

MODULE SIX

A portrait of a woman with wavy brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a black top, a watch, and jewelry. A semi-transparent black box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the text 'OVERCOMING' in white serif font and 'Overwhelm' in white script font.

OVERCOMING

Overwhelm

Overwhelm is a *coping* strategy

"Overwhelm offers short term relief from making the decisions required to be more effective – but, that is the limit of this coping strategy."

Angela Koning

If you've lived and breathed even a day in the corporate environment, you will likely be familiar with the rising, suffocating sensation of overwhelm. It's the sense that there's too much to do, and not enough of YOU to do it.

On the positive side, overwhelm can drive us to find more efficient ways of working, to prioritise more effectively, to outsource elements which do not reflect core business, and it can also be the seed of innovation – helping us to find new approaches when the old ones no longer work.

More often though, overwhelm causes us to feel stressed, anxious, and as though whatever we do in work and leadership will never be enough.

There's always more work, and not enough time to do it.

We work longer hours, neglect to take our breaks, develop ergonomic pains and strains - and worst of all, we can start to lose confidence in ourselves.

We begin to ask questions like:

- Why is what I do never enough?
- Why can't our organisational leaders prioritise, and set reasonable expectations?
- Do my bosses not understand how busy I am, and the pressure I'm under?
- Should I discretely browse Seek while waiting for my morning brew?

In short, overwhelm is a coping strategy, manifesting in the physiological signs that we can't continue working in the same way – think shallow, short breathing, a busy mind but low productivity, your body is buzzing but simultaneously you're more exhausted than you've ever been. Most of the time we overlook these signals, and push on anyway, because we limit our alternatives to unattractive options, like confronting our boss, finding another job, or just throwing in the towel.



The good news is that there are other, better strategies and you're about to engage with a fresh perspective on workload.

If you're in this place of overwhelm, I get you. I've been there. In fact, overwhelm was a favourite coping strategy of mine for many years, until I figured out the formula I'm about to share with you here.

The reason I say that 'overwhelm is a coping strategy' is because, quite ironically, it offers us 'relief'. When we're stuck in overwhelm, we don't have to move forward, make decisions or commit to focussed action – because, well... we're too 'overwhelmed'. Get it?

The first step in overcoming overwhelm is to acknowledge how this strategy is short lived in it's suitability and effectiveness. Let's explore how the overwhelm strategy might be playing out for you.



The first step in overcoming overwhelm, and reigniting your passion for your role, is to understand the message your overwhelm is trying to offer – and that is, your approach to work needs to change.

Angela Koning

THE *Problem* WITH OVERWHELM AS A COPING STRATEGY

If overwhelm is a coping strategy for you, it's time to acknowledge the impact of this approach. It will be having consequences for you, for your team, and your boss, that you have perhaps not considered.

Before we dive in, let's acknowledge the good intent behind feeling overwhelmed at your work. It's a sign that something needs to change.

Rather than ignore that well-intended message, and push on with working yourself into the ground, let's see what thinking patterns might lie underneath overwhelm.



What clients are saying

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I was really busy doing a whole bunch of stuff, and solving a whole bunch of people's problems. This coaching journey allowed me clearly see what wasn't working, and gave me the ability to move into the space that I wanted to be moving into, which was operating at the right level. It freed up a whole bunch of my time, by not needing to solve other people's problems for them.

David Warman, Head of Trading and Analytics, Energy Sector

ACTIVITY

Tick the boxes that resonate with you:

- ☐ My body is telling me I'm under stress
- ☐ I acknowledge my mind is full, but I'm not as productive as I usually am – something needs to change
- ☐ I feel like I'm not in charge of the quantity of my own work, or the work of my team
- ☐ I'm concerned that work quality suffers in favour of quantity
- ☐ I don't get time to work on the big, impactful, strategic projects that would drive our team / organisation forward
- ☐ I get stuck doing low value, administrative work, which is frustrating and doesn't use my talents
- ☐ Just keeping the wheels of the team turning seems to take up most of my time
- ☐ I feel like my boss doesn't understand the pressure I am under
- ☐ I feel my team could step up and do more, and I'm not sure why they don't help me more
- ☐ I'd like to get my team helping more with workload, but they just don't have the capability
- ☐ It would be quicker to do it myself, rather than train my team to do more.
- ☐ I would like to do more strategic work, but I don't have the headspace to plan my approach
- ☐ I sometimes resent my workload, even though I try to hide it from my team
- ☐ Other stories I tell myself about feeling overwhelmed with work:

Using the activity above, you can see the stories (beliefs) in black and white, and draw your attention to the impact that overwhelm is having on you, your team and your boss.

