

UNHEARD AND UNDERVALUED

Insights and Strategies to Transform Workplace
Frustration into Lasting Impact

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Unheard and Undervalued

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Trachsel Consulting, LLC

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Workplace Frustration into Lasting Impact*



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An ongoing gratitude to my teachers, professors, bosses, coworkers, leadership class instructors, and classmates for helping me learn how to live a life of purpose and be the best employee, coworker, and leader I could be.

To all my friends over the years: As we get older, some of the sayings of old start to make sense, especially that there is a time and a season for everything. No matter when or how long you were in my orbit, I am grateful to have been in yours.

For my children, Julia and Kalena. This is just the start!

But First: Why this book?

My career has been varied, but each step along the way has led me to be the person I am now. My college education was for becoming a math teacher, which led to an opportunity to be a childcare director, which led to an opportunity to join the Oregon Department of Human Services with progressive responsibilities, which led to working for a county health department, and finally to my current 9-5 job in emergency management. Careers seem to go that way, winding around as we have families, move, mature, and eventually (hopefully) realize what we are passionate about and go down that path.

Along the way, I realized that I still loved to teach and help people, and I also remained skilled at systems thinking, planning, and problem solving. A life in public service does not always lead to the opportunity to follow your own path, so in 2023 I started my own business, Trachsel Consulting. That sort of business is really a one-on-one, or single-team approach, and I really wanted some of what I've learned in life to get to more people. So, this initial e-book has come to be my first introduction into the Trachsel methods of thriving in work.

This book is in three parts to give you a comprehensive, high-level overview of what it takes to learn to thrive and hopefully enjoy the work you do. First, I will lay out a foundation to address some of the struggles you may be having. Second, you will learn some strategies to improve your efficiency, impact, and decision-making. Finally, I'll address some of the physical conditions that make it extra challenging to feel like you are making progress.

I hope you find some “aha!” moments in this book. My wish is that you learn a few things to help you thrive and be impactful in your life, and that you share your insights with me and others. Contact me directly or share your thoughts on social media.

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Part A: Foundations of Resilience and Growth

Chapter 1: The Power of Authenticity in Overcoming

Adversity

Have you ever been told at work to “leave your personal life at the door”? It’s not possible, at least for me. It is less about work/life balance and more about thriving in life. It turns out that science agrees. Research has shown that embracing and expressing our authentic selves rather than hiding our experiences and point of view can lead to a stronger sense of belonging, resilience, and satisfaction at work.

Authenticity helps us connect more deeply with others, approach challenges with confidence, and build the resilience needed to navigate adversity. This chapter explores the transformative impact of authenticity at work and how bringing one’s full self—experiences, values, and all—can lead to stronger team dynamics and individual fulfillment.

“Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are.”

— Brené Brown, *“Daring Greatly”*

Authenticity as a Source of Strength and Resilience

Our personal stories and backgrounds form the bedrock of who we are. Whether it's coming from a family that values hard work, navigating hardships, or overcoming personal obstacles, these experiences shape our perspectives, build our character, and fuel our resilience. In **Daring Greatly**, Brené Brown emphasizes the value of “showing up” fully and honestly, arguing that authenticity is crucial for both personal growth and interpersonal connection.

When people bring their authentic selves to work, they're more likely to feel engaged and supported. Studies show that employees who express their personal identities and values at work report higher job satisfaction and are less likely to experience burnout.

This concept, known as “authentic leadership,” has been shown to improve both individual performance and team cohesion. When leaders, in particular, model authenticity, they set a powerful example, creating a safe space for team members to bring forward their own unique experiences and perspectives. This openness fosters a positive work culture where diverse perspectives are welcomed and valued.

What does this look like in practice? When I interviewed for jobs in the past, I often shared a difficult story about a mistake I made very early in my career. I had just turned 28 and was nearing a year in my first job as a boss. A serious situation occurred, and I notified my leadership immediately, but just by email. I made an assumption that the volunteer board would check their emails quickly. A few days later, I was called in and

fired. At the time, I could not believe this had happened to me. I'd never failed so horribly in school or at work before. But it was the best thing that could have happened to me.

This experience taught me the value of clear, frequent, and multimodal communication. I should have made phone calls and asked for an immediate board meeting. By sharing this vulnerability, I demonstrated how I would be able to turn something difficult into a learning experience. This made me a stronger leader and more aware of communication styles.

The Authenticity Advantage: Improved Relationships and Team Dynamics

Authenticity doesn't just benefit individuals—it also has a significant impact on team dynamics. In a workplace where people feel comfortable being themselves, team members are more likely to collaborate openly, share ideas freely, and work through conflicts constructively.

Research in social psychology has shown that when individuals are encouraged to express their unique perspectives, it leads to a phenomenon called “psychological safety.” Psychological safety is the feeling that one can share ideas, ask questions, or raise concerns without fear of judgment or repercussions. Harvard professor Amy Edmondson, an expert in this field, found that teams with high psychological safety were more likely to engage in productive problem-solving and achieve better outcomes.

In contrast, environments where people feel they need to mask their true selves often lead to lower morale, decreased engagement, and even higher turnover. Employees in these settings may become disengaged, feeling they don't truly belong. Authenticity, therefore, fosters trust and a shared sense of purpose within teams, as it allows individuals to connect at a genuine level.

“When people feel safe to show up as their true selves, they create stronger connections and build resilient teams.”

— Amy Edmonson, *“The Fearless Organization”*



Overcoming the Pressure to Conform

Despite the clear benefits of authenticity, many people feel pressured to conform at work, hiding parts of their identity to fit in or avoid judgment. This “conformity bias” is

common in work environments where there's an unspoken expectation to act or look a certain way to be taken seriously.

According to research by psychologist Bella DePaulo, people who frequently “code-switch” (adjusting their behavior, speech, or appearance to fit in) are more likely to experience stress, exhaustion, and decreased job satisfaction. Constantly conforming is both physically and mentally taxing. It can even affect overall performance, as individuals may hold back their full creative potential, fearing their unique ideas will be dismissed.

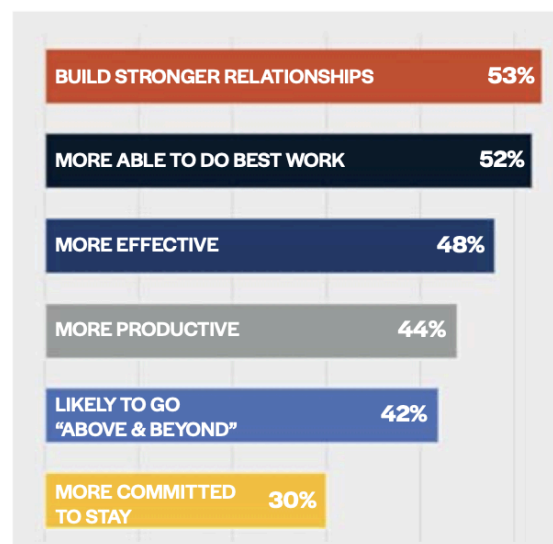
Learning to be yourself without code-switching, or masking, takes work. Sometimes, it just goes hand in hand with someone

whose brain processes information in a way that is not typical of most individuals.

Social media has significantly raised awareness of autism and ADD symptoms and also strategies to work with them.

About two years ago, my symptoms became such that my doctor ordered me off work. I began to see a counselor, and soon we began talking about ADD. I had always known I thought about things

What is the impact when you are authentic at work?



“Authenticity at work: why it matters for millennials and how it can improve your bottom line.” *Forbes*.

differently, and could easily conform my behavior to my audience, but I didn't know why. I spent over 30 years dealing with anxiety and depression. When she began talking to me about ADD, it was like being freed from a foggy cage. Now I knew that my brain just works differently, and I can learn strategies on how to live authentically with less stress.

Now, please don't go and diagnose yourself, but do consider talking with someone about what you are struggling with to get some tools to live your best life.

“Bringing your full self to work isn't just about personal expression—it's about unleashing your full potential.”

— Mike Robbins, *“Bring Your Whole Self to Work.”*

Practical Strategies for Cultivating Authenticity at Work

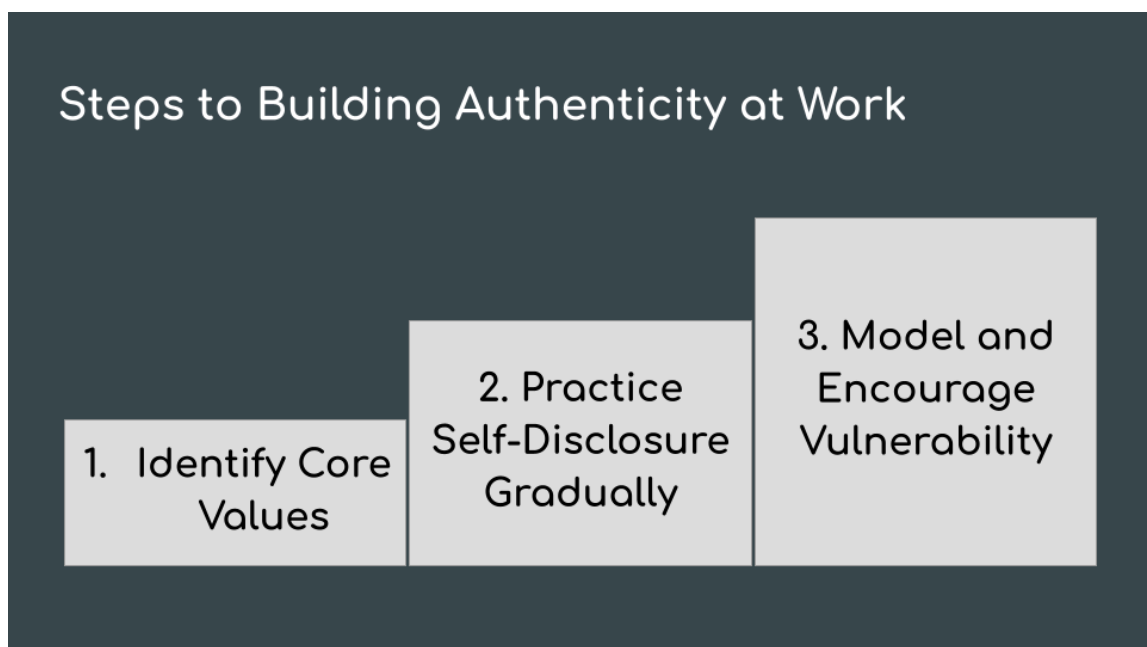
So, how can individuals start embracing their authentic selves in the workplace? Here are a few evidence-based strategies:

1. **Identify Core Values:** Taking the time to understand and articulate personal values can make it easier to align work actions with one's authentic self. Research by the VIA Institute on Character, for instance, suggests that individuals who regularly reflect on their core values and strengths are more likely to feel satisfied and fulfilled at work.
2. **Practice Self-Disclosure Gradually:** Self-disclosure—sharing small aspects of one's personal life—helps build trust and authentic connections. Studies on workplace dynamics suggest starting with simple, low-stakes disclosures, such

as mentioning hobbies or non-work interests. Gradually opening up in this way can help create an environment where authenticity feels safe and welcome.

