

3 MAJOR SOURCES OF EXECUTIVE STRESS

By Sylvia D. Hepler

Most stress for executives is rooted in fear. While C-suite occupants may be afraid of hundreds of different past, present, and future situations, they also tend to spend enormous amounts of energy trying to meet these three needs:

1. Convincing others they are more competent than perhaps they are
Executives, even outstanding ones, live in constant fear of being “found out”. They want their Boards, employees, and stakeholders to believe in their intelligence, savvy, and skill. If they’re on a pedestal, they dread falling off. It’s an ego and pride thing. All falls hurt. The daily mantra quickly becomes: “Stay on top of your game. Especially, do whatever it takes to make others trust that you are on top of your game. Every minute. Without fail.” Erasing any doubts—or heading them off from the outset—consumes the executive mind, driving the activities of each day. It’s exhausting work that never shows up in a formal job description.

What’s the alternative? Truly competent executives don’t present themselves as infallible from the beginning of their tenure. They share their struggles and dilemmas openly in appropriate venues, solicit input and feedback on a regular basis, and reveal their humanity in ways that attract rather than repel those around them. Executives need to demonstrate reasonable competence, not perfection. It’s the obsession to look perfect to superiors, peers, and subordinates that ultimately erodes personal integrity and authenticity. That’s a mighty big price to pay for a self created pedestal.

2. Staying in total control

Despite dwelling in a world that is more out of control than ever, executives have a need to feel in control of many people and things: their employees, Boards, profits, environments, competitors, and plans. The more tightly they hold the reins, the more chaotic life becomes. Employees resist, Board members oppose, competitors fight. The environments stagnate, profits decrease, and plans sink. Where is the “win”?

What can be done instead? Paradoxically, managers/leaders who appear to be less controlling are actually more in control of all aspects of their organization than those who constantly let everybody know they are the all-powerful boss. Sometimes less is more. Squeezing the life blood out of people and/or scaring them diminishes the control most executives crave. Real control is not palpable; it is subtle. It’s present without being discussed. It permeates the workplace in the way a pinch of cinnamon seasons apple pie or a teaspoon of vanilla flavors pudding. True control is less about action and more about attitude. Executives who really understand control share it with Board members, colleagues, and staff. They build partnerships rather than walls and enemies.

3. Dissecting decisions once they are made

Too frequently executives second guess themselves once they've made a decision. They plague themselves with questions like: Was firing so-and-so really necessary? Was person X actually the best choice for the position? Did I honestly choose the best team leader for the project? Should I have left the company last year instead of this year as I'd planned? This type of dissection either creates new stress or exacerbates stress that already exists in a given situation. Either way, this kind of stress serves no positive purpose. The only thing it does is burden the executive with unnecessary fatigue, worry, and confusion. It muddies the waters, and it wastes time.

What is better? Engaging in a sensible, meaningful process that leads to responsible decision-making and then living with the decision is better. When executives work through the following steps, they feel more secure about the choices they make: gather enough data, solicit the right information, seek input from the right players, identify the benefits, examine the consequences and risks, and determine the extent to which the final decision aligns with one's personal values. Decisions made after considering all of these things usually are wise decisions. Executives need to trust both the process and themselves.