



THE PLAYBOOK

The Load

Managing your own workload when everything is a priority. The arithmetic almost nobody does, how to make overflow visible, and how to renegotiate without saying no.

Paul Prado Pacardo

Executive Assistant & Operations · me.kabuhayan.app

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Everything fits until it does not

Most overload is not caused by a single unreasonable request. It is caused by a series of individually reasonable ones, each agreed to in isolation, none of them checked against what was already there.

The person accepting them is rarely being passive. They are usually being competent: they can see how each thing could be done, so they say yes to each thing.

Nobody does the addition, because the addition happens across weeks and conversations and nowhere in particular.

This playbook is about doing the addition, making the result visible, and having a specific conversation about what happens to the part that does not fit. It is written for the person carrying the load, and chapter five is for whoever manages them.

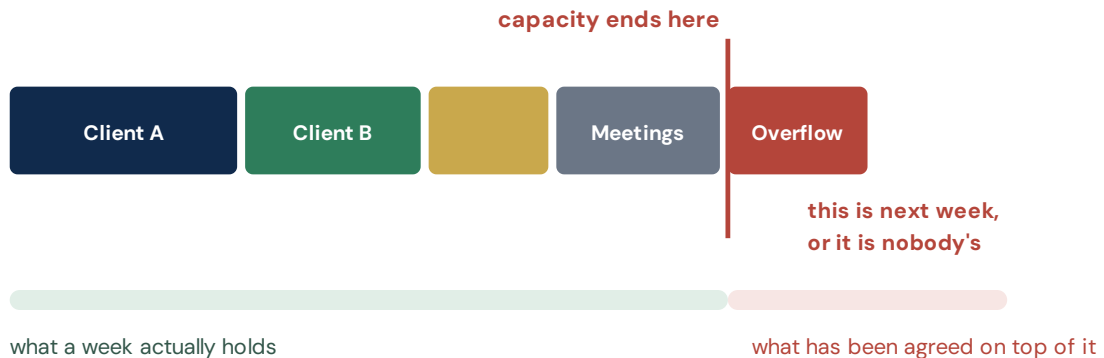
A NOTE ON BURNOUT

The World Health Organization added burn-out to ICD-11 in 2019 as an occupational phenomenon rather than a medical condition, defined by exhaustion, mental distance from the job, and reduced effectiveness, resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. That definition is worth knowing because the last clause is the operative one. This playbook is about the managing, not about coping better with the stress.

The arithmetic nobody does

The exercise takes twenty minutes once and about five minutes a week afterwards.

ONE WEEK, COMMITTED AGAINST AVAILABLE



The overflow does not disappear. It becomes late work, evening work, or something that quietly stops being done.

Figure: the block past the line is the thing to negotiate. Until it is drawn, it is invisible and therefore nobody's problem.

List everything you are currently committed to that touches this week. Put an honest hour estimate against each. Total it. Compare that to the hours you actually have.

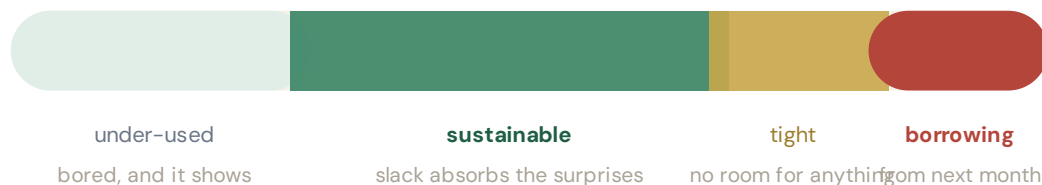
Two things almost always come out of this the first time. **The total exceeds the available hours**, usually substantially. And **meetings are larger than anyone expected**, because they were never counted as work.

The overflow is the entire point of the exercise. It does not disappear when it is invisible. It becomes late work, evening work, or something that quietly stops being done, and the third option is the most expensive because nobody chose it.

Capacity is not hours

The most common error in this arithmetic is treating available hours as capacity. They are not the same and the gap is large.

THE BAND WORTH AIMING FOR



A week planned to one hundred percent is a week with no capacity for anything unexpected.

Figure: planning to full is planning to fail, because every week contains something nobody planned.

Subtract meetings first. They are not overhead, they are consumed hours.

Subtract the recurring obligations you never count. The weekly report, the inbox, the requests that arrive without warning. In most operational roles this is a substantial share of the week and it is invisible precisely because it is constant.

Then plan to about eighty percent of what remains. Not because you are slow, but because every week contains something nobody planned, and a week planned to one hundred percent has no room to absorb it. When that happens, the thing that gives is either quality or your evening.

Planning to full is planning to fail. The slack is not waste, it is the only thing absorbing the surprises.

Making the overflow visible

The change that does the work is not saying no more often. It is making the trade-off visible at the moment of the request, so the decision is made by somebody with the authority to make it.

Keep a single list of committed work with hour estimates. One page, one place. Not a task manager, a capacity view.

When a new request arrives, add it before agreeing. Then look at the total. This takes ten seconds and it converts an instinct into a number.

Show the list rather than describing the feeling. "I am quite stretched" is easy to discount and hard to act on. A list showing 46 hours of committed work in a 38 hour week is a fact, and it moves the conversation from your resilience to the business's priorities.

