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Leaders in flames

Burnout is not only about the front lines, says **Eric J McNulty** in this article that looks at how to be ready to lead when and how it matters most

No one works in the crisis space looking for calm days at the office. The adrenaline response of responding to incidents can be addictive. Thus, it is all the more important that crisis leaders understand pressure and stress, and have strategies for dealing with them.

Dr Donna Volpitta of Pathways to Empower explained to me that the human brain seeks two primary states: security and autonomy. Crises can disrupt both. A crisis may have significant financial, reputational and operational continuity consequences, each of which can threaten security. Concurrently, the demands of elected officials, boards, the media, affected individuals and the public may constrain autonomy. Denied the states it craves, the brain always seeks workarounds, according to Volpitta. The trick is to have positive rather than negative pathways to meet those needs.

One missing element is training leaders on the underlying physiological and psychological determinants of selecting productive or counterproductive options. Dr Allessandria Polizzi, a highly experienced human resources leader, shared with me she that there were many more resilience resources for managers to use with their teams than were available to the leaders themselves. She admits to burning out herself, and now builds programmes to address that gap. Her experience reveals an unavoidable truth: Without effective strategies and tools for understanding and managing stress, leaders set themselves up for burnout.

Polizzi noted that each person has a distinct stressor profile. What causes anxiety for you may not be the same thing that worries your team, your boss, or your board. One way to map your profile is to list the things you most value: Personal integrity; financial security; your health; learning; or whatever comes to mind. Activities that threaten those values bring tension. Being clear on and acting consistently with those values helps to counteract it.

And just as important, Polizzi said, is knowing your immediate reaction to your stressors. For each, is it freeze, flight or fight? "Recognising your short-term response is the first step to restoring longer-term perspective and constructive action," she said.

Environmental variables are also important. Some people draw energy from the constant thrum of an emergency operations centre. Others need quiet to focus and process information. Craft a balance that keeps you visible and accessible to followers while giving you space for the sense-making and meaning-making that are essential for grounding your decisions and actions. A walk outside, particularly in the natural environment, is a restorative antidote to the harsh lighting and constant noise of office settings.

Beware the control trap; crises come with disruption. Some is related to the incident itself – the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus has eluded control for almost two years. Other turbulence arises from missteps in the response or actions of other stakeholders. Leaders attempting to exert control over the uncontrollable is among the most common missteps. For example, I have often heard leaders wail that the media is not telling 'their story'. Things are reported that are unhelpful, sometimes accusatory and, at times, even inaccurate.

One strategy we teach at the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard is for leaders to seek order beyond control. Where control increases order, exercise it. However, with the inevitable variables beyond your authority, the temptation to try to dominate them fully only increases frustration and stress. Instead, recognise your limitations even as you work to influence events.

In the media example, accept that news outlets and social media channels cannot be controlled. Yet with regular monitoring and skilful engagement, you can influence the narrative. Call reporters and their editors to correct factual inaccuracies. Disciplined, truthful and transparent efforts can even shift the momentum on social media. This approach increases security, as you have a plan and are exercising it; it also increases autonomy as you exert agency by responding rather than reacting to events.

With staff, over-control translates to micromanagement. Volpitta noted that pressure the brain recognises as a threat becomes stress, with its attendant detrimental effects. While granular control may increase a leader's security and autonomy in the short-term, the benefits evaporate quickly: "Micromanagement decreases security and autonomy for those being managed. They will disengage as they seek their own workarounds," she said. Performance is likely to degrade, stimulating more micromanagement. This becomes a downward spiral that serves neither leader nor followers.

Reversing downward spirals

Instead, hire, train and support good people. Express your confidence in them to build their security and yours. Grant them autonomy to do their jobs within appropriate boundaries. This frees the leader to attend to his or her priorities. These actions stimulate positive chemical reactions in the brain that help counter the potential harmful effects of stress.

It is also important to distinguish between short and long-term strategies. Dane Jensen has spent years understanding the good and bad aspects of pressure. He works with executives as well as elite athletes, including those in Canada's Olympic and Paralympic sport system. In his book, *The Power of Pressure*, he lays out three vectors to consider: Importance; uncertainty; and volume. Each is a multiplier of pressure.

I spoke with Jensen, and he explained that there are distinct short and long-term strategies for handling pressure. For example, to counter uncertainty, taking direct action is effective because it increases certainty – something is being done. Over the long-haul, embracing uncertainty as being inevitable is the smarter move, as it acknowledges reality and because continually taking direct action eventually wears a person out.

Importance is another key vector because in a crisis, everything can seem important. Every media story is 'breaking news' and each stakeholder cries for attention. Jensen advises that in peak moments, focus on what is not at stake. Yes, there has been a cyberattack on your network. At the end of the day, however, your family will still love you. You still have your health. Seeing what is not under threat puts everything else in perspective. In a long duration crisis, such as the pandemic, connect to why the work matters. Focusing on that larger goal and progress towards it triggers positive, sustaining reactions.

"One reason that people burn out is that they never shift from short-term to long-term pressure strategies – especially those people who excel in peak pressure moments such as first responders and business continuity professionals," he said. "Knowing how to make that pivot is critical."

Rank order these two statements: If I fail, my team fails; and if my team fails, I fail.

I put this challenge to leaders in resilience workshops. No matter your choice, there are implications for your potential to burn out, particularly with extended duress as experienced during the pandemic. Neither statement is the 'right' choice. The point is the interdependencies between leader and followers. Leaders often take on the extra burden of ensuring the wellbeing of their team – that's part of leading – yet they neglect themselves. And they tend to blame themselves when one or more team members succumb to pressure, no matter the actual cause. With yourself and others, express gratitude for what is good. Bring hope to adversity as that, too, is part of leading. Be kind. Take time to restore and refresh yourself physically and mentally. This ensures that you'll be ready to lead when and how it matters most.   C-RJ

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