

DEAR BOSS:

When it comes to overload and balance,
here's what we'd like you to do and why it matters:

Tell us why we're doing what we're doing. When we can't see why something matters, it's tough to get excited about investing. It can feel like we're just going through the motions. Help us connect the dots — task to purpose — and watch our commitment grow.

Don't make decisions in a fact-free environment. We know that as a high-level leader, you make high-level decisions and implementation falls to others. Not true! Our challenges are shared. If we can't deliver, neither can you. Ask us what it takes to make something happen. Listen to what we say. Adjust expectations accordingly.

Rethink priorities. If you're adding new goals, saying "do your best", "work smarter", or "do what we can" is not helpful. We need practical suggestions for including the new into existing work. We need tactical help sidelining what can wait. We take direction from more than one person. If we try to meet everyone's impossibly colliding timelines, we will spin over the edge.

Hold slackers accountable. It's tempting to keep delegating to your "go to" people — the ones who will deliver. It's far too easy to let poor performers coast. Star performers burn out and are resentful when others don't pull their loads. Challenge poor performers. Mentor them to build their skills. Follow through with consequences if there is no change.

Watch the pace you set. Moving fast and working long hours may work for you, but it's not for everyone. Challenge us to stretch. But watch that we don't snap. This is a variable. We have lives and interests outside of work. Discover what we care about. Respect differences and accommodate needs. Support fosters loyalty. Loyalty builds relationships. Relationships bring results.

Be crystal clear about direction & priorities. We can't be everything to everyone. A fuzzy focus fosters distraction. It is almost impossible to set priorities, and leaves us wondering if we are on the right track.

Help reshape the work. Projects start with guesses and estimates, and the scope shifts as the work unfolds. We'll feed you real information, but don't slam us for delivering news you don't want to hear. Help us redefine and rework timelines.

Start the conversation about load. Ask us how a new assignment affects other responsibilities, and the help we need. Welcome questions about conflicts. When we express concern, listen, explore and respond. Those of us who raise questions are not whining. We are helping you get real about what is possible. Help others see this practice as the mark of an effective leader and committed team player.

Budget training time. Every new process, system or software puts a dent in productivity. And doesn't mean the new person is up to speed. Training new recruits pulls us away from our work. Some of us work in high turnover function at full speed. Account for training and retraining time. The impact is significant.

Walk your talk. You reassure us that it's fine to do our best — that every goal, and when we believe you, we are raked over the coals on time. You say balance and time off are important. Yet you work evenings and weekends, sending email at two o'clock in the morning. You applaud and promote folks who succeed at the expense of their families. We're confused. We need consistency in word and action.

Stop zigging and zagging. We see that leadership is exciting and new ideas are seductive. However, if you change directions too often, we can't keep up. Stay the course long enough for us to make significant progress before lurching in a new direction.

Stay current. Some leaders are totally out of touch with frontline realities. Distinguish yourself. Work the frontline. Spend an hour walking in our shoes — or at least alongside us. Be visible, approachable and available. Don't just listen to concerns, nod and return to the office. Follow-up and feedback will earn our trust.

Ditch what doesn't matter. When we're overloaded, we've got no time or patience for redundant, "going through the motions" bureaucratic requests. Make sure that processes, reports and meetings are necessary. Don't ask us to research something that doesn't have a "snowball's chance in hell" of being implemented when there are many pressing tasks already on the go.

Legitimize down time. We need time to catch our breath, tidy up, and deal with those lesser priorities that eventually become urgent. Consciously carve out gaps between projects to allow this. When overload becomes a chronic problem, and we see no light at the end of the tunnel, performance and commitment suffer. We need hope. You can provide it.

Share the glory. A little thanks goes a very long way. When we go the extra distance, and knock ourselves out to deliver as promised, it would be nice if you noticed. Maybe you do, but you're silent. We need to hear that our extra efforts are appreciated — not just in an abstract "good job" kind of way — but specifically and personally. It makes a difference for next time. And you know there will be a next time.

We know your responsibilities weigh heavy. We care about the success of this organization. Hey, our paychecks depend on it! We need to jointly get a handle on work overload to deliver strong results and build a more satisfying life and work experience for all of us. We are all in this together!

