

The Perfect Storm – Leadership, Stress and Empathy.



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So, let's talk about "a perfect storm". This was the title of a great movie from 2000. In its time the special effects were good enough to get an academy nomination. The movie is about a fishing trawler which ignores from the weather office who had observed the mounting conditions for a massive storm. The crew ignored Hurricane warning and sailed into the teeth of a perfect storm.

For Leaders, COVID-19 has created the conditions for a perfect stress storm.

Does this mean that we will experience the perfect storm, no, but it could! Such a stress storm could creep up on us and our teams while we are busy trying to keep our worlds afloat.

What am I talking about? We can cope with stress right? Let's be honest, in any leadership position there are "stressors" that is part of the deal. There are targets, KPI's or performance standards, project deadlines, and a host of other challenges, which we and our teams are responsible for. We have bosses or shareholders who we account to. They rightly take their pound of Flesh! As leaders we need to demonstrate the ability to cope with these stresses. Our followers also need us to cope with this stress and lead with cool heads. This is part of what makes us good at our jobs!

So, what is this perfect stress storm stuff?



I have recently been asked to present a stress management program for a National Organisation whose leadership are working with clients who have experienced crises and grief as a consequence of COVID-19. While preparing workshop I went back through all the stress stuff I had been taught, and while doing so I began to see the potential for a perfect stress storm.

Like the weatherman in the movie, when we look at the different elements of what we know about stress we can see how a perfect storm could evolve for our teams and for our leaders.

1. We all know that when we experience protracted stress, our bodies experience abnormal levels of Adrenalin and Cortisol which over time can impact on our health and ultimately on life expectancy.

As far back as 1968 psychologists have identified that different stressful experiences can have a direct impact upon our health. *

2. We need some levels of stress to function optimally. But there is a threshold. Once this threshold is passed - more stress will negatively impact upon our performance and ultimately cause significant performance failure. **
3. We also know that when it comes to stress, we are all different. Some of us can manage significant stress levels and others not so much. *** There is no crime in this and your ability to cope with stress does not define your abilities. However, *we ignore our abilities to cope with stress at our peril.*

What I am describing could be illustrated as a Threshold. A Personal Stress Threshold. When we go past this threshold, we increasingly lose the ability to cope. We battle to perform as we expect. We struggle make good decisions and we lose the ability to provide clear leadership. We overreact and we become fatigued. If this continues, we are at further risk.

What makes up this Threshold?

Firstly, part of what determines our personal stress threshold is our makeup or personality. How you are wired, to a large extent, will determine how you cope with stress. The same stressor will completely destroy one person, while another looks less affected. A very negative personality is less likely to bounce back from something that stresses them, than the optimist.

Secondly, each work function or role has some level of inherent stress. We probably have coped with our job's inherent stress level for some time and under normal circumstances, we should be able to expect to continue to cope with, what we have managed before. **So where is this perfect storm?**

I would propose that as leaders, we need to be extra vigilant about our stress levels at the moment. COVID has introduced dynamics into our stress quota which we have not encountered before. These stressors will push us closer to our threshold. COVID has introduced a whole new range of new Stressors.

Consider the following:

1. Loss of someone close or the fear for the health and safety of those we love, adds a whole new list of stressors which will bring us closer to being exposed to our stress threshold.
2. Our own personal fears about COVID and our exposure. We have become very attuned to the Pandemic. Any sign of a sneeze and we immediately worry.
3. New financial reality's and concerns have emerged, and while financials are a known stressor, COVID has now significantly exposed most of us.
4. Leaders are exposed to their team's stressors. While good leaders are able to be truly empathetic and supportive, this takes a toll on the same leader's personal stress levels. In the current environment, the more empathetic you are, the greater leader you are, but also the greater risk to your stress threshold.
5. Going to work has become a personal risk. A visit to the shops, has lost its appeal even for the most committed shopper. If you must see the doctor, or a client, this comes with a whole new set of challenges. I am sure that every time I put on a face mask; I can feel my blood pressure rise.

6. Being disconnected and distanced from our social network. This ultimately means that one of the core stress reduction mechanisms for most of us, our support systems, our friends and in many cases family, are not as available. Let's be honest, the Zoom parties are just not doing it for me 120 days into lock down.
7. It is now well documented that remote or Socially distant working is stressful. The endless Zoom or whatever platform meetings, the never switch off. The tightrope of the retaining work-life balance while integrating home and office, is all adding to our stress levels.

The bottom line is that pre-COVID we were probably coping with the stressors of our positions and were, in most cases, safely within our stress threshold levels. In the current world, our stress threshold will be under pressure.

The stress weather forecaster could reasonably be sending out a weather warning. A perfect storm is gathering.

As leaders we have a responsibility to respond to our Stress storm. Our people depend on us. To serve them well we need to be able to protect ourselves first. How are we doing? Are the waves around us mounting and getting nasty? Are we reading the dark clouds on the horizon well? How close are you to your stress threshold? If COVID has done anything, it has taught us as leaders to take warning signs seriously.

Our teams equally are under pressure and each individual has their own stress thresholds and personal challenges. Keeping an eye on how our people are doing is our responsibility. Now is time for truly authentic empathetic Leaders.

If you think your stress threshold is at risk, you owe it to yourself as well as the people you lead to take it seriously. Leaders are at far greater risk if they fail to act now with a storm brewing, than if they admit that they might be at risk right now and begin to self-regulate their stress threshold.



Delphis - Stress Curve

There are many articles on the web about how to manage stress.

If you like we have an online stress management program you could register for. We also have a program on Empathy which could help a leader in the challenging world of showing Authentic Empathy.



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