

Unlimited Potential

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Newsletter

Leadership Power Stress: Creating Renewal

“Power stress is part of the experience that results from the exercise of influence and sense of responsibility felt in leadership positions.” – Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, Resonant Leadership, 2005

Ambitious and results-driven, many leaders begin a new position with great promise, only to crash and burn after months of unrelenting efforts. Why does this happen, in spite of a leader’s vision, talent and emotional intelligence?

Effective executives often find themselves caught in a cycle of stress and sacrifice, without any possibility or time for recovery or renewal.

It takes special talents to lead people within organizations. Most of those who make it to the top have proven track records for influencing others, getting teams to work together and achieving results.

Such leaders are what organizational psychologists Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee call “*resonant leaders*”: They are in tune with others and have high degrees of emotional intelligence and motivation for power and achievement.

“Yet even the most resonant leaders—whose ability to deftly manage their own and others’ emotions to drive their companies to great results—end up spiraling into dissonance,” the authors write.

Leaders are especially prone to “*power stress*,” and several unique factors contribute to its rise in executives at all organizational levels. Power stress can drive talented leaders into a cycle of dissonance with themselves, the people they lead and their organizations. Job-related burnout has serious ramifications, racking up substantial costs for individuals and their organizations.

To counter inevitable power stress, leaders must learn to manage themselves effectively. They can take many steps—from increasing their awareness of its signs and symptoms to practicing renewal and recovery exercises—before stress overwhelms them.



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Sources of Stress

The first decade of the 21st century is rife with unprecedented change—some of it quite disturbing. Consider the following recent events:

- Our planet’s climate is changing.
- Natural disasters are on the rise.
- New diseases and epidemics are emerging.
- Social systems that have been in place for ages no longer meet families’ or nations’ needs.
- Formerly local, containable conflicts are now global.
- Institutions struggle to survive, with some leaders bending the rules so they’ll appear successful—no matter what.
- Organizational complexity has increased exponentially, leading to creative, yet unusual, ways of doing business.

Those who run today’s organizations are doing their best to step up and inspire people to do their best. Leaders are now faced with unprecedented challenges: managing in global business environments, using technological innovations while maintaining security measures and achieving results in unstable times.

Leaders also find it extremely difficult to sustain their effectiveness—and resonance—over time, with organizations constantly calling upon them to give more. Little value is placed on renewal or developing practices and habits that create and sustain resonance.

In fact, many organizations overvalue and encourage certain destructive behaviors, such as working long hours. They tolerate discord, as long as results are achieved. They fail to provide time or encouragement for cultivating skills and practices that ameliorate stress’ negative effects.

Unfortunately, many leaders succumb to overwhelming pressures when power stress hits critical mass. There are, however, signs and symptoms one can recognize to prevent a professional and life crisis.

What Is Power Stress?

Leadership requires one to exercise influence and power. Leaders must have an impact on others to make things happen, are responsible for their organizations’ well-being and are under continual scrutiny—all of which increase stress levels.

Those who head organizations rarely face clear, simple choices. Communication and decision-making are incredibly complex. Leaders are often called upon to achieve results while leading individuals over whom they have little authority, as well as work well with alliances and peers.

There’s no doubt that it’s lonely at the top. Affiliating with others is known to relieve stress, yet pressured leaders are more likely to work harder than to reach out to others. The higher one’s position (perceived or otherwise), the less authentic the feedback. Leaders can be prone to “CEO disease,” where the feedback going upward is distorted or diluted.

Sources of Leadership Power Stress

- Leaders experience increased stress because they:
- Must make important decisions with conflicting and complex data
 - Must influence others over whom they have little authority
 - Have a dominant need for power
 - Value power and achievement over affiliation with others
 - Must continually achieve results—no matter what
 - Lack realistic and authentic feedback from others
 - Constantly fight fires, solve problems and contend with crises
 - Are held responsible for uncontrollable events
 - Are more visible to stakeholders, the public and customers
 - Are subject to unrelenting evaluation from peers, boards and competitors
 - Must exercise constant self-control
 - Must place the good of the organization above personal impulses and needs
 - Work for organizations that encourage self-sacrifice and long hours, while undervaluing renewal, recuperation and relaxation

A shift from occasional episodes of power stress to daily experiences leads to chronic stress — a condition that has deleterious effects on the immune system and one’s overall health. Even worse, power stress leads to destructive psychological states.

Leaders may withdraw to protect themselves or strike out at others, inappropriately expressing anger. Some may double their efforts to achieve results and, in the process, miss important information from colleagues. This further alienates people, who may begin to perceive the leader as

arrogant and unreceptive.