3. **Model and Encourage Vulnerability:** If you're in a leadership position, embracing vulnerability and being open about your own struggles or challenges can set a powerful example for others. Brené Brown's research highlights vulnerability as a core aspect of authentic leadership, arguing that leaders who share their struggles foster environments of trust, compassion, and loyalty.

Perhaps the most impactful way to start is to develop your personal core values and use them to guide your interactions. Two of my personal core values are to have empathy and be kind. They are not related to work, but how I want to live my life. A beneficial side effect is that it sets a positive foundation for work relationships that then lead to opportunity. If people like to be around you and feel you understand them, they are more likely to see you for the valuable person you are.



The Authenticity Ripple Effect

Bringing our true selves to work creates a ripple effect. When we move into authenticity, we not only empower ourselves but also inspire those around us. Authenticity breeds connection, resilience, and an inclusive workplace culture where everyone has the freedom to contribute their best.

In a world where so many feel unheard and undervalued,
authenticity is a powerful act of courage.

Chapter 2: Building Impactful Connections Without Overextending

In every workplace, building connections and helping others is essential for creating a positive, collaborative environment. Many of us want to be known as supportive team members who are willing to lend a hand. But for some, the desire to help can lead to taking on too many responsibilities and spreading oneself too thin. When we overextend, our energy and effectiveness suffer, making it challenging to focus on the tasks and relationships that truly matter.

This chapter explores strategies for striking a balance between building meaningful connections and safeguarding personal well-being. We'll look at the evidence for why

focusing on autonomy, mastery, and purpose leads to greater impact, and discuss ways to contribute to your team without burning out.

“Helping others is admirable, but to be truly effective, we must find the balance between making connections and protecting our own well-being.”

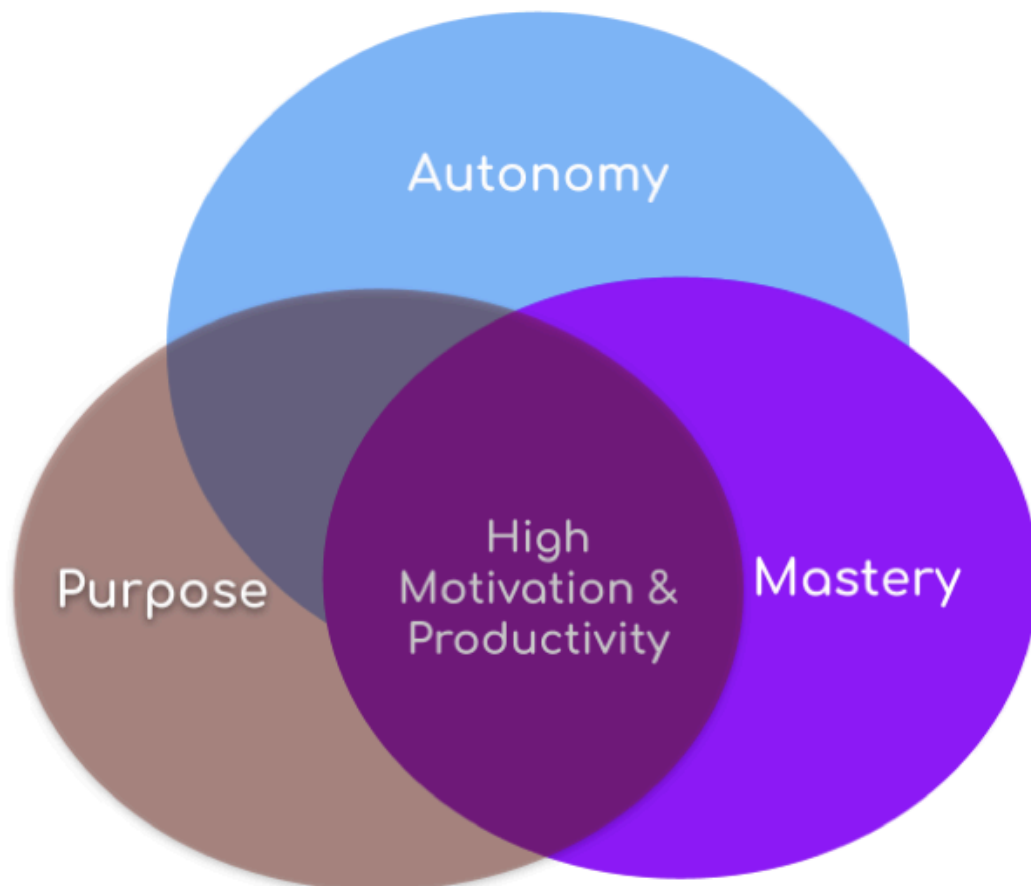
— Adam Grant, “Give and Take.”

The Importance of Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose

Psychologist and author Daniel Pink, in his book “Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us,” highlights three key factors that drive motivation and performance: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Pink’s research shows that individuals who have a degree of control (autonomy) over their tasks, opportunities to improve their skills (mastery), and a clear sense of meaning (purpose) are more engaged, productive, and satisfied with their work.

1. **Autonomy:** Autonomy, or the freedom to make choices about how and when to complete tasks, is crucial for maintaining a healthy work-life balance. People who feel they have control over their work are more likely to set boundaries, prioritize effectively, and focus on what really matters. Autonomy doesn’t mean working in isolation; rather, it’s about having the agency to decide which tasks to take on and which connections to nurture.

2. **Mastery:** Mastery is the drive to get better at things that matter to us. It encourages us to focus our energy on meaningful projects where we can see tangible growth. When we try to help with too many tasks or stretch ourselves across various responsibilities, we miss opportunities to develop our skills and build expertise. By focusing on a few key areas where we can truly excel, we become more valuable contributors to our teams.
3. **Purpose:** Purpose connects our work to something larger than ourselves. It's the reason behind our efforts and fuels a sense of fulfillment. Research shows that employees who understand how their contributions align with organizational goals are more resilient and less likely to feel overwhelmed by daily tasks. Purpose gives us a filter to identify which connections are essential and which tasks support our broader goals.



Balancing autonomy, mastery, and purpose helps us decide where to invest our time and energy. Rather than helping everyone with everything, we can focus on areas where our skills and interests align most closely with team goals. This approach maximizes our impact without depleting our resources.

I feel most productive and purposeful in my work when I'm focused on a main project and have the time to really dive in and become a master at it. Like when I've led and worked to roll out new software programs that would save employees hours of time. Or had my workload cleared so I could focus on leading the final steps on an office remodel. When I get into trouble is when I don't speak up about too many competing projects because none of them can be done well.

Focusing on High-Impact Contributions

In many workplaces, it's easy to feel like more is better—that the more people we help and the more tasks we take on, the more valuable we are. However, research suggests that this approach can backfire, leading to stress, burnout, and reduced effectiveness. Instead, focusing on high-impact contributions allows us to make a more meaningful difference without compromising our well-being.

The Pareto Principle

The Pareto Principle, also known as the 80/20 Rule, states that 80% of our results often come from just 20% of our efforts. Applied to workplace connections, this principle suggests that a small percentage of our contributions yield the most significant

outcomes. Identifying and prioritizing these high-impact activities can help us focus our energy on what truly matters.

A study from the University of California found that employees who concentrated on a few critical tasks were not only more productive but also reported higher satisfaction and engagement in their work. By channeling energy into essential contributions, these employees avoided the trap of constantly reacting to every demand, allowing them to make a lasting impact.

Instead of doing everything for everyone, focus on high-impact contributions that align with your strengths and make the most difference.

Most people want to feel accomplished at work, and many times we assume that being able to do the most work the quickest is what will get us to move higher up. But here's an open secret: doing a lot of busy work well does not make the impact you expect. Once I realized that, I looked for projects and opportunities for improvement I could spend more time on.

Look for what is not working, and make it your project to find a better way. When I took on an executive assistant role, I worked with my new colleagues to improve handbooks, reports, and processes so that time could be saved. It may not seem like much, but

looking for pain points and working collaboratively to fix things leads to more opportunities.

Building Boundaries Around Connection

Another essential aspect of impactful work is setting healthy boundaries around our relationships. Building connections is important, but we don't need to say "yes" to every request or always be available to help. Setting boundaries doesn't mean refusing to help others; it means being thoughtful about when and how we assist.

Strategies for Setting Boundaries

1. **Define Your Core Focus Areas:** Identify two or three areas where your contributions are most valuable. When new requests arise, consider whether they align with these focus areas. For example, if your strength is in strategic planning, prioritizing tasks related to this skill can help you stay within your zone of impact.
2. **Set Clear Communication Windows:** Designate specific times when you are available for questions, support, or collaboration. Research suggests that employees who establish "focus hours" are more productive and experience less stress.
3. **Learn to Say "No" Strategically:** Psychologist William Ury suggests framing "no" in a positive way by offering alternatives or clarifying priorities. For instance, you might say, "I'd love to help, but I'm focused on Project X right now. Would it help if I connected you with someone else on the team?"

Setting boundaries improves both individual and team productivity. Research from the Harvard Business Review found that teams with clear boundaries and role definitions experienced less conflict and higher morale, as members felt more respected and valued.

“Building boundaries isn’t about shutting people out; it’s about creating space for what truly matters.”

-Nedra Glover Tawwab, "Set Boundaries, Find Peace."

Setting boundaries doesn’t have to be complicated or intimidating. I sometimes simply update my calendar availability. I’ve even requested protected work time from my supervisor to focus on an important project. Try this at work: block time for deep work and shut your door, or put in your headphones and get to the important work!

Maintaining Well-being Through Intentional Connection

Building connections is meaningful and fulfilling, but overextending can lead to stress and fatigue. Studies show that people who engage in intentional, positive interactions with colleagues report higher job satisfaction and are less likely to experience burnout.

Intentional Connection Tips

1. **Prioritize Quality Over Quantity:** Aim for a few meaningful interactions rather than trying to connect with everyone. Relationships built on trust and genuine interest are more impactful than frequent but shallow connections.

2. **Engage in Active Listening:** Show colleagues you value their perspectives by practicing active listening. Research from the University of Michigan found that employees who felt genuinely listened to were more likely to feel engaged and motivated.
3. **Create Connection Rituals:** Set aside regular times for brief, informal conversations with close colleagues or mentors. These rituals can be as simple as a weekly coffee break, providing an opportunity to recharge and stay connected without overwhelming your schedule.

True connection comes from intentional engagement, not
constant availability.

