

Leadership Qualities: Stress Management

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Richard Swenson, in his book *Margin*, describes the society in which we live as “troubled.” He says, “We have more questions than answers, more problems than solutions. Few know where we are headed, but universally acknowledge that we are careening along at breakneck speed.”¹ He goes on to cite statistics that say 30 million men in America describe themselves as “stressed out.” The average desk worker in America has 36 hours of work on their desk, and they spend three hours a week just sorting out the piles. The average middle manager is interrupted 73 times a day. On average, we spend eight months of our lives opening junk mail. We spend two years of our lives trying to call people who are not in, or whose lines are busy. We spend one year searching for misplaced objects, when the average misplaced object has been moved only 10 inches from its original place.

More than 18 million Americans are on Prozac. Credit card debt is at the highest level ever, with consumer debt currently standing at \$1.4 trillion. According to LynNell Hancock, in 1850, the average person slept nine-and-a-half hours per night. Now, thanks to electricity, the figure is seven hours per night and declining. There are 70 million people with sleep disorders; we live in a society that is “fried by work, frazzled by the lack of time.” Hancock quoted one woman, a mother of four from LaGrange, Illinois: “I am so tired, my idea of a vacation is a trip to the dentist. I just can’t wait to sit in that chair and relax.”² When society has reached the point where people start looking forward to getting their gums scraped and teeth drilled as a refreshing activity, something has gone terribly, terribly wrong.

¹ Richard Swenson, *Margin* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995), p. 22.

² LynNell Hancock, “Breaking Point” in *Newsweek* 6 March 1995: 56-61.

We carry stress around like a badge of honor. This is especially true among business and community leaders where the lie is propagated that to be overbooked is to be important. Even people in vocational ministry will sometimes say, “I’d rather flame out than rust out.” The problem is, either way, you’re out.

Much of the stress in our lives comes as a result of our insistence on maintaining the illusion of control. We so desperately want to be strong enough to handle the trials and tribulations of life that we literally drive ourselves into the ground rather than admit our desperate need. Often God allows us to reach the breaking point for our own good. Only in those moments of rare clarity that come from bottoming out will we allow ourselves to admit how little control we actually have. In those moments, the only thing we can do is throw ourselves headlong into the grace of God. In these moments, the pain and suffering actually drive us to him.

Rather than something to be avoided at all costs, these times should be embraced as gifts. We should thank God for the chance to see our true condition and rid ourselves of the foolish notion that we are autonomous and independent creatures capable of navigating through life on our own.

If your successes and achievements are completely due to your own strength, stress is the only possible outcome. You can never relax. There can be no Sabbath rest for you. If, however, God is the ultimate source of every good gift you receive, then you can afford to relax and trust the outcome of things to him. In other words, we will never receive the diamond of his grace as long as we’re clutching tightly to the things of this world.

In his book *Shoulder to Shoulder*, Dr. Rodney L. Cooper defines stress as “The response of a sympathetic nervous system to a perceived or actual threat.” He adds, “This technical

definition probably won't mean much to you. Basically it says that stress is the way our body responds to perceived or actual danger. Our blood pressure skyrockets and our muscle strength increases. We're ready to fight or fly. Stress isn't the cause but the effect."³ In essence, stress is a reaction to danger – real or imagined.

Dr. Cooper's definition of stress certainly describes what happened to King Saul after David had killed Goliath:

When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang:

“Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands.”

Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. “They have credited David with tens of thousands,” he thought, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?” And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David.

The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the harp, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, “I'll pin David to the wall.” But David eluded him twice.

1 Samuel 18:6-11

Sensing that David was a threat to his position, the king's blood pressure skyrocketed, his heart rate increased and his muscles tightened. Overcome with rage, he hurled a spear at David, who barely escaped.

In that instance, Saul's response was to a perceived rather than an actual danger. David had no intention of overthrowing the king, nor would he have used his new-found popularity to ease Saul out of power. Saul naturally assumed that David was like himself. Unfortunately, one of Saul's shortcomings as a leader was his inability to deal constructively with his perceptions of danger. That weakness undermined his mental health as well as the stability of his throne.

³ Rodney L. Cooper, *Shoulder to Shoulder* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 41-42.

In the University of Life, stress and affliction are not elective courses; they're a required part of the curriculum. Stress is not always a negative thing; properly managed, it can lead to development and growth. The issue is not how much pressure you're under in life; rather the issue is how you respond to that pressure. It is never external circumstances that cause stress; it is always our internal response to those external forces. After all, we have little, if any, control over our situation. The only thing we can consistently control is our response. Effective leaders learn how to manage stress – both their own and that of the team which they lead. They view stressful situations as an opportunity for growth.

