



Mpowerment Matters

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Management Mpowerment Associates

Forward to a Colleague



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Many within an organization feel that the boss always has it easy. Others do the real work and the "leader" gets the glory, the fancy car (with its own special parking space) and a free afternoon or two each week for golf. Those looking up the organization with that sort of viewpoint see the decision-making process as relatively simple and low stress. Little do they know...

It is truly lonely at the top, and yes, the buck does have to stop somewhere. Different types of leaders make decisions in different ways. Some rely more on intuition, others rely on past experience, and still others wait until all of the facts available can be carefully reviewed before a decision can even be considered.

The styles are extremely different and the competencies relied on in the process are also different. How a leader makes decisions can be analyzed and assessed in great detail, and the competencies in which the individual is lacking can be worked on and developed. This is clearly an area where assessment tools such as Hallmarks, discussed last month, can be used to great advantage.

In an organization that relies on quickness and its ability to respond quickly to market conditions or customer needs, having a decision maker who requires a long period of fact-gathering and research, and a period of digesting all of the facts before making a decision, can create amazing dissonance and a number of pressure points. We have spoken in the past of the importance of leaders being aligned with the needs and the culture of the organization, and in the above example, there is a clear lack of that.

Stress is a fact of life in business, and how executives manage their stress and control their emotions are important considerations in determining the strength of their leadership. Athletes need to recover from their exertions, and so do thinkers and doers. Down time is one way to deal with stress, and recognizing when it is needed, and why it is important, is critical to the success of leaders.

But on top of that, Management Mpowerment Associates can work with leaders to develop their ability to handle their emotions, to deal with stress by recognizing those situations in which it tends to arise, and how to cope with it. We can help develop the decision-making process so that it is not painful or agonizing.

Remember, attitudes are habits of thought. Habits can be altered through positive behavior change. So changing how an individual looks at those situations that cause stress, and see how their habitual responses lead to stress, allows us to change those behaviors, thus changing the attitudes and the responses. This is not magic. Like any change, it is hard work. But what would it be worth to eliminate 50% of work-related stress?...How about 75%?

Management Mpowerment Associates is passionate about developing and building leadership behaviors. We would be glad to discuss with you how we can do that.

Leadership Power Stress: Creating Renewal

"Power stress is part of the experience that results from the exercise of influence and sense of responsibility felt in leadership positions."

-Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee

Effective executives often find themselves caught in a cycle of stress and sacrifice, without any possibility or time for recovery or renewal. Most of those who make it to the top have proven track records for influencing others, getting teams to work together and achieving results.

Such leaders are what organizational psychologists Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee call "*resonant leaders*": they are in tune with others and have high degrees of emotional intelligence, and strong motivation for power and achievement.

"Yet even the most resonant leaders - whose ability to deftly manage their own and others' emotions to drive their companies to great results - end up spiraling into dissonance," the authors write.

Leaders are especially prone to "power stress," which can drive talented leaders into a cycle of dissonance with themselves, the people they lead and their organizations. To counter it, leaders must learn to manage themselves effectively.

Sources of Stress

Leaders are now faced with unprecedented challenges: managing in global business environments, using technological innovations while maintaining security measures and achieving results in unstable times. They also find it extremely difficult to sustain their effectiveness - and resonance - over time, with organizations constantly calling upon them to give more. Little value is placed on renewal or developing practices and habits that create and sustain resonance.

In fact, many organizations overvalue and encourage certain destructive behaviors, such as working long hours. They tolerate discord, as long as results are achieved. They fail to provide time or encouragement for cultivating skills and practices that ameliorate stress' negative effects.

What Causes Power Stress?

Leaders must exercise power, influencing others to make things happen - and it's lonely at the top. They experience increased stress because they:

- Must make important decisions with conflicting and complex data
- Must influence others over whom they have little authority
- Have a dominant need for power
- Value power and achievement over affiliation with others
- Must continually achieve results-no matter what
- Lack realistic and authentic feedback from others
- Constantly fight fires, solve problems and contend with crises
- Are held responsible for uncontrollable events
- Are more visible to stakeholders, the public and customers
- Are subject to unrelenting evaluation from peers, boards and competitors
- Must exercise constant self-control
- Must place the good of the organization above personal impulses and needs
- Work for organizations that encourage self-sacrifice and long hours, while undervaluing renewal, recuperation and relaxation

A shift from occasional episodes of power stress to daily experiences leads to chronic stress - a condition that has deleterious effects on the immune system and one's overall health. Even worse, power stress leads to destructive psychological states. Leaders may withdraw to protect themselves or strike out at others, inappropriately expressing anger. Some may double their efforts to achieve results and, in the process, miss important information from colleagues. This further alienates people, who may begin to perceive the leader as arrogant and unreceptive.

Power stress causes a leader to go from resonance to dissonance. Once this happens, there's a lack of trust and, consequently, a lessening of influence over the troops. Results falter, and the leader becomes ineffective, downwardly spiraling toward burnout.

The problem lies with a lack of renewal time. As unrelenting pressures and stresses mount, greater attention must be given to recuperation on both the personal and organizational levels. Few leaders have developed the necessary skills to deviate from destructive patterns so they can renew themselves physically, mentally and emotionally.

Three Keys in the Renewal Process

Awareness

We must learn to recognize the moments when we're out of touch with ourselves and those we lead. We cannot succeed without developing a sense of self-awareness and "other-awareness." Honing this awareness leads to "mindfulness," an appreciation of what's going on inside and around us on several levels.

Hope

Hope contributes to recuperation and renewal, enabling us to believe the future we envision is attainable. Accompanied by an optimistic attitude, hope helps us move toward our goals and visions, while inspiring others.

Compassion

Connecting with other people's wants and needs provides another source of energy and recuperation. Compassion replaces a leader's small-minded, self-centered worries by redirecting his focus to others and helping him sidestep the trap of arrogant self-absorption. This shift allows leaders to renew their spirit, which is crucial for sustaining themselves and maintaining leadership efficacy.

The Brain and New-Age Rhetoric

Recent studies in management science, psychology and neuroscience all point to the importance of developing mindfulness, hope and compassion. It boils down to the brain, which processes information and sends signals to the sympathetic or parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic system is activated in response to a stressor (positive or negative). This part of the nervous system sends us into action (fight or flight).

The parasympathetic nervous system responds to events that are perceived as relaxing, enjoyable and calming. When activated, it counteracts symptoms of stress in the body.

Here are some common recovery rituals that involve the parasympathetic nervous system:

- Meditation
- Walking (also a way of meditating)
- Yoga and stretching
- Sports (team or individual, competitive or noncompetitive)
- Dancing, singing and listening to music
- Viewing films
- Reading books (novels and business-related)
- Doing volunteer work
- Teaching classes
- Participation in religious or philosophical groups
- Hobbies
- Family projects

There's a big difference between effective leadership practices that can be defined and empty words found in popular magazine articles. The notion that power stress can be managed by employing mindfulness, hope and compassion for renewal is not only logical, but also validated by scientific research.

As with many leadership development tasks, it's often best to engage the services of a qualified executive coach.

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