



Leadership And Managing People

# When You're Overloaded—and Delegating Isn't an Option

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**Summary.** If you and your team are too busy, it's essential to take time to figure out how to work differently. Here are three key strategies you can use to reassess and reconfigure the work you do to free up vital time and energy for what matters: 1) Make sure your team really understands what "good enough" looks like. 2) Identify and eliminate hidden low-value tasks. 3) Strategically reduce your availability. [close](#)

When managers are overloaded as many are now, the usual

leadership advice is to delegate more. But what if you've delegated everything you can and you still have too much work? If your team is drowning too, delegating more work simply means shifting the overload. This is not a sustainable option.

We have seen this situation many times working with hundreds of leaders and teams in our consulting and coaching work. Fortunately, there are three key strategies you can use to reassess and reconfigure the work you do to free up your limited time and capacity.

### **1. Make sure your team really understands what “good enough” looks like**

It's easy to think that every piece of work should be an A+. But if everything you or your team does is “excellent,” you are overdoing quality, stressing your team, wasting energy, and slowing down progress.

We encourage leaders to work in a “fit-for-purpose way.” That means intentionally assessing what level of effort makes sense for a given piece of work. Do you discuss what is “good enough” for specific assignments with your team members? Or what corners should be cut?

One example of a client who managed effort and time well was a CEO one of us (Jordan) coached who understood what was important and what wasn't. He told his board that he was going to send weekly email updates and that these notes would be a “brain

dump,” without any editing. This allowed him to keep his board informed in real time and didn't waste his own critical leadership capacity.

In a different organization with a process-heavy culture, the leadership team was in the habit of soliciting employee feedback on a lot of organizational decisions. You might think that employees would love this high-involvement approach, and occasionally they did. Overall, however, staff regularly complained that the organization was too process heavy, and it made their jobs and lives harder, not better. We coached this CEO and team to use different decision-making processes depending on the importance or risk of the issue, and to streamline whenever possible.

Another executive client now asks her direct reports to share quick, first-draft plans with her for work that is not overly complex or risky, instead of perfect, multi-page documents. She also encourages her team to send bullet-point emails, when possible, instead of long narratives, with the understanding that she will follow up if she has questions. The team is also looking into how they can leverage AI to make work less labor intensive.

If you and your team are too busy, it's essential to take time to figure out how to work differently.

Ask yourself and discuss with your team:

- **Where could you do B-quality work, cut corners, or streamline processes to save yourself time and energy?** For example, can you shorten weekly updates? Can you send bullet

points instead of narratives? Do you really need a full project plan if the situation is simple?

- **What agreements could you make with your boss to simplify or reduce deliverables and processes?** For example, could you tell your boss that it would be helpful if you could send simpler or fewer communications? Will a rough draft suffice instead of a perfect document to get the information across? Can a decision-making process be streamlined?
- **How can AI support you and your team in reducing time required for “good enough” work?** Ask your team what apps they are starting to experiment with and encourage them to do more. For example, meeting summary apps have gotten really good. First draft writing apps are also helpful. We brainstormed with colleagues recently and came up with an impressive list of tools with which to start experimenting.

When managers and teams step back to assess if there are tasks on which they can lower the bar strategically, the answer is almost always yes, and encouraging “good enough” work energizes the team.

## **2. Identify and eliminate hidden low-value tasks**

We all know it's important to eliminate low-value tasks, however, in working with clients we often see that many low-value tasks have become unconscious habits, hidden in plain sight. Even teams that have worked on streamlining stop too soon and miss opportunities. There are many more hours to be saved if you look deeper.

In our experience, it consistently takes two rounds of “looking” to

get people to identify all of the tasks they could offload or reduce.

Here is a simple offloading process you can use with your team:

1. Ask your team, in advance of an offloading session, to think of all the tasks that could be eliminated. In the actual session they will often first come up with things that other people can stop doing. That's fine. It gets them warmed up.
2. Then ask them to go deeper and think about what work they themselves could stop doing if they had one day less per week to work? This is when we typically see breakthroughs.

Of course, you need to make sure that eliminating work does not negatively impact customers, colleagues, or finance.

One of Frans's clients leads several nurse teams in a hospital. The nurses felt overwhelmed with administrative work and had too little time to look after patients. She asked the nurse teams how their workload could be reduced without compromising the care patients received. After some in-depth discussion, they came up with the idea to stop using a 100-question checklist that had to be filled out for each patient, and instead, only register irregularities. This led to a reduction of three to four hours per team member per week and enabled the nurses to spend more time on patient care.

A common place to find low-value work is in information overflow. Often a lot of information is shared that people don't read or act upon. Frans experienced this when he was CEO at a retail company, earlier in his career. There was far too much reporting and communication, and all of his leaders complained

about it. He and his team decided to stop all reporting for the next month and then discuss what essentials were missing. As a result, the team was able to eliminate close to 40% of all reporting.

Another usual suspect for low-value work is in administrative tasks, and long, involved forms or approval processes, as the hospital example above shows. Organizations with “process-heavy” cultures also tend to “over-process” everything they do, when many decisions, tasks, or projects should be handled in a simpler way. Additionally, review and rework of documents takes up a lot of time unnecessarily when “good enough” (as above) will get the job done. And of course, there are almost always meetings that don't need to happen or could be significantly shortened.

What could you experiment with stopping, changing, or reducing? Remember, if you eliminate something that does matter, you can always restore it. We have found that teams are much more comfortable stopping or simplifying work when they embrace the “two-way door” decision principle. Assure your team: If we remove or change the way we do this work and we need to put it back in place, we will.

### **3. Strategically reduce your availability**

Many leaders think they should always be available. But too much availability creates more interactions and makes team members more dependent on you than necessary or ideal. With a bit more space, your team members will experience more room to act and this frees up time for you too.

One senior partner in the professional services industry that we worked with consistently found herself overloaded with work

because she was involved in too many projects.

We challenged her on her standard, “all-in” level of participation on projects and introduced two other possible modes. The first was: Be there at the start, check in one to two times during the project phase, and attend the closing session of the project. The second option was to be available as an advisor “on request” for brainstorming ideas or solutions.

Shifting her involvement was a big relief for her—and for her team. She stepped back on several projects and the team felt much more empowered to lead the work.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What projects or initiatives are you too involved in now? What could you step out of completely?
- How could you scale back your involvement and still provide colleagues with what they need?
- Are more asynchronous updates possible?
- Can you attend only the relevant parts of meetings? Or only key decision-making meetings?
- Could you try 15-minute catch-ups with direct reports or colleagues instead of longer meetings?

Be creative in removing yourself where you can (and helping your team do the same), and tell colleagues why, so they understand your motivation.

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When you are overloaded and delegating more to your team isn't an option, there are still ways to free up capacity. Now is the time to reassess and be intentional about what you do and how you do it. Working in a fit-for-purpose way that matches appropriate effort with true need, removing habitual low-value work, and being strategically unavailable will enable you and your team to free up vital time and energy for what matters.



**Frans van Loef** is an Amsterdam-based executive coach and former CEO, specializing in helping overwhelmed leaders and their teams offload the overflow of initiatives and inefficiencies in work, refocus on high-impact priorities, and unlock the full potential of their leadership teams, which leads to accelerated meaningful progress on strategic goals while maintaining a balance between what is needed and what people can contribute. His upcoming book *Offload* publishes this fall. Frans also chairs the advisory board of [The Amsterdam Institute of Finance](#). Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#) or email him at [frans@freecapacity.net](mailto:frans@freecapacity.net).



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