Stress, Overload, and a More Sustainable Life · About 4 minutes

When Help Still Leaves You in Charge

The difference between completing a piece and carrying the responsibility

“I said I'd help. Why are you still upset?” The offer brought relief for a moment. The work of keeping track is still here.

Because sometimes help completes a piece of the work while leaving you responsible for making the whole thing happen. You are still remembering the deadline, answering the questions, and noticing what has not been done. The contribution may be genuinely useful. The relief you expected may still be absent.

Before concluding that you can't let go, it is worth checking what was actually handed over.

Luis and Bea are fictional volunteers preparing a community newsletter. Bea offers to collect event notices. Luis assumes she will contact contributors, check dates, and put the notices in the shared document. Bea expects Luis to send the information to her. On the evening before publication, he is chasing missing notices while she wonders why he is dissatisfied with the formatting she has completed.

They agreed to the words “collect the notices.” They attached different responsibilities to those words.

Follow the work all the way through

A clearer conversation would address the sequence rather than repeat the offer. Who contacts contributors? Who follows up when a notice is late? Who checks the date? If the person responsible becomes unavailable, who needs to know?

These questions can sound fussy until a deadline arrives. Then the unassigned parts usually return to whoever was already watching for them.

Bea may be willing to own the entire collection process. She may only have time to format what she receives. Luis may prefer to retain coordination and accept that narrower help. A full handover isn't inherently better; the arrangement needs to match the task and their capacity.

Bowen's systems perspective makes room for a considered position alongside realistic dependence on others.[1] In shared work, this can mean saying clearly what you need while allowing an honest answer. It also means hearing a limit before building a plan around help that isn't available.

There is another possibility worth considering. Luis may keep checking because Bea's adequate version differs from his preferred one. If so, the difficulty includes his standards. If she is missing agreed notices, the concern is follow-through. Those accounts deserve different responses. Neither “you never help” nor “you can't let go” is a sufficient investigation.

Try tracing the newsletter's unfinished work without deciding who is at fault. Bea has formatted the information supplied. The missing notices still need collecting. No one has confirmed who will do that. A specific gap is easier to address than an accusation about either person's character.

Once an agreement is reached, conduct matters. A kind response may be followed by another missed deadline. A disappointed response may still lead to dependable work. Let what happens inform the next arrangement.

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Where requests lead to threats or retaliation, greater openness is not the task. Confidential advice and practical protection may be needed. In less dangerous but persistently unreliable situations, another source of support may be more useful than another explanation.

Help changes that load when it reaches the remembering and organizing as well as the job itself.

When the task comes due, notice who remembers. That will tell you more about how much help has actually arrived.

Companion reading · When There Is More to Carry Than One Life Can Hold

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Stress, Overload, and a More Sustainable Life (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. (n.d.). Differentiation of self. Source.

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