



# The Conscious Leader

GILBURG LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE, INC.

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## Exposing Overwhelm in the Workplace

Morgan is a fairly new manager and is eager to prove himself to his demanding boss, whose big motto is: “We don’t have any complainers around here.” He has 5 deadlines due by the end of the week, which isn’t much different than last week, and he knows he won’t meet them all. He has a permanent pit in his stomach, isn’t sleeping well at night, and finds himself snapping at his colleagues. Four months ago, his staff was cut by 2 people and he knows those remaining are already maxed out, so he sucks it up and takes on the projects himself. Despite all his attempts to be the good soldier, the harder and longer he works, the more distracted and disheveled he becomes. Sadly, he recalls an old Amish saying, “the harder I work, the behinder I get.”

### Events

Pegasus Conference - November 5-7 in Seattle, WA – For more information go to: <http://www.pegasus.com> Pegasus promotes “Systems Thinking” as expounded by author Peter Senge. We believe this perspective is critical for organizational health and well being, and have found these conferences stimulating and inspiring for private and public sector leaders alike.

We’ll be presenting a generations workshop for the second year now.

The Conscious Leader Newsletter is produced by Gilburg Leadership Institute for the benefit of clients, colleagues and friends. Our intention is to offer relevant information, resources and reflections to support your leadership. Visit our website at <http://www.gilburgleadership.com>, or call us at 413-534-9634.

## What’s really happening in the workplace?

Is Morgan weak and incompetent and therefore unable to meet the 24/7 demands of today’s workplace? Or, could it be that the real problem lies in today’s workplace culture? Have we inadvertently created a Frankenstein monster that we are unable to handle?

We believe there is an increasing number of competent workers who are feeling overloaded, stressed out and overwhelmed. And, what’s worse, they don’t feel they can talk about the problem with anyone else—especially their bosses—for fear of being branded a complainer.

Here are some trends we see in the workplace:

- A majority of situations, projects, assignments, etc. take on crisis or emergency status, thus, people only have time to react; very little time is devoted to the luxury of explorative thinking, and/or prioritization and assessment of long-term impacts
- This short term focus dominates all aspects of the business, including financial planning, organizational strategy, and succession planning



- Multi-tasking and long hours are necessary to get through the relentless work load, so employees increasingly feel they are simply skimming over the surface of their multiple projects, rarely giving anything full attention—treading water to keep from going under
- Relationships are frayed, trust is low, and there is an increase in interpersonal conflict

For many, underlying much of this is a pervasive sense of dread – specifically FEAR of things like: competition, falling behind, being exposed for falling behind, losing a customer, missing a deadline, going over budget, employee grievances, having one’s ideas dismissed or laughed at, having a project rejected, missing an important email, being seen as weak and/or incompetent, becoming obsolete, being outsourced, losing one’s retirement or health benefits, and sacrificing quality time with one’s family.

All this fear has a detrimental impact on our capacity to examine our current situation with a rational, discerning eye and formulate successful strategies

for addressing the kinds of complex, systemic problems that face many of our organizations today. As the fear drives many workers to shoulder more and work harder, less time is available for rest, renewal, and overall health. In short, very few of today's employees are bringing their "A Game" to work. In fact many are depleted, drained and exhausted, which severely undermines their work effectiveness and efficiency.

### Typical approaches to organizational overwhelm

1. Rely on technology: Many workplaces continue to put their faith in technology to solve the big problems, with the belief that technology can save us time, effort and money. Upgrading hardware and software, increasing instantaneous communication by getting everyone a Blackberry, and requiring 24-hour electronic accessibility are examples of this. And while technology is an important part of the future, it alone cannot improve communication, prioritize issues or keep us focused on the long-term. In fact, for some this technology creates yet another time-sink resulting from indiscriminate emailing and virtual miscommunications.

2. Simply address the symptoms: Many organizations invest resources to fix only the symptoms: time management trainings, "team-building" afternoons, hiring consultants to squeeze out inefficiencies, and, of course, the time-honored fix of reorganizing. These fixes may be well intended, but often serve to deepen the feelings of fear and inadequacy that seems so pervasive because

the systemic flaws themselves remain unaddressed, and therefore continue to infect the culture.

3. Deny the problem exists: Perhaps the most common approach in so many workplaces is to ignore the problem or view the problem as "the way it is." This means people must tough it out and those employees who are less able to do so are seen as failures. Often this leads to internal, unstated contests around who gets the most cell phone calls at all hours of the day and night, who gets the most emails, who works the latest and comes in the earliest, who gives the best appearance of toughing it out. These corporate "badges of honor" add questionable value to the organization as a whole.

### Leaders are spending too much time on Quadrant I behaviors

We have become slaves to what Steven Covey calls Quadrant I (Q I) behaviors (see below): that which is Urgent and Important. Hence the focus is on crises, emergencies, immediate deadlines and short-term solutions. There is no thought to the future; it

becomes all about the present, and from this perspective, everything seems important.

The crisis-driven manager spends plenty of time fixing mistakes borne of Q I focus by: covering up bad judgment, recovering from poorly developed plans, back-filling when people get sick, dealing with employee turnover, repairing damaged relationships, and creating "work arounds" for challenging employees rather than dealing with poor performance or unacceptable behavior. Ironically, these are the things that put us in crisis mode in the first place. We end up facing backward, constantly dealing with what went wrong—devoting little time to planning and strategizing for what we want to have happen.

