Amabile are great starting points.

Leaders who effectively keep from being overwhelmed are no different.

In 2014, The Leadership Circle conducted **research** with exceptional leaders in five countries across the Asia Pacific region. Participants in the study completed a 360-degree assessment and achieved such positive results that they were rated in the top five-percent of the database—scoring higher than 95% of the thousands of leaders in the database. **To learn what allowed these leaders to be so exceptional, this study focused on capturing the internal thinking patterns and daily routines that these leaders used at home, before, after work, and even on the weekends.**



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The result was insightful into how these leaders developed such strong leadership capabilities and how they minimized being overwhelmed in their roles. These leaders had discovered that a two-part daily practice of intentional leadership, combined with four daily habits, allowed them to minimize feelings of being overwhelmed, develop exceptional leadership capability, and make daily progress in achieving their goals.

Daily Intention Setting and Reflection Help Minimize Being Overwhelmed

Our study showed these successful leaders had independently arrived at a similar process and almost identical reflection/planning questions. **Every morning before commencing work they journaled five key questions:**

1. As the leader, what does my organization most need of me?
2. What are the most important projects I need to complete today/this week/this month/this year?
3. How do I ensure my time is used effectively today?
4. As a leader, whom do I try to develop today?
5. As a leader, how do I ensure I am not the blocker?

At the end of every day the leaders in our study took 5-15 minutes to review the efforts they had made that day and notice the progress achieved. Utilizing the discipline of an evening review enabled them to 'rise above the noise' of the frenetic nature of senior leadership and to calmly review how they 'showed up' as a leader during that day. Some leaders in our study wrote their answers in a personal journal, others merely reflected upon them, while some graded their efforts or progress.

Four Enabling Daily Habits:

1. Exercise every day for at least 30 minutes. This is not a new idea, of course, but every leader in our study had found that the days they did not exercise, as leaders they were less effective and were more overwhelmed.

Exercise provides a release valve for any stress developed over the day but also a useful time for thinking through ideas and strategies. One CEO in Auckland commented that every day she walked for 35 minutes on a direct route to her home from the office. The days that were stressful she purposefully walked a longer route, up to 60 minutes, to ensure she had dealt with her concerns before walking through her home door.

2. Never accept an invitation to a meeting unless the meeting agenda is predetermined. At the very least, the decisions to be achieved in the meeting must be outlined in the invitation. These leaders know their time is very precious and it is easy to waste time in meetings. One leader in Sydney told us that once he implemented this simple rule with his leadership team and their direct reports, their collective time was freed up by over 20%!

The organization soon learned to think through the reasons to invite senior leaders to meetings and to be prepared in doing so.

3. Be clear on who to spend quality time with. Leaders will always have requests of their time and often feel obliged to say yes to every request including social requests from acquaintances or friends from a distant past. Our study illustrated exceptional leaders get very protective of their time, particularly on weekends. They jealously guard social activity time in order to spend it with those they really want to - their family and close friends. They realize time is a scarce resource and they strive to not spend it flippantly.

4. Reflection time is an investment in self-leadership. Author and popular podcaster, Tim Ferris, describes *that every successful person he had interviewed on his podcast had a daily reflective practice of some kind*. Our study also showed that leaders who reflected daily on key aspects of their leadership were highly likely able to minimize the sources of being overwhelmed and maximize their personal effectiveness.

The Bottom Line:

The reality is that even taking between 10-20 minutes per day to do both parts of this exercise requires discipline. The leaders in our research program commented that their leadership development or maturity happened over time through ongoing learning, testing of ideas, changing behaviors and reflecting on progress. The rewards they received were not just isolated to improved leadership effectiveness, they also managed to minimize being overwhelmed.

In addition to receiving these professional rewards, these leaders all commented that since developing these daily processes, they were more calm in their personal lives, better partners to their spouses, and better parents to their children. They also had improved physical health and enjoyed developing other people more than they ever expected.

All while achieving strong business outcomes.

About the Authors:

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