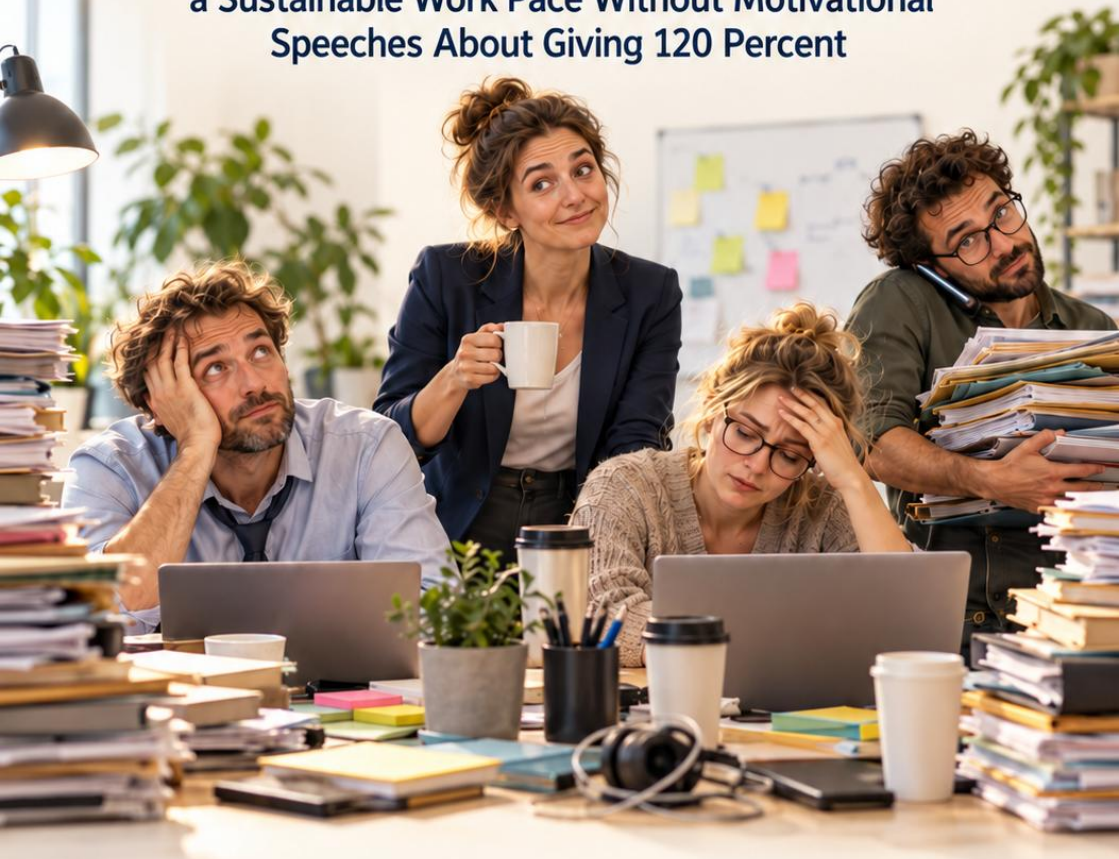
Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Have a Good Team That's Just Exhausted

How to Manage Overload, Set Priorities, and Rebuild a Sustainable Work Pace Without Motivational Speeches About Giving 120 Percent



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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INTRO

At 4:47 on a Thursday afternoon, a team manager named Rachel receives an email inviting everyone to a mandatory workshop called “Recharging Our Energy.” The workshop is scheduled for Friday at 3 p.m. Attendance is expected, participation is encouraged, and employees are asked to bring a positive attitude. Rachel looks at the invitation, then at the fourteen unfinished tasks on her team's board. Three have already missed their deadlines. Two are waiting for decisions from another department. One has been marked urgent for so long that nobody remembers what would actually happen if it were completed. The workshop promises practical strategies for reducing workplace stress. Rachel wonders whether declining the invitation would count as successfully applying one.

