

# THE MANAGER'S DILEMMA

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# THE MANAGER'S DILEMMA

Balancing the Inverse Equation of  
Increasing Demands and  
Shrinking Resources

JESSE SOSTRIN

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2015 978-1-137-48579-3

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First published in 2015 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-69510-2

ISBN 978-1-137-48580-9 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781137485809

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sostrin, Jesse.

The manager's dilemma : balancing the inverse equation of increasing demands and shrinking resources / Jesse Sostrin.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Executives—Job stress. 2. Management. 3. Problem solving. I. Title.

HF5548.85.S67 2015

658.4'09—dc23

2014048239

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: July 2015

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Sophia: from one author to another!

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# PREFACE

THIS BOOK WAS BORN OUT OF THE frustration and confusion I felt as a manager who was struggling to get everything done while feeling overmatched by the volume, pace, and intensity of the challenges I faced. Despite my continued advancement through the ranks, I always felt a deeper sense of anxiety that something would have to give; the unyielding tension between my increasing demands and the shrinking resources I had available to meet them felt perilous.

Over time, it seemed like work was just one long and stressful pattern marked by: intense periods of activity (where it didn't seem possible to get it all done), punctuated by moments of relief (when things miraculously came together in the eleventh hour), before a new period of intensity accelerated again. Although things always seemed to work out, the strain from these cycles left me feeling exhausted, and I began to wonder about the true costs of this unsustainable routine. Then, I found out.

One particular day, mired in a period of stressful intensity, I frantically drove to a client meeting. I was already late because it was the second "Wednesday at 10:00 am" meeting of the day. I was double booked again, which was an indicator of how I pushed the limits of what was possible in my effort to be everywhere and to say yes to everything. Pulling into the parking lot, I realized my heart was pounding and I was having trouble getting a full breath. Alarmed, I told my colleague what was happening, and she said it sounded like I was having a panic attack.

I denied it immediately, arguing that I did not feel panicked at all. Driving a bit fast probably elevated my heart rate, but I knew I did not

face any mortal danger or overtly intense warning that could trigger that kind of physiological reaction. Despite my denial, my colleague turned to me and simply said: “You and I might know that, but your nervous system thinks it is under serious threat. You have to slow down!”

It turned out that I was having a panic attack. After a few more such episodes and an eventual doctor’s appointment—voilà—I had my wakeup call. It was there the whole time, but I was too busy to notice and too wrapped up in my work to recognize just how affected I was. I didn’t understand it at the time, but I was stuck in the manager’s dilemma. At that moment, I faced one its biggest deceptions: *the belief that I couldn’t stop even though I knew I couldn’t keep going.*

With strict advice to reduce my stress levels, I began to reevaluate how I worked. I knew I wanted to make some changes, but the question was how? To begin, I started with my overflowing plate of responsibilities that never seemed to diminish, no matter how many to-dos I checked off the list. I quickly realized that I had very little control over the load that I carried. The economy and the organizational dynamics that enabled the “do more with less” attitude was not going to change anytime soon, no matter how much I personally needed to simplify things.

Accepting this inevitability left me with the other side of the equation to work with, and so I began to focus on *how I responded* to the load. Specifically, I considered what I did (or did not do) that made things more hectic and complicated and what specific triggers seemed to lead me back into that overwhelmed cycle. As I began to see my situation for what it was, I made two important discoveries. First, I realized that I had much more influence over my total experience than I previously believed. From the day-to-day choices I made, to the specific ways in which I approached my responsibilities, I could not only improve the quality of my experience during the spikes of intensity, but I could actually do certain things to get ahead rather than just tread water.

The second discovery was that I was not alone. I recognized a similar dynamic among most other managers. Despite the fact that each person’s circumstances showed up differently, the same cycle of

near-continuous stress and periodic calm was a persistent and troublesome theme in our working lives. Moreover, as the frequency and impact of our overflowing workloads only increased, the effects from these cycles posed a growing concern at all levels of leadership.

As my career evolved and I shifted from leading teams and organizations to externally coaching and consulting with organizations and their diverse leaders, I made a third discovery that formed the seed crystal of this book. I realized that a similar version of this experience was shared in some form by nearly every manager I encountered. It reflected a fundamental challenge that connected us across industries and sectors, as well as boundaries of age, rank, gender, and geography. Looking back, these three insights were the catalyst for *The Manager's Dilemma*.

Drawing on the lessons I've learned as a manager and consultant to countless others, I wrote this book to be an *experience guide* for anyone feeling undermined by the impossible expectation of producing more and better work with less time and fewer resources to get it all done. Whether you feel the slow burn or acute pain of this inverse equation, I hope these insights and tools provoke a healthy confrontation with yourself because you don't need to wait for a panic attack or some other wakeup call to come to terms with what isn't working in your life at work.

While your success as a manager might be determined by the outcomes and results you deliver, your success as a person is determined by the quality of the experience you have on your way to figuring it out. If you manage people, priorities, and projects, this book can help you find your way.

JESSE SOSTRIN,  
October 2014

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK MY EDITOR, Laurie Harting, for a great collaboration and for continuing to trust in me to deliver. I would also like to thank my editorial assistants, Bradley Showalter and Alexis Nelson, for the behind-the-scenes support that made the process of getting this book out to the world seamless.