

## #145: Project Deconstruction: The Key to Efficiency



### **Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**

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I'm Melissa Shanahan, and this is the *Velocity Work* podcast, episode number 145.

This podcast is for attorneys who are running their own firms. We explore tactics, tools, and stories related to pushing tasks and simply lawyering well and into building a successful firm. Working in your firm and working on your business are two very different things. This podcast focuses on the ladder.

Hey, everyone, welcome to this week's episode. We are going to be talking about today is project deconstruction. This concept is so important and will help you be much more productive if you understand how to deconstruct a project. Everything we're going to go into today is very simple and will make the path forward for you easier. You will experience more ease and more flow with getting things done if you follow the steps we go over today.

When you know that you need to get something done, but it has many steps, you will notice likely you don't actually write down all of the steps. You just write down the main thing, the main event, and maybe you schedule time for yourself to work on that main thing. When it comes time to show up to work on that thing, you don't actually know exactly what you're supposed to be doing in that hour; you're just supposed to dig in. That is a terrible way, a very inefficient way to approach your work. Not only is it frustrating, and it gives room because there's you have to kind of find your way into the projects because you didn't map out the steps that you were supposed to take in that hour that you gave yourself on your calendar.

So, in that weird space where you're kind of trying to get into the groove, you open yourself up to being distracted. There is no dropping straight in because you don't know where to drop in. So, you open yourself up for more distractions if you don't list out the steps. I want each of you to think about there's something that you probably have on your plate that needs to be done, and you keep thinking this needs to be done, this needs to be done, but it isn't just a single step. It's a series of mini-steps that will need to be taken in order for that thing to be done.

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So, your first job is to, at the top of a page, write down the name of the project and then start brain-dumping all of the different steps that need to happen in order for that project to be considered complete. It will be messy. It will fill all over the place. It will feel like a verbal vomit on a page, but that's exactly the way it should be. That is the first step to deconstructing a project.

Put the project at the top of the page, and then just start listing all of the things that need to be done. Now, I often when I'm sitting down to do Monday Map, which is an awesome practice. You should go get your hands on the guide that I have. It's—Go to [velocitywork.com](http://velocitywork.com) you'll see it pop up. It'll allow you to get the guide, but when I am doing my Monday Map, I will brain dump all of the things that need to get done that I can think of.

My job is to empty my brain so that I free up brain space in order to be effective and to give full brain power to execution instead of holding these things in my head. David Allen, who is the founder of Getting Things Done he's quoted as saying your brain is meant for having ideas, not holding them. I think of that all of the time. If I feel like I'm holding ideas, thoughts, or things I need to remember in my mind. My job is to get them out of my head and onto paper because it's the only way that I can use them as fully as possible, my brain to get the results I'm trying to create.

Instead of trying to kind of hang on to these bits and pieces of here, and then the rest of my—it's like this undercurrent, and then the rest of my brain can get focused. No, no. That's not an efficient way or an effective way to move forward. So, when I'm doing Monday Map, I'll do a brain dump, and I will see things on there that aren't clear enough. I will see things on there that need to be broken down further.

For example, I have something that I had down on my brain dump. It said June event. Okay. What is that? Right? Like, what am I supposed to do with that? I even could have said the plan for the June event. There are so many moving pieces to this. What I'm referring to is I am putting together

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an opportunity for mastery group members to come in person if they want to in June.

Normally our retreats are virtual, and we will continue to do that, but when I can, I want to offer that if people want to come, they absolutely can come to our turf, our offices, and we will facilitate the retreats, but in person, which is super fun. Alright, so my team and I need to get this together, which is top of the line for me. These things need to be done, and I will not be doing all the steps. But I am going to map this out and then work with my team on it.

So, the June event is at the top, and here's why a first pass at getting things out of my head look like this, reserve the room, create a document with event details for internal use, so everyone is super clear on who, what, when, and why. Create a registration page for participants. Create an invitation, create communication emails and such, the necessary communication, and create workflows. Okay.