Have you ever responded to someone's story with a story of your own? It's a common way for people who want to show they care, but it can have the opposite effect. I was this person, frequently jumping in to show I understood. Unknowingly, I had actually made them feel less heard.

Over the years, I've adjusted. My strategy to be a better listener now is to stop what I am doing, turn towards them, and fully engage with what they are saying. I've even had to bite my lip to have that physical reminder to be quiet.

Balancing connection with boundaries allows us to create meaningful impact without draining our energy. By focusing on autonomy, mastery, and purpose, prioritizing

high-impact contributions, and setting boundaries, we can bring our best selves to work and support others without sacrificing our well-being.

Chapter 3: The Hidden Cost of Burnout and How to Rebuild

Burnout is a widespread and often hidden challenge in the modern workplace. It's not just about feeling tired or overwhelmed; it's a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion that can have serious implications for both personal well-being and professional productivity.

This chapter explores the hidden costs of burnout, the signs to watch for, and actionable strategies to prevent and rebuild from it. With a focus on recognizing early warning signs, setting healthy boundaries, and creating sustainable work habits, we'll look at how individuals can prioritize their health without sacrificing their effectiveness at work.

It's often said that burnout is not a badge of honor. For me, it's a signal that it's time to set boundaries, prioritize, and rebuild.

Recognizing the Early Signs of Burnout

Burnout doesn't arrive all at once; it creeps in gradually, often starting with subtle signs. Pioneering burnout researcher Dr. Christina Maslach characterizes burnout as a syndrome marked by emotional tiredness, cynicism, and a diminished sense of personal

accomplishment. Recognizing these signs early on is crucial for intervention and prevention.

Early Signs of Burnout

1. **Emotional Exhaustion:** persistent fatigue that doesn't improve with rest, leading to a constant sense of depletion.
2. **Cynicism and Detachment:** A growing feeling of detachment from work, often accompanied by a cynical or negative outlook.
3. **Reduced Effectiveness:** feeling that your contributions no longer matter or struggling to find purpose and motivation in tasks.

According to Dr. Maslach's research, burnout often results from a mismatch between job demands and resources. When individuals are highly conscientious and take on multiple responsibilities, they may lack the resources to sustain their efforts over time. Addressing burnout requires a balance between the demands placed on workers and the support they receive. (Source: Maslach, C., "The Truth About Burnout").

Twice in my career, I've been told to take weeks off of work by my doctor. I had taken on too many projects and commitments and was dealing with pretty difficult events in life. My problem was that I pushed so hard that I didn't even recognize my health was getting worse.

The first time I was told to take care of my family first. The second time, I was told to take care of myself. No one is helped if we push ourselves to the breaking point. My

blood pressure was usually normal, but I had pushed it so far that I had to immediately take medication and leave work. A better way is to take care of yourself all the time.

The Physical and Mental Health Costs of Burnout

Burnout affects physical and emotional health as much as it affects employment.

Prolonged burnout can lead to various health risks, from heart disease to weakened immunity. Mentally, burnout can fuel worry, despair, and a general emotional tiredness that permeates personal relationships and general quality of life.

Physical Health Impacts

- **Increased Risk of Heart Disease:** Burnout can keep the body in a state of prolonged stress, elevating blood pressure and straining the cardiovascular system.
- **Weakened Immune System:** Chronic stress reduces immune function, making the body more susceptible to illnesses.
- **Sleep Disorders:** Burnout often interferes with restful sleep, leading to fatigue and making recovery more challenging.

Mental Health Impacts

- **Anxiety and Depression:** Burnout frequently co-occurs with anxiety and depression as people struggle to keep up with unmanageable workloads.
- **Emotional Numbness:** Over time, individuals may become emotionally numb, struggling to engage with work or find meaning in their roles.

A study published in *Occupational Health Psychology* found that people experiencing high levels of burnout reported significantly more health issues, both physical and psychological. Addressing burnout early can help mitigate these negative health impacts and promote long-term well-being. (Source: Schaufeli, W.B., & Enzmann, D., "The Burnout Companion to Study and Practice").

Burnout doesn't just impact our work. It takes a toll on our health, our relationships, and our overall quality of life.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

Physical

- Feeling tired and drained most of the time.
- Lowered immunity, frequent illnesses.
- Frequent headaches or muscle pain.
- Change in appetite or sleep habits.

Emotional

- Sense of failure and self-doubt.
- Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated.
- Detachment, feeling alone in the world.
- Loss of motivation. Increasingly cynical and negative outlook.
- Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment.

Behavioral

- Withdrawing from responsibilities.
- Isolating from others.
- Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done.
- Using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope.
- Taking frustrations out on others.
- Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early.

During my episodes of burnout, I had increased heart rate and blood pressure, anxiety, weight change, a feeling of helplessness, and wanting to just get away. This lasted for months in a row, and I should have taken action much sooner.

Setting Boundaries to Protect Against Burnout

One of the most powerful strategies for preventing burnout is setting clear boundaries. Boundaries provide space to balance professional responsibilities with personal life, allowing for necessary rest and recovery. Setting boundaries doesn't mean you're less dedicated to your work; it means prioritizing well-being so that you can perform at your best.

Practical Steps for Setting Boundaries

1. **Define Your Work Hours:** Specify times for work and for personal life, and communicate these hours clearly to your team. Studies show that employees with defined working hours experience less stress and greater job satisfaction.
2. **Say No When Necessary:** Taking on every task can quickly lead to overload. Learning to decline non-essential requests helps preserve your time and energy for high-priority work.
3. **Limit Notifications Outside Work:** Turning off work-related notifications outside of work hours prevents constant interruptions, allowing you to mentally disconnect and recharge.

Research published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that workers who set clear boundaries reported lower stress and greater satisfaction in both their work and personal lives. These boundaries provide a buffer that reduces the likelihood of burnout and increases resilience. (Source: Sonnentag, S., & Fritz, C., "Recovery and Work-Life Balance").

Setting boundaries is not about saying no to work—it's about saying yes to sustainable success and well-being.

It is in my nature to say yes when someone asks me to help. Whether it was coaching, joining a board, running for office, or a new project at work, I almost always said yes. After my second burnout, I began to limit my commitments. I resigned from a caucus leadership position. I began looking for contractors instead of doing all the work myself. I stopped working on weekends. I requested a prioritization of projects and tasks from my boss instead of trying to get everything done as quickly as possible.

Take a look at your day, week, or month. Where are some commitments that you could remove from your schedule? Be honest—do they really need you there? Or did you just feel like you had to say yes because you were asked?

Early Effects of Burnout

Physical Health Impacts

- **Increased Risk of Heart Disease:** Burnout can keep the body in a state of prolonged stress, elevating blood pressure and straining the cardiovascular system.
- **Weakened Immune System:** Chronic stress reduces immune function, making the body more susceptible to illnesses.
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Mental Health Impacts

- **Anxiety and Depression:** Burnout frequently co-occurs with anxiety and depression, as people struggle to keep up with unmanageable workloads.
- **Emotional Numbness:** Over time, individuals may become emotionally numb, struggling to engage with work or find meaning in their roles.

Cultivating Sustainable Work Habits

Creating sustainable work habits is essential for avoiding burnout in the long term. By incorporating small but effective practices into our daily routines, we can maintain energy and productivity without sacrificing personal well-being.

Sustainable Work Habits

1. **Prioritize and Delegate:** Focus on tasks that have the greatest impact, and delegate when possible. Research shows that individuals who delegate effectively experience less stress and greater productivity.
2. **Take Regular Breaks:** Studies show that little breaks during the workday help to keep concentration and lower tiredness. To help avoid burnout, the Pomodoro Technique—for instance—involves working in 25-minute intervals with five-minute rests.
3. **Practice Mindfulness:** Mindfulness exercises, such as deep breathing or meditation, have been shown to reduce stress and improve focus. Practicing mindfulness can help lower cortisol levels, the hormone associated with stress, making it a valuable tool for managing burnout.

Regular breaks and mindfulness practitioners reported lower stress levels and more job satisfaction, according to a study written up in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. Building these sustainable habits into daily routines helps prevent burnout before it begins. (Source: Kabat-Zinn, J., "Full Catastrophe Living").

Sustainable habits aren't just about getting through the day—they're about thriving in the long term.

Rebuilding After Burnout

Recovering from burnout is a journey that requires more than just “taking a break.” It involves re-evaluating priorities, redefining goals, and implementing strategies to prevent future burnout. For many, recovery includes building resilience and a stronger foundation for sustainable success.

Steps to Rebuild After Burnout

1. **Reflect on Root Causes:** Understanding what led to burnout is essential for avoiding it in the future. Was it a lack of boundaries, excessive workload, or lack of support?
2. **Seek Support:** Recovery is easier with a support network, whether through a mentor, counselor, or supportive colleagues.
3. **Re-establish Boundaries:** Reinforce boundaries and adjust them as needed. Clear boundaries help protect against slipping back into old habits.

Research from the *Work & Stress* journal shows that individuals who take time to reflect and adjust their work routines after burnout experience greater resilience and reduced stress in the long term. This recovery period allows individuals to build healthier habits and prevent recurrence. (Source: Hobfoll, S.E., "Conservation of Resources Theory").

Burnout recovery isn't just a reset—it's a chance to build healthier, more sustainable work habits.

My recovery from burnout took me about a year to feel like I had most things under control. I could not implement everything all at once, but as one action was taken, I gained confidence to take the next step.

First, I took a solo trip to see family in another state. My husband was very supportive, and this allowed me to decompress without the burdens of being at home. Then I located a counselor who specializes in Eye Movement Therapy (EMT) to address prior trauma. Finally, I resigned from a couple of volunteer programs and communicated my need to limit my involvement for a time on city counsel. When I went back to work, my supervisor prioritized what they actually needed done versus what their dreams were. I stopped working on the weekends at my salary job. Eventually I began to implement mindfulness, exercise, healthy eating, and finally a job change.

Your recovery will look different than mine, and I encourage you to find a professional counselor to help you through that process.

Burnout is a serious but preventable challenge in today's fast-paced workplaces. By recognizing the signs, setting strong boundaries, cultivating sustainable work habits, and taking time to rebuild, we can protect our well-being

Chapter 4: Creating Psychological Safety to Empower Team Success

Psychological safety is the belief that one can speak up, share ideas, and take risks without fear of punishment or embarrassment. For teams, it's essential—without it, people hold back their thoughts, disengage, or fail to collaborate effectively. Harvard professor Amy Edmondson, in "The Fearless Organization," explains that psychological safety is foundational for high-performing teams, enabling open communication, innovation, and resilience in the face of challenges. This chapter will explore how to foster psychological safety and the role it plays in team empowerment, shared success, and learning from setbacks.

Psychological safety isn't just about making people feel good—it's about unlocking their full potential in a trusting, open environment.