Let's explore that further.

Workload OVERWHELM:

The Impact on You

The impact of feeling overwhelmed in leadership extends beyond not being able to answer your emails in a timely way. It can affect your mental wellbeing, your physiological state, and your emotional health, too.

The primary coping strategy I see clients deploy is to look outside themselves for the source of overwhelm – they point to their bosses not understanding their workload, to their teams or colleagues not pulling their weight, but they rarely acknowledge the part they play in the problem.

This can often look like:

- Saying yes to more delivery, without realistically scheduling time and resources to tackle it
- Not managing stakeholder expectations of what can be done in certain timeframes
- Taking perfectionistic approaches, or overdelivering - seeing every task as a requirement to 'prove oneself'
- Playing the victim, which might sound like 'poor me, look at all the work I do, with no one helping me'
- Taking significance from busy-ness, which can sound like 'look how busy (and by implication, how important) I am!'
- Connecting with others around the proverbial water cooler on what a mess the organisation is in, and how much stress we're all under



REFLECTION

Take a moment to consider the impact of overwhelm on you, and your leadership state. Here are some key questions to help you:

- What is the impact of feeling overwhelmed on my leadership state, or how I'm showing up for others?
- What is the impact on the clarity of my thinking and leadership effectiveness?
- What is stopping me from taking action to improve this situation?

Let's rewrite this story.

If you were ROCKING OUT in leadership, what would this look like?

- How would you be showing up in your leadership state?
- What language would you use to describe your approach to managing workload?
- What would it feel like to be in charge of your work?

Leader OVERWHELM: The Impact on Your Team

When we try to hide our true leadership state from our team, well... we fail.

Every time.

Our people are smarter and more intuitive than we give them credit for, and they are always observing and measuring the health of their boss's leadership state – which is quite human, as your wellbeing is also key to their 'survival' at work.

This means that our leadership state will always be seen by, and have an impact on, our team.

It also means, there's no faking it. We need to find a way to have our 'insides match our outsides', otherwise, the inauthenticity of our struggle will always be perceived by our teams as us being out of control, struggling, not in charge, not authoritative – and we won't be experienced as a leader who can be trusted, despite our good intentions.

So, let's be honest. This might be painful, but it's time to get real.



REFLECTION

Answer these questions:

- What is my team seeing in my leadership state?
- What language do I use to talk about workload?
- How am I helping my team to manage their workload (or am I making this all about me)?
- What would my team be thinking, and saying, about our workload?

Let's create a different experience for your team.

If you were ROCKING OUT in leadership, what would this look like for your team?

- What would they experience in your leadership when managing workload?
- What language would you use to manage the workload with your team?
- What would your team be doing, feeling, and saying, differently?

THE IMPACT ON YOUR *Boss*

Bosses want one thing from us. Are you ready to hear it?

Bosses want CERTAINTY.

The certainty that you've got this. That you're under control. That you're making the right things happen, in the right way, on the timelines they expect.

Having certainty about your capability and judgment, gives them the confidence to share important and sensitive strategic context. This facilitates prioritisation, allowing them to see you as an ally rather than someone 'to be managed', meaning they'll engage you in important projects instead of isolating your contribution to the 'marginal' work they believe you can cope with.

Making sense?



REFLECTION

Let's reflect on our boss's experience of our leadership state, when we show up in overwhelm:

- What is my leadership state communicating to my boss?
- Do they feel certain about my ability to manage my work delivery?
- What would my boss be saying about my approach to managing workload?

Imagine your boss being delighted with the way you were managing the work of your team. If you were ROCKING OUT in leadership, what would they experience from you?

- How would you be showing up in your leadership state?
- What would your boss notice has changed about your approach to managing workload?
- How would you know that they feel certain about your capability?



In The Lit Leaders Intensive, we're helping you to understand that you're entirely in control of your workload, and that overwhelm, as a strategy, will only ever offer short-lived benefits.

It's time for a new approach.

Are you ready to do away with overwhelm and reignite your role?

TO COMMUNICATE
PASSION FOR YOUR
WORK IS TO
COMMUNICATE YOUR
PURPOSE AND
CONTRIBUTION.

THIS REQUIRES CLEAR
THINKING, FORWARD
MOMENTUM, AND A
CLEAR SENSE OF WHAT IS
TRULY IMPORTANT.

ANGELA KONING

