

CHAPTER 4

Stress Triggers and Coping Styles of Successful Managers

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ABSTRACT

Managerial roles have become markedly more stressful in today's competitive and fast-changing workplaces. Managers are held accountable for delivering results, leading people, protecting the organisation from external shocks and meeting demanding performance targets, often in conditions of considerable ambiguity. Stress is therefore an inherent part of the day-to-day experience of management. What distinguishes successful managers from others is not that they avoid stress, but that they are able to identify their stress triggers and apply appropriate coping strategies in order to sustain their effectiveness, their quality of life and their performance as leaders over time. This paper reviews the principal sources of stress to which managers are exposed and the coping mechanisms they employ. Drawing on theories of stress, coping, emotional intelligence and organisational behaviour, the authors argue that stress, although potentially harmful, can also produce growth and resilience when it is managed constructively. The paper outlines the internal and external sources of managerial stress, including workload, role conflict, decision-making pressure, interpersonal difficulty and organisational change, and examines the three principal coping styles used by successful managers: problem-focused, emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping. It also considers the part played by self-awareness, emotional self-control, social support and organisational culture in developing adaptive responses to stress. The paper concludes that the deliberate development of sound coping mechanisms matters a great deal, since the way managers cope affects not only their own performance but also the well-being of their employees and the health of the organisation as a whole.

Keywords: Stress triggers; Coping styles; Managerial stress; Work–life balance; Burnout.

1.0 Introduction

Stress in the workplace is now a fact of modern organisational life. New technologies, globalisation, competition and rising performance expectations have transformed the nature of managerial work.

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Managers plan, decide, coordinate, resolve interpersonal conflict and provide leadership, often all at once, and many feel anxious simply because of the volume of what is expected of them. Research suggests that moderate levels of stress can improve motivation, concentration and results. Sustained high levels of stress that are poorly managed, however, lead to burnout, lower job satisfaction, poorer decisions and weaker organisational performance. What distinguishes the highest-performing managers is their ability to recognise the sources of their stress early and to apply effective coping methods so that their effectiveness is preserved under pressure. Organisational psychology shows that stress arises from the interaction between the characteristics of the person and those of the surrounding environment. Managers experience stress in many forms, including excessive workload and deadlines, interpersonal conflict, ambiguity in their duties, ethical dilemmas and responsibility for the performance of others. The burden increases when leadership carries a heavy emotional load, as it does during organisational change or crisis. Many managers nevertheless handle these pressures very effectively, and their resilience lies in the coping styles they have developed to deal with difficult situations, manage their emotional reactions and sustain performance over the long term. Understanding how successful managers cope therefore offers valuable guidance for developing future leaders and for designing organisational support systems and training programmes.

2.0 Concept Explanation: Stress and Coping in Managerial Environments

2.1 Understanding stress at work

Stress may be defined as the psychological and physiological response that occurs when individuals perceive an imbalance between the demands placed upon them and their capacity to meet those demands. In managerial settings, stress frequently arises from high responsibility, accountability for outcomes and the need to make decisions under uncertainty. The managerial role combines organisational goals with human needs, which makes it inherently complex. A manager is expected to achieve performance targets as a representative of the organisation while also motivating and managing employees, resolving conflict and responding to changes in the external environment. When demands exceed the available resources, whether of time, support or authority, stress levels rise. The perception of stress is also highly individual: a situation that one manager experiences as threatening may be seen by another as an opportunity. Managers who can change the way they interpret a stressor generally experience less strain as a result.

2.2 Stress triggers faced by successful managers

Stress triggers are the specific situations or conditions that set off a stress response. For managers, these triggers may be broadly divided into task-related, interpersonal,

organisational and personal stressors. Task-related stressors include workload pressure, tight deadlines, complex problem-solving and performance appraisal. Interpersonal stressors arise from leading diverse teams, handling conflict and dealing with difficult subordinates or superiors. Organisational stressors include restructuring, policy change, job insecurity and market competition. Personal stressors, such as work–life imbalance and self-imposed perfectionism, further compound managerial stress.

Successful managers are not immune to these stressors; they are simply more attuned to recognising them and to responding proactively. Their effectiveness lies in the ability to anticipate stress triggers and to prepare coping strategies in advance.

