

How Do I Keep from Being Overwhelmed?

by Mike Bonem

One of the most common questions of second chair leaders is how they can avoid the feeling of being pulled in too many directions. This has been the most frequent cause of frustration in our pre-seminar surveys, and it was one of the highest rated FAQ's in our survey of the "second chair community." Life in the second chair will always be busy, but the leaders who fill these roles need to find balance in order to sustain their ministries for the long run. When they become overwhelmed for an extended period of time, their lives and their ministries will suffer.

What are the factors that contribute to this busy-ness? As leaders who live in the tension of the "deep-wide" paradox, second chairs constantly find themselves filling gaps. They see the problems that need to be resolved and the opportunities to move their churches forward, and they take action. Of course, there are always more gaps than there is time for filling them. And the nature of gap filling can create an ongoing sense of unpredictability and being off balance. Second chair leaders may also find that their first chair delegates much responsibility "down the line" to them, while at the same time their subordinates are pushing up for their involvement in key decisions. In these environments, the second chair leader may feel like screaming, "Why does everything have to rest on my shoulders?!?" Even if you cannot prevent these and other factors from putting pressure on you in the second chair, you should proactively address them.

Practice Pruning

One of the most important practices for a second chair leader who feels overwhelmed is saying "No." Far too often, they feel (or are made to feel) that they must do everything that is requested of them and that they are failing if they do anything less. Second chairs need to be able to turn down new requests that are not wise investments of their time. And they need to have the freedom to quit doing things that they have done in the past. In fact, this latter practice of "pruning" commitments is essential because of the nature of the role.

Because their responsibilities and the organizational needs are constantly changing, a second chair leader cannot simply turn down every new demand for their time. Some of these requests have genuine merit. Just as pruning a plant allows for more healthy growth, a second chair's pruning clears the calendar for the activities that will be of greatest benefit to the ministry. The challenge is to remove low value tasks just as quickly as you add high value ones. What have you pruned from your responsibilities recently? This needs to be an ongoing practice for second chair leaders, and as we will discuss below, it needs to be guided by a clear sense of priorities and a close relationship with your first chair leader.

Know Your Priorities

Can you start each day and each week with a clear sense of the activities that you should undertake in order to make the greatest contribution to your church or organization? If not, you are guaranteed to be pulled in too many directions. Second chair leaders will always have many demands on their time, some of which are externally driven and some of which come from their

own initiative. The only way to effectively manage these demands is to let your priorities guide your choices on how your time is spent.

The pruning process, as described above, should be based on these priorities. If you simply say, “I can’t add anything else because my ‘to do’ list is too long,” you will inevitably miss out on some great opportunities. Priorities are not static. They should have a foundation in God’s call for your church and your own ministry, and should be shaped by the current organizational needs and your own unique giftedness. Said another way, you should strive to end your day or week with the reflection that you have truly been a good steward of whatever God has entrusted to you.

Develop Other Leaders

The principles of pruning and priorities do not mean that everything else is left undone. As a second chair, one of your highest value investments of time should be the development of other leaders. Spend the time to know them and their passions and gifts. And as you do so, discover how they can help you carry the burdens of the second chair.

Far too many second chair leaders thrive on the feeling of being needed to solve every major problem in their church. This mentality – whether based in the need to be the “hero” or a desire to be in control – causes multiple problems. It overloads the second chair, it limits the church’s ability to expand its ministry, and it deprives other capable leaders from using their gifts in meaningful ways. The only way to counter this tendency is for the second chair leader to cultivate co-laborers and to entrust them with significant responsibilities. Will they make mistakes when you do this? Absolutely, but you also have made mistakes, and you are compounding your mistakes if you try to do everything yourself. Take stock of the leadership pool for your ministry – is it deeper today than it was a year ago? Is it continuing to grow? If not, then loosen your grip on the reins and begin today to develop others.

Be Efficient

Before you complain about a boss who is overloading you with work, take stock of your own time management practices. Are you making the best and most efficient use of the time that you have? If you’re not careful, you will get to the end of the week and wonder where the time went. For example, second chair leaders who are highly relational will find that their daily interaction with people occupies much of their time. This may be exactly what they need to do, but they may also find a 10-minute conversation stretching into an hour. Second chairs who are compulsive may drive themselves to “dot every ‘i’” on every project, even when this level of detail and precision is unnecessary. Some can’t stand to miss a meeting because “something important may be decided” in their absence. And others who are easily distracted may be unaware how much time they spend on the internet and junk email. The reality is that you have some traits and tendencies that can keep you from using your time wisely. Do you know what these are for you? Grow in your self-awareness of your own time drains, and then be on your guard.

Cultivate the Relationship with Your First Chair

If you have read our book, you knew this discussion would come back to your relationship with your first chair! Perhaps more than anything else, a healthy relationship with your senior pastor is the best way to counteract being stretched too thin. Does your first chair know how you are setting your priorities and how you are spending your time? Are your gifts and passions something that he or she understands and appreciates? If you cannot give an affirmative answer to these questions, then your first chair cannot know that you are feeling overwhelmed. If you have proven to be a loyal and effective second chair leader, your senior pastor will gladly add to the list of duties. But he or she also wants you to thrive in ministry *for the long haul*.

This means that you have an opportunity and a responsibility when you feel overwhelmed. Be sure that you have demonstrated your competence and your diligence to your lead leader, so that there is no question about your work ethic and commitment. Once you have done this, then you have can (and should) have that conversation about rebalancing your work load. The conversation should be shaped around the ministry's overall priorities, not just about your personal needs. But remember that the health of the key leaders is one of those priorities. When is the last time you had this kind of conversation with your first chair?

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The work is not going away, which means that second chair leaders will always feel the stress and stretch of having too many irons in the fire. You cannot control that. But you can control how you respond, and in doing so you can keep from being overwhelmed in the second chair.