The uncomfortable part is that Rachel manages a genuinely good team. These are not people who need constant supervision or elaborate incentives to get out of bed. They know their jobs, care about the quality of their work, and have repeatedly delivered difficult projects under pressure. A year ago, they challenged assumptions, volunteered useful ideas, and occasionally had enough energy left to laugh at the company's more imaginative decisions. Now they mostly ask which deadline has changed, whether the latest request is genuinely urgent, and who approved the new reporting requirement. They are still working hard. In fact, some are working harder than ever. Yet progress feels slower, mistakes are becoming more common, and every successful week seems to require a level of effort previously reserved for emergencies.

This creates a particularly frustrating problem for a manager. When a team performs poorly because people lack skills, there are recognizable responses: training, coaching, clearer expectations, or changes in responsibilities. When someone consistently refuses to do agreed work, a manager can address performance. But what happens when capable, conscientious people are struggling precisely because they have been conscientious for too long? What if the team has become so reliable that the organization no longer notices the extraordinary effort required to maintain ordinary results? The employees who always find a way have gradually become the preferred destination for every difficult assignment. Their competence has turned into a convenient substitute for capacity planning.

Organizations are remarkably inventive when it comes to creating work that does not appear in the original plan. A quick question becomes a forty-minute investigation. A small amendment requires three approvals. A meeting generates five action items, which require another meeting to establish ownership. Someone requests a report that looks suspiciously similar to a report already being produced, except the columns appear in a different order. Each request makes sense to the person submitting it. Nobody necessarily intends to overload anyone. Nevertheless, the team must absorb the combined consequences, often without being allowed to renegotiate existing commitments. The official workload stays beautifully organized while the actual workload develops a personality of its own.

The usual response is to encourage greater effort. Managers remind people of the importance of teamwork, celebrate resilience, introduce ambitious targets, and occasionally arrange activities designed to restore

motivation. Some of these things can be valuable. Recognition matters. Shared purpose matters. A team that has genuinely lost direction may benefit from renewed clarity and encouragement. But enthusiasm cannot replace missing information, create additional working hours, or eliminate a queue of decisions waiting for approval. Telling exhausted employees to give 120 percent is particularly interesting because it treats arithmetic as an attitude problem. The missing twenty percent is apparently expected to emerge from somewhere between personal commitment and a sufficiently inspirational PowerPoint slide.

Of course, it would be equally misleading to pretend that every workplace difficulty is caused by excessive demands. Sometimes expectations are unclear. Sometimes skills need developing, collaboration has deteriorated, or individual performance needs attention. A team can be overloaded and still have genuine accountability problems. The challenge is to distinguish these situations rather than explaining everything through a single convenient story. Label every struggling employee unmotivated, and you risk punishing people for problems they cannot control. Attribute every missed deadline to overload, and you may overlook issues that require direct management. Good leadership demands curiosity before judgment and evidence before conclusions.

There is another complication: you may have very little freedom to change the conditions creating the problem. Perhaps recruitment is frozen, a major customer has imposed an immovable deadline, or senior management expects additional output without additional spending. You cannot solve these constraints by announcing that everyone will now work at a comfortable pace. You still have commitments, commercial realities, and responsibilities to

the wider organization. Sometimes every available option carries a cost. This book takes those situations seriously. It will not suggest that you can eliminate pressure by purchasing a prettier planner, learning three breathing exercises, or informing the finance director that your team has collectively decided to embrace serenity.

What you can change begins with understanding how work actually moves through your team. Being busy and making progress are not the same thing. A person may spend the entire day answering messages, attending discussions, and updating documents without bringing an important deliverable significantly closer to completion. Another may appear less visibly active while quietly resolving a difficult problem that has blocked everyone else. The difference matters because organizations often reward activity that is easy to observe while overlooking the conditions that make valuable results possible. More tasks started, more meetings attended, and faster replies can produce impressive dashboards without producing better outcomes.

You will learn to examine workload in terms of genuine capacity rather than theoretical availability. You will see why priorities require choices, not merely labels, and why every new commitment carries consequences for existing ones. We will explore the decisions managers need to make about delegation, interruptions, deadlines, and the work that quietly accumulates between official assignments. Just as importantly, we will consider how to communicate uncomfortable realities to people above you without turning every conversation into a complaint about insufficient resources. There is a substantial difference between saying, “My team can't cope,” and explaining which results are

achievable, under what conditions, and what must change to deliver more.

