

How to handle the pressure of being a manager right now *(from Harvard Business Review, Apr 2020)*

You've been working from home for weeks and feeling stressed because there's no light at the end of the tunnel. What can you do to stay focused and upbeat during this uncertain time? Who can you vent to? What can you do to recharge when most of your usual outlets aren't available? At times like these, the quality of your leadership is dependent on how well you're able to adapt to adversity. Here are some recommendations to help.

Choose self-compassion

This doesn't mean being soft on yourself, making excuses, or being complacent. Ask yourself: *"How would my best friend, or a mentor who wants the best for me, reassure and support me?"* Too many managers criticise themselves for every little mistake. Self-bullying is damaging to your mental and physical health, and it doesn't benefit the people around you either. It's hard to move forward when you're constantly beating yourself up.

Reflect on your purpose

One of the reasons the Covid-19 crisis is so personally painful is that our purpose in life is tied to the future, but for now that future is in limbo. With previous plans dissolved, it's easy to lose a sense of who you are and where you thought you were going. To regroup, reflect on your values and focus on what is truly important in your life and your work. Make time to think about what energises and inspires you. Ask yourself, *"What's important to me? What's worth protecting? What's worth holding on to?"*

Force yourself to think positively

It can be hard to cultivate an optimistic mindset during a global pandemic, but this is one of those times in your life and career that you must force yourself to think positively. How are you explaining the current challenge to yourself? Do you view the coronavirus as a permanent and pervasive threat, or do you acknowledge that these difficult circumstances are temporary? Do you take the adversity personally, or can you recognise that many people are in the same boat? If you're thinking and communicating negatively, your team is likely to suffer too. Take "detachment breaks" from work and the news. Find ways to recharge: get some fresh air, lunch with your partner, or a virtual coffee break with a friend.

Seek a sense of achievement

You and your team are dealing with the frustration that arises from challenges that can't be solved in a day or a week or a month. Look for localised, contained tasks that you and your people can reasonably accomplish over the course of the day or week. Focusing on small victories for yourself and your team helps provide direction and much-needed boosts.

Also seek outlets outside your job that offer a sense of accomplishment and achievement. If you have the time and motivation, consider developing a new skill: study a foreign language, or learn to code. At a time when you feel out of sorts, it's helpful to have a slice of your life where you feel confident, capable, and that you're getting better at something.

Embrace your humanity

Even in good times, frontline managers must balance two identities. On the one hand, you want to be a role model of strength, confidence and calmness. On the other, it's important to be human. If you're open about the challenges you're going through, your people will appreciate your openness and feel a sense of solidarity with you. However, remember that as a manager, you have a megaphone: everything you say gets amplified. So speak honestly about your concerns, but also share what you're doing to alleviate them so you don't inadvertently direct them toward negative feelings.

Look for outside support

Mindful of the previous point, it's more important than ever that you seek other avenues for social connection to help you cope. Call on a trusted family member, friend, mentor, or a peer, ideally at a different organisation. Everyone needs a sounding board. If you bottle up and try to go about business as usual, your problems stay with you. Perspective and insight from someone on the outside can help you solve them.

Practice self-care

When work is demanding, it's easy to neglect your wellbeing. In addition to getting enough sleep and eating well, make time for exercise and/or meditation. They provide protection against burnout and make a difference in terms of how your body and mind respond to stress. Taking care of your physical and emotional health is neither selfish nor self-indulgent. Hobbies and diversions can also help you relax and refresh. Dust off the musical instrument sitting in a cupboard, challenge yourself to cook a gourmet meal, plan your next DIY project, or read a book. Immerse yourself in something to stop your mind from spinning.

Principles to Remember:

Do

Think about what's important in your life and your work, and take time to reflect on what energises and inspires you.

Shift your mindset to reorient how you and your team accomplish your goals. Certain windows may be closed, but others are open.

Spend time on tasks that give you a sense of mastery and achievement. You need a part of your life where you feel confident, capable, and in control.

Don't

Beat yourself up. Treat yourself with kindness and empathy the way a good friend would.

Shy away from revealing your humanity. Be open with your team about how you're coping with the challenges you're personally going through.

Neglect your physical and emotional wellbeing. Make self-care a top priority and find ways to decompress and recharge.