The Importance of Psychological Safety in Teams

Psychological safety is more than a "nice-to-have" quality in the workplace—it's a core driver of team success. When individuals feel safe to voice their ideas, questions, and concerns, they're more likely to engage fully in their work, contributing to the team's collective intelligence and creativity. Edmondson's research shows that teams with high psychological safety are more effective, innovative, and resilient, as members collaborate openly and supportively, without fear of judgment.

Benefits of Psychological Safety

- **Enhanced Innovation:** Team members are willing to suggest new ideas, leading to higher innovation.
- **Improved Engagement:** When people feel safe, they are more likely to participate actively, building a more cohesive team.
- **Faster Learning:** In psychologically safe environments, team members feel comfortable admitting mistakes and asking for help, which accelerates learning and growth.

In a study conducted by Google on its own teams, psychological safety was identified as the top factor in high-performing teams. Teams with this quality were able to work through challenges more effectively, take creative risks, and learn from each other, leading to higher productivity and job satisfaction. (Source: Edmondson, A.C., "The Fearless Organization").

Building Psychological Safety Through Open Communication

One of the first steps to building psychological safety is to establish a culture of open communication. This means creating spaces where everyone feels free to share their perspectives, ask questions, and express concerns. Leaders play a crucial role here by modeling openness, asking questions, and responding non-judgmentally to feedback or ideas.

Practical Communication Strategies

1. **Encourage Active Listening:** Active listening involves giving full attention to the speaker, validating their points, and responding thoughtfully. Research shows that active listening builds trust and respect, as team members feel that their voices are genuinely valued.
2. **Model Vulnerability:** When leaders share their own uncertainties or admit mistakes, they set a tone that normalizes vulnerability. Brené Brown's research emphasizes that vulnerability fosters trust and encourages others to take similar risks.
3. **Ask Open-ended Questions:** Open-ended questions invite more thoughtful responses, creating a space for team members to share insights and ideas freely.

Research published in the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* suggests that teams that practice active listening and open-ended questioning are more likely to build strong relationships and trust. Open communication serves as a foundation for both psychological safety and team success. (Source: Brown, B., "Dare to Lead").

Creating space for every voice to be heard is the first step
toward psychological safety.

Empathy as a Cornerstone of Psychological Safety

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, and it's crucial for building psychological safety. When team members feel empathy from their leaders

and peers, they're more likely to open up and collaborate. Empathy reduces misunderstandings, increases patience, and creates a sense of shared understanding.

Ways to Cultivate Empathy in Teams

1. **Practice Perspective-Taking:** Encourage team members to consider different perspectives in discussions or when disagreements arise.
2. **Show Appreciation and Recognition:** Acknowledge contributions and thank team members for their input. Recognition fosters a culture of respect and support.
3. **Encourage Peer Support:** Teams that engage in peer support build empathy by helping each other during challenging times, which strengthens trust.

A study in the *Harvard Business Review* found that empathy among team members was correlated with higher levels of engagement, resilience, and productivity. Team members who feel understood are more likely to contribute positively and less likely to experience conflict. (Source: Goleman, D., "Social Intelligence").

Empathy builds bridges that connect team members, making it easier to collaborate and innovate.

Empathy at work is just as important as effective communication. It is something I focus on when trying to improve my own interactions. In the past, I would continue typing if someone stopped by my desk. This changed when I learned how that was perceived by a friend. Now, I stop and look and engage with the person while they are talking.

What I noticed after I changed my strategy was more coworkers coming to me for advice. When this happens, it means you have developed trust, and co-workers and supervisors may see you as someone who can be trusted with more responsibility and can collaborate with anyone on the team.

Learning from Setbacks and Gaining Perspective

Setbacks are inevitable in any team environment, but psychologically safe teams view them as learning opportunities rather than failures. When team members feel safe to reflect on setbacks, they gain perspective, develop resilience, and align better with their goals. Carol Dweck's concept of a "growth mindset," from her book **Mindset: The New Psychology of Success**, emphasizes the importance of learning from mistakes to grow stronger and wiser.

Steps to Learn from Setbacks

1. **Encourage Reflection:** Set aside time to reflect on setbacks and discuss what could be done differently next time. This reinforces that mistakes are part of the learning process.
2. **Celebrate Lessons Learned:** Recognize and celebrate the lessons gained from setbacks, framing them as valuable insights that contribute to growth.
3. **Set Future Goals:** Based on the lessons learned, set new, realistic goals that align with both personal and team growth.

Research in “Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes” shows that teams that reflect on setbacks as opportunities to improve experience less frustration and greater motivation. This reflective process also enhances team cohesion and resilience. (Source: Dweck, C.S., "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success").

Setbacks aren't failures—they're stepping stones to resilience and growth.

In emergency management, a “hot wash” and after-action report are required activities after an event. The “hot wash” brings people together quickly once the emergency is over to debrief and share their observations. It is always set as a no-fault environment to encourage people to share. This debrief does not have to take very long, but it is essential to developing a beneficial path forward. The after-action report is where you plan how to fix the issues and maintain or increase the actions that were helpful.

Sample Debrief Template

	Description
What went well	
What needs work	
What I learned	
My future goals	

Fostering an Environment of Trust and Continuous Growth

Trust is at the heart of psychological safety. In an environment where team members trust each other, they feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work, sharing ideas, and supporting each other's growth. Continuous growth becomes possible as teams encourage honest feedback, constructive criticism, and support.

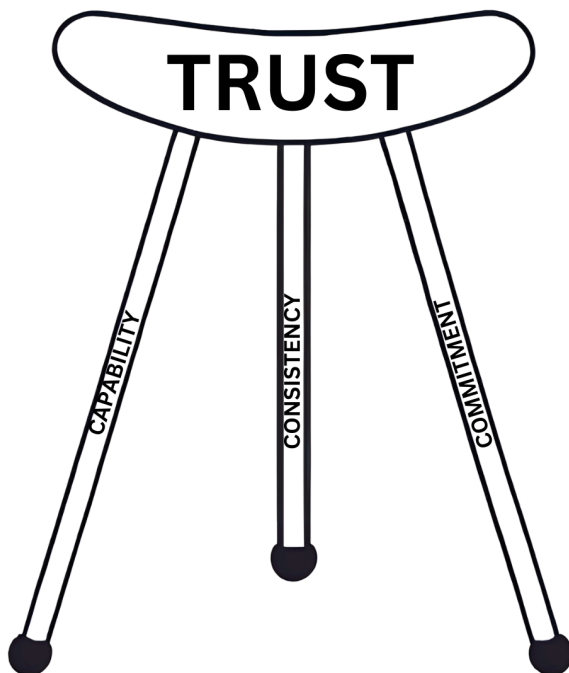
Strategies for Building Trust.

- **Set Clear Expectations:** Communicate clearly about team goals, roles, and responsibilities so everyone knows their part in the larger picture.
- **Encourage Constructive Feedback:** Normalize giving and receiving feedback, both positive and constructive, to promote ongoing improvement.
- **Promote Peer Learning:** Create opportunities for team members to learn from each other, whether through mentoring, skill-sharing sessions, or collaboration on projects.

Research shows that teams with high trust and psychological safety engage in more open discussions, take calculated risks, and experience fewer misunderstandings. Trust is a foundation for continuous learning, as it enables teams to share insights and address challenges together. (Source: Sinek, S., "Leaders Eat Last").

Trust is the foundation of any successful team, and psychological safety is the key to unlocking it.

In 2010, I had the privilege of hearing author Stephen Hacker speak during a leadership academy I was attending. That day he described trust as a



three-legged stool. If you don't have one leg, the entire stool topples over. Those three legs are commitment, capability, and consistency. In his book "The Trust Imperative" (*Hacker et al., 2002*), he explains what happens when one pillar is missing.

- A committed but inconsistent person seems erratic and unreliable.
- A capable but uncommitted person appears disengaged and opportunistic.
- Someone consistent but incapable struggles to meet expectations.

By balancing these three elements, individuals and organizations create a strong foundation of trust, fostering healthy relationships, improved teamwork, and greater efficiency.

Psychological safety is essential for building high-performing, resilient teams. By fostering open communication, practicing empathy, learning from setbacks, and creating an environment of trust, teams can empower every member to bring their best.

Psychological safety isn't just a value—it's a proven driver of team success, enabling individuals and teams to thrive and innovate together.

Chapter 5: Learning from Setbacks and Gaining Perspective

Setbacks are inevitable in any career or personal journey, but the way we respond to them can shape our growth and future success. Rather than seeing setbacks as failures, embracing them as opportunities to learn can provide valuable insights, helping us refine our goals and build resilience. Carol Dweck's research on the "growth mindset" underscores the importance of seeing challenges as chances to grow. In this chapter,

we'll explore how setbacks can act as stepping stones, guiding us toward more meaningful and sustainable goals, and discuss practical ways to reframe setbacks to gain perspective and recover stronger.

Setbacks are not the end of the journey; they're the beginning of a new path that brings us closer to success.

Embracing a Growth Mindset

Carol Dweck, in her book "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success," contrasts a "fixed mindset"—the belief that abilities are static—with a "growth mindset," which views abilities as adaptable and improvable. Individuals with a growth mindset see setbacks as learning opportunities rather than failures, understanding that skills can be developed through dedication and hard work. This perspective fosters resilience and encourages continuous improvement.

Characteristics of a Growth Mindset.

1. **Seeing Challenges as Opportunities:** Those with a growth mindset are more likely to tackle difficult tasks, viewing them as chances to grow rather than as **obstacles.**
2. **Embracing Learning:** Individuals with this mindset understand that setbacks are part of the learning process and are necessary for personal and professional development.

3. **Valuing Effort Over Perfection:** Instead of fearing mistakes, people with a growth mindset value the learning and progress that comes from effort.

Studies show that people with a growth mindset respond better to challenges and setbacks than those with a fixed mindset. According to Dweck's research, individuals who believe in their ability to grow are more likely to overcome obstacles and achieve long-term success. (Source: Dweck, C.S., "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success").

Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
You may feel you must prove you are smart.	You are open to new ideas and are eager to learn.
You may feel like you can't make any mistakes.	You confront challenges to make progress.
If you fail, you may feel less confident.	You see failure as an opportunity to grow and improve.
You feel effort is not required for those who are smart	You view effort as the path to make you smarter.
You feel you must be the best.	You define success by working hard to become the best you can be.

Reflecting on Setbacks to Gain Clarity

Reflection is a powerful tool for learning from setbacks. When we take the time to analyze what happened, why it happened, and what can be learned, we turn difficult experiences into opportunities for growth. Reflection also allows us to gain clarity on what we truly value, helping us to realign our goals with our most meaningful objectives.

Practical Reflection Techniques.

