6 tips for when your team is underresourced

You may not be able to control things like budget cuts and hiring freezes. But you can help your team get the most important work done with the resources you have — and at a pace that they (and you) can sustain.

"Due to recent cutbacks, tonight you'll be visited three times by the same ghost."

1. Identify things to stop doing (so you can focus on what really needs to get done).

If your team has more demands than they can handle, you have two choices: You can try — and inevitably fail — to do everything well while stressing your team to the brink. Or, you can decide what won't get done. Hint: Go with the second option.

Many leaders default to adding goals, tasks, and meetings to try to get more done — even though strategically subtracting those things is one of the most powerful ways to make time.

So how do you choose what not to do?

- **Get crystal clear on your and your team's top priorities.** Doing so gives you a rubric for what to say yes to now and in the future — anything that doesn't align with those priorities gets a courteous no.
- **Ask direct reports to keep a [not-to-do list](#).** Items should include tasks that gobble up their time (like volunteering to work at another team's event or compiling a report weekly instead monthly) and don't help them meet important goals.

- **Minimize time spent in meetings.** Scrutinize meetings you run to be sure they're useful, especially recurring meetings (this goes double for ones labeled "update"). When in doubt, try canceling a meeting and see if people clamor to add it back. And for meetings your direct reports attend, give them permission to opt out when possible (like skipping another team's weekly check-in when they don't have relevant information to share). For more, see [9 ways to spend less time in meetings](#).

Important: If changes to your team's work will affect other teams or departments, let them know what you're changing and why to reset expectations. And support your direct reports if their saying no creates friction with colleagues.

2. Talk through current top priorities with your manager.

When resources are scarce, you don't want your boss piling on extra tasks that that split your team's efforts across too many projects.

To get on the same page, share what you see as your team's highest priorities and check for agreement. Ideally, you'll align on what's most important — and what to delay or stop doing in order to focus on those things. Remember to realign regularly with your boss as circumstances change.

If you struggle to get in sync or your boss has an outsized view of what your team can handle:

- **Use ["even over" statements](#) to push your boss to choose among competing priorities.** For example, *"So it's important for us to improve customer service this quarter, even over working on the project to bring in new customers. Is that right?"*
- **Try the "Yes … and" technique to explain the tradeoffs required to do what your boss wants.** For example *"Yes, we can focus on project X. And if we do that, project Y will be delayed — or element Z will not be as polished as it could be."*
- **Use a visual to show where your team is stretched thin.** For example, you could use a virtual whiteboard to map your team members to active department projects to show the mountain of things they're currently responsible for.

For more, see [When your boss adds work to your team's plate, suggest a prioritization plan](#).

3. Focus on developing your direct reports' skills.

Many well-intentioned managers rush in to problem-solve or personally take on their team's harder tasks in the name of not drowning their already swamped direct reports. But consider: If you instead spend your energy developing your direct reports, they can work more independently — and you can add capacity to your team without adding people. Plus, if you present stretch challenges as opportunities to grow, they may even feel excited to take on more.

To develop your direct reports' skills:

- **Delegate challenging work.** A silver lining to being underresourced: Your direct reports who are eager to level up may have ample opportunities to do more advanced work. Look for tasks that tie into each direct report's interests and career goals, be sure you have time to provide support along the way, and clearly communicate your expectations (including talking through what they can delay or stop doing in order to take on the new work). For more, see 6 ways to enable your direct reports to stretch and take on bigger challenges.
- **When someone comes to you with an issue, coach them on how to fix it.** It's faster in the moment to jump in with an answer — but taking the time to teach the person how to address a problem helps them tackle similar ones on their own in the future. Try asking them coaching questions like:
  - *"What are some potential solutions? Which one seems most promising?"*
  - *"What next step could you take to try that potential solution?"*

Keep in mind that you won't see results overnight. Helping direct reports build skills takes effort from everyone in the short term, but the payoffs are worth it.

4. Negotiate the scope and timeline of your projects with stakeholders.

Project management experts talk about three variables you can adjust to make a project more doable: deadline, scope, and resources. If resources (staff and budget) can't budge, could you adjust the other two variables in order to delay or downsize what's required from your team?

- **Scope.** You might need to reject your inner perfectionist to consider what your team could do less of and still technically succeed. For example, does every email in a new marketing campaign need a unique design or would a reusable template suffice?
- **Deadlines.** If you can't reduce the workload, could you at least spread it out? For example, instead of having every piece of a project done in two weeks, could you have the main components done then but complete the lingering pieces over the following week? Even a small change in the timeline could make a difference to your stressed-out team.

5. Call in favors from other teams.

Think back on times when you've helped other teams: Maybe you covered a shift for an overwhelmed colleague or offered a direct report's time to help with another team's project. Cash in on that goodwill now. There's a good chance your colleagues will want to help, or at least return the favor — building some goodwill of their own.

To do it:

- **Ask to temporarily outsource work to someone less busy.** You don't have to shout, "Help! My team is drowning!" Frame your request in terms of larger priorities, and be specific about what you're asking the person to do. For example:
  - *"My team's top priority is dealing with support tickets — and we have a backlog of them right now.*
    It would really help if we didn't have the weekly call reports on our plate. I know that your team has experience pulling call reports. Could you help us out by having someone cover that for us for the next two weeks?"

- **Pool resources where possible.** Even if other teams are also stretched thin, you may be able to make progress on a challenge you can't overcome alone. Let's say you and a peer manager are both hampered by an inefficient inventory tracking system. If your teams shared the burden of streamlining the system, everyone could benefit from the ongoing time savings.
- **Ask another team to reorder their priorities to buy your team more time.** For example, you might say to a peer manager, *"X requires help from my team that we just can't give right now. Could your team work on Y first and X in three weeks?"*

6. Help direct reports structure their work lives so they have time to recharge.

Being underresourced can lead to [a scarcity mindset](#). You and your team are so busy scaling the Mt. Everest of to-do lists that you barely have time to think — much less focus and make sound, strategic decisions. Taking a break might feel like the last thing you can manage, but you owe it to yourself and your team to make room for rest — which ultimately builds mental capacity.

So, how can you establish — and protect — better work/life balance for everyone?

- **Set team-wide rules to promote well-being.** Examples include no-meeting Fridays and designated email and chat off-hours for your team. Give gentle reinforcing feedback to team members who stray.

Well-being expert AJ Lee offers tips to improve your whole team's well-being.
- **[Check on every direct report's well-being.](#)** Help each person to create time for rest that works for them, whether it's a daily lunch break or a few days off. Doing so shows that you care about them as people and that they shouldn't feel guilty for setting needed work/life boundaries.
- **Set a good example by taking care of your own well-being.** Regardless of how much you encourage people to check email only during work hours and to take time off, nobody on your team will feel comfortable doing so if you're sending messages all hours and haven't taken a day off in nine months.

For more, see [6 ways to help your team handle stress in times of disruption](#).