

CHANGE HAS CHANGED

Handout for Leaders

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WORK ISN'T WORKING

We are struggling to keep up because there is so much coming at us. We are:



DISTRACTED

We're paying attention to too much. We're constantly interrupted.



TRIGGERED

Society is emotionally dysregulated. We feel under threat.



BURNED OUT

Energy levels are at a historic low. Burnout is rampant.

This is not a state from which to achieve amazing things together.

IT'S NOT THE WORKLOAD, IT'S THE THOUGHTLOAD.

But the problem is not just how much work there is to do. (Most people would be thrilled to just do their work.)

Instead, it's the weight of everything we're trying to pay attention to and every emotion we're trying to cope. And it's the drain of doing all that with a body and mind that's exhausted.



How can you **reduce your own thoughtload** and help your **team manage their thoughtload** so you can more more effective and less stressed?

THE THOUGHTLOAD EQUATION

COGNITIVE LOAD + EMOTIONAL BURDEN

ENERGY RESERVES

Cognitive demands = endless inputs competing for your attention
Emotional burden = the drama you're absorbing, managing, and suppressing
Energy reserves = the physical and mental strength to keep going

The higher the cognitive demands and emotional burdens you deal with, and the lower your energy reserves, the higher your thoughtload.

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Being more productive and effective isn't about reducing workload—it's about managing thoughtload.

FOCUS DISTRACTED ATTENTION



Mono Tasking, Serial, Togglers

As humans, we're built to pay attention to one thing at a time. We're mono-taskers, not multi-taskers. Unless one activity is a habit that we can do without conscious attention, we're not multi-tasking, we're just toggling back and forth between two tasks, usually eroding the speed and quality of both.

Multitasking or toggling:

- Makes us slower at all tasks
- Decreases quality
- Creates more anxiety

To improve your focus and fight the temptation to multitask, use these strategies:

FOCUS ON OUTCOMES

There are three things you can focus on at work:

ACTIVITIES



The things you do

(ex. send emails, attend meetings)
If you focus on activities, you become busy, but not much more.

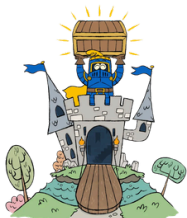
OUTPUTS



What you deliver or finish

(ex. sending a report, doing a proposal)
If you focus on outputs, you become productive, but still not sufficient.

OUTCOMES

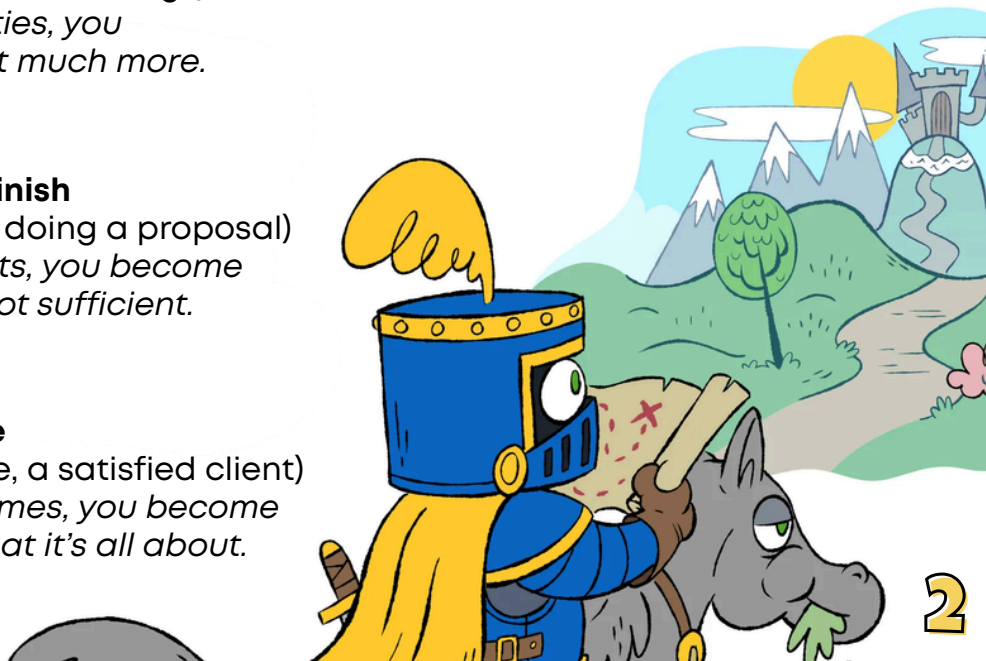


The impact you make

(ex. improved revenue, a satisfied client)
If you focus on outcomes, you become effective, which is what it's all about.

Focusing on outcomes (naming your quest)

and stripping away the outputs and activities that aren't creating progress allows you to achieve more by doing less.



MAKE THREE LISTS, NOT ONE

There is more to work than advancing your most important outcomes. Once you understand your own quest, you need to consider the role you play in helping colleagues achieve their quests.