1. **Journaling:** Writing about setbacks helps process emotions, gain insight, and identify patterns. Studies show that journaling can lead to emotional clarity and personal growth.
2. **Seeking Feedback:** Engaging with trusted colleagues or mentors for feedback provides external perspectives that can deepen your understanding of what led to a setback.
3. **Self-Questioning:** Asking questions like “What could I have done differently?” and “What did I learn from this experience?” encourages constructive reflection.



Research published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that employees who engage in regular reflection reported higher resilience and job satisfaction. Reflection helps individuals make sense of their experiences, transforming setbacks into valuable lessons. (Source: Dewey, J., "How We Think").

Reflection turns painful setbacks into powerful lessons.

Find the method of reflection that works best for you. Every time I try journaling, I stop after one or two tries. I have piles of notebooks and journals I have with just a couple pages written on them. Talking it out with someone else feels a little invasive for my personality. What I do a lot of though is thinking and talking through things in my head. I don't formalize any kind of self-questioning; that is not needed to get the full benefit of reflection.

Redefining Goals and Values After a Setback

Setbacks often provide an opportunity to reevaluate and refine our goals. Instead of pushing forward with the same approach, we can step back to consider whether our goals align with our core values and long-term aspirations. This recalibration not only makes goals more meaningful but also makes them more sustainable.

Steps to Redefine Goals.

1. **Identify Core Values:** Reflect on what matters most. Aligning goals with personal values increases motivation and satisfaction.
2. **Set Realistic, Incremental Goals:** Break down larger goals into manageable steps, which helps maintain momentum and prevent future burnout.
3. **Focus on the “Why”:** Revisit the purpose behind each goal. A strong “why” provides motivation and resilience, especially during challenging times.

According to a study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, individuals who reassess and align their goals with their values after a setback report greater resilience and satisfaction. This process, known as “values clarification,” helps people find purpose in their work and maintain motivation over the long term. (Source: Steger, M.F., "Meaning in Life and Well-Being").

When our goals align with our values, setbacks become
stepping stones to deeper fulfillment.

Cultivating Resilience Through Setbacks

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity and continue moving forward. Setbacks can actually help us build resilience, as each challenge we overcome strengthens our capacity to face future obstacles. Building resilience involves embracing flexibility, finding meaning in adversity, and maintaining a positive outlook.

Strategies for Building Resilience.

- **Practice Self-Compassion:** Treating yourself with kindness rather than harsh criticism allows you to recover more effectively from setbacks. Self-compassion reduces stress and increases motivation to improve.
- **Seek Support:** Resilient individuals don't hesitate to seek help. Studies show that strong social connections improve resilience by providing emotional support and fresh perspectives.

- **Reframe Negative Thoughts:** Cognitive reframing—seeing a setback as a challenge to grow—has been shown to improve resilience and mental well-being.

Research in behavioral medicine has found that resilience is associated with better mental and physical health, as well as higher job performance. Individuals who actively cultivate resilience experience less stress and are more adaptable in the face of setbacks. (Source: Southwick, S.M., & Charney, D.S., "Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges")

Resilience is not a trait—it's a skill we develop by overcoming life's challenges.

Charting a New Path After a Setback

A setback often serves as a turning point, prompting us to consider a new path that may be more aligned with our current priorities, strengths, and interests. Embracing a “path-forward” mindset allows us to transform setbacks into opportunities for growth and new directions.

Steps to Chart a New Path.

1. **Evaluate Past Goals:** Consider which goals remain relevant and which may need to change.
2. **Identify Strengths and Interests:** Reflect on what energizes you and where you excel; use these strengths as guideposts for setting new goals.

3. **Create an Action Plan:** Break down your new path into achievable steps, focusing on incremental progress.

A study in the Journal of Vocational Behavior found that individuals who set new, meaningful goals after setbacks reported higher levels of satisfaction and achievement. Redefining one's path helps turn adversity into a constructive experience, promoting well-being and personal fulfillment. (Source: Lent, R.W., & Brown, S.D., "Social Cognitive Model of Career Self-Management").

Setbacks aren't roadblocks; they're invitations to explore new directions.

Being fired from a job feels horrible. In the moment, it may seem like your dreams are lost. But what if those were only temporary dreams and more greatness is waiting for you? When I was fired at 28 years old, I thought my future as a leader was over. What happened instead was a career in social services where I was able to learn more about leadership than I ever could have in that other job.

Setbacks may feel discouraging in the moment, but they're powerful tools for personal and professional growth. By embracing a growth mindset, reflecting on experiences, redefining goals, building resilience, and charting new paths, we transform setbacks into opportunities. Each setback is an invitation to learn, adapt, and become stronger, guiding us toward a future shaped by resilience, insight, and meaningful achievement.

Part B: Strategies for Impact: Tools to Enhance Personal and Team Efficiency

Chapter 6: Efficiency by Design: Tools to Streamline

Personal Workflows

In today's fast-paced world, managing multiple responsibilities can be overwhelming. With so many tasks and competing priorities, it's easy to feel constantly busy but not always productive. This chapter focuses on evidence-based tools and strategies that streamline personal workflows, helping you manage time more effectively, reduce mental fatigue, and focus on high-impact tasks. By incorporating these practical techniques, you can achieve greater productivity and satisfaction in your workday.

Efficiency is not about doing more things; it's about doing the right things with purpose and focus."

Time Blocking & Task Batching

Time blocking and task batching are techniques that improve focus and minimize the mental fatigue caused by frequent task switching. Time blocking involves setting aside dedicated blocks of time for specific types of work, while task batching groups similar tasks together. Together, these methods create structure in the workday, helping you manage multiple responsibilities without feeling scattered.

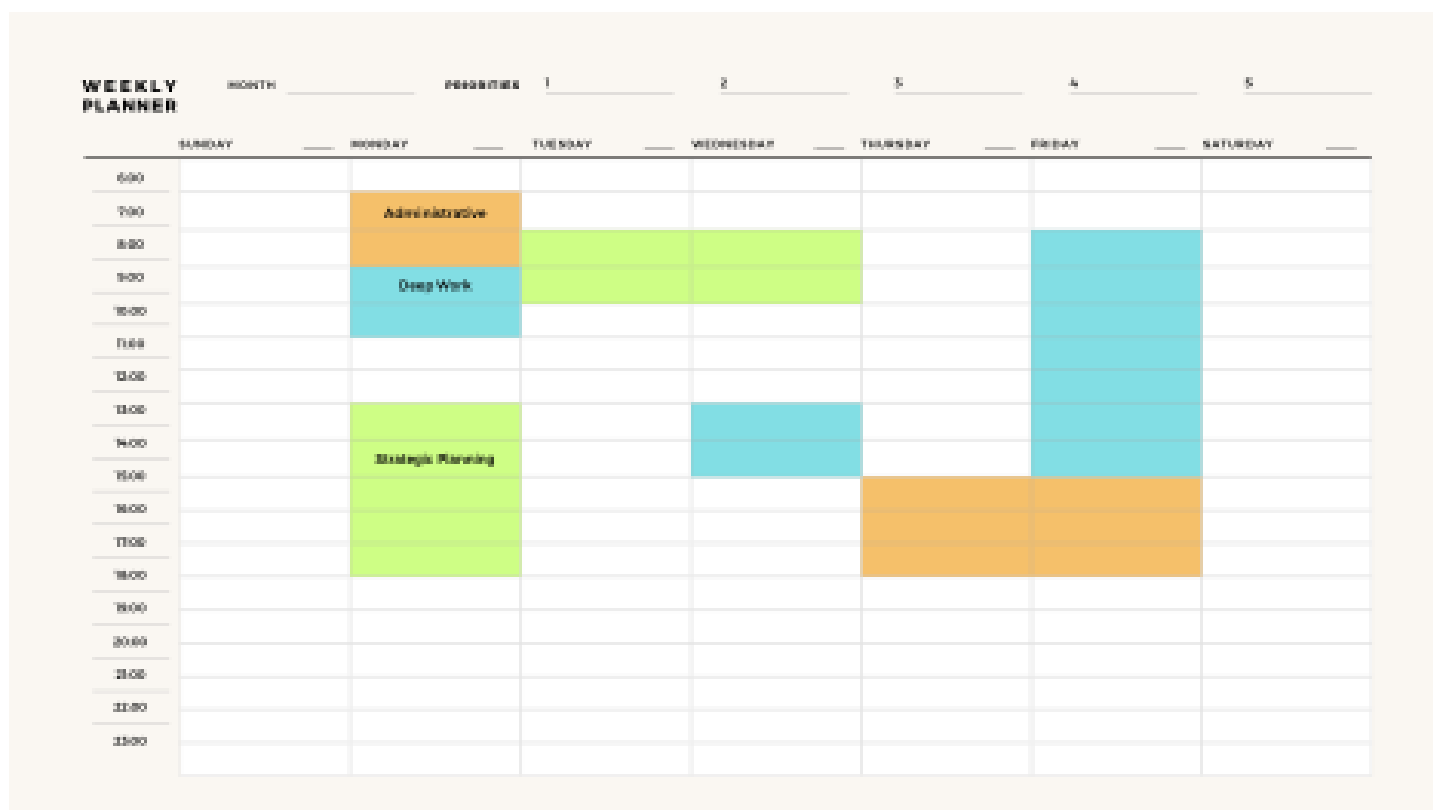
Time Blocking.

Time blocking requires you to divide your day into defined segments, with each block dedicated to a specific type of work. For example, you might reserve a block of time in the morning for “deep work”—intensive tasks that require focus—followed by an afternoon block for administrative work. Cal Newport, author of **Deep Work**, emphasizes that uninterrupted focus during these blocks enables individuals to achieve high-quality work in less time.

Task Batching.

Task batching is a complementary strategy in which similar tasks are grouped together to minimize the mental “switching cost” that occurs when shifting from one task to another. For instance, you could batch tasks like responding to emails or preparing reports, allowing you to handle them all at once rather than spreading them throughout the day.

Studies have shown that time blocking and task batching reduce mental fatigue and improve focus. According to a study in “Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes,” task switching can take up to 40% of an individual’s productive time. By grouping similar tasks and dedicating blocks of time to them, you minimize interruptions, conserve mental energy, and enhance productivity. (Source: Newport, C., “Deep Work”).



A sample weekly calendar illustrating time-blocked segments for deep work, administrative tasks, and strategic planning. Each block is color-coded to emphasize focused time for specific categories of tasks.

The most frequent tactic I use is task batching. For emails, this means I spend a set amount of time reviewing emails with a goal of Inbox 0 unread. For administrative work, this means all financials or all meeting agenda development. This sometimes leads into a “flow” and helps me get multiple tasks taken care of so later it is easier to focus on more difficult activities.

Eisenhower Matrix for Prioritization

Simple but powerful, the Eisenhower Matrix helps people concentrate on high-impact activities by grouping tasks according to urgency and importance. Named for President Dwight D. Eisenhower, this matrix lets users separate chores that call for immediate

attention from those that are important but not urgent from those that may be assigned or deleted.