None of this works particularly well if employees are afraid to tell you what is happening. A team may report green status indicators while individual members privately worry about mistakes, exhaustion, or commitments they know cannot all be honored. People sometimes stay silent because they believe speaking up will make them appear unreliable. Others have learned that raising a problem simply earns them responsibility for solving it. A manager who wants accurate information must therefore pay attention not only to the questions being asked but also to what happens after someone answers honestly. Trust develops through repeated decisions, especially the inconvenient ones.

There is room for a useful experiment even before you redesign anything. Think of a recent week when your team appeared exceptionally busy. Identify one important result that took longer than expected, then consider what consumed the time between starting and finishing it. Was the work itself unusually difficult? Did information arrive late? Were requirements changed? Did the responsible people repeatedly leave the task to handle unrelated requests? You may not have the answers immediately, and that is fine. The purpose is to replace the vague conclusion that everyone needs to work faster with a question that can lead to an actual decision.

We should also be careful about what management can reasonably achieve. A healthier workload does not guarantee that everyone will feel energetic all the time. People have personal circumstances, different capacities, and periods when work feels harder than usual. Persistent exhaustion or serious physical or psychological difficulties

may require professional support beyond workplace adjustments. Managers should not diagnose employees or promise to solve health problems through better scheduling. They can, however, address avoidable organizational pressure, respect appropriate boundaries, and avoid turning exceptional demands into permanent expectations.

Ultimately, success will not mean creating a team that never faces difficult weeks. It will mean building a way of working in which difficult weeks remain recognizable as exceptions, commitments are made with an understanding of available capacity, and employees can finish meaningful work without regularly sacrificing their evenings to keep the organization looking successful. You should not need to supervise every decision personally, and your strongest people should not have to demonstrate their value by surviving conditions that make everyone else miserable.

A good team does not necessarily need a louder leader, a more exciting mission statement, or another speech about reaching its full potential. Sometimes it needs someone willing to examine the demands placed upon it and make decisions that everybody else has been avoiding. That may be less glamorous than standing before an audience and promising extraordinary performance. It is also considerably more useful.

And if someone insists that everyone must give 120 percent, there is a perfectly reasonable question to ask: which twenty percent are we planning to borrow, and when exactly do we intend to pay it back?

Chapter 1 - When a Good Team Starts Performing Badly

The first complaint came from a customer who had always been easy to please. Her company had used the same software provider for six years, the service was reliable, and whenever something went wrong, somebody usually sorted it out before she needed to ask twice. This time, however, a straightforward account change had taken nine days. Three employees had been involved, two had apologised, and one had promised an update that never arrived. When the customer finally asked whether something had changed inside the company, nobody knew quite how to answer. Nothing dramatic had happened. There had been no major system failure, no mass resignation, and no disastrous management decision that everyone could point to. The department simply seemed to have become less capable of doing things it used to do rather well.

That is what makes deterioration in a good team so difficult to recognise. Poor performance rarely announces itself with a convenient explanation attached. More often, familiar work becomes unexpectedly difficult. Decisions that previously took an afternoon now stretch across several days. Colleagues ask questions they once answered independently. Experienced employees become cautious about promising deadlines. The manager notices that everyone appears busy but fewer tasks reach a clean conclusion. Because the changes happen gradually, each one acquires its own reasonable excuse. A demanding customer, a complicated assignment, an unfortunate

absence. It is only when you consider the pattern that something larger becomes visible.

Managers understandably look for changes in employee behaviour. Perhaps people are less committed. Perhaps standards have slipped, or the team has grown too comfortable with success. These possibilities should not be dismissed automatically. Employees are accountable for their work, and individual performance problems genuinely exist. Yet there is a fundamental difference between a person who will not perform and a person whose ability to perform is being obstructed. Treating both situations identically can turn a manageable operational problem into a damaged working relationship. Before deciding that people need more supervision, you need to understand what has changed between their previous success and their current struggles.

