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Managerial stress can wreak havoc on leaders and managers. You can let it overwhelm you into paralysis or you can have a plan to execute effectively in its face.

Many new managers believe they should be able to arrange their work life so that there will be no stress. But stress cannot be avoided. Occasionally, it will come calling. How you react to it is the key. You cannot always control what happens; what you can control is how you react to what happens to you.

What causes work-related stress?

There are numerous causes. We all have different thresholds to what is stressful for us. But anything that takes our body or mind out of whack is stressful. Here are some typical work-related stressors: receiving no direction from the boss; computer failures; poor time management; constant interruptions; performance pressures; priorities constantly changing; upper management constantly changing; mergers; downsizing; reorganizations; organizational politics; bringing personal problems to work; and working long hours for extended periods of time.

No doubt you can relate to these stressors, but there is some relief.

As you proceed through your career, especially if you are a manager, the stress you feel in repeating situations diminishes over time. Most of what seems stressful when you're new in management will seem ordinary and even mundane after you're experienced.

Go back in your memory to the days you were taking driver education to learn how to safely operate an automobile. The first time you got behind the wheel was quite stressful. With experience, your ability to drive improved to the point that driving now seems as natural as brushing your teeth. The situation has not changed, but your experience and reaction to it has changed.

Quite often, managers walk around

looking deep in thought, with burrowed brows. When people notice this demeanor on a continuous basis, they begin to think you are stressed out enough that either you can't think clearly or you can't figure out how to guide them through a tough and/or demanding situation. Your demeanor is contagious, and not always in a good way.

It's hard to think clearly when you are uptight and nervous--those reactions will exacerbate the situation. And you add more pressure by worrying about how you will be judged. Get rid of the nerves and stop worrying. Don't "not care" to reduce the stress, rather shift your thoughts and focus to solving the problem--and you'll notice that spotlights shining on your face start dimming.

There are those who believe that stressful situations get the juices flowing and bring out the best in people. You've heard the old saying, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." This is much easier said than done. It can only become true when you get over the fear of a stressful situation. And fear is like pouring the juices of stress down through a very small funnel. As you take notice of the small funnel, you begin fearing you will spill as you pour. The fear of spilling is evident by your facial expression. To alleviate the fear, though, calmly acquire a larger funnel. Upon that acquisition, your fear starts to subside. This is an example of converting the *fear* of a stressful situation into the *challenge* of a stressful situation. Meet the challenge and fear takes a back seat.

If you are going to be a manager who periodically faces stressful situations, here are seven suggestions for you:

- 1) Don't be panicked into impulsive action. It may make matters worse.
- 2) Take several deep breaths and try to relax. Speak slowly, even if you don't feel like it. This instills calm in those around you. It says, "He's not losing his head, and therefore I shouldn't."
- 3) Reduce the situation to two or three key points that could be handled

to remove the urgency of the moment, so that the rest of it can be processed in a nonurgent way.

4) Assign three or four major elements to members of the staff or team to process in parts. Then bring the completed parts together and combine into the whole.

5) Ask for suggestions and ideas from the experienced members of your staff.

6) Think about the problem and not your reaction to it.

7) View yourself as an actor playing the role of the wise, calm, and decisive leader. Play that role to the hilt, and after a while it will cease to be role-playing and will be you.

As a manager, it is important to have confidence in your abilities. You are handling tougher questions than those that came to you before your promotion. If they were all easy, anyone could solve them. You are there because someone saw in you the ability to deal with these more difficult situations. As you move up the corporate ladder, the problems become more complex, or so it seems. The important thing to remember is that your added experience will lighten the weight of the stress. When you've been a manager for a while, you will not react the same way to the same situation as you did the first few months in your managerial career. It will get better.

In the early days in management, just having the job brings elements of stress. That is why so many new managers look intense, as though they are carrying the weight of the world. While the concern and the desire to perform well are commendable, the intensity often gets in the way of getting the job done. Always remember you are managing people in the tasks they need to complete in order to achieve the desired result. You are not leading them out of the trenches, with bayonets attached, across a minefield to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat (that's a whole 'nother column!). So lighten up! Manage and lead with composure.

~ The End ~