Physically speaking, we build ourselves up by intentionally inducing stress on our muscles. Why does the correlation between the physical and the spiritual so often elude us? We much prefer to go to a physical gym but abide in a spiritual lounge. Until we allow God to take us to his spiritual gym and intentionally place us under stress in a controlled environment, we won't grow into the leaders he designed us to be.

The Suffering (but not Stressed-Out) Servant

Through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, our God experienced stress on a firsthand basis. Our Lord faced stressful circumstances on numerous occasions, but all of these were minor in comparison to the stress he endured from Gethsemane to the cross. To what resources did Jesus turn during this ordeal? The Bible shows us Christ's response to stress and suffering.

The author of Hebrews records:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.

Hebrews 5:7-8

Jesus was able to manage stress with dignity and integrity because he maintained a clear sense of his Father's purpose for his life as well as a willing submission to it. On the eve of his crucifixion he asserted, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (John 12:27-28). In Gethsemane, his soul was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:34), but he realized that his coming ordeal represented the very purpose for which he had come.

If we stopped our analysis of the text there, it might drive us to be thankful that Christ suffered all this for our benefit. But that would be incomplete; there's more to be found here. Christ not only suffered, he left us an example that we "should follow in his steps." If you live the Christian life very long on this planet, you will join Christ in becoming a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. Peter reveals three aspects of Jesus' suffering as examples for us to follow:

To this [endurance of suffering] you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

1 Peter 2:21-24

First, Jesus suffered *sinlessly*; his pain was not the consequence of his own sins but of the sins of others. There will be enough suffering in this world without adding to it by shooting ourselves in the foot. Because we live in a fallen world, we will suffer, but we need not increase our suffering through our own foolishness.

Second, he suffered *silently*; instead of shouting threats of vindication or retaliation, he entrusted himself to his Father's will. The temptation to seek revenge and retaliation for the things we have suffered can be overwhelming, particularly in such a litigious society as ours. But God says leave vengeance to him (Deuteronomy 32:35). We are called to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). There is a time to seek justice, but there is also a time to suffer in silence, trusting God to judge justly in the end.

Third, he suffered as a *substitute*; his grief was redemptive and brought great benefit to others. The things we endure create a life message in us, which we can then use to minister to others who are going through similar situations. Your suffering is not pointless; it fashions you more into his image and fits you for more effective ministry. By trying to avoid pain, we tell God to take his hands off of us. We're actually inviting him to love us less, not more. His is a holy love that only seeks what is best for us. His desire is that we become more like Jesus, so we can minister to others the way he did. In other words, like Christ, we suffer for the benefit of others. The writer of Hebrews explains:

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 2:17-18

All of this is a model, an example for how we should deal with stressful situations in our own lives. But in order for us to view our trials and difficulties with joy (James 1:2) we must embrace a growing sense of the Father's purpose for our lives. This is harder than it looks on the surface. Oswald Chambers suggested that most of us never intentionally renounce God's vision for our life. We simply lose sight of it through neglect. When we come to faith we catch a glimmer of the significance of our worth to both God and the world around us. We become

disobedient to that vision when we begin to live as though it cannot be obtained.⁴ We rarely deny the vision outright or argue with God's dream for us. "We lose the vision by spiritual leakage," says Chambers.⁵

We must also diligently maintain a willing submission to his purpose, even when it carries us in directions we do not wish to go. We must maintain an immovable resolve to stay the course and persist in the face of discomfort. Francis de Sales wrote of being placed in specific situations like a statue is placed in a specific place:

He has put us like a statue in its niche.

When there is added to this simple staying some feeling that we belong completely to God, and that he is our all, we must indeed give thanks to his goodness. If a statue that had been placed in some niche in some room could speak, and was asked, "Why are you there?" it would say,

"Because my master has put me here."

"Why don't you move?"

"Because he wants me to remain immovable."

"What use are you there; what do you gain by doing so?"

"It is not for my profit that I am here; it is to serve and obey the will of my master."

"But you do not see him."

"No, but he sees me, and takes pleasure in seeing me where he has put me."

"Would you not like to have movement so that you could go nearer to him?"

"Certainly not, except when he might command me."

"Don't you want anything else, then?"

"No, for I am where my master has placed me, and his good pleasure is the unique contentment of my being."⁶

This sort of resolve is a matter of trust and perspective. If God really knows what he's doing, then wherever we are, if we are walking in obedience to him, is exactly where we are supposed to be. It would not only be foolish to be somewhere else, it would be sinful. As we become

⁴ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour & Co., Inc., 1963), from the January 24 reading.

⁵ *Ibid.*, March 11.

⁶ Francis de Sales, *Thy Will Be Done*, trans. Henry Benedict Mackey (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1955), pp. 34-35.

more and more conformed to the image of Christ, we not only submit to his good will, we learn to submit *willingly*. Other options lose their appeal as God proves his trustworthiness.