Our focus on present day crises with little time spent assessing how these crises will affect our future means we are abdicating our power to take charge of our workplace—we are leaving the future to chance.

### Leaders must engage in more Quadrant II behaviors

In our view, effective executive leaders create a compelling future by providing sound direction, clear priorities and a framework of policies that will enable people to work together to get there. We have also promoted the idea that mid-level leadership is about creating an island of sanity in the midst of a sea of craziness. This requires leaders to take a stand for sanity in the domains they control.

Back to Covey's point about time: effective leaders make time for doing the work of Quadrant II (Q II), which covers things that are Important but Not Urgent. Q II includes strategic planning, recreation, targeted retreats, rejuvenation, contemplation about the future, relationship building, risk management and prevention, and exploring new opportunities. However, because these things are

### Covey Time Management Matrix

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	<b>Q I</b> Crises, emergencies Pressing Problems Deadline-driven projects	<b>Q II</b> Prevention Relationship building Recognizing new opportunities Planning Recreation
Not Important	<b>Q III</b> Interruptions Some emails & calls Some meetings Proximate, pressing matters Popular activities	<b>Q IV</b> Trivia, busy work Some email & calls Time wasters Pleasant activities

Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, p. 151.

NOT URGENT in today's world they too frequently get ignored.

Many of our clients have expressed feeling disempowered from addressing such deep systemic issues. For some leaders, moving from Q I to Q II may feel risky, but that risk can be managed if we start with small changes and look for allies. It begins with an internal decision to use what power we have to make more time for Q II activities for ourselves and our immediate colleagues. Often, people initiate small steps towards Q II focus and their efforts snowball—they discover they have more energy, and thus they take more time for these kinds of activities. Over time such sustained efforts result in a more trusting, focused and efficient workplace.

## Examples of Quadrant II steps taken by our clients:

Since emails have become such a huge time-sink, George decided to delete all emails for which he was listed as “CC”, which turned out to be well over half the total. He decided he didn't need to know everything that was going on, and if someone needed his action, he would eventually be informed directly. Further, he let others know of his new policy, only to be greeted, mostly, with cheers and a decision by many to follow his lead. The resulting email load people needed to “handle” was reduced by over 40%, leaving more time for priority work.

Sally decided to negotiate deadlines with headquarters staff. Frequently she would receive 4 to 5 different demands from different staffers for the same project. She negotiated directly with all concerned to determine the true deadline and then made good on her end. Consequently, Sally gained their trust and met her own time management needs. And her actions compelled the headquarters staff to take more time to coordinate their communications with field staff, thus reducing redundancy and confusion.

The up front time coordinating ultimately lowered the number of clarification communications they had to reactively deliver.

Frank decided to break the code of silence and talk with his organizational peers about the sense of overwhelm he was experiencing. He was surprised to discover the camaraderie and shared experience he had with his peers. Emboldened by their discovery they dedicated a weekly one-hour teleconference to plan and strategize how they could manage the challenges and demands of their position. As a united group they presented alternative, measured proposals to their bosses around the timing and communication of new initiatives.

Jane accepted that there would always be “something else” that needed her attention. Instead of arriving early and staying late every day of the week, she committed to leaving on time three days a week and going to a local pool to swim. She quickly realized that taking time to recharge meant she was more focused and effective at work. She intentionally communicated her “normal” departure plan to her colleagues. To her surprise, Jane was greeted with support and gentle reminders to get out of the office to go swim.

## Shifting focus to Quadrant II behaviors takes courage: Is it worth it?

All the clients in the examples above had the courage to speak up, name the challenges of their current reality, and propose changes in some way. Courage is always required to challenge or even question the status quo. But the question is whether it is worth the risk? So, ask yourself, “what's at risk for me to act to change my situation”, and then ask yourself, “what's at risk for me to maintain and not change?” The answers to the first question may reveal a lot of

“what ifs” based on conjecture and hypothesis; while the latter will likely reveal your current reality—the risks and consequences you are already experiencing on a day-to-day basis. There may be a possible reward to testing your assumptions, making small changes, enlisting allies, and taking a mode of control of your work environment.

We believe the pervasive over focus on Q I activity and subsequent under focus on Q II efforts is making our workplaces feel like rudderless ships at sea fated to respond to the next storm to ensure survival. Consequently workplace culture will value and reward those who can “weather the storm”, keep the ship afloat, and do what it takes to get through another day. But a deeper, burning question must be answered in order for people and organizations to not only survive, but thrive: “Where do we want to go and how do we want to get there?” At GLI, our work is helping leaders and organizations answer this question while simultaneously exposing the current reality so a clear trajectory can be charted. The long-term viability of our institutions depends upon it.

## Feedback

Contact Us: If you have found ways to make your workplace saner, we'd love to hear from you and share your success stories in our next newsletter... if you are the captain of a “rudderless ship”, perhaps we can help: contact us at [info@gilburgleadership.com](mailto:info@gilburgleadership.com)

### Resource links from HBR:

For more thinking on this topic, review these related articles in the Harvard Business Review:

[\*The Making of a Corporate Athlete\*](#)

[\*Manage Your Energy\*](#)

[\*Are You Working Too Hard?\*](#)