



CAREERS • WORK SPACE

## How managers can make time for their own work

BY JENNIFER MIZGATA

October 28, 2021 4:30 AM PDT

**Q:** I'm so busy at work that I don't have time to do my job. I'm a manager, and I'm so bogged down in the tasks of taking care of my team that I don't have time to get to the strategy and vision work that is a part of my job. I can't get a handle on my schedule—anytime I carve out some time to get ahead, someone will add something to my calendar. I keep skipping lunch, and I haven't found time to work out in weeks. How do I make time for the deeper work I need to do when I can't get a moment to myself?

—Candice

Dear Candice,

Managing well takes a lot of time and energy, but it does not have to take all of your time and energy. Sometimes you have to be available to other people, like when someone is in crisis or a boss needs you for something on deadline. That's an entirely different thing than perpetually booking yourself in meetings back to back, or worse, being in a place where you are RSVPing to multiple meetings happening at the same time, or trying to multitask on two different tasks at once. All of this isn't a sign that you're important and needed (although those things may be true), it's a sign that you are overburdened and need to take action to fix things.

How you are currently operating is unsustainable. You're so focused on one part of your job that you're not able to take care of other important work. As you overextend yourself with your team, you're falling behind on other responsibilities and don't have time for yourself. By prioritizing other people's work before your own, you've lost control of your own schedule because you're always responding to other people's needs.

While many of us are great at multitasking and firing on all cylinders, we're simply not meant to be working in fifth gear indefinitely. You're in a situation that I'm all too familiar with, as I've both been there myself and worked with dozens of managers who have been in this position. When I'm coaching clients, even when the session is supposed to dig into more complex challenges, this is often the first thing that we work on.

It's time to find ways to be proactive about taking control of your schedule and to stop operating reactively, where other people take precedence over your needs. You need to reset your relationship to your calendar and your approach to how you work and then communicate the changes to your availability with your team and hold yourself, and other people, to the boundaries that you're setting.

It is especially hard to find time to work interrupted when other people have the ability to add things to your schedule without asking. I've worked places where this was the norm. While it seems like an easy way to operate, expecting people to put things on other people's schedules without coordinating with them first can overburden us and

set us up for failure. While I like the transparency into what direct reports are working on and being able to see people's schedules to cut down on back and forth with scheduling, I've also been caught off guard by things that were scheduled when I wasn't expecting it. The idea that we should be ready at the tip of a hat to pick up another task because someone else added it to our calendar makes no sense to me.

Maintaining a work culture where people add themselves to other people's calendars can lead to a terrible assumption, one that's often not even spoken out loud: If people aren't in a meeting, then they are free to be in a meeting. Work is not only meetings. Pushing back against meetings is reasonable if they are getting in your way of doing your job. In short, the first step here is to take control of your schedule to make it work for yourself and maintain strong boundaries when last-minute requests pop up.

I spoke with Tiffany Shlain, author of [\*24/6: Giving Up Screens One Day a Week to Get More Time, Creativity, and Connection\*](#), to get her perspective on your situation. Tiffany is a modern polymath: a longtime tech aficionado who founded the Webby awards, filmmaker, and writer. Her writing focuses on the power of protecting your time and taking breaks from technology to find time to be your best self.

"I'm very pro-tech to the core, but I found about 12 years ago that I was feeling like I couldn't work in an undistracted way. And I really don't like that as a filmmaker and a writer," she told me.

For over a decade, Tiffany has been unplugging from all screens for a full day a week, and advocating for other people to do the same. When she unplugs, she told me, she feels more creative.

“I have my most creative ideas [when unplugged]. I feel most connected. I laugh the most. I sleep the best. And so I look forward to it every week.”

Pulling the plug for a full day may not work for you, but if you're stuck in a loop where you can't get away from the habits you've developed, it might be a great experiment to shake up your routine and send a message to your team. While I don't do a full screen break every week, I stopped emailing on Saturdays years ago. I find that even that small brain break helped me be more in control of my schedule, approach the workweek with fresh eyes, and set boundaries with people who request my time.

One of the simplest and most effective tools to help you sort your work is the tried and true [Eisenhower Matrix](#), which will help you see what tasks are important and how to organize them.

The Eisenhower Matrix framework will illuminate what you should focus on ASAP (important and urgent), what you should schedule (important and not urgent), what you should delegate (not important and urgent), and what you should stop doing (not important and not urgent). I find this tool especially helpful when work is overwhelming. By plotting out what you have to do this week, you'll be able to see what you've been prioritizing and get some perspective on where you've been spending time.

