

CHAPTER 30

Stress Management Toolkits for Aspiring Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Competitive and career change leadership is not just about position or knowledge. Anyone aspiring to a leadership position has to perform tasks, supervise others and make decisions in a stressful and uncertain environment, often while developing their own leadership style. These circumstances create tension, especially for leaders whose identity has not been solidified. When not managed well, stress has negative effects on performance, decision making and on wellness, but when managed well, it has positive effects on learning, resilience and personal development (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This article outlines what stress is in leadership, the most frequent stressors faced by aspiring leaders (including performance expectations, role ambiguity, time pressure, managing people and the challenge of balancing work and life), and a toolkit of practical things that can be done to manage them. The toolkit covers self-awareness and emotional management, time management and planning, mindfulness and recovery, physical health, cognitive reframing, social support and mentorship, setting boundaries and structured problem-solving among other areas. It asserts that proper stress management is not only a personal stress management issue; it also gives aspiring leaders the calmness, balance and ability to lead sustainably.

Keywords: Stress management; Aspiring leaders; Coping strategies; Resilience; Work–life balance.

1.0 Introduction

Leadership is challenging and complicated. Newly appointed managers, management students or young professionals are often under pressure to perform, to adapt and to build their credibility as an emerging leader.

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They are required to plan work, interact with others, adhere to deadlines, and deal with uncertainty, often without much prior experience. Stress of this nature is a regular part of their work life (Robbins & Judge, 2020). Stress is part of the job when you're in a role of responsibility, but the important thing is how you look after yourself when you're stressed. Without good pressure control, the results can be fatigue, faulty decision-making, emotional burnout and loss of self-confidence. A stress-aware leader can take the responsibility and remain effective over time, if he/she knows what is stressful, how it occurs and how it can be managed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Learning how to manage stress is important for management students who are training to become leaders: it can help them in the present, when they are dealing with the demands of learning and their initial career, and in the future when they will be taking on the responsibility of leading others. Stress management is not a one-size fits all approach, but is unique for each person in terms of what is stressful and what is effective. This article therefore outlines a toolkit of approaches that can be used by the aspiring leader to draw inspiration from as they build their own practice (Northouse, 2021).

2.0 Concept Explanation: Stress in Leadership

2.1 The meaning of stress

Stress is the reaction to the relationship of the demands placed on an individual to the resources they have to deal with those demands. It typically occurs when responsibility is important, when the consequences of a decision are unclear and when the decision has implications for others (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). With responsibilities stacking up, the more recent ones will have more weight and the more the expectations are raised.

When a leader is in his place, he is able to lead his colleagues effectively. Without emotion getting in the way of that decision, it will be easier to make a decision, and by tuning oneself out of the emotional response, one can focus on what the team needs to do instead of the pressure of the moment. This kind of composure enables decisions to be made for the good of all concerned and for the greater good of the organisation.

Thinking, on the other hand, becomes less focused and stability lessens when under continued pressure. Effective leaders do not avoid these moments; instead, they are able to learn from them and adapt. (Goleman, 1998)

2.2 Common sources of stress for aspiring leaders

There are several common sources of stress for aspiring leaders. Some common sources of stress for aspiring leaders are: There are a couple of different types of pressure that come up for many people in a new leadership role, and each of these impacts performance—and ultimately the outcome.

- **Performance expectations.** It is a common experience of new leaders that a lot is expected of them, either explicitly or otherwise. It can become a preoccupation to meet an assumed standard, and when mistakes and setbacks occur, this pressure is added to. This concern can come from senior colleagues, peers, or from within the individual, and this lack of confidence can be especially prevalent when challenging decisions need to be made (Robbins & Judge, 2020).
- **Role ambiguity.** When responsibilities and expectations are vague, decision making is difficult and results are ambiguous. This kind of ambiguity is disturbing to any leader, especially one who's new to it (Northouse, 2021).
- **Time pressure.** When the workload is greater than the time available, there is stress build-up. The importance of a clear order of doing things cannot be overstated here as "prioritising by importance" lessens the need to put in extra effort at the last minute (Robbins & Judge, 2020).
- **Managing people.** People who have to control others create tension. Team members have varying abilities, instructions can be misunderstood and conflicts can occur among team members. This is often the most challenging part of the job for new leaders (Goleman, 1998).
- **Imbalance between work and family life.** Leaders who focus on helping others often forget to get some rest. At times of high demand, self-care takes a back seat, and fatigue builds up behind the facade of ongoing work (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

3.0 The Stress Management Toolkit

Stress management involves a collection of exercises that enable an individual to handle day-to-day challenges in a way that will help them sustain their health, especially during stressful times. It is important for leaders to understand not just that stress management is not about doing what is in front of them, it is also about doing what is right for them. These are all interconnected and happen in parallel, not in order.

3.1 Self-awareness and emotional regulation

Theories of emotion and the importance of self-awareness and emotional regulation. When you have a leader who knows themselves, it is easier for them to deal with pressure because awareness is the key to what happens when the pressure really starts to mount. Knowing what is happening inside their body when they feel it, makes it easier to figure out why they feel it and make changes before problems build up.

Deliberate reflection is important because one does not always see patterns when they happen, only at the end of the day after reflection: "Did this day go well? How? At the end of the day, think about it and notice how. Keeping a challenge alongside the factors that affect it and the potential options available, helps to clear thinking and enable informed

decisions. A working notebook is helpful exactly because it's the record that does not exist elsewhere. The emotional awareness gained through this approach enables an individual to act lawfully in response to stress, rather than reactively, and to stay calm when faced with the challenge.