Most of what I just said, there are projects within the project. It's still not clear enough. I can't put create workbooks on my calendar. Like, what am I doing there? Am I designing the content? Am I pulling diagrams? Am I having images made to help explain the concepts better? Like, there's a lot that goes into creating workbooks. Everything I just wrote is still a project. I have to break it down further.

Then, I go back, and I look at creating a registration page, for example, and I ask myself what are all the steps needed in order for this page to be created? Here's what I wrote. Decide the URL determine how to turn it off after a certain number of registers because we have a limit to what can be in the room. So, we have to be able to automatically find a way that when it hits a number, it turns off so that more people don't register than we can have. Create images that will be going on the page. Create the actual page and test its functionality of the page. Okay.

This is better. Now, I will be delegating likely most if not all of the things that I just read you, but it's still important to think through the steps and

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delegate the steps. Now, my team is getting better and better, and we are working tighter and tighter where I will have to do less and less of this. They will start to handle much of this, but for me, this is new. This is a new company thing. This is my idea, and I am thinking through this.

If I were to just put June event, you can see where you'd get stuck, and you don't exactly know what to do, so then you fly by the seat of your pants, even if you don't procrastinate even if you dig in. You're still flying by the seat of your pants, and it's a really unorganized way to approach getting something done. Now, the reason to be organized and do the planning and thinking upfront is that it will make the execution so much smoother and certain.

So, this is an example of what that looks like. I also have; I broke down what we needed to do to create the invitation. I wrote down all the pieces of communication that I could think of that people would need in terms of you know they're going to need an email to confirm that they're registered. They're going to need emails to give them to prep to travel here. There are things that we've thought through, so I have all of those emails listed out and then creating workbooks.

I need to evaluate the content that we've had before. I need to make some decisions about what we're going to add. I need to have an additional image created. Like, there are things—So, I wrote them all out. That is clear. That is clear. Now, so next to each one, I can go through and mark if it's going to be delegated and mark what's mine. What is mine then I can calendar time to do. This is the right way to approach any sort of project that you have, and remember, a project doesn't have to be big. This is a bigger project, I think, for us and for the company. It's longer-term, but there are projects that look like recording a podcast episode.

That's not enough. That's not broken down enough. For me, I need to think through what are the topics that I'm going to be talking about? What are the resources that I need in order to prepare for that podcast episode? At this point, I have recurring time in my calendar because this is every week. We have to have an episode out, right?

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So, I have time in my calendar to think through topics and resources and prepare for recording an episode. Then, I have time to record the episode. But if I were just to put record the episode on the calendar, not enough. I wouldn't even get to the recording because I would get to that even on my calendar and be like, okay, well, what are we recording? Let's think; let me look back through my list of ideas.

Oh, there was a really good quote about X. Let me look that up, and then by the end of the hour that's scheduled for myself, I'm barely even to the place where I'm starting to record, right? That's the kind of trouble we get ourselves in. So, I want for each of you to think about all of the different things on your plate that could be considered a project by definition, or maybe there's just, it's two or more steps involved and break down the steps.

Then, schedule or delegate the steps. That is the way to move through projects as quickly as possible, without delay, without your own hold-ups. Because otherwise, what happens is the truth from a brain's perspective; this is what happens. You'll have a list of things to do, and on your list will be something big, a big result that needs to be created. And your brain will not focus on it. It will sort of skip over it because there isn't clarity there.

Your brain will go to the things that are super clear, and there's a sense of accomplishment with checking something off really quickly. It's very, very efficient, and you have to remember your brain is all about efficiency. So, it will find the efficient route, period. So, when it comes to spending your time, it's going to look at your list of things to do, and it's going to scan for the things that it can crush, and it can move through pretty quickly.

The things that aren't broken down, it's a little, like, your brain has to stop and think through where to start and what's supposed to be done, and so your brain will skip over it. It will want to skip over it, but if you break down the project into the smaller tasks, your brain can make headway on the tasks really quickly. That is why people let things sit on their list. It's not because they're procrastinators. It's not because they're lazy. It's not because they don't have follow-through.