How the Eisenhower Matrix Works.

The Eisenhower Matrix partitions work into four quadrants:

1. **Urgent & Important:** These are urgent and vital chores requiring quick attention.
2. **Important but Not Urgent:** Tasks that are essential but don't require immediate attention; they're ideal for scheduled focus.
3. **Urgent but Not Important:** These tasks can often be delegated.
4. **Not Urgent & Not Important:** Tasks in this category can often be eliminated to free up time for higher-priority activities.

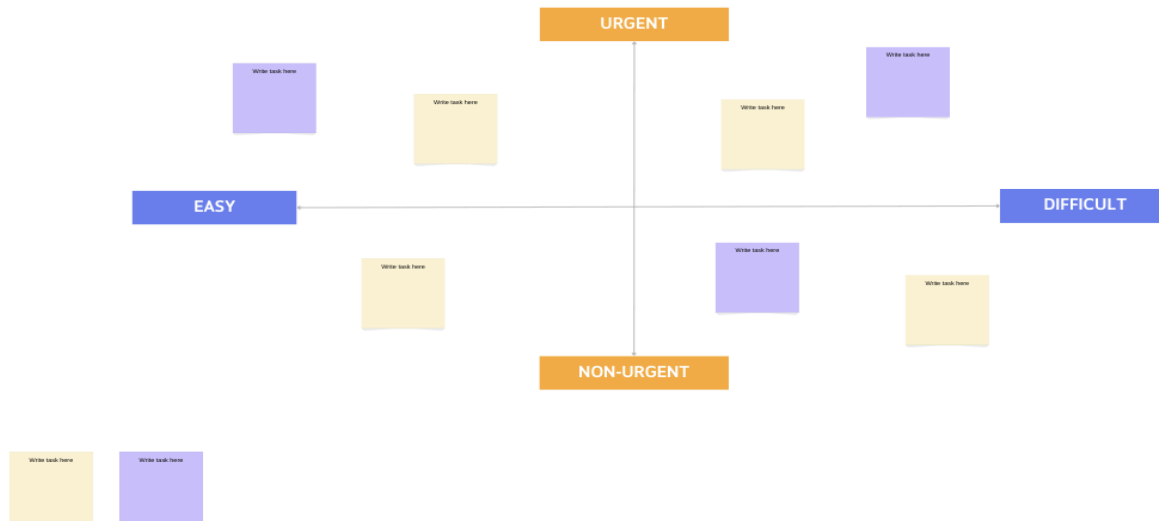
Using this framework, individuals can systematically tackle high-impact tasks while minimizing distractions from less important ones.

Research supports that structured prioritization frameworks like the Eisenhower Matrix reduce stress and increase productivity by clarifying task importance. According to "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen Covey, individuals who prioritize based on importance rather than urgency are more productive and experience less burnout. (Source: Covey, S., "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People").

Focus on what's important, not just what's urgent.

2x2 Prioritization Matrix (Eisenhower Matrix)

01 Let's align on which tasks we should focus on first.



Another way I've used this matrix concept is when planning which projects to prioritize for our city. Instead of using urgency and importance, we can use difficulty and importance. Easy and important should be done right away. Difficult and Not Important can be removed or saved for after all other projects are complete.

The Two-Minute Rule for Quick Decisions

Popularized by productivity guru David Allen, the two-minute rule is a rapid, small-job approach.

The rule says: do it right away if a job takes less than two minutes to finish. Taking quick care of these little chores helps them from accumulating and becoming an unbearable backlog.

How to Apply the Two-Minute Rule

As little chores develop during the day—such as responding to a brief email or approving a document—ask yourself if each one may be finished in two minutes or less. If the answer is yes, tackle it immediately. For larger tasks, note them down for later review. The two-minute rule keeps minor responsibilities from lingering and helps maintain a sense of accomplishment.

Studies on task management have shown that immediate action on small tasks can reduce mental clutter and improve overall efficiency. According to Allen's book **Getting Things Done**, handling simple tasks right away prevents them from disrupting focus on more complex projects later. (Source: Allen, D., "Getting Things Done").

For tasks that take less than two minutes, don't defer—do.

I use the 2-minute rule every day while reviewing my emails. In my process, I respond right away if I know the answer or can find it very quickly in under 2 minutes. Otherwise, I flag the email and go back later in the day to assign it a deadline on my to-do list. My personal goal every day is to get to 0 unread messages before I leave. All emails will have some sort of action taken on them, even if it means I added it to my daily task list for later in the week.

Pomodoro Technique for Energy Management

Working in short, concentrated bursts with regular breaks is the Pomodoro Technique, a time-management method. Designed by Francesco Cirillo, the Pomodoro Technique divides work into 25-minute intervals known as "Pomodoros," then a five-minute break. After four intervals, a longer break (15–30 minutes) is taken.

How the Pomodoro Technique Boosts Energy and Focus.

Working in short intervals with breaks helps maintain high energy levels and prevents mental fatigue. The technique is particularly effective for people who struggle with attention difficulties, as it provides a clear structure for alternating between focused work and rest.

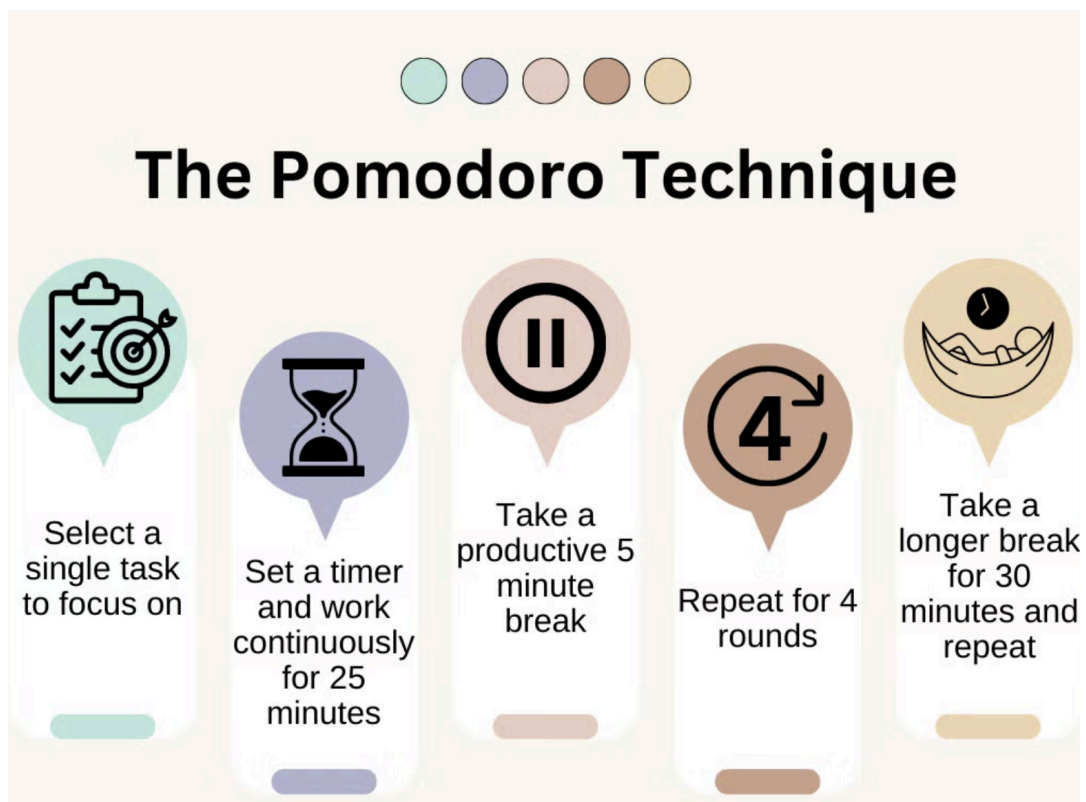


Image Source: University of Pittsburg, study-lab

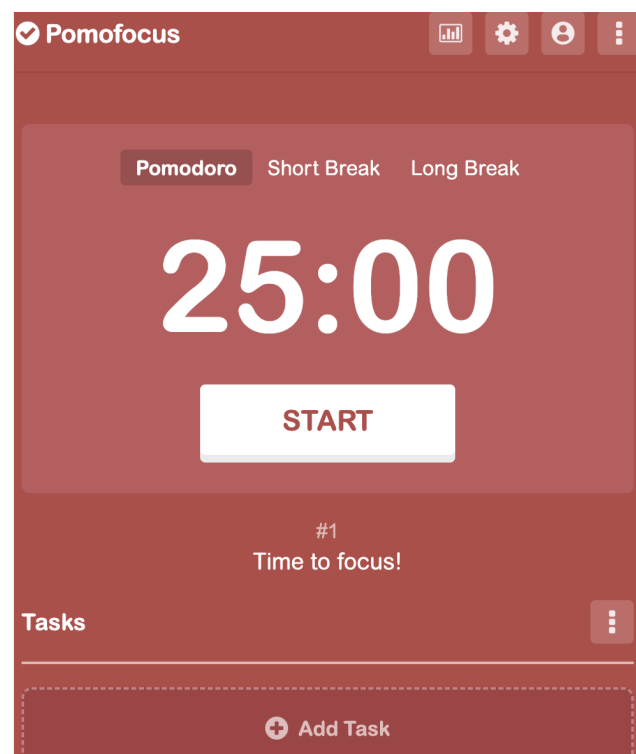
Steps to Implement the Pomodoro Technique

1. **Set a Timer:** Start with 25 minutes of focused work.
2. **Take a 5-Minute Break:** After each interval, take a short break to rest.
3. **Repeat Four Times:** After four intervals, take a longer break to recharge.

Research suggests that the Pomodoro Technique can improve focus and productivity, especially in individuals prone to distractions. A study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that time-management methods like the Pomodoro Techniques help maintain consistent productivity levels, enhance focus, and reduce stress. (Source: Cirillo, F., "The Pomodoro Technique").

Work in bursts, rest in between—your energy will thank you.

As parents, we used this technique with our children to put away toys and clothes. I've even used it for cleaning the house. A modified version of this is common for people who are managing life with ADD. If I'm overwhelmed with a mess or workload, I tell myself to "just do one thing." Sometimes, that's all I do, but most of the time it leads to me completing the full task.



Bringing It All Together: Building Your Efficiency Toolkit

By incorporating these evidence-based strategies, you can create a personalized toolkit for managing time and maximizing productivity. Each method—whether it's time blocking, prioritizing with the Eisenhower Matrix, using the Two-Minute Rule, or applying the Pomodoro Technique—has its own strengths, and together they can be tailored to meet the unique demands of your workload.

