



accountabili-buddy

— CLARITY. COMMITMENT. FOLLOW THROUGH. —



CASE
STUDIES

CASE STUDY 41

OVERWHELM VS. PERFECTIONISM

1. TRAINING OBJECTIVE

Distinguish overwhelm produced primarily by workload demands from overwhelm amplified by excessively demanding standards for how a task must be completed.

The trainee should recognize that the client's experience of overwhelm does not, by itself, establish what is producing it.

2. CLIENT PROFILE

Client: Lauren

Goal: Prepare a quarterly business review

Current Commitment: Complete the presentation by Friday.

3. RELEVANT HISTORY

Lauren has five days remaining before the presentation is due.

The presentation requires approximately 20 slides and is based largely on data that already exists.

Lauren has described the project repeatedly as "massive."

The available evidence does not establish how much usable work time Lauren has during those five days.

4. CLIENT MESSAGE

Accountabili-Buddy: Where are you with the presentation?

Lauren: Barely halfway.

Lauren: It is just too much. Every slide needs to be perfect, the charts need to match, the wording has to be tight, and I keep finding numbers I want to double-check.

Accountabili-Buddy: What does the review actually require?

Lauren: Mostly that the leadership team understands the numbers and the main decisions.

Lauren: But I hate showing anything that looks rough.

5. TRAINEE TASK

What are the strongest competing formulations?

What evidence supports genuine workload overload?

What evidence supports an excessively demanding performance standard?

What remains unknown about the actual requirements and Lauren's available capacity?

What information would materially distinguish the formulations?

What would you say next?

6. EVIDENCE ANALYSIS

FACTS

- The presentation contains approximately 20 slides.

- Much of the underlying data already exists.
- Lauren has five days remaining before the presentation is due.
- The evidence does not establish how much usable work time she has during those five days.
- Lauren reports repeatedly working on wording, chart consistency, and data verification.
- She says every slide needs to be “perfect.”
- Lauren describes the presentation's primary purpose as helping the leadership team understand the numbers and main decisions.
- Lauren explicitly says she dislikes showing work that appears rough.
- The evidence does not yet establish which elements of Lauren's checking and refinement are required for an adequate business review and which reflect her preferred standard.

CLIENT INTERPRETATION

Lauren experiences the project as overwhelming and describes it as “too much.”

Her explanation emphasizes the amount of work involved in bringing each component to the standard she believes it needs.

ACCOUNTABILI-BUDDY INFERENCE

Lauren's experience of overwhelm is genuine.

The evidence suggests that the amount of work she is creating through her applied performance standard may be contributing substantially to that overwhelm.

Her statements that every slide needs to be “perfect” and that she hates showing anything that looks rough make an excessively demanding standard a strong competing formulation.

However, the Accountabili-Buddy does not yet know Lauren's actual available work capacity or which presentation requirements are legitimately necessary.

Some data verification, formatting consistency, and careful wording may be appropriate for a quarterly business review.

The relevant distinction is therefore not between “necessary work” and “perfectionism” based on the Accountabili-Buddy's judgment alone.

The Accountabili-Buddy needs to help Lauren distinguish the standard required for the presentation to fulfill its purpose from additional standards she is imposing because she would prefer the work to be more polished.

7. PRIMARY FORMULATION

Lauren's applied performance standard is likely increasing the effective workload and contributing substantially to her experience of overwhelm. Genuine workload demands remain relevant because actual requirements and available capacity have not yet been fully established.

8. ALTERNATIVE FORMULATIONS

GENUINE WORKLOAD OVERLOAD

The presentation may require more legitimate work than Lauren can reasonably complete within the time and capacity available.

Twenty slides, financial data verification, preparation of charts, and communication of business decisions may represent substantial work even when unnecessary polishing is removed.

The evidence needed to evaluate this formulation includes actual requirements and Lauren's usable work capacity before the deadline.

EXCESSIVELY DEMANDING PERFORMANCE STANDARD

Lauren may be increasing the effective size of the task by applying standards beyond what is necessary for the presentation to fulfill its purpose.

Her language about every slide needing to be perfect and her discomfort with anything appearing rough support this formulation.

The strength of the formulation depends on whether the work she is adding actually exceeds legitimate presentation requirements.

MIXED FORMULATION

The presentation may be genuinely demanding while Lauren's preferred standard adds additional work.

Under this formulation, neither reducing the task nor challenging the performance standard alone necessarily addresses the full problem.

