Harvard
Business
Review

Stress Management

Help Your Team Do More Without Burning Out

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October 15, 2018

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Summary. Earlier in our careers, speed and energy are important components. But there comes a point where you actually can't speed up any more. You need to rely less on what you can personally achieve (your "ego-drive") and more on what you can achieve with others (your "co-drive"). Instead of being energetic, you need to become energizing. Instead of setting the pace, you need to teach others to self-propel. Instead of delegating, you need to allow people to congregate. As you shift from proving yourself to helping others perform, your key question is not "How can I push harder?" but "Where can I let go?" **close**

As we begin our coaching session, Nick is fired up. He radiates energy, his eyes are beaming with determination, and he never really comes to a full rest. He speaks passionately of a new initiative he is spearheading, taking on the looming threats from Silicon Valley, and rethinking his company's business model completely.

I recognize this behavior in Nick, having seen it many times over the years since he was first singled out as a high-potential talent. "Restless and relentless" have been his trademarks as he has risen through the ranks and aced one challenge after another.

But this time, I notice something new. Beneath the usual can-do attitude there is an inkling of something else: Mild disorientation and even signs of exhaustion. "It's like sprinting all you can, and then you turn a corner and find that you are actually setting out on a marathon," he remarks at one point. And as we speak, this sneaking feeling of not keeping pace turns out to be Nick's true concern: Is he about to lose his magic touch and burn out?

Nick is not alone.

In a psychologist's practice, common themes rise and wane across a cohort of clients. Right now, I see a surge of concern about speed: getting ahead and *staying* ahead. More clients use similar metaphors about "running to stand still" or feeling "caught on a track." Invariably, their first response is to speed up and run faster.

But the impulse to simply run faster to escape friction is obviously of no use for the long haul of a life-long career. In fact, our immediate behavioral response to friction shares one feature with much of the general advice about speeding up: It is plainly counterproductive and leads to burn out rather than break out.

To add insult to injury, the way to wrestle effectively with the challenge of *sustainable speed* is somewhat counterintuitive and even disconcerting — especially to high-performing leaders who have successfully relied on their personal drive to make results.

From ego-drive to co-drive

The key to speeding up without burning up is a concept I call *co-drive*. Sustainable speed does not come from ego-drive, that is, your own personal performance or energy level, but rather from a different approach to engaging with people around you.

Rather than running faster, Nick needs to make different moves altogether. First, he must let go of his obsession with his own development, his own needs, his own performance, and his own pace. Second, he must start obsessing about other people.

It may seem illogical, but the leap to a new growth curve begins by realizing that the recipe is not to take on more and speed up, but to slow down and let go of some of the issues that have been your driving forces: power, prestige, responsibility, recognition, or face-time.

The talent phase in our careers tends to be profoundly self-centered, even narcissistic. If you need to move on from the first growth curve in your career, and want to take on more challenges, you need to exchange ego-drive for co-drive.

Co-drive requires that you momentarily forget yourself — and instead focus on others. The shift involves an understanding that you have *already* proven yourself. At this stage, the point is to help those around you perform. The change to co-drive involves moving from a stage of grabbing territory to a stage characterized by letting go of command and control.

Beyond teamwork

So here is what Nick needs to do: Rather than striving to be energetic, he should aim to be energizing. Rather than setting the pace, he should aspire to make teams self-propelling. Instead of

delegating tasks, he should learn to lead by congregating.

Be energizing, not energetic. Here is the paradox: You can actually speed things up by slowing down. There is no doubt that being energetic is contagious and therefore a short-term source of momentum. But if you lead by example all the time, your batteries will eventually run dry. You risk being drained at the very point when your leadership is needed the most. Conveying a sense of urgency is useful, but an excess of urgency suffocates team development and reflection at the very point it is needed. "Code red" should be left for real emergencies.

Nick has always had a weak point for people, who, like himself, are high-energy and get things done. These "Energizer Bunnies" are his star players. However, with the co-drive mindset, Nick needs to widen his sights and recognize and reward people who are good at energizing others. Energizing behavior is unselfish, generous, and praises, not just progress, but personality too.

Seek self-propulsion, not pace-setting. If you lead by beating the drum, setting tight deadlines, and burning the midnight oil, your team becomes overly dependent on your presence. Sustainable speed is achievable only if the team propels itself without your presence. Jim Collins wrote that great leaders don't waste time telling time, they build clocks.

Self-propulsion comes from letting go of control, resisting the urge to make detailed corrections and allowing for informal leadership to flourish. As Ron Heifetz advocates, true leadership is realizing that you need to "give the work back" instead of being the hero who sweeps in and solves everybody's problems.

In Nick's case, he should resist the urge to take the driver's seat and allow himself to take the passenger seat instead. Leading from the side-line, not the front line will change his perspective. Instead of looking at the road and navigating traffic, he is able to monitor how the driver is actually doing and what needs to improve. In his mind, he should fire himself — momentarily — and see what happens to his team when he sets them free and asks them to take charge instead of looking to him for answers, deadlines and decisions.

Congregate, don't delegate. From very early on in our careers we learn that in order to solve big, complex issues fast, we must decompose the problem into smaller parts and delegate these pieces to specialists to get leverage. Surely, you can make good music by patching together the tracks of individual recordings. But true masterpieces come alive when the orchestra plays together.

One example is the so-called Trauma Center approach. When a trauma patient comes in, all specialists are in the room assessing the patient at the same time, but constantly allowing the most

skilled specialist to take the lead (and talk), not the designated leader.

The most well-run trauma teams I have observed know when to jump in and when to step back. To put it simply, it's no use working on a finger if the heart is failing. A trauma team relies on trust and patience. They trust each other's specialty and work very symmetrically. There is a very strong "no one leaves before we are done" mentality in those teams.

To Nick, this may sound like good old teamwork, and while Nick is certainly driven by a good measure of self-interest, he is also an accomplished leader who masters the dynamics of teamwork: Having shared goals, assigning roles and responsibilities, and investing in the team.

But there is more to co-drive than plain teamwork. It is about re-working the collaborative process it self. Rather than cubicled problem-solving, sustainable speed requires a shift toward more collective creation: Gathering often, engaging issues openly and inviting others to *improve* on your own thoughts and decisions.

Co-drive requires a different mindset. And it goes beyond team-work. Adam Grant from Wharton has done research demonstrating that a generous and giving attitude towards others enhances team performance.

Try, for instance, to take a look at your own behavior yesterday and gauge the balance between giving and taking. Givers offer assistance, share knowledge, and focus on introducing and helping others. Takers attempt to get other people to do something that will ultimately benefit them, while they act as gatekeepers of their own knowledge.

Grant's conclusion is clear: a willingness to help others is not just the essence of effective cooperation and innovation — it is also the key to accelerating your own performance.

Maturity and Caliber

Headhunters call this change of perspective from ego-drive to co-drive "executive maturity." The mature leader's burning question is: how do I help *others* perform?

The developmental psychologist Robert Kegan calls the leap a subject/object shift. You progress from seeing and navigating in the world on the basis of your own needs and motives — and allowing yourself to be governed by these needs — to seeing yourself from an external position as a part of an organism.

It requires a certain caliber and self-assuredness to act in this way. The ability to put your ego on hold may require a great effort. It might be worthwhile reminding yourself of the words of the American President Harry Truman: "It is incredible what you can achieve, if you don't care who gets the credit." If you succeed in

making this shift, and thereby improving the skills of the people around you, then you will also experience a greater degree of freedom.

So next time you are feeling stuck, don't ask: "How can I push harder?" but "Where can I let go?"

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