

10 ways to help employees feel less overwhelmed

by JoAnn Corley



No matter where your organization is located, which field it specializes in, or what its product or service is, your employees are feeling overwhelmed.

Employees who survived the downturn have absorbed work left behind by laid-off co-workers. Most employers are still riding the brakes on hiring. Job descriptions have expanded to the breaking point. “Overwhelmed” is here to stay.

As an HR pro, you might not be able to help employees embrace that sad fact, but you definitely can help them manage it. Here’s how:

1. Look inward. Before you can help employees cope, deal with your own feelings. Most of the HR pros I know are overwhelmed themselves. Especially if you work for a small company, your HR department might be woefully understaffed. Maybe it’s just you! That makes it hard to keep up in the best of times.

2. Don’t deny the fact that employees are overwhelmed. Admit it. Acknowledge it with respect. Tell them: “I know you’re swamped. We’ve got a lot going on.”

3. Express appreciation. A simple “thank you” for going the extra mile can defuse a lot of the feelings that work is overwhelming. Someone who feels appreciated might be less resentful, and more willing to make personal sacrifices to help the company get through a hard time.

4. Build a more collaborative environment. Nudge managers to talk about working together to get stuff done. Encourage offers to help one another. Build a “we’re all in this together” culture.

Example: Walmart employees often huddle for a few minutes at the beginning of a shift to talk about their plans and goals for the day. They even clap and sing together. At a company where I once worked, we had a similar stand-up meeting to share what was on our plates for the day and the outcomes we expected. We also asked for our peers’ support and encouragement. Those activities help employees understand that all of the pressure for the work isn’t on one person. It helps them feel less alienated and more supported.

5. Be consistently clear about priorities. Employees have so much to do that they can’t figure out what to do first. Encourage regular instructions from managers to staff.

6. Know the priorities. Perhaps employees can't prioritize because their overwhelmed managers don't know what's most important, either. Coach bosses to divide department-wide to-do lists into "A," "B" and "C" tasks. Train employees the basic time-management skill of plugging the "A" tasks into their calendars with a reasonable time estimate. That way, everyone will be clear about how much they can get done.

Tip: To determine which are "A" tasks, ask: What are the consequences if it does not get done? Is someone waiting for it? How important is that person? Who gave it to me to do? How important is *that* person?

7. Lighten the load. Teasing out the "A" tasks also forces managers to examine whether the "B" and "C" tasks are important enough to devote staff time to at all. Those chores will either percolate to the top and become "A" tasks, or they won't. If they're not priorities, why are they on your list?

8. Watch for the breaking point. The recession showed us that people can be way more productive than we thought. Still, everyone has a breaking point. At some time, you'll need to hire more staff.

9. Make time management a core competency for all employees. Incorporate time-management instruction and coaching into employee orientation. Every employee needs it, yet too many organizations leave it to the wind.

10. Listen and coach. Allow employees to honestly express their feelings. Give them time to vent, and then help them develop a plan. That will go a long way to defusing hard feelings and low productivity caused by feeling overwhelmed. It will help employees gain control of their own work.

Managers can help by setting priorities. Employees will feel less like it's all up to them—and less guilty when they can't get it all done by themselves. Honor and respect the fact that people are feeling overwhelmed, and those employees will more likely accept it as the new normal—and acknowledge that they can get important work done.

JoAnn Corley is an Atlanta-based speaker, management and career coach, and author of the book Organizational Strategies for the Overwhelmed. Contact her at (630) 926-5323 or via her website: www.joanncorley.com.