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MARCH 20, 2019

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As a manager, you want to do right by your employees and support them through intense work periods so they don't get burned out. But this can be a challenge when you're feeling overly stressed yourself. How can you take care of yourself so that you have the time and energy to support your team? What steps do you need to take to reduce your stress level? And what actions can you take to improve your team members' well-being?

What the Experts Say

It's tough to find the energy you need to help others when you yourself are at your limits. Burnout — as opposed to more run-of-the-mill stress — can cause you to "feel utterly depleted," says Susan David, a founder of the Harvard/McLean Institute of Coaching and author of *Emotional Agility*. And it "can permeate all aspects of your life. You are overtired and under-exercised; you're not attentive to food and nutrition; and you're disconnected from relationships." But it's not just you who suffers. "Your team is picking up on your stress, and it's making everything worse," says Whitney Johnson, the author of *Build an A-Team: Play to Their Strengths and Lead Them Up the Learning Curve*. So for the sake of both your health and the health of your employees, you need to summon all the resources you can to improve matters. Here's how to do that.

Make your own health a priority

Before you can help your team members manage their stress, you need to manage your own. "Instead of hunkering down and concentrating" on your job, "you need to stop, look around, and figure out how you're going to help your people get what they need," says Johnson. A good starting point is to take care of your physical and mental health. Eat healthy, wholesome food; exercise regularly; get plenty of sleep at night; "try meditating, and find someone to vent to"— preferably "not your boss." Taking care of yourself is not an indulgent luxury; it's a matter of self-preservation. Johnson suggests sharing your tension-management techniques and rituals with your team. "Say, 'here's something I'm doing to manage the stress. This is how I cope.'"

Tackle the problem as a group

Even if you haven't fully reigned in your stress, it's helpful to demonstrate that you take the issue seriously. You can even suggest that you all take on self-care as a team — learning meditation as a group or sharing tips about what practices are working to reduce stress. You can make it a team goal to keep stress under control, says David. "Say to your team, 'Even in the context of this change, how do we come together?'" This is helpful for the group but will also keep you accountable for taking care of yourself. Don't force anyone into these activities though. A sense of autonomy can counteract the symptoms of burnout so you want people to feel they are making their own choices.

Exhibit compassion

Don't be so hard on yourself or your team. "Burnout can often feel like a personal failing," says David. But of course, that's not true: We are all susceptible to it — and, in fact, our "environment precipitates" it. We are "living in an imperfect world, and yet we expect perfection." Many organizations breed stress. "The ambiguity, the complexity," not to mention the 24/7 nature of technology, leads many of us to feel "an extreme level of strain." Be compassionate. Recognize, both inwardly and publicly, "that all of us are doing the best we can with the resources we have been given." This doesn't mean that you're "lazy or letting yourself off the hook." Rather, you're "creating a psychologically safe place for yourself and others." Johnson recommends talking your team through stressful periods in an honest but upbeat way. Yes, the workload is intense. And yes, big, high stakes projects are daunting. Tell your team, "'We are in this together, and I know we can deliver.'"

Set a good example

You also need to "think about the [behaviors] you're modeling" to your team, says David. "If you're running from meeting to meeting and don't have enough time in the day to breathe," what message does that send? Set a good example by making downtime a priority. Show your team that you don't always operate in full-throttle mode at the office. "Bring humanity back into the room," she says. Johnson agrees. When "your people are completely overwhelmed," you need to "encourage them to take regular breaks," she says. "They need time to rest and rejuvenate and disconnect from work." It's also important to set limits on how much work encroaches on evenings and weekends. Whatever you do, "don't send anyone on your team an email at midnight," says Johnson. "You're thinking, 'I've got to get this out.' But you're also throwing a grenade into your employees' peace of mind." Instead, she recommends using Boomerang, or a similar program, that allows you to schedule emails.

Focus on the why

A common symptom (and cause) of job-related burnout is a "disconnect between a person's values" and the work at hand, says David. "You feel stressed and tired, and yet you continue to work and work and work," all the while forgetting what drew you to your career and organization in the first place. "It can be toxic." As a leader, you need to "develop a shared sense of why" — as in, why are we driven to accomplish the mission? As a boss, it's your job to galvanize your team. Remind them of the objective and why it's important to the organization and your customers. When people have shared values and connection they are more likely to feel positively about their work.

Advocate for your team

If you and your team are suffering under a heavy workload, it might be time to ask your boss for a reprieve. It is your responsibility "to advocate for your team within the context of your organization's goals," says Johnson. She recommends talking to your boss about the effect stress is having on morale and performance. "Say, 'My team is fully committed to this project, but people are tired. And we all know the law of diminishing returns.'" Convey the consequences of burnout and describe how it is in your boss's best interest to take action. "There are going to be mistakes and slippage. And those will be costly." Explain that you're worried you might lose people who are valuable to the organization. Then ask, "can this deadline be pushed back? Or can this assignment be curtailed?" Think, too, about what you can "put in place within your team that can help," says David. Perhaps certain meetings can be discarded or at least shortened. It's "important that leaders go to bat" for their employees.

