

Managing Leadership Stress

Tight budgets, accountability for results, corporate politics, employee retention woes, litigation concerns—the mere mention of these stressors may accelerate your heart rate.

If so, you might be in a leadership position such as a manager, key executive or chief financial officer. Factor in global manufacturing concerns, research and development challenges, time-to-market pressures, strict quality standards and today's tough governmental guidelines, and chances are you're not just any leader, but one in the biodiesel or biofuels industries.

Workplace stress is a fairly common ailment, lurking among 40 percent of the general workforce, according to recent studies. However, leadership stress differs greatly from that suffered by typical employees. For instance, a scientist might lose sleep over an especially complicated calculation not testing as expected in the lab. His or her supervisor, the head of the R&D department, may be stressing over whether his or her inability to secure more government funding will cost that scientist a job. While the sales department administrative



assistant feels overwhelmed by a cubicle mate's annoying daily habits, his or her manager is wondering how they are going to motivate 25 people to increase their sales figures by 30 percent before month's end.

The responsibility and accountability leaders bear can be a heavy burden. The pressure to meet objectives, manage people and make tough-sometimes life-changing-decisions often weighs heavily on the hearts and minds of decision makers as they struggle to keep a balance between effectively moving the company toward its goals and keeping those around them happy. Many times, the responsibilities come at the expense of the leader's personal time and peace of mind.

However, not all stress is negative. Certain types of stress actually help drive performance and can be the foundation for extraordinary innovation and accomplishment. The pressure to succeed, meet goals and beat the competition can be positively channeled into R&D, performance management and competitive strategies that enable individuals, teams and entire organizations to develop breakthrough technologies, devise creative solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems and deliver results that were beyond expectations.

For executives, the problem with stress occurs when the pressure becomes more dominant than the objective. During

these times, management styles tend to become more blunt and dictatorial, decisions become rushed, and ultimately, the executive and organization suffer very real costs as performance falters. In worst cases, the executive suffers mental and physical illness.

What is the solution to stress? As an executive, simple techniques can be used to manage leadership stress and possibly even maneuver it to an advantage.

Become a Better Delegator

As a leader, you're the one who's accountable for results. Your career rides on the performance of others. As a result, you may be tempted to "do it all yourself" or micromanage every task. According to an article in the Wall Street Journal written by Kayleen Schaefer, "The reason so many leaders have trouble giving up projects is because they've risen up the corporate ladder by doing everything themselves."

The higher one rises in an organization, the less feasible the do-it-yourself strategy becomes. As responsibilities grow, so does the need to effectively get work done through others. To become a better delegator, expand skills in the following areas:

◎ **Hiring:** Do you hire people who are smarter and more technically capable than you are? Most executives say that they want to hire the best. In reality, they tend to hire people who are slightly less competent than they are. If you are going to be an effective delegator, you need to build a team you can trust, and hiring the right people is the most important first step.

◎ **Training:** Once the right people are on staff, it's important to make sure the team's skills are kept up-to-date. Create a proactive plan to regularly evaluate each person's skills and knowledge, and plan for their future training needs. The more current people's skills are, the easier it will be to delegate with confidence.



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© Management: Of course, competence alone does not make delegation work. You also need effective managerial systems. While it is beyond the scope of this article to review different management structures and philosophies, the challenge is to find the methods that best provide the information and fit the culture of the organization. Ideally, the system ensures people clearly understand their goals-and your expectations-while providing key indicators to monitor performance and ensure those goals are being met.

© Delegation: With the right people and processes, delegation is a much easier task. All that remains is to determine what and to whom to delegate. As a starting point, prioritize the tasks that only you can do, and then get everything else off your desk. Anything that can be done by someone else should be done by someone else. During delegation, provide a concise explanation of what is expected and a clear deadline when it's expected to be done. Ask follow-up questions to ensure that the person being delegated to understands the project and is willing and able to meet the deadlines.

Force Yourself to Take Breaks

Successful leaders typically have little or no free time in the workday. However, one of the keys to beating stress is to give the mind and body occasional chances to recharge. In other words, take a break once in a while. The following provides a few ideas for creating a healthy balance.

Schedule daily mini-breaks, and plan several mental breaks throughout the day. For example, if you're in front of a computer most of the day, schedule two or three daily three-minute walks. If you're going to be locked in meetings most of the day, use breaks to step outside, stretch, walk or listen to music. If your job requires constant movement, schedule a five- or 10-minute sit-down break every few hours. Balance is about not doing the same thing all day long.

Strike a better work/life balance. It almost goes without saying that vacation time is crucial to beating stress. That means a vacation where you're not attached to a laptop, cell phone or other

remote device. Yes, it's hard to get away from the office, but that's the only real way to unwind.

Getting beyond vacations, make time to take stock of personal priorities and the role that work plays in helping achieve your objectives. Often, stress is caused by a feeling of being out of control. The simple act of putting things in perspective can help regain control and have a very positive impact on mental well-being.

Tune out at the end of the day. Most leaders take their work home with them each night. Whether you're physically checking e-mail or just thinking about issues at the office, there comes a time when you need to leave work and leadership responsibilities behind. Set personal time boundaries and stick to them. For example, decide to turn off your cell phone as you walk in the front door each evening, or stop checking e-mail after 9 p.m. To ensure that work time is as productive as possible, have time that is truly down time.

Maintain a Positive Attitude

When leadership stress is at its peak, one may feel down or even doubtful about their abilities. You may find yourself dwelling on the "shoulds" in your professional life-I should be making more money, I should be handling this latest project better, My staff should like me more, etc. This is just stress wearing down on self-confidence and resolve. Don't give in.

This is the time to refocus on something positive. One easy solution is to remind yourself of something pleasant in another area of life, such as your daughter's softball team's big win last night or the pride felt when you climbed Mount Rainier last month. Another solution is to write down a physical list of assets and accomplishments, and when feeling overwhelmed by stress, pull out the list and remind yourself of all the things you have done and the people whose lives you have positively impacted.

Certain stressors inherent to the bio-diesel industry will never disappear. In fact, they may become exacerbated with fluctuations in the economy

and availability of skilled employees. Whether it's the pressure of keeping up with industry standards or dealing with tight budgets, leadership stress can have a negative impact not just on your performance, focus and well-being, but that of the company. CEOs, senior executives and managers dictate the level of stress throughout the organization. If you efficiently delegate, properly maintain balance and think positively, you will be able to rise above leadership stress and take the team and the company with you.