Stress-Free Work

Some people associate work with creativity, productivity, positive challenges, significance, pride of accomplishment, enjoyable relationships and stimulating challenges. Others associate it with dreary toil, futility, injustice and joyless malaise. Scripture provides mixed signals concerning the nature and value of work. From one perspective, God's word speaks of work as a vehicle of expression and a means (not a source!) of provision that can impart satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. God mandated the fulfillment to be found in labor even prior to the tragedy of the fall: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). But the Bible also points out that work can be a source of pain, oppression, drudgery and unhappiness. Work has been tainted by sinful human nature with its pride, envy, greed, corruption and tendency toward the exploitation of others. Thus, many people view the workplace as an arena characterized by continual frustration and unhealthy stress.

In their book *Your Work Matters to God*, Doug Sherman and William Hendricks articulate what God's Word says about our jobs:

Every day, millions of workers go to work without seeing the slightest connection between what they do all day and what they think God wants done in the world. For example, you may sell insurance, yet you may have no idea whether or not God wants insurance to be sold. Does selling insurance matter to God or not? If not, you are wasting your life.... We think your work matters deeply to God.... It is not something we do apart from God, as the secular world would view it. It is not something beneath God's dignity and concern, as [some Christians view it].... Work is a major part of human life that God takes very seriously. It has intrinsic value. It is inherently worth doing. Through work we serve people, meet our own

needs, meet our family's needs, earn money to give to others, and through work we love God.⁷

Work is not a curse; it is not part of God's punishment. God himself is a worker. For six days he worked, designing the universe, developing the balance of nature, fashioning the plant and animal kingdoms. He formed man from the dust of the earth. When he finished his initial work of creation, he took a day off, rested and went back to work. Jesus said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working" (John 5:17).

It was not work itself that came as a result of sin, but frustrating and difficult work. Work may be more stressful and painful because of the fall, but God's original intention for work was for our benefit – so that we would have a sense of self-worth, our relationships would be enhanced and our physical needs would be met. Work still meets those needs. Moreover, God created us with an emotional need that can only be met by an honest day's work. Every person, having been made in the image of the Creator, has a God-given desire to imitate him and create. We long to accomplish a task, to do something valuable. When we complete a difficult task, we feel satisfaction and a greater sense of self-respect. Ecclesiastes 3:13 tells us, "That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil – this is the gift of God."

Ecclesiastes 2 offers a middle position that acknowledges both the joys and the heartaches of work. The Teacher cautions us to avoid both extremes – that of taking work too seriously and that of regarding it as a totally futile endeavor. So from one perspective, "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" (v. 24). But from another vantage point, the same Teacher laments that "work...is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (v. 17). Putting these pieces together, we can observe that one key to stress management is a realistic satisfaction in work, while avoiding the pitfall of turning it into an idol. We should

⁷ Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1987), pp. 7, 77, 87.

hold onto our work with a loose grip, since our true source of significance and security is in God, not in our jobs.

Have you ever been so caught up in an enjoyable task that you lose all track of time? We usually think of heaven as a place where we will lie around all day, strumming harps. If you're in an unrewarding job and succumb to the pressures of stress, that may sound like a good thing for a while. But sooner or later, you'd get bored with that and need to do something meaningful.

An even better existence would be to have a task you revel in doing, where you cannot fail or be frustrated and you never get tired. The Bible describes heaven as a place where we will be given such work by God. Revelation 22:3 says, "No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him." Our work in heaven will be so enjoyable, so void of stress, that time will fly. We will never grow weary, never get bored and never fail.

Turning Stress into Peace

We all need techniques to manage stress. This need is intrinsic to the human condition. Hans Selye, the great stress researcher, differentiated between helpful, neutral and debilitating stress.⁸ In Philippians 4:4-9 Paul teaches us how to turn pressure to our advantage. This passage is essential reading for any leader under pressure:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have

⁸ Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill, 1978).

learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice.
And the God of peace will be with you.

Stress is a complex and potentially dangerous phenomenon. Managing its effects is the subject of many publications. The apostle Paul offered advice not on how to manage negative stress but how to avoid it altogether. Before you write off Paul as an idealistic do-gooder, remember that his own work generated enormous pressure. Stress avoidance doesn't mean pressure avoidance. Paul achieved in his lifetime more than most people dream of accomplishing. And he did so under constant harassment and powerful opposition. People lied about him. He was unjustly imprisoned (the letter to the Philippians was written from a prison cell). He was eventually executed for his work. Paul certainly knew what pressure was all about, but he also knew what accomplishment was all about. That's why he is so qualified to help today's leader endure pressure without being crippled or even killed by the stress that so often accompanies it. Paul taught four principles in this passage:

1. Define perspective. Only when the perspective described in Philippians 3:1-4:6 is adopted does Paul's "rejoice" (v. 4) ring true. Our present circumstances must be contextualized into the bigger story, which is God's story.
2. Be gentle (v. 5). A person under the effects of stress is like a car in which the driver has one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake. Again – be gentle. Gentleness does not imply becoming a doormat; Christ was gentle without being weak. Gentleness implies having great power under control.
3. Trust God. The words in verses 5-7 are worth memorizing or printing out and posting on your desktop or calendar. If there was a machine that could turn anxiety into peace, it would make its inventor a billionaire. Yet God has given us the recipe for doing just this.
4. Live ethically (vv. 8-9). How much stress is generated by fear of being found out? Ethical people experience less stress. Being truthful is, in many ways, its own reward. It makes sense if for no other reason than because of its stress-reducing properties.

Stress will inevitably creep in – and, at times, flood in. Read and heed stress management suggestions. Far more importantly, work through this primer on stress avoidance.

Jesus was obviously a man who endured great pain and sorrow, yet he had peace in the midst of it all. On the night before his crucifixion, he told his disciples that he had so much peace that he could afford to give some to them (John 14:27). He had excess joy in spite of the fact that he was about to endure the greatest crucible of all (John 15:11). On what should have been the most stressful night of his life, he demonstrates an astonishing level of poise and inner calm. How was he able to endure such a high level of pressure? The writer of Hebrews tells us it was a matter of his perspective:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:2-3

Jesus endured more pressure than we can imagine, yet he had peace, poise and power – because he embraced the Father’s perspective. Amazingly, this is the same perspective he invites us to:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30

Trusting God, submitting to his leadership, eliminates stress and brings us rest.

Stress and the “Facts of Life”

If you’re a leader, you may assume that stress is simply an unavoidable component of your job.

Fortunately, King David offers some insight intended to help leaders manage their stress:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup

overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalm 23

Leaders under the immense pressure of identifying and solving problems can quickly reach high levels of stress. In this psalm, King David – who often faced overwhelming pressure – told his readers where he found his solace and security. This psalm can afford comfort to anyone, anytime; but we all find it especially relevant while we're under stress.

Fred Smith provides some helpful advice for leaders who are compelled to manage stress:

The first step toward healthy stress is to define the problem. The best definition I've heard of a problem is [that] a problem is something I can do something about. If I can't do anything about it, it is not my problem. It doesn't become my problem until I can do something about it. If I can't do anything about it, it's my fact of life. And I have to constantly be able to recognize facts of life, accept them, live with them and not consider them problems. I can't solve things that can't be solved; therefore I don't spend time thinking about them.⁹

Our “facts of life” are in the Shepherd's hands. He manages those things. He expects us to focus our attention on the tasks he has given us to do. Therein we find our legitimate “problems.” When we try to carry both our problems and our facts of life, we increase the pressure and set ourselves up for debilitating stress.

Stress and Release: A Divine Rhythm

Work is not only a blessing from God, it is also a command. The first half of the fourth commandment says: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (Exodus 20:9). However, the second half of that commandment is a call to rest: “But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...” (Exodus 20:10). Rest is just as much a part

⁹ Fred Smith, “Dissecting Sense from Nonsense: Insights from a Layman,” *Leadership Journal*, Volume 1(1), Winter, 1980, p. 105.

of the creation ordinance as work. Anyone who thinks they do not need to take a sabbath rest thinks they're better than Jesus. He rested every Sabbath, worshiping God in the synagogue (Luke 4:16). The God-man himself made the Sabbath a priority. He did not observe it in a legalistic sort of way, but he observed it nonetheless.

Rarely does God give us a reason behind his commands. But he does for the fourth command. He says we are to take a day off from our work because God himself did: "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:11). God could have accomplished all his work at once. It would not have taxed God to cram all six days' worth of creation into one day. But God was establishing a pattern for people made in his image to follow – a rhythm of work and rest. God worked and when he found a good stopping point, he rested. He never burnt out. He never collapsed in a heap on the weekends.

The world seems to be increasingly stress-inducing. In order to manage that stress and channel it into a healthy lifestyle, we must take the offer of God's sabbath rest seriously. We must reclaim the perspective that sees God as sovereign and in charge. We must take all our anxiety and cast it on him, because he cares for us more than we can imagine (1 Peter 5:7).

*This is the pattern of Creation. Work and rest.
Stress and release. Sound and silence.
The string of the violin sings only if it is taut,
and yet it breaks if it is not loosened between songs.
In His own image, male and female, God created His people.
Let us share in His rest.
Thus we worship and glorify His Holy Name.¹⁰*

¹⁰ Madeline L'Engle, "Sabbath," *Ladder of Angels* (New York: HarperCollins Juvenile Books, Reissue 1988).