Be a source of optimism

Whenever work is frenzied and frantic, make a concerted effort to promote positivity, says Johnson. This is hard to do when you are stressed out but "look for the good," she says. "Smile at people. And be kind." Make sure you regularly acknowledge, recognize, and thank people for their efforts. "Say, 'I notice you did X. Thank you. I appreciate it.'" Cultivate a feeling of community and social support. When your team hits a milestone or when a particular crunch time is over, celebrate. Acknowledge the accomplishments — yours and the team's.

Principles to Remember

Do

- Encourage your team to take regular breaks and seize opportunities to rejuvenate.
- Support your team with inspiring language. Your message should be, "We are in this together."
- Go to bat for your team. If the workload is too heavy, ask your boss if deadlines can be moved or tasks reassigned.

Don't

- Neglect your health and wellbeing. Take good care of yourself and share your favorite stress-reducing strategies with your team.
- Consider burnout a personal failing. Recognize, both inwardly and publicly, that people are doing the best they can with the resources they have.
- Get bogged down in negativity. Be a source of optimism and try to cultivate positivity in the ranks.

Case Study #1: Set a good example for your team — and celebrate accomplishments

A couple of years ago, Peter Sena, the CEO and Chief Creative Officer of Digital Surgeons, the marketing and design firm, was in a crunch time.

"We were rapidly expanding in every way possible," he says. "We were doubling the size of our team, adding new clients, and building new offices. We were all working crazy hours. And the leadership team was approaching burnout."

The stress was taking a toll on his direct reports, too. "I could tell my team was tired," he says. "People were feeling anxious and hyped up."

Another significant sign of pending team burnout: employees were making mistakes. "They were dropping balls."

Peter knew he needed to take action. He started by improving his own habits. "I wanted to set a good example for my team," he says. "When you're stressed, you're generally overworked and under-slept, and you don't eat smart." That needed to change. In addition to getting more exercise and taking regular power naps, Peter began practicing meditation. "It helped me become more mindful and present," he says.

In fact, he found meditating so helpful that he introduced it to his team. "We brought in a meditation [expert] to teach people how to do 10- to 15-minute mindfulness exercises," he says. "It gets everyone to take a hard pause in the middle of the day."

Peter also made sure his team didn't feel constant pressure to be online. "We use Slack, and I encourage people to use the 'do not disturb' function in the evening," he says. "It's helped us become more efficient in how we use email."

Finally, he urged his team to take regular breaks when they needed them. One of his employees, for instance, wanted to leave early once a week to take a yoga class. He was fully supportive. When people are stressed, it's important to "give them a level of control," he says. "The more you give people the freedom and flexibility to shape their own path, the more committed they are to the goals of [the enterprise.]"

Peter feels good about how he and his team dealt with — and continue to deal with — stress and burnout. "In this industry, it is not uncommon to work well past 8 PM and to work every weekend," he says. "But I wanted to create a more relaxed company culture."

Recently, Digital Surgeons experienced another hectic, high-growth quarter. To celebrate, one of his teams is going on a company outing to play laser tag on a Friday afternoon. "The message is, 'We worked hard this past month. Let's take a pause and enjoy it,'" he says. "Those little things make a big difference."

Case Study #2: Take care of yourself and focus on the organization's larger goals
Magdalena Mook, CEO of the International Coach Federation (ICF), a nonprofit that is the world's largest organization of professionally trained coaches, says that when she starts to feel the telltale signs of burnout, she reminds herself she's "being watched and observed" by her employees.

"The team follows the lead of the leader," she says. "They pick up on [my] nervous energy and that impacts their ability to perform."

She says she's learned to "develop self-awareness" so she doesn't exhibit her tension and anxiety. "Leaders are role models," she says.

Still, though, there are times of extreme stress at work when that's difficult. For instance, the ICF holds an annual conference for its chapter leaders. The event, which was held in Vancouver last year, involves a lot of complex logistical planning.

"It requires many long hours because we are working with people from around the globe," says Magdalena. "We have a board meeting with our Board of Directors a day before the event, which adds an additional layer of stress."

Needless to say, in the lead up to the conference, "emotions fly high" among her team members, she adds.

To cope, Magdalena made it a point to get some form of physical activity each day. This helped her relieve stress. "Exercise clears my mind and allows me time to reflect."

She also made sure her reports focused on the overarching goals of the organization rather than on the line items of their to-do lists. "We were all feeling overwhelmed because we all felt a huge sense of responsibility," she says. "We were bringing our leaders together for this celebration, and we wanted it to be worth their time."

Magdalena says she reminded her team about the organization's mission. She wanted her team members to feel that they "are part of something bigger" than themselves.

"Our vision is that coaching is an integral part of society," she says. "We need to remember that when times are tough. It makes the burden, along with the hours and the occasional frustration, worthwhile."

Once the conference was over, Magdalena took time to celebrate her team's accomplishment. She recognized and acknowledged just how hard her team worked. "We relaxed a little and toasted a job well done with a glass of champagne," she says. "[Saying thank you] goes a long way."

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.