The evidence hiding inside ordinary work

Consider a fictional customer operations department with eight experienced employees. Over the past year, the company has introduced additional verification requirements, expanded its product range, and begun serving several larger customers. None of these developments is inherently negative. The new checks reduce particular risks, the expanded offering creates opportunities, and larger customers support the business. Management has reasonably celebrated each improvement. What nobody has examined is how the combined changes affect an ordinary customer request. An employee who once completed a change using two systems must now consult four, obtain information from another department, and check whether the customer's particular contract requires additional approval.

From the executive level, the department still looks adequately staffed. Eight employees handled the work previously, and eight remain employed. Customer numbers have increased, but a recently introduced automation tool should compensate for some of that growth. The assumption sounds plausible until somebody follows an actual request from arrival to completion. The automation handles one administrative step, while the new verification requirements add several others. Employees spend more time coordinating exceptions and less time completing routine work. A customer request that once had a clear route through the department now resembles a sightseeing tour of the company's internal systems, with occasional opportunities to admire the same information entered for the third time.

The manager might initially conclude that employees need better training. But before spending money on a course, she could examine a handful of delayed requests and ask where the additional time went. Did staff struggle to understand the task? Were they waiting for decisions? Did they need to repeat work because information had changed? Were responsibilities unclear? These questions establish whether the difficulty lies primarily in knowledge, execution, or the conditions surrounding execution. They also prevent the familiar spectacle of sending competent people to training on a process that is fundamentally badly designed.

The distinction matters because struggling teams often respond to growing demands by working harder in ways that temporarily conceal the problem. Employees skip optional discussions, rush documentation, postpone internal improvements, and stop asking whether a process could be simplified. Those adaptations can preserve results for a

while. Eventually, however, their costs become visible. Errors increase because checks have been compressed. Problems recur because nobody has time to investigate their causes. New employees struggle because experienced colleagues cannot give them adequate support. The apparent decline in performance may therefore reflect the exhaustion of informal adjustments that previously kept the department functioning.

The people who stop volunteering

A particularly revealing signal is the disappearance of initiative. Imagine an employee named Daniel who has always been quick to identify unnecessary steps in the company's processes. He used to suggest improvements without being asked and enjoyed helping colleagues understand complicated cases. Recently, he has become noticeably quieter. When the manager invites suggestions, he says the existing process is fine. When somebody asks whether he can help with an unfamiliar case, he requests that the task be formally assigned. The change could indicate disengagement, but it could also represent a rational effort to control an expanding workload. Daniel has learned that proposing an improvement often makes him responsible for implementing it, while helping a colleague can turn into permanent ownership of that colleague's problem.

A manager who interprets his behaviour solely as a loss of team spirit may respond by asking for more collaboration. That request can make the situation worse if Daniel is already spending considerable time on work that nobody recognises. A better conversation would investigate the change without inventing an explanation: "I've noticed you're taking on fewer additional requests than you used to. Has something changed about the work or the amount of

support people need from you?" The answer might reveal excessive interruptions, frustration with unfulfilled promises, or a personal preference that deserves respect. The point is to discover the reason rather than diagnose someone's attitude from a distance.

Watch also for a shift in how people communicate uncertainty. Healthy teams can usually say, "I don't know yet," without treating the admission as a professional catastrophe. Under excessive pressure, employees may become reluctant to reveal difficulties because every problem is followed by demands for an immediate recovery plan. They begin describing uncertain work as "nearly finished" or "progressing well," even when important dependencies remain unresolved. Nobody needs to be deliberately dishonest for this to happen. People naturally learn which answers make meetings easier. Unfortunately, a manager surrounded by reassuring updates can become the last person to discover that an important deadline is genuinely at risk.

A decline in humour can be another clue, although it is certainly not a reliable diagnostic instrument. Some excellent teams are naturally quiet, and some thoroughly dysfunctional ones remain remarkably entertaining. What matters is a change from the team's usual behaviour. When colleagues who previously chatted comfortably become guarded, or minor disagreements suddenly generate disproportionate tension, investigate the working conditions rather than insisting that everyone become cheerful again. A mandatory happiness initiative is unlikely to improve matters if people suspect that smiling will be added to their performance objectives.