Using these strategies, you can streamline their workflows, eliminate unnecessary time drains, and focus on what truly matters. The result is increased productivity, reduced stress, and a greater sense of satisfaction in their daily work.

Efficiency isn't about doing everything; it's about doing the right things, one focused step at a time.

Chapter 7: Collective Clarity: Decision-Making Tools to Boost Team Efficiency

Efficient decision-making is the backbone of any high-performing team. When decisions are made with clarity and structure, teams reduce ambiguity, streamline collaboration, and ensure every member's voice is heard.

This chapter introduces evidence-based decision-making tools that enhance team efficiency by clarifying roles, identifying root causes of issues, fostering consensus, and

improving risk management. By adopting these techniques, teams can make faster, more effective decisions, ultimately contributing to a cohesive and productive environment.

Clear decisions lead to clear outcomes, and structured processes empower every team member to contribute confidently.

The RACI Matrix: Defining Roles to Boost Accountability

The RACI Matrix is a straightforward tool that assigns specific roles to team members for each task or decision. The acronym stands for responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed. By clarifying each role, the RACI Matrix reduces overlap, minimizes misunderstandings, and ensures accountability throughout a project.

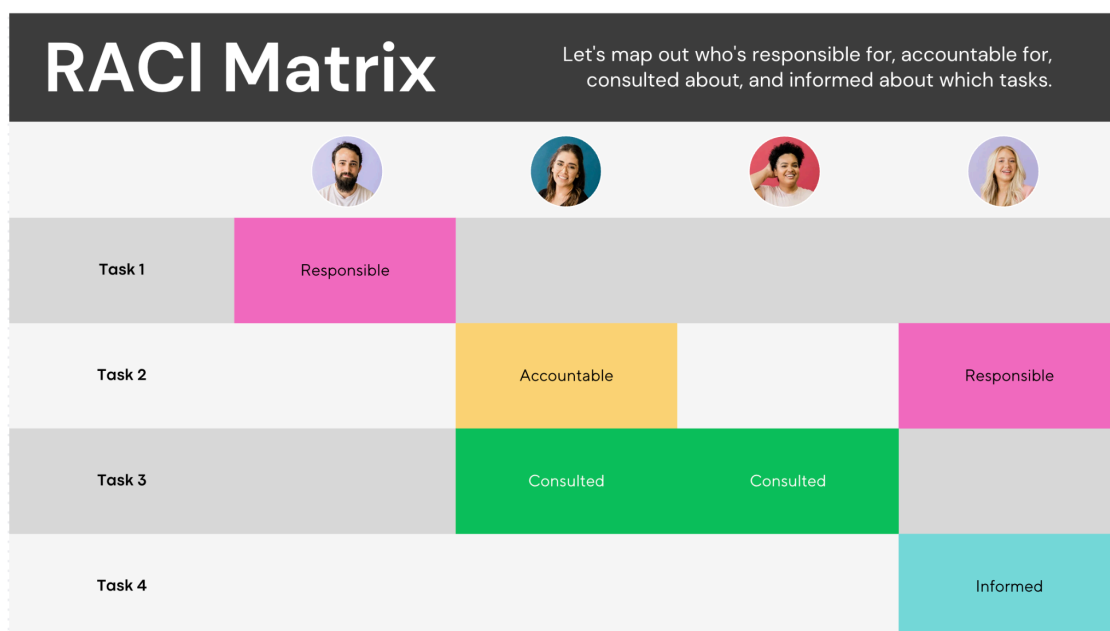
RACI Matrix Roles

- **Responsible:** The person(s) directly responsible for completing the task.
- **Accountable:** The person ultimately accountable for the task's completion and outcome.
- **Consulted:** Those whose input is sought before a decision or action is finalized.
- **Informed:** People who are kept updated on the task's progress or completion but do not contribute directly.

How to Use the RACI Matrix

1. **Define Tasks and Deliverables:** List all tasks and deliverables for a project.
2. **Assign Roles:** For each task, identify who will be responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed.
3. **Communicate Roles:** Share the RACI chart with the team to ensure everyone understands their roles and expectations.

Research indicates that clearly defined roles improve team coordination and reduce project delays. A study in **Project Management Journal** found that teams using the RACI Matrix experienced fewer conflicts and more consistent accountability, leading to smoother workflows. (Source: Clegg, S., & Courpasson, D., "Power and Organizations").



Source: Canva Creators

The 5 Whys Technique: Uncovering Root Causes

Derived from Lean methodology, the 5 Whys Technique is a great technique for asking "Why?" several times, usually up to five, therefore helping to find the main cause of an issue. Teams that delve deeply into the problem can avoid reoccurring issues, make better judgments, and provide answers that deal with the root cause instead of only surface symptoms.

How to Use the 5 Whys Technique

1. **State the Problem Clearly:** Begin with a clear, specific statement of the issue.
2. **Ask "Why?" Five Times:** For each answer given, ask "Why?" again, each time digging deeper.
3. **Identify the Root Cause:** Continue until you reach the underlying cause of the problem.
4. **Develop a Solution:** Based on the root cause, brainstorm solutions that prevent the issue from recurring.

Problem: A project deadline was missed.

1. Why? Because the team didn't receive feedback in time.
2. Why? Because feedback wasn't prioritized by key stakeholders.
3. Why? Because there wasn't a clear timeline for providing feedback.
4. Why? Because roles and responsibilities weren't clearly communicated.
5. Why? Because the project plan was incomplete at the start.

Root Cause: A lack of clear planning and communication at the project's outset.

Studies show that root cause analysis techniques like the 5 Whys prevent recurring issues and streamline decision-making. According to research published in the International Journal of Lean Six Sigma, the 5 Whys Technique enables teams to identify critical factors that influence project outcomes, saving time and resources in the long term. (Source: Ohno, T., *Toyota Production System*).

Solving problems at the root saves time, energy, and resources
in the future.

One year, the department I worked in implemented a LEAN model to reduce the backlog of appointments for benefits applications. One method used to develop a plan forward was 5-whys. Our office was nearly 6 weeks out on appointments for food benefits during the holiday season. One problem identified was too many people not showing up for their appointments.

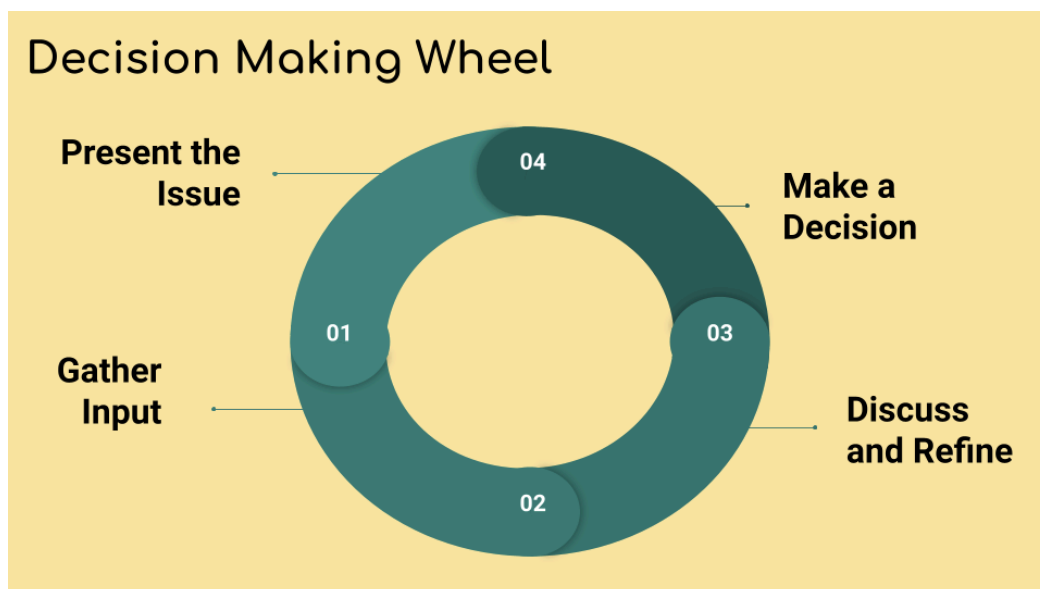
Through the process of questioning why they missed the appointments, we ended up deciding to offer appointments for all programs on each day. Along with other interventions, we went from weeks out to same-day or next-day appointments for every applicant.

Consensus Decision-Making Models: Balancing Inclusivity and Efficiency

Consensus decision-making is a structured approach to team decisions, ensuring that each member has a voice and fostering buy-in and commitment. This model is particularly useful for complex decisions where it's essential to include diverse perspectives. The process balances inclusivity with efficiency by using structured feedback rounds to gather input without causing delays.

Steps in Consensus Decision-Making

1. **Present the Issue:** Clearly define the decision to be made.
2. **Gather Input:** Conduct rounds of feedback where each team member has an opportunity to contribute.
3. **Discuss and Refine:** After gathering feedback, refine the options based on common themes.
4. **Make a Decision:** Use majority agreement or compromise to finalize the decision.



Benefits of Consensus Decision-Making

- **Reduces Groupthink:** Gathering diverse perspectives prevents groupthink and leads to more well-rounded decisions.
- **Increases Buy-In:** When team members feel included, they are more likely to support the decision.
- **Promotes Innovation:** By encouraging open discussion, consensus models foster creativity and innovation.

Research in **The Wisdom of Crowds** by James Surowiecki suggests that group decision-making, when structured, yields better results than decisions made by individuals alone. Consensus models increase inclusivity and innovation, as diverse input leads to more comprehensive solutions. (Source: Surowiecki, J., "The Wisdom of Crowds").

Inclusion in decision-making builds commitment and drives better outcomes.

One method I've used for consensus decision-making is the "Fist to Five" technique. Once discussion is done, the facilitator takes a vote using hand signals. Fist = 0 and absolutely do not agree with the decision, and Five fingers = fully support the decision. A three means you can live with the decision.

Once the vote takes place, everyone who voted 0–3 explains why they don't agree and what could move them to agreement. The proposal is then revised, and voting continues until everyone is at three or higher.

Pre-Mortem Analysis: Mitigating Risks Before They Arise

Pre-mortem analysis is a proactive decision-making tool that encourages teams to envision potential failures before a project begins, then brainstorm ways to mitigate these risks. This technique, developed by psychologist Gary Klein, provides a structured way for teams to anticipate challenges and develop contingency plans, improving project outcomes and reducing risks.

How to Conduct a Pre-Mortem Analysis.

1. **Define Project Objectives:** Clearly outline the goals and scope of the project.
2. **Imagine Failure:** Ask the team to imagine that the project has failed and brainstorm reasons for the failure.
3. **Identify Preventative Measures:** Based on potential failure points, discuss strategies to prevent these issues.
4. **Create a Risk Management Plan:** Develop a plan that addresses identified risks, with steps to mitigate or avoid them.