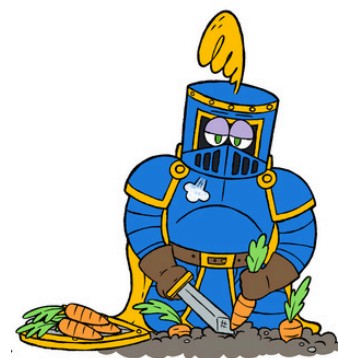
MY QUEST

The most important outcomes I must advance.



MY COLLEAGUES' QUESTS

Where others need my support to succeed.



SIDE QUESTS

The necessary, but lower-impact tasks.

List each item on each list in **numbered order**. You should only have one #1 priority in each category.

Once you have your three prioritized lists, align your calendar. Stop letting low value work into your most effective time (and stop trying to cram in your most important work when you have no energy left).

CALENDAR ZONE

WHEN

FOCUS ON

Focus & Forge time Deep work, strategy, design	The most precious time in your week. When you can do your most energized and creative work.	My Quest
Collaborate & Connect time Meetings, coaching, brainstorming	The secondary time slots. When you're productive but maybe less creative.	Your Quest
Tidy & Tend time Admin, cleanup, planning	The swamp land of your calendar. When you don't have the energy for other things	Side Quests

EXPOSE TIME BANDITS



Deal with the common culprits that are wasting your time and energy:

- Standing meetings (“we go because we always go”). Remove them from your calendar and use them as a “hold” instead, for when they’re necessary.
- Bloated invite lists (“Am I needed on this quest?”). Focus on more fit-for-purpose agenda items and participants. Be deliberate about who you invite.
- Email/Slack/Teams overuse (“constantly in responsiveness mode”). Clarify what tools are for what purpose and set expectations for each.

DON'T TAKE EVERYONE

Teamwork and collaboration are necessary to accomplish many of the tasks in our work, but that doesn't mean we need anyone and everyone involved in everything we do.



- Shrink your teams down to only the people who are required to create the output.
- Strengthen your communities so you can call on others to support you when needed
- Reduce the number of participants and duration of meetings
- Invite fewer people onto asynchronous channels and copy fewer people on emails

PROCESS TRIGGERED EMOTIONS



Emotional, Susceptible, Protective

Humans are emotional creatures. Emotions are built into our operating system and are essential for many processes like memory and learning. But if we aren't careful, we can take the wrong message from those feelings and get hijacked into a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn protective reaction.

To ensure you learn from emotions without them derailing you, try these strategies:

INTERRUPT YOUR FEELINGS

- **Emotions** are automatic, physiological responses that occur before we're consciously aware. They're tied to things we care deeply about; things that are associated with our safety, efficacy, value, and worth.
- **Feelings** are the *stories we tell ourselves*. Feelings come from the conscious processing of our emotional experiences.
 - "She interrupted me → she doesn't respect me."



Unprocessed feelings can turn into **drama** that derails you and spreads to your teammates.

When you understand the difference between emotions and feelings, you can interrupt the chain between your emotions and feelings and choose the narrative you want to believe.

FIND THE TREASURE

When emotions flare, it's because something we value feels threatened.

- **Fire** = the emotions and feelings (anger, frustration, fear, disrespect)
- **Treasure** = the thing you value or believe that feels threatened (autonomy, control, credibility, relationships, success)

A common reason we experience strong emotions is because we feel **social pain**. Anything that suggests we might not belong in the group (exclusion, criticism, teasing) is processed in the same network in your brain as physical pain. It's true that you can hurt someone's feelings.

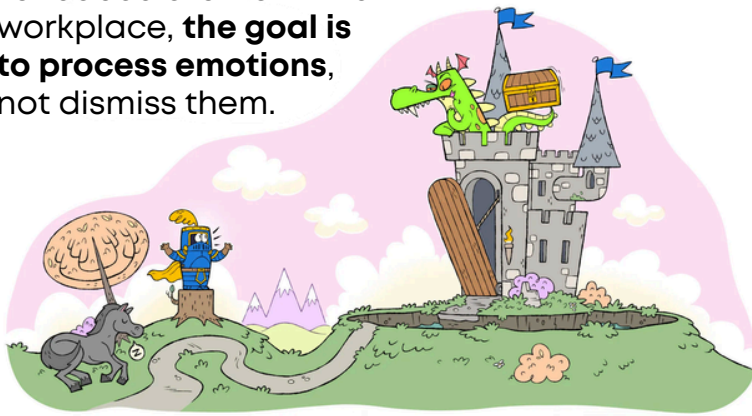
To understand why someone is having a strong emotional reaction and to work through it, **find the treasure**



Being more productive and effective isn't about reducing workload—it's about managing thoughtload.

