

Stress and Leadership

Stress happens. It is a part of life. It always has been. It always will be.

For those in leadership, the pressure can be especially troublesome. Because you hold a position of responsibility, everything that you say and do influences the lives of others. Each decision you make affects not only the organization, but everyone around you. Make a good decision, and there are positive outcomes. Make a poor decision, and there are consequences.

This is normal and to be expected. Yet, when you add an economic downturn with unstable financial markets to the leadership picture, you have a combination for massive stress. Every decision and action becomes even more critical as the pressure grows to do more with less while maintaining the current level of performance.

The Leadership Challenge

In a survey conducted in 2006, the Center for Creative Leadership looked at the amount of stress that leaders experience related to their work. The study revealed that 88% of leaders found work to be a primary source of stress, and that having a leadership role increased their stress by 75%. In addition, most indicated that their level of stress had grown by 65% in the last 5 years.ⁱ

What is the message from this study? Being a leader is stressful. The more that is given to you to do, the more that is expected of you. Some might say, "It goes with the territory."

It is something like living in a fishbowl. When you are the leader, every word and action becomes magnified importance. While this is easy to say, for leaders, it is more difficult to manage.

Stress Comes in Layers

The leader's personal life goes wherever he or she goes. Health and well-being, children, financial responsibilities, time management, and overall ability to deal with pressure are all parts of each person's thoughts on a daily basis. You will often hear people say, "Leave your personal life at home." While you know this to be practiced, you also know your personal life is not a "light switch" that can be turned on or off automatically. These areas of personal concern are in the background all of the time.

Combine your personal pressure with leadership pressure, and you have added another layer of stress. Each leader faces responsibilities, people, relationships, expectations, and goals for performance. You can't walk away from them. You can't forget them. They go with you wherever you go.

So at the same time you're serving as a leader, you are also living as a person. Under each layer there are different pressures and challenges and experiences. Being aware of the events and stressors is the starting point for managing stress well.

Paying the Price

Stress is costly. Dealing with the pressures of life and leadership, takes a toll on everyone.

When the leader is stressed, he or she may not be doing the best work. Decisions may be made under pressure. Projects may be initiated with an unrealistic time line. Quality of work may drop. It also seems that when leaders are stressed, mistakes happen more often than normal.

There are many definitions for stress. The one that I use most often is quite simple, "It is having too many demands and not enough resources." This can come in many forms. It may not be enough mental, emotional, physical, or financial resources to meet the demands that you are facing.

If the leader tries to operate while feeling the pressure of "too many demands and not enough resources," his or her work will suffer. Relationships will be affected. Communication will be strained.

Stress carries a pretty high price tag.

Strategies for Change

Awareness helps. Accepting the fact that stress is a normal part of our life experience and leadership responsibility makes it a little bit easier to cope. Stress is a part of the fabric of life.

Self care becomes essential. Taking care of yourself physically, emotionally, and mentally is not an option; it is a requirement. You will never be very effective if you do not give good care to yourself.

Learn to take a break. Create a space where you can step away from the pressures for a short period of time. This might mean getting out of the building at lunch or during a break. It also can mean being able to put your mind into neutral for a few minutes throughout the day. Give yourself time to relax and regain your focus.

Re-visit your boundaries. "Yes" and "No" are the great gatekeepers of life. Nothing should come into our life or work without our permission. If we do not exercise the power of "No," then we allow people in advance to violate our sacred space.

Exercise your body and mind. Being able to get out and move around not only gives you new scenery to view, but it gives your mind a way to renew. As you exercise, your mind finds a way

to get away mentally from the pressures. In quiet and unexpected ways, your whole system enjoys some stress relief when you exercise.

The Leaders Responsibility

Why is stress management so essential for leaders? I could talk about self-care and being able to perform at the highest level. Instead, I would like to focus on another thought. Leadership, to a large degree, is about self management. Manage yourself well, and others will be more willing to follow you. Your credibility goes up. People trust you. Your ability to influence and win hearts increases as you manage yourself better. Setting an example that inspires others is a part of being a leader. If you cannot manage the pressures of life and leadership, it calls into question your ability to lead.

ⁱ The Stress of Leadership, Michael Campbell, Jessica Innis Baltes, André M'artin, and Kyle Meddings, The Center for Creative Leadership, CCL, White Paper.