Studies on risk management show that pre-mortem analysis improves project success rates by encouraging teams to think critically about potential pitfalls. Research published in *Harvard Business Review* suggests that pre-mortem analysis enhances

team resilience, as team members feel more prepared and confident in navigating unexpected challenges. (Source: Klein, G., "Performing a Project Premortem").

Preparing for failure empowers teams to navigate success with confidence.

Bringing It All Together: Building a Cohesive Decision-Making Process

Each tool introduced in this chapter—the RACI Matrix, the 5 Whys Technique, Consensus Decision-Making, and Pre-Mortem Analysis—offers unique advantages. Together, they help teams clarify roles, uncover root issues, foster inclusive decision-making, and anticipate risks.

By implementing these structured approaches, teams can expect faster decision-making, reduced conflicts, and increased productivity.

Teams equipped with these decision-making tools gain a clear pathway to shared goals, greater confidence in collective choices, and a more cohesive, empowered team environment.

Structured decision-making doesn't just streamline processes; it strengthens team unity and empowers every voice to be heard.

Structured decision-making has saved hours of time on teams I've worked with. There are fewer meetings and people feel like they are heard and are able to do the work they want to do.

At Trachsel Consulting, I work with teams to design structured workshops to help teams get to solutions quickly and with full input of the team. Without structure, meetings tend to take longer and achieve fewer results. We prepare the structure and process so your expertise is heard, acted on, and a clear path forward is planned by the end of the workshop. Work the process, and the process will work!

Decision Making Toolkit



1. RACI Matrix
2. 5-Whys
3. Consensus
4. Pre-Mortem Analysis

Part C: Navigating and Thriving with Invisible Conditions

For many professionals, living with chronic conditions—whether physical, mental, or both—is an invisible challenge layered over daily work responsibilities. Conditions such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), autoimmune diseases, chronic pain, or mental health challenges add complexity to an already demanding world.

For people facing these realities, thriving at work requires a unique blend of adaptability, resilience, and intentional self-care. This chapter offers evidence-based strategies to help manage energy, maintain focus, and prioritize well-being while implementing the methods and tools outlined in this book.

Living with a chronic condition doesn't limit your potential—it challenges you to discover the strengths and strategies that enable you to thrive.

Embracing Flexibility and Self-Compassion

The first step toward thriving with a chronic condition is embracing flexibility and self-compassion. Research on resilience shows that self-compassion—treating oneself with kindness rather than criticism—plays a crucial role in managing chronic conditions. When setbacks arise due to symptoms or fatigue, practicing self-compassion prevents frustration from turning into self-blame.

Self-Compassion Techniques

- **Mindful Acknowledgment:** Recognize your experience without judgment. When faced with a tough day, take a moment to say, “This is challenging, and it’s okay to feel this way.”
- **Affirm Your Efforts:** Remind yourself that managing both work and a chronic condition is a significant accomplishment. Recognize and celebrate small victories.
- **Prioritize Self-Care:** Self-compassion includes giving yourself permission to rest, adjust plans, or reach out for help. By honoring your limits, you conserve energy for your priorities.

Research by Dr. Kristin Neff, a pioneer in self-compassion, found that individuals who practice self-compassion experience less anxiety, greater emotional resilience, and improved well-being. For those with chronic conditions, this approach reduces stress and enhances the ability to navigate work demands sustainably. (Source: Neff, K., "Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself").

During the period of time leading to my own burnout, I was confronted with a situation where my reaction was one of extreme anger and rage while at home. No one was around, but this response seriously concerned me as it was not a normal response for me. My counselor reminded me that my integrity was attacked, so my limbic system response to this threat was that of fighting. She encouraged me to be kind to myself and

recognize that our reaction to threats is innate, and it's what we do about it that is most important.

Leveraging Strengths While

Managing ADD/ADHD

Individuals with ADD often excel in creative and problem-solving tasks, where their minds can explore freely. However, structure and time management can pose challenges, particularly in work environments that require prolonged focus and organization. By leaning into strengths and using adaptive strategies, it's possible to manage ADD in a way that supports productivity without overwhelming mental energy.

Employee Start Dates

Employee Name	Division	Start Date	Orientation
Jane	Primary Care	12/2/2024	12/18/24
John	Primary Care	12/2/2024	12/18/24
Mary	Behavioral Health	12/16/2024	12/18/24
Ryan	Public Health	12/30/2024	1/15/2025
Charlie	Developmental Disabilities	12/16/2024	12/18/24
Melanie	Behavioral Health	12/1/2024	1/15/2025
Julia	Administration	12/16/2024	12/18/24
Trevor	Behavioral Health	12/16/2024	12/18/24
Elizabeth	Primary Care	12/30/2024	1/15/2025
Eric	Administration	12/2/2024	12/18/24
Stephanie	Behavioral Health	12/2/2024	12/18/24
Claire	Primary Care	12/2/2024	12/18/24
Jessica	Behavioral Health	12/16/2024	12/18/24
Samantha	Behavioral Health	12/15/2024	12/18/24
Alica	Public Health	12/15/2024	12/18/24

An example of how I organized employee start dates by Division. I still remember the colors!

Strategies for Focusing with ADD

1. **Create a Flexible Structure:** Instead of rigid schedules, use adaptable time blocks that allow for task variety. For instance, use short, focused sessions (like the Pomodoro Technique) to tackle tasks, interspersed with brief breaks.
2. **Break Tasks into Micro-Steps:** Breaking projects into smaller, actionable steps can improve focus and prevent overwhelm. Each micro-step builds momentum, making larger tasks feel more manageable.

3. **Use Visual Cues and Reminders:** Visual reminders, such as sticky notes or color-coded lists, serve as gentle prompts without overloading mental resources.

Dr. Russell Barkley's research on ADHD management emphasizes the importance of external aids, such as reminders and visual cues, in supporting individuals with ADD/ADHD. These tools reduce cognitive load, improve focus, and enable sustained attention on critical tasks. (Source: Barkley, R.A., "Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A Handbook for Diagnosis and Treatment").

In my work, I use lots of color coding. It helps me to quickly glance at calendars, files, or lists to get an overview without having to read into the detail. As mentioned earlier, I aim for an inbox of 0 new messages by the end of the day. This lets my brain rest, and I know that I've seen my messages and have planned what to do with them.

Energy Management for Physical Chronic Illnesses

For those managing chronic physical illnesses, energy is a precious resource. Symptoms such as fatigue, pain, and fluctuations in physical capacity mean that traditional time-management techniques may not always work. Instead, energy management—balancing work tasks with rest and self-care—is essential.

Energy Management Techniques

1. **The Spoon Theory:** Created by Christine Miserandino, the Spoon Theory is a metaphor for energy management. Each “spoon” represents a unit of energy, which is limited for those with chronic conditions. Start each day by identifying

available “spoons” and allocating them wisely, conserving energy for high-priority tasks.

2. **Prioritize High-Energy Tasks Wisely:** Reserve your most productive hours for high-impact work. By structuring your day around energy rather than time, you maximize productivity without depleting reserves.
3. **Schedule Recovery Time:** Build rest breaks into your day, especially after high-energy tasks. Recovery time is critical for managing chronic symptoms and avoiding burnout.

Research supports energy management strategies like pacing and rest intervals for people with chronic conditions. Managing energy rather than time allows for a sustainable workflow that accommodates fluctuations in capacity. (Source: Stewart, D.E., & Dantzer, R., "Quality of Life Research on Chronic Illnesses").

It took me years to learn that my invisible chronic illness was taking a lot of my energy, and I had to find a way to balance work and rest. A strategy I have used several times is spoon theory. On days where I’m feeling pretty exhausted, I tell myself I can do three things. It’s challenging to limit myself, but in my case, my body will crash if I do not take time to rest. If I don’t take the time to rest, I will end up with days of extreme fatigue where all I can do is sleep. Getting three things completed over the course of 5 days is a lot better than 10 things done one day and 4 days of no energy to do anything. It’s a marathon, not a sprint.

Adapting the Tools in This Book for Your Needs

Each tool and strategy in this book can be adapted to fit the unique demands of managing chronic conditions. Flexibility is key. Techniques like the Eisenhower Matrix, time blocking, and pre-mortem analysis can be modified for individuals with fluctuating energy levels or attention challenges.

Adaptation Tips

- **Eisenhower Matrix:** Use the matrix with an additional layer—consider not only urgency and importance but also your energy level. This adaptation ensures that high-priority tasks are matched to times when you're best able to complete them.
- **Time Blocking with Built-In Rest:** Instead of rigidly adhering to time blocks, structure your day with built-in recovery periods. Shorten blocks or alternate between high-focus and low-focus tasks to prevent fatigue.
- **Pre-Mortem Analysis for Personal Projects:** Use pre-mortem analysis to anticipate potential challenges related to your condition. For instance, if a project might require high energy, develop a plan to adjust deadlines or break the work into smaller steps to prevent overexertion.

Research on adaptive work strategies shows that individuals with chronic conditions benefit from flexible, personalized approaches. A study in **Disability and Rehabilitation** found that adaptive work environments and customized tools reduce burnout risk and improve job satisfaction for individuals managing chronic conditions. (Source: Varekamp, I., & Van Dijk, F.J., "Workplace Adaptations for Employees with Chronic Illnesses").

Efficiency isn't about doing everything; it's about doing what matters, in ways that honor your health and energy.

Finding Support and Building a Resilient Mindset

Living with an invisible condition in the workplace can sometimes feel isolating. Support systems, whether they're colleagues, mentors, or health professionals, play a critical role in maintaining well-being and resilience. A resilient mindset, bolstered by support, enables you to approach work with confidence, even during tough periods.

Support and Resilience Tips

- **Communicate Your Needs:** When comfortable, share your situation with trusted colleagues or supervisors to foster understanding and secure any necessary accommodations.
- **Develop a Support Network:** Surround yourself with people who understand and support your needs, whether through professional networks, chronic illness groups, or online communities.
- **Cultivate Resilience:** Embrace the idea of “bouncing back,” viewing difficult days as part of a larger, manageable picture. Practices like mindfulness, gratitude, and self-compassion contribute to a resilient outlook.

A study in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* found that individuals with chronic conditions who accessed workplace support networks reported higher levels of job satisfaction and reduced stress. Support systems foster resilience and adaptability,

enabling employees to thrive despite challenges. (Source: Bakker, A.B., & Demerouti, E., "The Job Demands-Resources Model").

Support is strength. Building a network of understanding
enables resilience and empowers you to succeed.

Over time, my support network has expanded to include my spouse, my children, my supervisor, my coworkers, and even my dogs! People with chronic disease can feel like they are a burden, but when I spoke with my friends and family about what was going on, they assured me they wanted to help. Don't be afraid to ask for help just because you think someone will view you as a burden. Give them the opportunity to help or understand.

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