



What Great Leaders Do Differently Under Stress

A People Acuity Leadership Report

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You're up against a critical deadline on the most important project of your life – and your kids are fighting around you as you try to conclude your ten hour workday at the kitchen table. In the middle of all this, your email pings, reminding you that you're late (again) on your credit card bill. Your heart rate goes up, you start sweating, and your mind stops focusing. You feel like you're going to blow a fuse any moment.

Stress like this lowers your mood and energy level, and negatively impacts your relationships and work performance – not to mention your health. It is also painfully contagious and ripples out in ways you may have never considered. For example, according to a recent VitalSmarts study:

	Leaders Who Are Overrun by Stress	Leaders Who Wisely Manage Stress
Have these Characteristics	Are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closeminded and controlling Upset and emotional Rejecting Angry Sidestepping/avoiding communication Deceitful Dishonest 	Are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open and curious Holding emotions in check Seeking to understand Calm Direct and straight-forward Transparent Honest
Create these Impacts on Others	Have employees who are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 62% more likely to consider leaving their job 56% more likely to shut down and stop participating 49% less likely to go above and beyond 47% more likely to be frustrated and angry 	Have employees who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet quality standards and act in the customers' best interest 56% more of the time Meet deadlines 47% more of the time Improve workplace safety 34% more of the time Achieve budget 25% more of the time

*From a November 2018 study by VitalSmarts (1,334 employees)

As you can see, there is a wide divide between those who are overrun by stress and those who manage it wisely. Let's consider how you can be one of those who manages stress wisely.

Stress is defined as, *"emotional or physical tension created by a perceived challenge, demand, or threat."* If you look carefully at this definition, you may notice the tiniest clue to stopping your own stress from overrunning you. Focus your attention on the word *"perceived,"* and consider what might be important about this in the search for better stress management – especially as you think about it in light of the formula for stress:



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The truth is that it is never what happens to you that causes you to go into stress-out mode - that can create pressure. But how you perceive - or see - what is happening, and begin to ruminate about that perspective, causes what you Feel, what you Do, and ultimately what you Get. Knowing that you are the author of the story you tell about your pressure is the beginning of changing your response to stress!

The VitalSmarts researchers relate an important observation about what it's like to be caught in stress (versus responding wisely to it):



*"When we feel stressed, we amplify our negative emotions by ruminating aloud about them and telling villain, victim, and helpless stories. Villain stories exaggerate others' negative attributes. Victim stories make us out to be innocent sufferers who have no role in the problem. And helpless stories rationalize our over- or under-reactions because 'there was nothing else I could have done!' **Instead, take control of your emotions by challenging your story.**"*

In one sentence, researchers offer a solution: *challenge your story!* High-performing athletes have a strategy for doing this, and it reduces their cortisol (stress hormone) by as much as 30% and increases their performance by as much as 50% - according to Harvard research. It is as simple as stopping and opening up their bodies - shoulders back, head up, standing tall - and just breathing deeply (bringing more oxygen into their bloodstream). As they do this, they then **visualize themselves responding favorably to the situation ahead**. In other words, they quiet their adrenaline through breathing, and at the same time, replace their negative ruminating with positive visualization. Simple - right?

If it's simple, anyone can do it, even you. So, let's give it a try. First, just stop for one minute. Breathe four or five deep breaths, until you feel your body relaxing. As this happens, ask yourself these visualizing questions:

- *Who do I most want to influence right now?*
- *If I could have more positive influence what would it look like?*
- *What would be different for them and for me?*
- *What can I do right now to begin to create that positive difference?*

Be still until the answers come. It should take you less than two minutes, but as you breathe and see differently, it will change all the hours left in your day. When you know these answers, you've already challenged your story, stopped your ruminating, and replaced it with a new way of seeing that boosts your energy and performance.

Here's to wisely managing stress - so that you can have the positive influence were born to make!

