



## Managing Yourself



# Are You Too Responsible?

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**Taking responsibility is an essential element** of strong leadership. As we are often reminded, “The buck stops here” and “Leadership is taking responsibility while others are making excuses.”

However, leaders can also inadvertently become overly responsible, taking ownership of others’ tasks, emotions, mistakes, and problems. For example, take Joyce, a senior tech leader, who spent nearly every weekend working so as not to overburden her team. Or Tyra, who felt responsible for and distressed by a team member’s personal struggles. Or Alec, a partner in a law practice, who became physically ill working tirelessly to fix a problematic situation a client had created.

Undeniably, there are greater faults than being too responsible. But when the scales tip to over-responsibility, both the leader and their team suffer. Overly responsible leaders can feel consistently overloaded and overwhelmed, leading to burnout. Leaders with an overactive sense of responsibility can also disempower others, reducing their confidence in their own abilities. And if you secretly feel resentful, your team can pick up on that and catch your negative emotions.

Consider the following: Do you often pay attention to the needs of others but neglect your own? Do you frequently remind others what needs to be done and get annoyed by how irresponsible they seem? Or say “yes” to most things you’re asked to do but then feel resentful? If something goes wrong, do you feel the entire weight of that outcome? If so, these could be signs that you have an overactive sense of responsibility.

Over-responsibility can be a hard habit to break. Helping others makes us feel good: We feel competent, reduce our stress, and avoid conflict. This habit also gets reinforced by those around you, who learn to depend on you. But don’t wait until you feel burned out and resentful. Instead, use the following strategies to find a more appropriate balance of responsibility.

### **Examine your assumptions**

Examine the beliefs around your over-responsibility. For example, Joyce believed she had to carry the excess load for the team. Alec thought it was all on him to fix his client’s situation.

Over-responsibility can start in childhood and get entangled with your sense of self. For example, you may pride yourself on being highly responsible. And when being super-responsible has previously served you, it’s easy for your identity and self-worth to get wrapped into it.

Regardless of how the over-responsibility started, our beliefs and **self-concept** can keep us stuck in unproductive behavior. To start overturning your over-responsibility habit, examine the beliefs and fears that keep it alive. Are they really true?

Reframe the release of responsibility and consider that you're empowering others: By allowing them to struggle with a task, solve their own problem, or own up to a mistake, you help them develop greater competence and confidence.

### **Give responsibilities back**

Whether you willingly assumed a given responsibility or it was imposed on you, it's time to return it to its rightful owner.

Start small. Identify one responsibility you can return to a specific person. It may be giving back a simple task that someone else should be doing. Or returning the responsibility for remembering project deadlines to another team member. Or perhaps, like Tyra, it's something more significant, like returning responsibility for their own happiness to her team member.

Be sure to communicate what you're doing and why, and collaborate on a transfer plan. For example, you might say: "I recently audited everything on my plate. I've been writing the update emails on this initiative, and this responsibility should belong to you. I'd like you to take it over starting next week. What do you need from me to make this a smooth transition?"

Expect a few hiccups at first, but resist the temptation to jump back in, or you'll end up right where you started.

## **Define what you're truly responsible for**

When it feels like the weight of the world is on your shoulders, try the following pie-chart exercise. Start by grabbing a piece of paper and listing everyone involved in this particular situation. For example, in Alec's case, this included the CEO, his executive team, the board, a team of strategy consultants, and other legal counsel.

Now, draw a circle on your paper and allocate responsibility for the situation to each person or group on your list. Add up those amounts and determine the remaining percentage. The amount left over is a closer approximation of your actual share of responsibility. For example, despite being conservative with his estimates, Alec's portion of the pie amounted to a paltry 5%.

This simple exercise can help you more accurately assess how much you're really responsible for and offer relief.

## **Accept help**

If you're overly responsible, you likely say "yes" whenever others ask for help but don't ask for any yourself. It's time to rebalance your give-accept ratio.

Practice accepting offers of help. If someone asks if they can take something off your plate or offers to do something for you, say "yes." If you're worried about burdening them, understand that your acceptance of their offer allows them to enjoy the same positive feelings you enjoy from helping others.

Once accepting help feels comfortable, start making specific requests for support. Make explicit, well-defined requests rather than vaguely stating that you "could use some help on this project." Leaders who ask

for help increase feelings of positivity, inspiration, and connection on their team.

### **Empathize — without taking on others' distress**

Today's workforce is more willing to be vulnerable and share personal challenges, which is critical for creating a sustainable and mentally healthy workplace. However, for overly responsible leaders prone to taking on others' emotional burdens, this can add to their personal emotional load.

To shield yourself from negative emotional contagion and potential downsides of too much empathy, learn to balance your emotional empathy with cognitive empathy, which involves taking on another person's perspective to understand what they are thinking and feeling. Conversely, emotional empathy is feeling what others feel; left unchecked, it can damage your health.

To practice more cognitive empathy, focus on seeking additional information. Ask questions to understand better how someone thinks and feels about their situation, rather than emotionally placing yourself in their shoes.

By responding as an information seeker versus an emotional sponge, you can demonstrate compassion while protecting yourself from the collateral damage of too much emotional empathy.

### **Be self-compassionate**

Changing our habits and behaviors is notoriously hard. It often takes longer than we want and feels uncomfortable. You may also meet initial resistance in those who have come to rely and depend on you.

Be patient and self-compassionate as you shift into a new pattern of balanced responsibility with those around you. Setbacks are a natural part of the change process. Rather than berate yourself when the inevitable lapse occurs, see it as an opportunity to learn. Ask yourself: What can I learn from this setback? And what can I do to get back on the right track?

Rightsizing your responsibility is not about shirking what is yours to own but finding a more appropriate balance. By taking 100% of your responsibility, but not more, you will avoid unnecessary stress and empower and help others grow.

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