3.2 Time management and planning

When you have a lot of work and not sure how to start, it's a sure way to cause strain. Manipulating time purposely decreases the pressure and constant sense of urgency, and helps prevent sudden course changes that pressure can create.

The first step is to choose what is truly important and not try to do everything at once, and to divide the larger tasks into smaller ones that can be accomplished in order. Whether it's a written system or a digital tool, many leaders feel it helps them to stay on-top of things when it comes to planning. However, where organisation is part of a routine, time management becomes significantly easier and time management leaders know their priorities better and feel more in control of their working day.

3.3 Mindfulness and recovery

This is the here and now that matters. Being constantly in a state of what if and re-thinking previous decisions and mistakes will eventually become a burden. Slow and steady breath brings focus to the here and now, reducing the immediate sensation of strain and calming the thinking.

Rest periods are also important. The effect is significant throughout a working day and not just for the person taking the break, but for everyone around them; others will feel relieved that a leader is taking what is considered to be a sensible break, and not working without let up. A calm leader makes people feel stable, and a group decodes the stability.

Interruptions help to maintain attention and prevent fatigue caused by prolonged periods of work. Of course, with practice, these habits will help ensure calmness when things don't go as planned, leading to clear thinking on problems that seemed intractable.

3.4 Physical health and everyday habits

Physical health has a significant impact on mental health. Prolonged sitting during a workday can make it easier to feel irritated by minor matters, whilst frequent changes of activity are better for the body and help to clear the mind. Exercise has cognitive as well as physical effects and promotes circulation and oxygenation which helps concentration and processing of information. Some very simple things can make a difference all day long: take your time to get up in the morning, stretch a little, embrace and maintain a certain amount of activity, are all important contributors to energy and help to manage your emotions. Eating habits also have an impact on mood, performance and emotional stability, and it's

worth creating a sensible and deliberate schedule of regular meals, activity and movement throughout the working day.

3.5 Reframing challenges

Problems often seem more burdensome than they actually are and the stress that often accompanies the situation can be more a reflection of how the situation is perceived than the situation itself. Thinking about explicitly what the worst possible scenario is, and what you would do in that scenario, typically makes the current situation seem more manageable, and you see more effective responses. Mistakes are opportunities to learn, which in turn adds confidence over time. When you think about and try out new strategies, you'll have a wider variety of strategies to choose from and will keep a constructive mindset. Recognising one's capabilities, and the options to which they have access, helps to promote balance, and having one's focus on what is going well leads to increased feelings of calmness. It is mostly practice that makes you composed in challenging situations.

3.6 Social support and mentorship

Leaders don't work alone. Even in the face of challenges, there are solutions that become easier to find when colleagues offer support and challenging situations become more manageable when they can be discussed. Mentorship is of great value, especially. The experienced, calm and listening mentor can provide advice and direction during the troubling years and can also provide the advantages of experience and time. In the eyes of a first-time leader, this can really impact them. Collaborative colleagues are just as important, and the best way to find them is to provide them themselves: team members can make any situation easier by offering assistance to each other.

3.7 Setting boundaries and maintaining balance

Without any restrictions, every additional demand puts pressure on when it first occurs and only serves to drain energy and motivation over time. Over-committing can seem like productive activity in the moment but is not sustainable. Setting limits, taking breaks and slowing down when things get more stressful are all sensible reactions. Maintaining a balance between work and rest and between work and other duties helps clear the mind and relieves tensions that have arisen. If strain continues for a long time, or starts to cause problems with health or daily life, it is not a sign of weakness to reach out for help to a qualified professional, or to a trusted colleague or mentor.

3.8 Problem-solving and decision-making

Not completed jobs and unsolved issues are a source of strain. When problems are faced sequentially, setting out definite steps and planning them in advance will enable

problems to be faced directly and problems that might arise in the future to be avoided. It is important to be aware that there will be no perfect decision or solution. When you do, you eliminate superfluous stress. When a leader is visibly calm and composed in a challenging situation, the team members feel confident in their leader, and that will help solve a problem more quickly than if it were debated for a long time.

4.0 The Effects of Stress Management on Leadership

It is important to manage stress effectively to enhance leadership ability, performance and outcomes. Some face pressure better than others and are able to retain a level head even when under pressure. They respond emotionally to their problems in a healthy way and therefore have a more consistent perspective and a clearer mind to deal with those problems better. They also are more capable of leading others and providing a stable working environment.

Where pressure is disregarded, the consequences may include exhaustion and persistent frustration, together with reduced empathy towards colleagues and a greater likelihood of miscommunication within a team. An emerging leader who learns to manage stress gains an advantage that endures and that supports their own health.

Leaders who convey composure influence those around them accordingly, lifting the outlook of a team, easing tension and making substantial demands feel more manageable. This encourages a sense of responsibility among colleagues, which in turn reduces the need for continual direction.

5.0 Conclusion

Stress is a normal feature of leadership, particularly for those still learning to manage their responsibilities and the uncertainties that accompany them. It is not invariably harmful: managed well, it can support growth and resilience and contribute to a person's development as a leader.

This article has examined the sources of pressure commonly encountered by aspiring leaders and set out a practical toolkit for addressing them. Building self-awareness, managing time deliberately, attending to physical health, drawing on support and holding work in balance with rest together provide a workable foundation.

For management students preparing for leadership, stress management is not merely a personal skill but a component of leadership practice. Leaders who manage pressure effectively are better able to guide others and to sustain their effectiveness over the longer term.

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