This is the reframe: overload stops being a personal characteristic and becomes a scheduling problem. Scheduling problems have solutions and are somebody's job. Personal characteristics do not and are not.

Renegotiating without saying no

Most people asked to reduce their load hear an instruction to refuse things, which feels professionally risky and often is. There are better moves and they are more effective.

01 Yes, and here is what moves

"I can take that. It means the reporting rebuild goes to the following week. Is that the right trade?" You have accepted and handed the prioritisation to the person who should make it.

02 Yes, at a different depth

"I can get you something rough by Thursday or something finished by the following Wednesday." Many requests do not need the finished version and nobody asked.

03 Yes, if this is the priority

Not a refusal, a clarification. It surfaces that a choice is being made, which is usually all that was missing.

04 Not me, and here is who

Redirecting is not declining. It is often the most useful answer and it is underused because it feels like passing something on.

What all four have in common: **they hand the decision upward with the information attached**, rather than either absorbing silently or refusing flatly. Most managers, given the trade-off explicitly, choose sensibly. They just cannot choose what they cannot see.

What a manager owes here

If you manage somebody, three of these are yours and the first one is the hardest.

Make it safe to show you the list. If somebody presenting a full week is treated as a capacity problem or a complaint, they will stop presenting it and start absorbing quietly. You will find out later, at a worse moment, in the form of a resignation or a missed deadline.

Answer the trade-off rather than deflecting it. When somebody says "this means that moves, is that right?", answer the question. "Do what you can with both" is not an answer; it is the decision handed back with the responsibility attached.

Count meetings as work when you schedule them. A person with fifteen hours of meetings has a twenty-three hour week, and pretending otherwise is how a reasonable-looking workload becomes an unreasonable one.

And watch for the person who never shows overflow. In most teams there is somebody who always says yes and always delivers. That person is not fine. They are absorbing, and they are usually closer to leaving than anybody realises, because being reliable is invisible until it stops.

The signals before it breaks

Chronic overload has a recognisable progression, and the early stages are the ones worth catching because they are cheap to fix.

First, the slack goes. No thinking time, no buffer, every day fully booked. Still delivering, and it looks like productivity from outside.

Then the improvement work stops. Anything that is not urgent gets dropped: documentation, process fixes, the automation that would help. This is the most expensive stage because it removes the things that would have reduced the load.

Then quality degrades in small ways. Details missed, follow-ups forgotten, the second pass skipped. Usually attributed to carelessness rather than to load.

Then the mental distance arrives. Cynicism about work that previously mattered. This is the ICD-11 middle dimension and it is the point at which people start looking elsewhere, often without having decided to.

THE CHECK WORTH RUNNING MONTHLY

Ask yourself, or ask your team: what have you stopped doing that you used to do? The answer arrives faster than any wellbeing survey and it is more specific.

Protecting the recovery

Once a load has been reduced, it refills. Reliably, and within weeks, unless something structural changed.

Give the recovered time a name. Unallocated time gets allocated by whoever asks next. Blocked and labelled time, even for something as vague as process improvement, survives longer because it looks like a commitment rather than a gap.

Spend some of it on the thing that reduces the load. The automation, the checklist, the documented process. This is the only version of this that compounds, and it is the first thing dropped when things get tight.

Re-run the arithmetic monthly, not when it feels bad. By the time it feels bad you are already in the second or third stage. Five minutes on a schedule beats a crisis review.

And accept that some weeks are simply full. The goal is not a permanently comfortable week; it is that the full weeks are chosen, visible, and followed by a lighter one. The problem is not intensity, it is intensity nobody decided on and that never ends.

Visible beats heroic

Nothing in this playbook is about working harder or coping better, and that is deliberate. Chronic overload is a stress that has not been managed, and managing it means arithmetic and conversations rather than resilience.

List what you are committed to with honest hours. Subtract meetings and the recurring invisible work. Plan to eighty percent of what is left. When a new request arrives, add it before agreeing and look at the total. Then hand the trade-off upward with the number attached rather than absorbing it silently.

If you manage somebody: make it safe to be shown the list, answer the trade-off when it is put to you, and pay particular attention to the person who never shows one.

The sheet overleaf takes five minutes a week. Its real function is not planning. It is that it turns a feeling into a number, and numbers can be discussed.

Paul Prado Pacardo

Senior Executive Assistant, Operations and Project Manager.

Ten years supporting C-level leadership. Available for remote work.

me.kabuhayan.app

[linkedin.com/in/paulpacardo](https://www.linkedin.com/in/paulpacardo)

pacardopaul18@gmail.com

Weekly load sheet

Five minutes, same day each week · v1

Committed this week	Hours	Who asked	Movable?
Meetings count them; they are consumed hours			
Recurring and unplanned inbox, requests, the weekly report			
Total committed		Available	

Four ways to renegotiate. Yes, and here is what moves · Yes, at a different depth · Yes, if this is the priority · Not me, and here is who. All four hand the decision upward with the information attached.

Plan to about eighty percent of available hours. The remaining twenty is not spare, it is what absorbs the thing nobody planned for.