

WHEN AN ORGANIZATION'S LEADERSHIP IS STRESSED OUT, TRAINING SUFFERS

by [Tess Taylor](#)

Stress in the workplace has reached epidemic proportions; it forces some [employees to walk away](#) from certain careers, and it's a symptom of a work life that is out of balance. But stress goes much deeper.

More than half of employees believe the stress of their leaders may create a chain reaction – negatively impacting their own career advancement, according to a study published by [Life Meets Work](#). The survey asked 1,000 college-educated adults how they viewed leaders' ability to manage stress on the job, and found that only 7% think stressed out leaders can effectively manage teams.

When employees regularly experience their leaders struggling with stress, this understandably makes them less inclined to climb the corporate ladder. Ultimately, that means leadership development programs will have to target stress management in order to be effective.

DEVELOPING BETTER TASK AND STRESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS

In an age where technology tends to overwhelm us rather than support stress management, the mental toll of an always-on culture can be intimidating. HR Dive spoke with Rachel Ernst, Head of Employee Success for Reflektive, for tips on how to address these concerns within leadership teaching.

Ernst said that leaders must cover three core areas:

1. Doing less each week by choosing three to four priorities that are achievable and realistic, yet challenging enough to keep employees moving forward.
2. Alignment of professional goals with those of the company.
3. Understanding how to 'de-prioritize' things when new pressing items arrive.

Ernst adds that a healthy work environment can only be created when management develops effective stress management practices and demonstrates them to

employees on a regular basis. This can, in turn, create more opportunities for leadership development.

MAKING THE MOST OF TIME TO DEAL WITH STRESS

We've all got the same amount of time each day, but it's what we do with it that counts. Much of the stress working professionals experience has to do with the control factor, said Leela Srinivasan, Chief Marketing Officer for software firm Lever, told HR Dive.

Srinivasan suggests that leaders need to engage in 'ruthless prioritizing' by evaluating their calendars to see where they can free up space, not only for themselves but also for their subordinates. For example, do all members of a team need to be in a specific meeting?

"The reality is that we've created layer upon layer of complexity without streamlining or adding clarity to things," she said. "It's time to think in simpler terms."

Srinivasan wisely pointed out that more technology is not always the answer either – productivity has not increased despite all the tools drowning the modern workplace. A 15-minute standup meeting, she said, can serve the same purpose as a 60-minute sit-down meeting. A post-it note with one task to be accomplished in 24 hours can take something off a longer to-do list.

RESPONDING TO STRESS – WHEN THE WRONG LESSON IS TAUGHT

Patrice Murphy, Ph.D., a partner with Schaffer Consulting, said that she often encounters the various ways in which beleaguered leaders demonstrate self-control in the face of stress.

"Unfortunately, we've probably all seen leaders – sometimes very senior leaders – behave in ways that send a poor lesson about self control and stress management to their subordinates," Murphy said. An experience she shared involved a senior leadership advisement role for a large city government agency in which she witnessed a department

head, "abuse his deputy, loudly and in front of internal and external colleagues, for coming late to a meeting."

"His failure of self-management actually signaled his own shortcomings more than hers. It certainly damaged his standing in the eyes of all who were there," she said.

"Even a negative example like this can be instructional for subordinates."

DEALING WITH STRESS AND TEACHING FUTURE LEADERS

Another critical point to consider: There's a bigger need for leaders who teach by example, often referred to as coaching leadership. Employees watch what their leaders are doing and often repeat these behaviors in the workplace.

"Leaders can mitigate stress by collaborating and planning ahead to minimize last minute changes or requests," said Jeff Wever, SVP of Bridge by Infrastructure. "[They] can show employees that it's okay to take time to de-stress by promoting and supporting teams at outings or activities outside of work."

Executives and management should be open to creative stress-management solutions, whether through an official company wellness program or through informal functions after work. Even routine, day-to-day activities can be altered to accommodate this strategy.

One such way to accomplish this is to encourage walking meetings," said Jon Silber, CEO of Purple Squirrel. "By moving meetings outside, executives can make employees happier by boosting their mood, sense of well-being and level of calmness."

But overriding all of these suggestions are two key themes, according to SmartRecruiters CEO Jerome Ternynck: Clarity and trust.

"If we can trust that we have shared objectives and good intentions, we know that there will be a solution once we find time to sit down and talk," Ternynck said.

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