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No. It's because it's not broken down well enough, which means it's hard for your brain to be onboard. That's all that it means. Doing this sets yourself up so well. I touched on it earlier, but it's worth revisiting for a second. I'm hoping that you can see now how important it is to break things down so that when you schedule a time to do the thing, you actually put that step as an event on your calendar.

Then, it allows you to drop in really quickly. For people who put just a topic on their calendar and then there are things to do, but they aren't specified, what ends up happening is your brain can't find the path, the easiest path to do a great job with the topic, and so it's so much more susceptible to dings and pings and going off track, mentally just going off track. Thinking about things that you could be doing, should be doing, call your mom, need a snack, need to go to the bathroom, and really you're supposed to be showing up for this topic on your calendar, but that's why it's so easy for your brain to get off track is because there isn't a specific job for it.

You have to give a specific job. Another way I've heard this talked about recently, which I thought was brilliant, was to treat your brain like an employee. Stop and think about that for a second. If you thought about your brain as an employee and you're a good boss, right? Like, you're not a crappy boss. Your brain is not a crappy employee. It can be a really good, healthy working relationship, but your brain is an employee. If you think about that for a second, it totally shifts how you approach giving your brain what it needs to be successful. This is a really great example of giving your brain what it needs to be successful. It needs specificity.

So, if you could break down steps so that it knows exactly what to do, it can knock it out of the park for you, but if you don't do that, then that's where delay happens, and procrastination and putting things off and then you want to blame yourself for it, and it's nothing to do with your—You're making it personal. This isn't personal, and I often say to people make it math—facts, not feelings.

So, give your brain as many facts as possible to be able to execute on. And by facts meaning, like, you need to get this done, you need to get this

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done; those are facts. The more you can do that, the better off you are with experiencing a sense of ease and flow toward the things that need to be done. Every single client I work with, whether it's a private client or a member of mastery group, at the turn of every quarter, every single client that I work with, whether they're a private client or a member of mastery group. It's always facilitated to set goals and to set rocks.

Now, if you aren't familiar with goals and rocks and the difference between them, there is an episode called Goals Vs. Rocks that you can go back and listen to. We'll put that in the show notes, but rocks are essentially projects. That's the easiest, simplest way to look at them. So, they determine what their rocks need to be, and then we have pages dedicated in the workbook for rock deconstruction. This is their chance to break down each of these projects into its smaller components and into the smallest steps possible.

Then, they can see what they can delegate, what they need to get done, and also another very important step is that if they get them broken down small enough, they can put down the amount of time that's required for that one step. And that is really helpful. We will talk more about that in just a second. So, there are pages in each workbook dedicated to this, and that's because it's so important. If they don't take the time to do this, they will delay on starting their rocks.

So, they'll get mid-way into the quarter or a month into the quarter, and it's like, oh, I need to get going on these. But their brain does not have clarity on exactly what they're supposed to do. They know the result they're supposed to create, but they don't know what to do. So, things sit. Now, this happens less and less with my clients because I facilitate this. Right? It takes the cognitive load off of you to have to break things down. It's an extremely important step.

They can't skip it. If they skip it, they won't start. They won't start when they should've, could've, and even if they did, it will be inefficient and most likely ineffective. So, this is a very important piece of the work that we do inside of Velocity Work, but it's because it's an important piece for you as a law firm owner. You have to do it.

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Now, I mentioned a moment ago that once you break things down into their smallest components, then you assign a time to each one. That is a very important step. So, as you schedule down all the steps that you can think of, I'm telling you if you ask any member that is a part of the mastery group, and they will tell you, you can't break it down small enough. You just can't because you keep seeing what you can delegate.

The smaller you break it down, you see what you can get off of your plate, and it allows you to be very good at deciding how much time you're going to spend on that thing, right? So, if breaking down to a step to send email to X person, post jobs. So, I just had someone who was going to post for an associate attorney at schools post a job. Well, that's not a step. There are things to think of through that, right? Like, okay, we need to contact these three schools, and we need to draft XY and Z. There are things that you have to think through. You can't just go post a job at a school. There are more steps involved.