Once you've anchored into what you'll focus on, block specific times for tasks that you need to do. This is especially important if other people have the ability to book directly on your calendar and can claim your time. Grind culture encourages us to fill every hour in our calendars to show that we're productive, and you're not the only person I've heard from that's pointed out this tendency has led to them inadvertently sacrificing their own mealtime to help their team. Recently, I worked with an overbooked manager to map out what times she liked to eat breakfast and lunch every day, as well as when to go running. It turned out that it was better for her to plan to exercise on days she doesn't have staff meetings. She emailed me the next week to let me know she'd gotten in her first long run in weeks, and it made her feel so much better.

We all need to shift our mindset towards protecting our time.

Another challenge you're facing is getting pulled into task switching, which research shows can cost us up to [40% of our productivity](#). Tiffany highlighted the importance of

having “protected time” to get strategy and creative work done and encourage others to do the same.

“It’s about blocking out a chunk of time when you’re most feeling creative, or you can think best. Everyone has different times,” Tiffany said. “If you say, ‘I am going to put focus time on my calendar where I’m going to turn off the notifications and focus on this task,’ you’re going to model that for other people.”

It’s helpful for me to do different types of focused work on different days, since I realized I’m not as effective switching tasks back-to-back throughout the day. I do coaching on different days than I do my other work. I set up separate schedules in [Calendly](#) for coaching and other client meetings, and when people book time with me, they choose from different calendars that both feed into my personal calendar. At the beginning of the week, I review what meetings I’ve got booked and schedule time for important work. Then I block the remaining open times in my calendar so people can’t overextend me on days I’ve hit my personal meeting limit.

Tiffany explained that she also puts 15 minutes on her calendar after every meeting to “digest, process, and reset,” so she can take care of any follow-ups right away before transitioning to her next task. If I’ve been in meetings and then I’m going to switch to writing or strategy work next, I take a short walk in between to reset.

Building in time where you’re not doing anything will help you unlock the ideas that you need for your big-picture work. “There’s time for input and stimulation, and there’s a time for processing, digesting, and formulating new ideas,” Tiffany said. “It’s why your mind comes up with great ideas when you’re doing the dishes or taking a shower or going for a walk. You’re letting your mind make new connections and links.”

As a manager, how available and communicative you are is something you model to the team. When Tiffany first changed her availability, she was managing people in the film industry who worked demanding schedules: “As the manager of the company, it had such a great ripple effect because it really gave permission for everyone to take their weekends back, and ultimately be more enthusiastic when they came back to work. And, I think, more creative and more productive.”

Communicate to your team when you’re blocking time off and politely reinforce that you won’t be available during that time. You can help them by making sure that you have dedicated time to check in with them and by resetting expectations about when and how quickly you’ll be available outside of those times. You can also be transparent around what warrants an interruption (such as emergencies or a specific project that’s on deadline) and how you’ll prioritize that work.

While you’re a manager, there may also be times that you don’t feel empowered to say no to obligations, including standing meetings that bring together people on different schedules. If you’re repeatedly being conscripted into a meeting time that doesn’t work for you because you’re trying to accommodate other people’s schedules, talk to your

team to see if you can find some flexibility. Options include rotating the meeting time every other week, having it be an optional one for you to attend once a month, or checking in on a quarterly basis to see if the time still works for folks. If this hard-to-fit meeting just can't be moved, see where you can adjust other time blocks around it to give yourself some breathing room in other parts of your schedule. While you're obligated to work around other people's schedules for some "locked" parts of your week, this mindset doesn't have to trickle down to all of your work time.

Experiment with some of these techniques and see what works for you. You might have to adjust your time blocks after a first try, or find that you fall into old habits when work gets busy. Be patient with yourself as you dig out of this overloaded time. Pay attention to what makes you feel like you have more space in your calendar and your brain, then build on what works.

This may not be easy for you. We live in a time when boundaries have been blurred between work and home, and overworking is not only praised but expected. Yet we know deep down that this is untenable in the long term and that there are better ways of operating.

We feel trapped and obligated by grind culture. We turn expectations into obligations and let obligations bind us so tightly that we can't imagine a way out. Proactively scheduling is one small way that you can start prioritizing your work, your goals, and your well-being at work. As you start shifting your mindset away from one that feels obligated to prioritize other people, you'll find that having more space in your day will help you make more space for all the deeper work that you need to do. You might even bring your coworkers along with you as you create a calmer and more productive work environment.

Sending you lots of good vibes,  
Jen

---