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Get a Better Handle on Leadership Stress

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Tight budgets. Accountability for results. Corporate politics. Employee retention woes. Litigation concerns. Does the mere mention of these stressors accelerate your heart rate? If so, you must be in a leadership position—a manager, a key executive, or perhaps a CEO. Add to that list global manufacturing concerns, R&D challenges, time-to-market pressures, strict quality standards, and today's tough EPA and FDA guidelines and chances are you're not just any leader, but one in the chemical or household and personal products industries.

Workplace stress is a fairly common ailment; lurking among some 40% of the general workforce according to recent studies. However, leadership stress differs greatly from the usual kind suffered by typical employees. For instance, whereas a scientist might lose sleep over an especially complicated calculation that's not working as expected in the lab, his supervisor, head of the R&D department, may be stressing over whether her inability to secure more government funding will cost that scientist his job. An administrative sales assistant may be overwhelmed by her cubicle mate's annoying habits, while her manager is worrying about just how he's going to motivate 25 people to increase their numbers by 30% before the end of the month.

The Leadership **Burden**

The responsibility and accountability that leaders must bear can be a heavy burden. The pressure to meet objectives, manage people and make tough— sometimes life-changing— decisions often weighs heavy on the hearts and minds of decision-makers as they struggle to keep a balance between effectively moving the company toward its goals and keeping those around them happy. And many times, these responsibilities come at the expense of the leader's personal time and peace of mind.

But not all stress is negative. Certain types of stress actually help drive performance and can be the foundation for extraordinary innovation and accomplishment. The pressure to succeed, to meet goals and to beat the competition can be positively channeled into R&D, performance management and competitive strategies that enable individuals, teams and entire organizations to develop breakthrough technologies, devise creative solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems and deliver results that were beyond expectations.

For executives, the problem with stress occurs when the pressure becomes more dominant than the objective. During these times, management styles tend to become more blunt and dictatorial, decisions become rushed and, ultimately, the executive and the organization suffer very real costs as performance falters, and in the worst cases the executive suffers mental and even physical illness.

So what is the solution to stress? As an executive, there are some simple techniques you can use to manage leadership stress and possibly even maneuver it to your advantage. Here are a few guidelines:

Become a Better Delegator

As a leader, you're the one who's accountable for results. Your career rides on the performance of others, as a result you may be tempted to "do it all yourself" or micromanage every task. According to Wall Street Journal writer Kayleen Schaefer in her article, How to Delegate to Others and Lower Your Stress Level, "The reason so many leaders have trouble giving up projects is because they've risen up the corporate ladder by doing everything themselves." But the higher you rise in an organization, the less feasible the DIY strategy becomes. As your responsibilities grow, so does your need to effectively get work done through others. To become a better delegator, expand your skills in the following areas:

Hiring

Do you hire people who are smarter and more technically capable than you are? Most executives say they want to hire the best, but in reality they tend to hire people who are slightly less competent than they are. If you are going to be an effective delegator you must build a team you can trust and hiring the right people is the most important first step.

Training

Once you have the right people on your staff, it's important to make sure your team's skills are kept upto- date. Create a proactive plan to regularly evaluate each person's skills and knowledge, and plan for their future training needs. The more current people's skills are, the easier it will be to delegate with confidence.

Management

Of course, competence alone does not make delegation work. You also need effective managerial systems. While it is beyond the scope of this article to review different management structures and philosophies, your challenge is to find the methods that best provide the information you need and fit the culture of your organization. Ideally, you want a system that ensures people clearly understand their goals—and your expectations—while giving you key indicators to monitor performance and ensure those goals are being met.

Delegation

With the right people and processes, delegation is a much easier task. All that remains is to determine what to delegate and to whom. As a starting point, prioritize the tasks that only you can do—and then get everything else off your desk! Anything that can be done by someone else, should be done by someone else.

When you delegate, provide a concise explanation of what you expect and a clear deadline of when you expect it done. Ask follow-up questions to ensure that the person you are delegating to understands the project and is willing and able to meet the deadlines.

Force Yourself to Take Breaks

As a successful leader, you probably have little or no free time in your workday. But one of the keys to beating stress is to give your mind and body occasional chances to recharge. In other words, take a break once in a while. Here are a few ideas for creating a healthy balance:

- Schedule daily mini-breaks. Plan several mental breaks throughout the day. For example, if you're in front of a computer most of the day, schedule two or three daily three-minute walks. If you're going to be locked in meetings most of the day, use your breaks to step outside, stretch, walk or listen to music. And if your job has you constantly on the move, schedule a five or 10-minute sit-down break every few hours. Balance is about not doing the same thing all day long.
- Strike a better work/life balance. It almost goes without saying that vacation time is crucial to beating stress. And that means a vacation where you're not attached to your cell phone or other remote device. Yes, it's hard to get away from the office, but that's the only real way to unwind.
- Getting beyond vacations. Make time to take stock of your personal priorities and the role that work plays in helping you achieve your objectives. Often, stress is caused by a feeling of being out of control. The simple act of putting things in perspective can help you regain control and have a very positive impact on your mental well-being.

- Tune out at the end of the day. Most leaders take their work home with them each night. Whether you're physically checking email or just thinking about issues at the office, there comes a time when you need to leave your work and leadership responsibilities behind. You need to set personal time boundaries and stick to them. For example, you may decide that you'll turn off your cell phone as you walk in the front door each evening, or that you will not check email after 9 pm. To ensure that your work time is as productive as possible, you need to have time that is truly down time.

Maintain a Positive Attitude

When your leadership stress is at its peak, you may feel down or even doubtful about your abilities. You may find yourself dwelling on the "shoulds" in your professional life—"I should be making more money," "I should be handling this latest project better," "My team should like me more," etc. This is just your stress wearing down your self-confidence and resolve. Don't give in to it.

This is the time to refocus on something positive. One easy solution is to remind yourself of something pleasant in another area of your life, such as your daughter's softball team's big win last night or how proud you felt when you climbed Mount Rainier last month. Another solution is to write down a physical list of your assets and your accomplishments, and when you feel overwhelmed by stress, pull out the list and remind yourself of all the things you have done and the people whose lives you have positively impacted.

Certain stressors inherent to our industry will never disappear. In fact, they may become exacerbated with fluctuations in the economy and availability of skilled employees. Whether it's the pressure of keeping up with industry standards or dealing with tight budgets, leadership stress can have a negative impact on not just your performance, focus and well-being, but that of the company as well. CEOs, senior executives and managers dictate the level of stress throughout the organization. If you delegate efficiently, maintain balance properly and think positively, you will be able to rise above leadership stress and take your team and the company with you!

"The reason so many leaders have trouble giving up projects is because they've risen up the corporate ladder by doing everything themselves."

Kayleen Schaefer, *Wall Street Journal Writer*

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