So, the more that you think through it, the better off. Now, that was a part of a bigger rock or hiring an associate. So, hiring an attorney is one of their rocks, and one of the components of that rock is to post a job at a school, but that's not its smallest component. So, for that part, that little sub-project that's a part of hiring an attorney can be broken down into steps, into tasks, and then, many of those, maybe all of them can be delegated, but it's not something you'll delegate initially because you don't see that you can delegate all of the steps because you don't know what all of the steps are.

So, thinking through this is remarkably helpful and important to you as a law firm owner. So, now, putting the time next to each component allows you. If it's yours, it allows you to schedule time on your calendar specifically for that thing. That is brilliant because sometimes we'll just put 30 minutes on the calendar or an hour on the calendar or something, and we needed like 15, but we didn't think it through. So, we soaked up extra time on our calendar, which was a waste because we could have actually after that 15-minute thing to get like two more things are done, right?

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You could've scheduled two more things in that same amount of time. The more specificity you can bring to this on the front end, the easier you will flow through it. And so, that includes, just as we talked about, doing a brain dump of all of the things that need to happen to complete the project. Breaking each of those things down into its smallest components and then putting an amount of time next to each item. If you're going to delegate it, you don't have to do that unless you just want to. But I don't usually.

I will just go through first and see what can I delegate here, and I mark the things that I need to do, and then I make a decision about how much time I'm going to give myself to do that thing. If I don't know, it's probably not broken down small enough. So, word to the wise, man, people want to skip this step of putting amounts of times next to each thing, but that is a mistake. It is a mistake. It is a mistake.

People think it's not because they haven't ever done it this way before. It just seems so frivolous and unnecessary, but it helps you immensely because it adds specificity. This means you can be more specific on your calendar. That means that more can get done. Or the appropriate amount can get done, because also sometimes people undercut. They'll put 20 minutes on their calendar for something or a half-hour, and they need an hour. Thinking through this ahead of time allows it to go smoothly. There are so many things that are on your plates that are important and meaningful and will help your firm and will help you achieve the results that you want to achieve.

Whether that's hiring someone, whether that's implementing a new system into your firm or process, whether that is implementing a new piece of software into your firm, all of these things are meaningful. You want to get them done, but there isn't enough specificity in order for you to take action easily. It's heavy. It's vague. It's grey. It's unclear how to really move forward, and that's just because there is enough specificity. Listen, if you sit down, and you're like, I genuinely don't know where to start. I do not know all of the steps of this.

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Then, do you know what your step is? There's one step you do know you need to find out what the next step is. So, for me, oftentimes, that means scheduling a call with an expert or scheduling time on my calendar to research XY and Z. Then, I'll have enough information to know my next few steps, right? So, don't let the I don't know stand in your way. It doesn't matter that you don't know. Be active about that, and just there's one to do. That means there's one to do, and it's to carve out time to gain the knowledge about what the next steps will be.

Go break down some projects. Go sit down, make a list of all the things you've been wanting to do, haven't done, you've put off, maybe you've put the time in your calendar, but you didn't show up for it because you got busy and your brain didn't know what to do with it. Go sit down and think of all the things you'd love to accomplish for your firm that isn't just a single step. There's more required, and then pick one of those and break it all the way down. That's called constraint, and we believe in constraint over here.

You pick one thing, and you commit to that project. You break that project all the way down into its smallest components, and then you go through and figure out what is yours and what is going to be delegated. The things that are yours, you put an amount of time next to each of those things, and then you calendar those things, and you delegate the rest. See this all the way through until it gets completed, and then move on to the next thing. The constraint is extremely important. There's an episode on constraint that could be useful if you feel like you commit to too many things at once; that's episode number 40. If that sounds like something, you might need to listen to. Happy project deconstructing. You've got this. Alright, everybody, I'll see you here next week.

Hey, you may not know this, but there's a free guide for a process that I teach called Monday Map, Friday Wrap. If you go to [velocitywork.com](http://velocitywork.com), it's all yours. It's about how to plan your time and honor your plans, so that week over week, more work that moves the needle is getting done in less time. Go to [velocitywork.com](http://velocitywork.com) to get your free copy.