9. MISSING INFORMATION

The key distinction is between:

- what the presentation legitimately requires to fulfill its purpose;
- what Lauren prefers the presentation to look like before she is comfortable showing it;
- and whether the legitimate workload fits the time and capacity she actually has available.

The Accountabili-Buddy does not need to determine the professional standard for Lauren.

The useful inquiry is to help Lauren identify which requirements are necessary and which reflect additional preferences, then evaluate the workload that remains.

10. RECOMMENDED RESPONSE

“Some of this may genuinely be a lot of work. I’m also hearing two different standards in what you’re describing: what the review needs in order to communicate the numbers and decisions accurately, and what you would prefer before you’re comfortable showing it. Which of the things you’re still polishing or checking are actually required for the presentation to do its job?”

11. REASONING

The response does not dispute Lauren's experience of overwhelm.

It also does not accept "too much" as a complete explanation for what is producing that experience.

Instead, it separates task volume from the performance standard being applied to the task.

The question does not tell Lauren which elements are unnecessary. Lauren is asked to identify the legitimate requirements of her own work.

This matters because the appropriate accountability response depends on what remains after those standards are clarified.

If the legitimate workload exceeds Lauren's available capacity, workload or commitment design becomes more relevant.

If substantial work is being generated primarily by standards beyond what the presentation requires, reducing task volume without addressing those standards may leave the same problem intact.

Both factors may also be operating simultaneously.

12. PLAUSIBLE ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE

"I think we need to separate how much work the presentation actually requires from how much work is being created by the standard you're applying to it. Of what you're doing right now, what is necessary for an accurate, useful review, and what is additional polish you would prefer?"

13. WEAK RESPONSE EXAMPLES

WEAK RESPONSE A

"You are overwhelmed. Break the deck into smaller pieces."

Problem: Task decomposition may make the work easier to organize, but it does not establish what is producing the excessive workload. Each smaller component could still be held to the same demanding standard.

WEAK RESPONSE B

"You are just being perfectionistic."

Problem: The response converts a plausible formulation into a conclusion and dismisses the possibility that the presentation contains substantial legitimate work.

WEAK RESPONSE C

"Do fewer slides."

Problem: The response changes the task before establishing whether slide volume, legitimate requirements, available capacity, or Lauren's applied standard is creating the problem. The Accountabili-Buddy also does not know whether fewer slides would satisfy the work requirement.

14. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

If Lauren identifies substantial work that reflects her preferred standard rather than an actual presentation requirement, the Accountabili-Buddy can help her make that distinction visible and ask how she wants to approach the remaining work.

If the legitimate requirements still exceed the time and capacity Lauren has available, the Accountabili-Buddy can help her examine whether the existing commitment remains workable.

If Lauren determines that some elements she initially considered "perfectionistic" are actually necessary for accuracy or the business purpose, those requirements should remain part of the workload rather than being removed merely to reduce pressure.

If both legitimate workload and an excessively demanding standard are contributing, the formulation should preserve both factors.

Lauren retains ownership of any resulting decision about her work, standard, or commitment.

15. RECORD / UPDATE

Goal: Prepare quarterly business review

Current Commitment: Complete presentation by Friday

Current Status: Approximately halfway complete

Current Issue: Presentation experienced as overwhelming

Relevant Evidence: Approximately 20 slides; much of underlying data exists; repeated wording, chart, and data refinement; explicit “perfect” standard; discomfort showing work that appears rough

Current Formulation: Applied performance standard likely increasing effective workload; legitimate workload and available capacity remain relevant

Missing Information: Actual required standard and usable work capacity before deadline

Next Question: Which remaining elements are necessary for an accurate and useful presentation, and which reflect additional preferred polish?

16. SCORING CRITERIA

Full-credit responses should:

- Validate Lauren's experience of overwhelm without automatically accepting her explanation for its cause
- Distinguish task volume from the performance standard applied to the task
- Recognize excessively demanding standards as strongly supported without treating them as the only possible cause
- Preserve genuine workload overload as a plausible competing formulation

- Recognize that legitimate workload cannot be evaluated without considering Lauren's actual available capacity
- Distinguish required work from preferred polish
- Avoid assuming that checking, formatting, or refinement is inherently unnecessary
- Avoid having the Accountabili-Buddy determine the professional standard for Lauren's work
- Maintain a mixed formulation when the evidence supports multiple contributors
- Avoid premature task or scope reduction
- Identify the smallest useful inquiry capable of clarifying what is generating the effective workload
- Preserve Lauren's ownership of any resulting decision about her work, standard, or commitment