



Is Stress Negatively Affecting Your Ability to Lead?

Description

In recent webinars I've done, many business owners and leaders have raised questions about how to deal with the mental and emotional stress created by the pandemic lockdown. The isolation and worry are taking a toll. What I know is that if some leaders are talking about the impact of stress, plenty of others are *also* feeling it but choosing to suffer in silence.

In fact, I suspect many leaders may not even realize how much stress they're under. It reminds me of the boiling frog story. Just as the water temperature slowly increases without the frog realizing the danger, stress creeps up on us. Then one day we wake up to find we're in trouble.

Stress can have a huge impact on our leadership style. When leaders are in stressful situations, they sometimes speak to employees in a way they wish they hadn't and employees are hurt. Sometimes employees don't realize how much pressure leaders are under. While we can communicate some of it, it's sometimes hard to give the full scope. If they knew, they might not take it personally.

Even so, as leaders, it's our responsibility to keep our stress in check. When things return to normal (or at least the "future normal"), these employees will forever remember how their leader treated them during these times.

The key is self-awareness. By nature, leaders are action-oriented. We're so used to plowing through one task and moving onto the next one that we may not spend much time thinking about our mental and emotional state. Yet it's deeply important that we do so, in large part because it impacts how we relate to others.

We as leaders should take notice of how we are feeling and be aware of how that cascades into our communication style. Secondly, we should have good people around us who will tell us the truth. We need to ask them regularly how they think we are doing. Ask them, "Do I need to adjust my tone? How am I being perceived by others? Am I reducing anxiety or creating it?"

Too many people are counting on us to help them through these difficult days. We have to get intentional about building up our emotional resources so we don't end up damaging relationships. We certainly don't mean to, but we do. Unmanaged stress can lead us to lash out. And when we do, it isn't

just employees we harm. We may also take our stress-fueled behavior home to our family.

Here are a few tips to help you cope with stress and build your emotional resources:

Remember that leaders set the tone. How you behave sets the tone for how employees feel, how customers feel, and how everyone manages stress. If you fall apart, you make it okay for those around you to fall apart, too. If you move ahead with focus and confidence, so will they.

Don't take your emotional temperature every five minutes but do check in with yourself a few times a day. How do you feel? Tense? Anxious? Restless? Irritable? Are your thoughts racing? Do you feel overwhelmed? Is it a struggle to concentrate? If so, you are likely stressed out. Just being aware of your emotional state may help you avoid lashing out at others or making poor decisions.

Hold up the mirror. Is how you're treating people consistent with who you normally are? For example, do you find that you're short with employees these days? If so, apologize and make the effort to do better. People are more vulnerable now than ever and are looking to you for reassurance, as well as for guidance on how to behave. If you aren't sure how you're coming across, ask several people you trust to tell you the truth.

Practice overreacting in a positive way that people will remember. This will help you counter the urge to be harsh or overly critical. Even if it feels unnatural to you, people will appreciate your enthusiasm, optimism, and gratitude. We all need extra positivity right now (and it feels as good to the person who shares it as the one who receives it). People are feeling incredibly vulnerable, and a little kindness goes a long way.

Set aside a little time each day for mental and emotional self-care. I'm sure you've heard the analogy about putting on your own oxygen mask before you help others. We're all feeling the effects of stress. As leaders we have the responsibility to stay mentally and emotionally well so we can help others do so too. Make this a daily priority.

For example, establishing a morning routine of exercise, prayer, meditation, or journaling can help you set the tone for the day. There are online classes and apps (many of them free) that teach mindfulness breathing, relaxation techniques, and so forth. Keep looking until you find what works for you.

Take care of your physical health too. Mental, emotional, and physical resilience are intertwined. Get some exercise every day if possible. An online fitness class or a short walk outside (making sure to keep a safe distance from others, of course) can make a big difference. Also, pay attention to your diet. When you're stressed, it's easy to overeat "comfort foods" or snack mindlessly throughout the day. How you fuel your body matters now more than ever.

Reach out to other business owners as often as you can. It helps to be with people who face similar issues. Chambers in many communities are serving as informal "support groups" for members. Other business owners may help you solve problems you're struggling with. Even if not, reaching out to them will help you feel less alone. A shared experience is a great connector.

Don't let your stress spill over onto your family. Others in your family may be working (or attending school) from home as well. Respect them. This means being aware of the tone you set: As with employees, your unmanaged stress can infect others in your household. Finally, create work/family

time separation when you can so that you're not constantly holed up in your office.

Find a way to hold someone up. When you learned to ride a bike, someone likely held you up. Now, do the same for someone else on an emotional level. Offer a supportive ear to someone who needs to talk about a hard time they're going through, or offer to mentor someone who is struggling professionally. Be a friend to someone who is lonely. Be a difference maker.

Also, reach out often to close friends and extended family via phone or video chat. We all need the support of loved ones, and they need us. Just a short interaction with them can make a huge difference in your mood, and it will mean a lot to them as well. It's an energy multiplier.

Get professional help if you need it. Resources are available to help leaders and employees alike who are grappling with anxiety and depression. If you suspect what you're feeling goes beyond manageable situational stress, you owe it to yourself and those who count on you to consult a mental health professional. Don't let a fear of stigma hold you back. We all need help from time to time, and the responsible thing to do is seek it when needed.

Finally, know that mindset really matters. It may help to view what we're all going through as a growth experience. The challenges we overcome may leave battle scars, but they may also make us stronger and more interesting.

I've heard it said that it's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that counts. None of us would have chosen the hardships we're facing but we *can* choose how we approach them.

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Author

quint-studer