Power stress causes a leader to go from resonance to dissonance. Once this happens, there's a lack of trust and, consequently, a lessening of influence over the troops. Results falter, and the leader becomes ineffective, downwardly spiraling toward burnout.

The Cycle of Sacrifice and Renewal

Power stress has always been a workplace reality, but perhaps it is more prevalent now because flatter organizations require more authentic leadership. A leader cannot rely on his position as a source of power and influence; rather, he requires authentic trust and resonance with those he leads.

The problem lies with a lack of recovery time. There's no halftime on the field. As unrelenting pressures and stresses mount, greater attention must be given to recuperation on both the personal and organizational levels.

Leaders continuously sacrifice themselves on the job. Few have developed the necessary skills to deviate from destructive patterns so they can renew themselves physically, mentally and emotionally.

How do resonant leaders manage perpetual crises and chronic stress without succumbing to exhaustion, fear or anger? How can they avoid responding to stress and perceived threats with fear-based, defensive acts?

Renewal: A Holistic Process

Leaders who successfully manage the cycle of sacrifice, stress and renewal are mindful of what it takes to turn situations around. They find opportunities in challenges and create unique ways to overcome obstacles. They motivate themselves and others by being optimistic, focusing on values and connecting with others.

No one can pull this off without mastering stress management and self-renewal. These skills require one to pay attention to mind, body, heart and spirit. Effective leaders know they must attend to themselves first; otherwise, they won't have the energy to maintain resonance or manage other people.

The Leadership Paradox

Daniel Goleman, an authority on emotional intelligence in organizations, calls this the *leadership paradox*: “For leaders, the first task in management has nothing to do with leading others; step one poses the challenge of knowing and managing oneself.” (*Resonant Leadership*, p. x)

This includes:

- Connecting with the deep values that guide us
- Imbuing our actions with meaning
- Aligning our emotions with our goals
- Keeping ourselves motivated
- Keeping ourselves focused and on task

When we act in accord with these inner measures, we feel good about what we do. Our emotions become contagious. When we, as leaders, feel positive, energized and enthusiastic about our work, so do those we influence.

Three Keys in the Renewal Process

Awareness - Be vigilant. We must learn to recognize the moments when we're out of touch with ourselves and those we lead. We cannot succeed without developing a sense of self-awareness and “other-awareness”—two key elements of emotional intelligence.

Honing our awareness skills leads to “mindfulness,” an appreciation of what's going on inside and around us on several levels. We become fully conscious of our whole self, other people, and the context in which we live and work.

Hope - Hope contributes to recuperation and renewal, enabling us to believe the future we envision is attainable. Accompanied by an optimistic attitude, hope helps us move toward our goals and visions, while inspiring others.

Compassion - Connecting with other people's wants and needs provides another source of energy and recuperation. Compassion replaces a leader's small-minded, self-centered worries by redirecting his or her focus to others and helping him or her sidestep the trap of arrogant self-absorption. This shift allows leaders to renew their spirit, which is crucial for sustaining themselves and maintaining leadership efficacy.

The Brain and New-Age Rhetoric

Before you dismiss the concepts of mindfulness, hope and compassion as New Age rhetoric, take note of current research. Recent studies in management science, psychology and neuroscience all point to the importance of developing mindfulness, hope and compassion. These practices are solidly supported by scientific evidence.

It boils down to the brain, which processes information and sends signals to the sympathetic or parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic system is activated in response to a stressor (positive or negative). This part of the nervous system sends us into action (fight or flight).

The parasympathetic nervous system responds to events that are perceived as relaxing, enjoyable and calming. When activated, it counteracts symptoms of stress in the body.

Here are some common recovery rituals that involve the parasympathetic nervous system:

- Meditation
- Yoga and stretching
- Sports
- Viewing films
- Doing volunteer work
- Participation in religious or philosophical groups
- Family projects
- Walking (also a way of meditating)
- Listening to music
- Dancing and singing
- Reading books
- Teaching classes
- Hobbies

Of course, each of these activities involves the whole body and both nervous systems. The key is one's attitude. It's possible to let ambition and competitiveness interfere with the relaxation and recovery processes. We must be aware and mindful of how we manage our thoughts, bodies and spirits.

The notion that power stress can be managed by employing mindfulness, hope and compassion for renewal is not only logical, but also validated by scientific research. Leaders can easily adopt these approaches in the context of the work world.

As with many leadership development tasks, it's often best to engage the services of a qualified executive coach.

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