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## One Strategy Business Leaders Can Use To Reduce Overwhelm And Produce Meaningful Results

By Joelle K Jay



An executive coaching client of mine — the president of an international consulting business — recently described symptoms to me that seem increasingly common. See whether you've ever felt these yourself:

- Your desk, calendar and to-do list are so full that you're having trouble focusing.
- You're hanging in there and just barely avoiding panic as you see how much you have to do.
- Your heart feels tight; you may even be forgetting to breathe.

There's a word for this condition: It's "overwhelm," and from what I've seen, it's sweeping the nation.

Many business leaders are overwhelmed, and there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. Hoping for change probably won't work, nor will waiting it out to reach some new phase. I believe we need a new approach.

Fortunately, you have what you need to overcome the overwhelm, and I'm going to show it to you now. There's hope.

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The trick is to identify one thing — just one — that is most essential to you now. Focus on that. Let the rest go for now.

Greg McKeown, the author of *Essentialism*, calls this item “what’s essential.” Authors Gary Keller and Jay Papasan call this *The One Thing*. In my own book, *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership*, I call this your “catalyst” — the single most important thing you need to be focused on to get the results you want.

In the swirl of your average workday, finding that one thing can be a lifeline.

- You know your goal.
- You know where to focus.
- You’re clear.

Without it, you can feel completely at sea — unable to anchor, and afloat and buffeted about by the next email, the next fire drill or the next urgent/angry/demanding client, customer or boss.

So yes, it’s reasonable to be overwhelmed, and yes, that very condition can lead leaders to lose track of what has to be done and to take their eye off of the goal. But you can get your focus back.

Follow these steps:

1. Without doing anything, just scan the items that are demanding your time and attention:

- Read your entire to-do list.
- Scan your email.
- Review the projects on your desk.

2. Then:

- Put it all down. Walk away. Breathe.
- Ask yourself: What’s the single most important thing I need to focus on now to achieve my goals? Choose one.
- Listen for the answer.

3. Now go do that thing.

If you work on your selected item — if you choose one and only one for the moment — you’ll likely be able to make progress. The energy and focus you expend will be aligned with your goals, and you’ll likely feel productive and at peace. Very good.

After that, you can return to the heap on your desk and all those things you scanned in step one, and if there’s time, choose one more.

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This approach can help you snap into focused productivity with the added benefit of letting everything else fade into the background. When you're ready, you can take on each thing one at a time.

Will your most important things get done? Absolutely. Will there be some things that don't get done? Probably, yes. Does it matter? Nope — not as long as you're clear about what you're letting go.

I've found that it's not just a better way to work -- it's a better way to live.

Let's look at an example of a leader who made this strategy work: Sali was overwhelmed with day-to-day meetings and tasks. Her first priority was to be promoted, but she couldn't carve out time for the high-priority items that would help her get a higher-level position. She tackled the steps above. She took stock of what was taking up her time, and then she escaped for a walk around the building, during which time she reconnected with her top priority. "If I want to be promoted," she thought, "I need to be taking on a higher-level project and showcasing my results."

Returning to her office, Sali shut down her email for a mere fifteen minutes and held the phones so she wouldn't be interrupted. She put together an action plan. She then called her boss to propose her idea for a big project — one she could own and on which she could deliver. Within a very short time, she had identified her priority, made it her priority with her actions, committed to it and let the rest of her tasks take a back seat. She got to those later — but with a great sense of purpose and a commitment to get back to her primary goal as soon as she could.

What's the No. 1 thing you want to be focused on? Where should you be focusing your attention?

Once you know that, in addition to taking the steps above, you might consider making yourself what I call a mini-strategic plan. The size of a sticky note, this miniature plan can go with you wherever you go and remind you of your new decision.

It should contain:

- Vision: Your top priority
- Plan: How you're going to get there
- Outcome: Your measure for success

Sali's mini-strategic plan could look like this:

- Vision: Lead the company to a new level of success by getting promoted to a senior leadership position
- Plan: Deliver on a high-visibility project
- Outcome: Share results and show my plan for the future of the company

One grand vision, one specific item to deliver and a clear focus on results. Three bullet points. That's clarity.

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So drop the overwhelm. Join the leaders who are rejecting the endless and ever-increasing demands of the modern work life, and focus on the one thing that can make the biggest difference. Not only will you feel better, but you'll also be making a bigger impact.



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