

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 139 · WORKSHEET

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The Promotion Trap

Ben was the best analyst on the floor — the one everyone brought the hard problems to. When the director job opened, he was the obvious pick. He got the promotion, the bigger team, the title. And six months later, he was working longer hours than he ever had as an analyst. This episode shows you why success itself sets the trap — and four steps out: name it, hand it, trade it, and check it.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. The First Half of the Trap

Ben still built the models himself. He still fixed the numbers himself. He still stayed late on the work only he knew how to do. His team waited on him, his calendar filled up with the old job plus the new one, and the work that used to come easily started slipping. He was exhausted — and still effective. That is the first half of the trap. And here is the cruel part: nobody noticed. His boss saw the results, not the hours. His team saw a director who always had the answer, not a director who never let go.

2. The System Rewards the Old Job

Three economists — Alan Benson, Danielle Li, and Kelly Shue — tracked promotions at 131 American firms, and they found the pattern: the best sellers were the ones who got promoted most. And the stronger their sales had been, the worse their teams performed once they were managing. Firms promote people because of the old job's results. Then the new role asks for something else entirely. So the system rewards the old job and then punishes you for keeping it. That is the trap.

3. Two Profiles: Overextended and Ineffective

Two researchers, Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter, gave us the shape of it. They sorted burnout into profiles, and the trap has two of them. The first is Overextended — exhausted, but still engaged and still effective. That is why nobody flags it. It looks like the price of the promotion. The second is Ineffective — the effort keeps rising, but the results fall away, because the old skills stop working at the new level. Overextended slides into Ineffective. And that slide — effort up, efficacy down — is the tell. The level above sees the output and calls it commitment. You feel the hours and call it the price. Both of you are wrong, and that is why the trap lasts so long.

4. Three Tells

Three tells, and you can check all of them in your own week. One: you are still doing the old job — the work that belonged to the level below you. Two: hours are your only lever — every problem gets answered with more of your time. Three: your effort is rising while your results are falling. One tell on its own is a busy week. All three together is the trap.

Joe Dutkiewicz

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5. Huffington Redefined Success First

In 2007, Arianna Huffington collapsed in her office after eighteen-hour days building the Huffington Post — a broken cheekbone, diagnosed with acute burnout. She did not ask how to keep doing it. She asked what winning actually looked like. She redefined success — sleep, for one thing — and then she changed how she worked, not just how much. She changed the definition first. The schedule followed. She wrote a whole book about it, Thrive, and eventually left the company she had built to run Thrive Global — a company built around ending the very epidemic she had lived through. She was not promoted into the role, so the trap was founder overwork, not a promotion. But the mechanism is the same.

The picture: Ben was the best analyst on the floor. He got the promotion, the bigger team, the title. And six months later, he was working longer hours than he ever had as an analyst — his team waited on him, his calendar filled up with the old job plus the new one, and the work that used to come easily started slipping.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — name the old job.** Look at your calendar this week and find the work that belongs to the level below you — the model, the report, the fix only you do. Write it down. If you can't name it, you can't hand it over.

The old job I am still doing:

- [ ] **Step two — hand it over, properly.** Not the task — the authority. Give it to someone who can decide, not just execute, and stay out of the way long enough for them to get good at it. Give them the decision and the deadline, and let them bring you the result — not the draft for you to fix. If you keep checking it, you still own it.

Who gets it, and by when:

- [ ] **Step three — trade hours for a resource.** Stop answering every problem with more of your time. Add one resource instead — a decision you can make without approval, a standing hour with your boss, a peer who tells you the truth. Demands went up when you were promoted. Resources have to go up too, or effort is your only lever, and effort is what breaks. One resource, this week. Not a system overhaul — one decision you stop escalating, or one hour you stop giving away.

The resource I will add:

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- [ ] **Step four — check the profile.** Once a week, ask yourself two questions: is my effort rising, and are my results falling? If the answer to both is yes, you are sliding from Overextended to Ineffective — and that is the moment to go back to step one, not to work harder.

Effort rising? Results falling?

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

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