How Can Leaders Keep Their Teams Calm Under Pressure?

There won't be a leader on the planet who hasn't experienced stress at some point in their life. Stress is a natural human response to pressure and it manifests itself in symptoms such as high blood pressure, exhaustion, nausea and a racing heart.

Being able to manage stress is a critical skill for leaders. So, with this month being National Stress Awareness Month, what should leaders know about managing stress – both for themselves and their teams?

1. Share the struggle

"Many leaders think that if they say words like 'stress', 'burnout' or 'mental health', they will create a problem that wasn't there, and everyone will take time off and feel like they don't have to work hard," says Petra Velzeboer, a psychotherapist, coach and author of *Begin With You: Invest In Your Mental Well-being and Satisfaction at Work*. "In fact, the opposite is true."

Velzeboer says that when we have a shared language about the struggle involved with stress, we open up the path to catch challenges when they're small and support each other to sustain long-term success. "I like to ask my team questions such as what are the biggest challenges they're facing either personally or professionally?" she explains. "But, of course, I have to first give permission to others to answer in a way that feels right for them."

It's also important that leaders talk about the kinds of stressors both they and their team are facing, whether it is the type of healthy stress that's helping them to thrive or whether it is debilitating and making them freeze? "Sometimes we don't have time for setting this up before a particular deadline, in which case it's really useful to debrief after," Velzeboer suggests.

Many negative stressors in teams germinate because of assumptions and a lack of clarity. "Listening to others doesn't mean we have to action everything, but a good leader is clear about what's possible and what isn't," says Velzeboer. "Crucially, they lead by example by managing their own stress in healthy and transparent ways – apologizing when reacting rather than responding and treating the team as a place where we can learn together and evolve our working practices for the future."

2. Manage your nervous system

The nervous system in our bodies initiates our "fight or flight" response to stress. As a result, it makes sense that we should focus on managing our nervous system to alleviate stress in work environments.

A particularly effective group technique is synchronized vagal breathing, according to Jennifer Mann, co-author of The Secret Language of the Body and co-founder of nervous system healing platform Somia. This involves inhaling through the nose for four counts and exhaling for eight counts through the mouth, for three to ten minutes. The technique taps into the science of the vagus nerve, which is crucial for regulating our stress and relaxation responses.

"It allows individuals and groups to transition from the 'fight or flight' sympathetic state to a 'rest and digest' parasympathetic state, cultivating restoration," says Mann.

This collective practice not only eases stress momentarily, it also boosts individual resilience and team cohesion. "The rhythm in synchronized breathing promotes a non-verbal cue for safety and belonging, vital for group stress relief," says Mann. "As leaders implement this practice into regular team meetings or as a daily ritual, they promote an environment where success and health are intertwined with the team's ability to adapt to stress positively and innovatively."

3. Create a culture of effective stress management

"Stress can be contagious and detrimental if there is too much of it," says Anna Eliatamby, director of community interest company Healthy Leadership and co-author of Healing-Self Care for Leaders and their Teams. "To avoid this, leaders must look at their impact and create a culture for effective stress management."

So, how can leaders create an open culture in which people can speak about managing stress? Eliatamby's advice is to say that you would like to discuss how to create a culture in which stress is named, addressed and brought to a level where it is helpful. Ask what is positive and what causes stress at work? Triggers could include issues at home, the nature of the work environment itself (such as too many tasks or a toxic culture), personal health or even major societal issues such as climate change. What is in their control, what can they influence and what do they need to accept?

It is also important to explore how the team responds to stress. For example, does it address stress or ignore it? And how does it cope with stress? For example, are there any helpful or unhelpful habits to be aware of?

"Answer these questions yourself," says Eliatamby. "Share your answers as you want. Also, ask for feedback on your leadership style and how you manage stress. What advice would your team give you?"

Once you've completed this exercise, you can build and enact a series of interventions with staff, including personal and group self-care plans.

4. Know that stress isn't inevitable

"Exposing the myth that stress is an inevitable part of life is crucial for effective leadership and helping others to thrive," says Chantal Burns, author of Bulletproof: Be Fearless and Resilient – no matter what. "When we misunderstand how stress works, it creates unnecessary suffering."

Burns has undertaken research showing that when people recognize that feelings of stress are a product of their perceptions (internal thought processes), they experience less anxiety and are calmer and have greater clarity in high-pressure situations. Blaming external factors (such as other people, the past or the future) for our stress, anxiety or overwhelm only perpetuates a sense of

helplessness and hinders our capacity to thrive. This is especially the case when we have no direct influence or control over those factors.

"To minimize unnecessary stress and improve decision-making and clarity of mind, focus on helping your teams to understand the true nature of stress," says Burns. "Do an inventory of the psychological and environmental noise in the workplace – are you incentivizing over-achievers? Do you create space for reflection? Do you model a healthy work-life balance?"

"Stress doesn't exist as a separate entity 'out there' in the world," concludes Burns. "Thought and feeling are two sides of the same coin. Whatever we think, we will experience as a feeling or sensation in our mind and body. Embracing this truth fosters resilience, enabling leaders to function effectively despite fluctuating emotional states."

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