OPEN THE DRAWBRIDGE

To reduce drama in the workplace, **the goal is to process emotions, not dismiss them.**



If you're in a heated argument, you can also ask yourself these open drawbridge questions to increase your self-awareness and identify the treasure you're protecting. As you figure out the answers, share them with your colleagues. *"I think this is frustrating me because I feel like we have so little time and we've been talking about this for two months with no resolution."*

REDUCE THE SPREAD

Avoid **"emotional contagion"**: When you start experiencing the emotions that someone else is experiencing.

- **Empathy** = "I feel for you." (Healthy)
- **Sympathy** = "I feel with you." (Dangerous)

Ask Open-Drawbridge Questions (Help them draw you a map to their treasure):

- "This is important — what do I need to understand?"
- "What's this issue about for you?"
- "How do you see this playing out?"
- "What am I not paying enough attention to here?"
- "What outcome is most important for you here?"
- "What would make this work better from your perspective?"
- "What parts of this won't work, and why?"
- "What are we missing?"
- "Where should we go from here?"
- "Help me understand what you would change."

Tip: Avoid "why" — it triggers defensiveness. Say "Help me understand...", "What" or "How" instead.



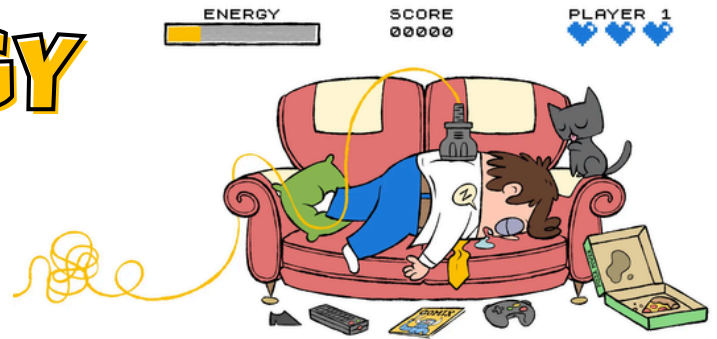
Processing emotions for yourself and your team reduces drama and restores a sense of psychological safety.

To avoid emotional contagion, call out what's going on as an observation so people become aware → "I notice we're all a bit tense — what's going on?"

- The more power you have, the more likely your emotions are to spread to those around you.
- If you aren't processing your emotions, the more likely they are to spread to the team.
- If you aren't helping your team members process their emotions, they're more likely to spread their emotions to one another, which leads to drama.

RESTORE DEPLETED ENERGY

So far, we've been talking about the top of the thoughtload equation; the cognitive and emotional weight we bear. Now we need to talk about the physical and mental energy we have to carry that weight.



EFFICIENT, INERTIAL, RATIONALIZERS.

Humans are very good at optimizing the energy we spend. Our bodies and brains have myriad ways of ensuring we don't expend too much energy and leave ourselves depleted. Sometimes the messages we get are too conservative—we feel exhausted when we still have energy to spend. Other times, we push too hard and for too long leaving us vulnerable to burning ourselves out.

To ensure you have the energy you need for the most important activities, use these strategies to fill your cup:

FIND THE WATERFALLS

The best way to feel energized is to work in a state of “flow.” Flow states are when you feel like you have “effortless attention,” intrinsic motivation, and a flood of positive emotions and self-worth.



Get into a flow state by:

- Protecting an hour or more for uninterrupted work with no distractions
- Setting a clear, meaningful outcome and a manageable output
- Starting small by committing to a short time and building momentum from there
- Tapping into a flow state multiple times each week

FIND THE WELLS



You won't always have the chance to work in a flow state. Instead of filling your cup from a gushing waterfall, you'll feel like you have to dig deep to find a well.

Recognize the moments when you need to tap into your natural well of energy and select the approach that best matches your style.

Wells are very personal to you. Your sources of energy will be different than some of your colleagues, **but here are some ideas to try:**

- Get unstuck by being physically active. Go for a brisk walk. Do a lunch time workout.
- Share what you're working on with others and brainstorm to generate energy
- Create a detailed plan to feel more confident and energized about what you need to accomplish
- Making the work more creative by switching modalities: draw the idea, use a metaphor, try design thinking methods

Fill the cracks in your cup by addressing your energy drains. Some places to look include:

- An unresolved conflict –you may need to pay of a “conflict debt” if it's wearing you down
- Useless meetings that are taking up the most effective times in your week
- Inefficient or ineffective activities that are frustrating you
- Particular clients or types of work that are creating friction you need to address.



You can fill your cup from waterfalls or wells, but if there are too many cracks in your cup, you'll never get ahead.

Recognize where the drains are and reduce or eliminate them

RESET YOUR ENERGY BALANCE

- Block and protect your **Focus & Forge** time weekly.
- Don't stay stuck. Walk and talk, use voice memos, try AI to jog your creativity, switch modalities.
- Take 15 minutes before logging off to write tomorrow's top 3 quests.
- Build in **air time** — one hour spots multiple times a week with *no input* (no phone, no podcast, no people).
- Celebrate small wins.
- Create a 15-minute buffer between work and home at the start and end of the day.

BEING A ROLE MODEL

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