

THE STRESS EFFECT

Leadership Lessons in Coping with Stress

By Heléne Smuts

Anticipating, managing and preventing stress is one of the most important functions of any leader. **Heléne Smuts, Managing Partner at CONTRACT** – a human resources development and organisational development consultancy based in Cape Town – explores this fascinating topic further.

One of my clients is a talented businessman and successful leader. But it often happens that leaders set high standards not only for themselves, but also their employees. While that might be good for the company, it can sometimes result in tensions. So, over the course of about a year we had been working on adjusting his leadership style.

We made significant progress. My client learned to temper his pursuit of excellence with a genuine passion for people, and he was then promoted from being the director of one division of his company to being the managing director of the whole group.

But the new role was incredibly stressful. He defaulted to his original managerial mode. He was direct and exacting. He began to micromanage. And as his stress affected those around him, the mood in the company changed.

The story has a happy ending. As with most things in life, it's a lot easier to achieve balance or improvement the second time around. Our leader and his employees are in a much happier space, and the company is doing better than ever.

Happy ending aside, I'm telling you this anecdote to illustrate how stress can infiltrate entire organisations through individuals – and what we can do about it.

The good, the bad, and the inevitable

It's safe to say that people are more stressed than ever before. The first thing people do when they wake up is reach for their phones to check emails from colleagues in different time zones – even while on holiday!

But stress is not always or necessarily a bad thing. In the 1960s, psychologist Richard Lazarus pointed out that stress can be a great motivator and can spur innovation. So, he distinguished between this 'good stress' (which he called eustress) and 'bad stress' (which he called distress), which numbs or frightens people.

Of course, people differ in their capacity and threshold for eustress and distress. In the example above, my client probably perceived his striving for excellence as eustress, but his teammates and employees experienced it as distress. So, it is fundamentally subjective. Setting high expectations or ambitious objectives will always create both good and bad stress. The good news is that we can train ourselves and others to walk on the better side of that fine line.



Driving on the right side

At CONTRACT, we use a number of lenses and models to describe what makes individuals, teams and members 'tick'. One of the models we use looks at 'Drivers'. According to Transactional Analysis, people are motivated by five primary subconscious mantras – Be perfect, Be strong, Please others, Try hard, and Hurry up.

Stress pushes these drivers to unhealthy extremes. Perfectionists will craft and re-craft that vital email for far too long, terrified that a mistake will lead to further stress. People driven by urgency will become paralysed with frustration, and so on. In our example above, my client's 'be strong' driver compelled him to take on too much responsibility, adding to both his own and the company's stress levels.

The cruel irony is that stress takes otherwise valuable virtues like motivational mantras, which spur people to grow companies, and it perverts these drivers to work against the people they have helped. And the more this happens, the more stressed out leaders and employees become. It's a vicious cycle.

Managing stress

I work with some amazing leaders. The very best ones have a number of tools to anticipate, manage and prevent eustress from tipping over into distress.

- *Dialogue* – Make sure it is not a structured or formal conversation with a particular task or outcome in mind – make it an open dialogue, with no agenda. Pay attention; tone of voice and facial expressions are important clues that a report or email will not give you.
- *Speak openly* – Don't stigmatise stress by making it a taboo subject. Ask direct questions about stress levels. Say the word. Own up to it, and you can own it too.
- *Peer coaching sessions* – One of the services that CONTRACT offers is setting up peer coaching groups in companies. These are always useful because it's an important platform to share not just professional knowledge, but also emotional support.
- *Fail fast* – Often stress comes from failure. Learning to fail efficiently and effectively will result in more learning and less stress. It's important to create a safe space for this, however, as the expectation to fail fast creates stresses of its own.

Get stress fit

Make no mistake, stress is as contagious in an office as a tummy bug in a nursery school. If you as a leader are stressed and you snap at your PA, she transfers that stress when she speaks to a client or a stakeholder, which affects how they view your business.

CONTRACT's vision is to inspire a humane economy. That means understanding the personal reactions we all have to economic forces. It's not easy out there, and that's okay.



Our stress resilience workshops work on spiritual, social, mental and even physical fitness levels – so that we can thrive on pressure instead of drowning in it.

Remember the example at the beginning of this article; the change of behaviour from the MD led to bickering among the staff and defensiveness. It takes an amazing amount of self-awareness and courage to improve yourself, for the greater good. Doing this may not remove stress entirely from your life or career, but it will certainly teach you to harness it as a force for good.