One struggling employee or a struggling system?

Patterns across people provide useful evidence. Suppose three employees with different experience levels all begin missing similar deadlines after a change in how work is approved. That suggests a shared obstacle worth investigating. If only one employee struggles while colleagues handling comparable assignments continue to perform effectively, an individual issue may deserve closer attention. Neither observation proves a cause. Workloads, customer difficulty, responsibilities, and experience may differ. The manager's job is to compare like with like wherever possible, rather than assuming that a shared job title means identical working conditions.

Individual difficulties still require fair, direct management. An employee may need clearer expectations, additional coaching, suitable adjustments, or a conversation about repeated failures to meet agreed standards. Equally, a normally reliable employee may be affected by circumstances they do not wish to discuss. Managers should respect personal boundaries and avoid making medical or psychological judgments from workplace behaviour. Persistent exhaustion and significant health difficulties may require appropriate professional support. Organisational improvements are important, but a team manager is neither a clinician nor the owner of employees' private lives.

A useful investigation can begin with a sample of work that has recently become troublesome. Select several delayed or repeatedly corrected assignments, including some considered ordinary. For each one, establish what outcome was expected, what actually happened, and which events changed the original plan. Speak with the people involved, then compare their accounts with the information already available. Resist the temptation to introduce a

detailed activity diary for everyone. An exhausted department does not need to spend the next fortnight documenting its exhaustion in fifteen-minute increments. A small, carefully examined sample often reveals practical questions that a broad survey would miss.

It is especially useful to distinguish work waiting for somebody from work being actively performed. A case may remain open for twelve days even though completing its individual steps requires only a few hours. Equally, an apparently simple assignment may consume considerable attention because the employee repeatedly receives contradictory instructions. Understanding those differences changes the conversation. Instead of asking why someone has been so slow, you can ask which part of the process prevents the work from moving forward. That does not remove individual accountability; it places accountability alongside the actual conditions in which results are produced.

Listen for changes in the language of commitment

A team approaching its limits often begins qualifying promises. Employees who previously gave confident deadlines now say, "Assuming nothing else comes in," or "If we get the information in time." These statements can sound defensive, particularly to a manager accustomed to decisive answers. They may also be the most responsible answers available. The employee recognises uncertainties that a simplified schedule ignores. Rather than discouraging these qualifications, ask what assumptions the deadline depends upon. A conditional commitment supported by clear facts is more useful than an unconditional promise made to avoid an awkward conversation.

You should also notice when people repeatedly choose immediate tasks over important ones. This may happen because urgent requests carry visible consequences, while postponing preventive work causes no immediate complaint. A team can therefore maintain an appearance of responsiveness while gradually losing its ability to improve. Documentation becomes outdated, recurring errors remain unexplored, and opportunities to simplify work are continually deferred. Eventually, those neglected activities return as operational difficulties. The employees then appear less effective, even though they have spent months doing exactly what the organisation rewarded.

For managers, this investigation can be uncomfortable because some of the obstacles may originate in their own decisions. Perhaps you regularly interrupt employees for updates that could wait. Perhaps you assign difficult work to the same dependable people or reward immediate replies while asking for deeper concentration. You may have excellent intentions and legitimate pressures from above. Nevertheless, the effects on the team deserve examination. Asking employees for honest feedback and then explaining why every managerial decision was entirely justified is an impressively efficient way to ensure that future feedback contains nothing interesting.

The next conversation should therefore involve both observations and genuine curiosity. Explain what has changed in results or behaviour, ask employees what makes the work harder, and identify specific differences between the current process and the one that previously worked. Do not promise to remove every difficulty. Some demands are unavoidable, and some answers will require decisions beyond your authority. What you can promise is to take the

information seriously, distinguish facts from assumptions, and communicate what can realistically be changed.

A good team does not cease to be good because its results deteriorate. Nor does a successful history guarantee that every current difficulty is caused by excessive demands. The useful question is what explains the difference between the team's demonstrated capabilities and its current performance. Once you examine that gap carefully, you can stop treating every symptom as an employee attitude problem and start making better-informed decisions about the work itself.