PS — Someday we may find ourselves in your shoes. So it would be great to figure out how to make this work. Make it your legacy!

DEAR EMPLOYEE:

When it comes to overload and balance, here's what we'd like you to do and why it matters:

Speak up. We can't read your mind. If you're experiencing health issues, elder care or childcare problems, tell us. If something has changed in your personal life that impacts work, fill us in. It's impossible to help when we're in the dark about the concern.

Take advantage of available options. Access to flex-time, EAP and family days are there for a reason. Test them out to see if they help. Use them to address conflicts and problems that you're experiencing. That's why we offer them.

Take responsibility for what's within your control. It's possible you might be creating overload in the way you think and the choices you make. Are you responding to every change as bad news? Are you labouring away in pursuit of perfect where good enough might do? Are you volunteering for assignments that are likely to send you over the edge?

Control your workload. Stay on top of the responsibilities and tasks that are on your plate. Sort out priorities at the start of the month, and every week. Monitor daily, and red flag conflicts that arise. Now you'll be ready to raise questions and provide real information when overload tasks are headed your way.

Cultivate a solid work ethic. Be accountable and follow through with your very best effort. Solid consistent performers are much more credible and more likely to get a fair hearing when it comes to discussing issues of load.

Be a partner. When we set goals and targets we're using the best information available. If this is out-of-date, or there are steps we have missed or issues overlooked, we need your help with the details. Don't suffer in silence, or complain to others not in a position to influence change.

Alert us well ahead of deadlines. It's not that we're totally inflexible — we're focused on the horizon and the longview. We're not always tuned in to the current day-by-day status. Last minute surprises cause problems. Keep us up to speed as projects and situations unfold.

Accommodation is a two-way street. Although we're eager to support you in finding balance, we need you our industry and our work. Asking tells us that you don't understand our business needs and goals. By keeping those pressures in mind, it shows us you are every bit as committed to our joint success as we are committed to you.

Be open to new possibilities. Be flexible and willing to learn. We know it takes extra effort to learn new processes, master new systems, and change how you do business. It's necessary. We'll do our best to support you and we'll try to make sure that there aren't so many that you're overwhelmed in the process.

Nix the gossiping, whining and complaining. If you have concerns, speak directly to the person or people involved. Make your case to someone who can do something about it. If you're not sure what's going on, don't jump to conclusions. Seek information. In its' absence, don't make up your own. We'll do our best to keep you informed.

Watch out for each other. You are far more involved with your colleagues than we are. We may not notice when someone is struggling or stressed out. If you notice, talk to them. Let us know if we can help. Let's work together to support those who need it.

Help us recognize others. We don't work closely with everyone to see when someone has done something that's worthy of appreciation or in need of encouragement. Extend appreciation yourself or bring it to our attention to ensure people get acknowledged and are celebrated for their contributions.

Take a vacation and make time for breaks. We know that you'll be far more productive over the long haul if you invest in renewal. Yes, the workload is heavy. No, there may not be someone who can handle it all in your absence. We'd prefer you stay healthy than have to fill the gap because you're not!

Try to understand our choices. We may not be the world's best role models when it comes to balance and renewal. For many leaders, our work is our play. Things that might wear you down may energize us. It's not always the hours that are the best measure of balance. Believe us when we say we don't expect you to make the same choices we do. If you have concerns about our approach to balance and self-care, let's talk.

Take pride and speak well of our organization. No place is perfect. If there are things that we can do to improve, tell us. We'll do our best to fix them. Meanwhile, there is no positive outcome for any of us in destroying our relationships and trashing our reputation.

We are human, too. It's rather nice when you buy us a cup of coffee or share a bit of praise. It feels good to hear that you like our ideas or plans. But please, only do it if it is genuine. Kissing our butt will get you nowhere — and we do know the difference.

We know our expectations weigh heavy. We care about your well-being and the success of this organization. We truly could not do it without you! We need to jointly get a handle on overload to generate strong corporate results and build a more satisfying life and work experience for all of us. We are all in this together!

PS – We don't have this all figured out yet. And we sure could use some help. Maybe together we can get things under control. 