2.3 Coping styles: Conceptual overview

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals use to manage stress. According to the transactional model of Lazarus and Folkman, coping styles may be broadly classified as problem-focused or emotion-focused. Later research introduced a third category, meaning-focused coping, which involves reframing a stressor in a positive or purposeful light. Problem-focused coping addresses the source of stress directly, for example by improving time management or seeking solutions to work challenges. Emotion-focused coping seeks to regulate emotional responses such as anxiety or frustration, through relaxation, emotional expression or social support. Meaning-focused coping involves finding value, purpose or learning in a stressful experience. Rather than relying exclusively on one approach, successful managers tend to use a flexible combination of all three.

3.0 Relevant Details and Thematic Analysis

3.1 Workload, time pressure, and performance expectations

One of the most common stress triggers for managers is an excessive workload combined with time pressure. Managers frequently juggle multiple responsibilities, oversee several projects and respond to constant demands from stakeholders. Performance expectations from senior management intensify this pressure, particularly in results-driven organisational cultures. Successful managers cope with workload stress through effective prioritisation, delegation and time management. Rather than attempting to control every task, they empower team members and concentrate on high-impact activities. This problem-focused approach reduces the burden and improves effectiveness. Successful managers also set realistic goals and manage expectations in order to prevent the accumulation of chronic stress.

3.2 Decision-making and responsibility stress

Managers constantly make decisions that carry significant consequences for employees, colleagues and other stakeholders. The fear of deciding wrongly, particularly

under uncertainty, is a major source of stress. This burden of responsibility is heaviest in senior managerial positions, where decisions involve financial risk, ethical considerations or the survival of the organisation itself. Successful managers cope with decision-related stress by relying on data, consultation and experience. They seek out different perspectives, engage in collaborative decision-making and accept that uncertainty is an inescapable part of leadership. Emotion-focused coping, such as self-reflection and emotional regulation, helps them manage the anxiety that accompanies high-stakes decisions.

3.3 Interpersonal relationships and conflict management

Dealing with people is one of the most demanding aspects of management because of the emotional effort it requires. Conflict within the team, resistance to change, poor individual performance and simple failures of communication are all common sources of managerial stress. Emotional labour, the effort required to regulate one's own feelings and responses towards others, adds a further burden to the role.

Effective managers are generally highly emotionally intelligent, which helps them connect with people, empathise with them and regulate their own emotional reactions. They treat conflict as a normal feature of organisational life and address it constructively rather than avoiding it, and they draw on peers and mentors for the support that helps them manage their own emotional strain.

3.4 Organizational change and uncertainty

Organisational change, whether restructuring, merger, technological transformation or a shift in policy, creates significant stress for managers. They are expected to implement change while maintaining employee morale and performance, and uncertainty about future roles, resources and outcomes intensifies the pressure. Successful managers cope with change-related stress through adaptability and meaning-focused coping. They frame change as an opportunity for learning and innovation rather than as a threat. Transparent communication, emotional reassurance and active involvement in the change process reduce uncertainty and stress for managers and their teams alike.

3.5 Work–life balance and personal well-being

Balancing professional responsibilities with personal life is a persistent challenge for managers. Long working hours, constant connectivity and blurred boundaries between work and home contribute to stress and eventual burnout. Successful managers recognise that sustained performance depends on attention to physical and mental well-being. They adopt coping strategies such as setting boundaries, taking physical exercise, practising mindfulness and pursuing interests outside work. These emotion-focused and meaning-focused strategies help restore energy, build resilience and prevent long-term stress-related health problems.

4.0 Conclusion

Managers inevitably encounter stressful events in the fast-paced and highly competitive environments in which organisations now operate. Successful managers do not avoid such events; they acknowledge them and manage them deliberately. This article has examined five principal sources of managerial stress: workload pressure, decision-making responsibility, interpersonal difficulty, organisational change and work–life balance. The review of coping styles shows that successful managers draw on a range of techniques, combining problem-focused, emotion-focused and meaning-focused strategies into an approach that suits their own temperament and reduces the harmful effects of these stressors. What makes such approaches effective is flexibility of response, self-awareness and emotional intelligence. By treating stress as an occasion for growth rather than as a purely negative experience, successful managers convert pressure into leadership development. Organisations have a part to play as well, by raising awareness of managerial stress, providing emotional intelligence training and supporting work–life balance. Sound coping is critical not only to an individual manager’s success but also to the sustainable performance of the organisation and the well-being of its employees. In the end, the study of stress triggers and coping styles among successful managers’ points to adaptability, emotional intelligence and adaptive leadership as the qualities that matter most in meeting the demands of the contemporary organisation.

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