You may discover that certain individuals need support or clearer accountability. You may discover that expectations have expanded without anyone acknowledging the additional effort. Most likely, you will find a mixture of issues requiring different responses. That is considerably less convenient than announcing that everyone must rediscover their passion, but it gives you something better than a motivational slogan: a credible understanding of what needs attention.

And understanding matters. Without it, you may spend months asking a good team to become the team it used to be, while continuing to change the conditions that made its earlier success possible.

Chapter 2 - Why Working Harder Can Produce Worse Results

There is a peculiar type of management meeting in which everyone agrees that the department is already operating at full capacity and then spends forty minutes discussing how to increase output without changing anything else. The headcount must remain fixed. Spending cannot increase. Quality must improve, deadlines must shorten, and customers should receive more individual attention. A slide entitled "Productivity Opportunities" appears, followed by the reassuring observation that the organisation possesses considerable untapped potential. Nobody identifies where this potential is hiding. Presumably it lives in the stationery cupboard, alongside the missing presentation adapters and the emergency biscuits.

The assumption beneath this discussion is that effort and output have a straightforward relationship. If employees produce a certain amount while working at their normal pace, asking them to work faster should produce more. Sometimes that is true. A short period of concentrated effort can help complete a demanding assignment, particularly when the work is well understood and unnecessary distractions have been removed. But beyond a certain point, additional effort may create very little additional output. It can even reduce the amount of useful work completed, because exhausted employees make more mistakes, complicated tasks compete for attention, and unfinished assignments accumulate. The crucial question is not how much effort people are contributing. It is how effectively that effort travels towards a finished result.

Consider a fictional payroll services business preparing for its busiest processing period. Its experienced team handles multiple employers, each with different arrangements and deadlines. Management sees that several assignments are running late and asks everyone to increase their pace. Employees respond by starting work earlier, reducing informal discussions, and handling more requests simultaneously. For several days, activity increases noticeably. Messages are answered, spreadsheets are updated, and the department appears wonderfully industrious. Yet the number of completed payroll files barely changes. Important information is missing from several customers, two unusual cases need specialist review, and a growing number of partial assignments now require attention before their deadlines. Everybody is moving faster through their day, but the work itself is not reaching the finish line any faster.

Being occupied is not the same as being productive

This distinction becomes easier to understand when you stop thinking of workload solely as a collection of hours. Imagine a specialist who has six hours available for concentrated work and one assignment requiring approximately four hours. Under reasonably stable conditions, completing that assignment is plausible. Now give the same person five assignments, each carrying a different deadline, and encourage them to demonstrate progress on all five. The employee might spend an hour on the first task, switch to the second, respond to questions about the third, and prepare notes for the fourth. At the end of the day, several activities have progressed, but none may be complete.

This is not necessarily evidence of poor discipline. Each interruption can require the employee to reconstruct information, reopen documents, remember earlier decisions, and check what has changed. Some switching is inevitable in collaborative work. The difficulty arises when the organisation expects continual availability while simultaneously demanding sustained concentration. The employee is asked to think deeply, respond instantly, remain flexible, and never lose momentum. It is an ambitious specification for a human being. Even modern computers become less impressive when required to run too many demanding processes at once, although at least they generally refrain from scheduling a meeting to discuss their feelings about it.

The cost of switching is particularly visible in work involving complex decisions. An employee preparing a financial reconciliation may need to understand several exceptions together before identifying the correct treatment. Interrupt that reasoning repeatedly, and the person must rebuild their understanding. By contrast, some routine activities can be handled in short intervals without significant disruption. This is why blanket rules about avoiding multitasking are not especially useful. Managers need to recognise which assignments require uninterrupted attention and which genuinely benefit from rapid responses. The objective is not to eliminate every interruption but to stop treating attention as an unlimited resource.

In the payroll department, the manager could examine how many active files each specialist is handling and which ones can actually be completed with the available information. Where appropriate, the team could concentrate on finishing files that are ready while separately pursuing