

The Leadership Imperative of Self-Care



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INTRODUCTION

It is said that wars are won in the general's tent. Sharpening the saw in the first three dimensions – the physical, the spiritual, and the mental – is a practice I call the “Daily Private Victory.” And I commend to you the simple practice of spending one hour a day every day doing it [self-care]—one hour for the rest of your life. There's no other way you could spend an hour that would begin to compare in terms of value and results. It will affect every decision, every relationship. It will greatly improve the quality, the effectiveness, of every other hour of the day, including the depth and restfulness of your sleep. It will build the long-term physical, spiritual, and mental strength to enable you to handle difficult challenges in life. (Covey, 1989, p. 296)

Leaders are givers. By our very nature, our attention is on others—those we lead, those we serve, those we rely on, and those who rely on us. There is no leadership without giving.

Ordinarily we think of those in the “helping professions” as the givers: doctors and nurses, teachers and aides, those whose care others rely on. Business leaders are in the “helping professions” also, though possibly seldom viewed that way. And just as it is vital for those in the traditional “giving” fields of medicine and teaching to practice self-care—caring for themselves so they can continue to care for others—leaders in and at the helm of organizations of all kinds need self-care as well.

Self-care, as we are defining it for the purposes of this paper, is “prioritizing time and taking measures to ensure that you are maintaining physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health for optimum performance at work.” This definition builds on Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), specifically “Habit #7—Sharpening the Saw: Principles of Balanced Self-Renewal.”

The high degree of stress that comes with leadership demands a high level of self-care. Why?

Research on leadership, stress, cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence and decision making over the past 30 years indicates that when a leader's stress level is sufficiently elevated—whether on the front line of a manufacturing process, in the emergency room, in the boardroom, or on the battlefield—his or her ability to fully and effectively use the right blend of cognitive intelligence and emotional intelligence to make timely and effective decisions may be significantly impaired, sometimes leading to poor decisions: the bolt is affixed too tightly, the incorrect medicine is given, the merger is killed, the wrong order is given. (Thompson, 2010, p. 7)

The evidence is in the results. Over time, the lack of self-care impacts the bottom line, fuels conflict, destroys teamwork and partnerships, reduces morale, and can create roadblocks to raises, promotions, and opportunities for future growth. In addition to these traditional performance metrics, a lack of self-

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care also reduces job satisfaction, creativity and innovation, and a willingness to take risks (Thompson, 2010). Business as usual continues with a survival mode instead of fueling an entrepreneurial spirit. A lack of self-care promotes a lack of heart and spirit at work, essential to long-term success in the marketplace, with stakeholders, and for ourselves.

In our demanding professions, we as leaders devote so much dedication, commitment, energy, and concern to what we do every day that we run the risk of achieving burnout or becoming numb from the stress of continual emotional demands. We can get over-focused on competing priorities and doing for others that we do not give ourselves the time and energy we require to be whole and healthy.

In his book *The Stress Effect*, Henry Thompson (2010) makes the case that “good decision making under extreme stress” is a quality essential to effective leadership, especially with mounting global marketplace pressures, technological advances, security breaches, and human capital demands. “We are virtually guaranteeing an epidemic of leaders making unsound decisions and resulting organizational failures if we overlook the relationship between stress and decision making, and if we don’t take that relationship into account when we ourselves lead or choose others to do so” (p. 6).

Leadership is more complicated than ever. Mountains of data, emails, requests, and conflicting deadlines strain our capacities to process information, respond appropriately, and keep everyone moving forward. Simply put, it is easy to get lost in the minutia of work. It is vital for us to simplify where we can, to give our brains, hearts, and spirits the messages they need, when they need them.

BACKGROUND

Stress management has been talked about for decades. The current research reveals that stress levels are rising, not diminishing. Despite all the talk, the plethora of stress management articles, seminars, workshops, and books, and the near daily reminders of the need for stress management via newscasts of workplace violence, suicides, and tragedies continue unabated. Negative, unhealthful, and oftentimes horrific results of too much stress could have been averted—potentially—if self-care were well understood and practiced.

According to Bobroff, Martins, and Montezeli (2013), three out of every four American workers describe their work as stressful. And the problem is not limited to these shores. In fact, occupational stress has been defined as a “global epidemic” by the United Nations International Labour Organization.

The negative impacts of stress are manifold and can include issues with concentration, focus, productivity and workplace safety. In addition, unmanaged stress can lead to many physical, psychosomatic and psychosocial problems (Bobroff, Martins, & Montezeli, 2013). These, in turn, can lead to poor work performance, high accident and injury rates, increased absenteeism, low productivity, and low morale. It is therefore of vital importance to optimize work conditions and make self-care a daily practice.

Stress Prevention at Work Checkpoints, published in 2012 by the International Labour Office in Geneva, Switzerland, makes the case for optimizing organizational performance by paying attention to many issues of self-care, including stress management. This manual includes “easy-to-apply checkpoints for identifying stressors in working life and mitigating their harmful effects” (p. v). It also provides guidance on linking workplace risk assessment with the process of stress prevention. The checkpoints in this volume constitute good practice for enterprises and organizations in general. They are especially useful for companies and organizations that wish to incorporate stress prevention into their overall occupational safety and health policy and management systems.

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