

Behind the Mask: managing the emotional challenges of leadership

Our role as leaders appears to require that we appear strong and confident. Meanwhile, behind the role, we human beings have to contend with a wide range of other feelings. How many of the following examples do you sometimes experience in your job? Please mark YES or NO.¹

1. I am often reluctant to delegate because I believe it's more likely to get done to my standards if I do it myself. YES
 NO
2. I feel like I can't make mistakes in front of my staff – as if somehow I have to be perfect. YES
 NO
3. I sometimes feel awkward having power over others in my organization. YES
 NO
4. I have imposter syndrome. I feel like people believe I'm smarter and more competent than I am – that somehow I've fooled everyone. YES
 NO
5. I get uncomfortable making unpopular decisions. YES
 NO
6. I get frustrated that my staff isn't doing what I want them to do. YES
 NO
7. I feel an enormous weight of responsibility that makes it hard to relax. YES
 NO
8. I'm sometimes reluctant to simply tell people what to do. YES
 NO
9. I feel like I have to project confidence and look like I know what I'm doing, even when I don't feel it. YES
 NO
10. I'm sometimes uncomfortable with how others treat me as an authority figure. YES
 NO

¹ The digital version of this PDF form can be filled out using Adobe Reader.

ARE YOU SUFFERING FROM LEADER-ITIS?

11. I get insecure making big decisions that have so much impact on others. YES
 NO
12. I feel isolated in my role because there are things I can't talk to my staff about and have to keep to myself. YES
 NO
13. I feel like I'm never doing enough. YES
 NO
14. When anything goes wrong in the organization I feel like it's my fault. YES
 NO
15. I feel like I'm juggling too many balls and worry that I'll start dropping them. YES
 NO
16. I often feel like I'm not doing well enough at my job. YES
 NO
17. I sometimes long for the old days before I became a top leader. YES
 NO
18. I sometimes wonder how long I really want to stay in this job. YES
 NO
19. My mind is almost always racing – first thing in the morning and when I'm trying to go to sleep – thinking about all that I have to do. YES
 NO
20. I feel like there must be something wrong with me that I have so many concerns about fulfilling my role. YES
 NO

Are some of the above examples familiar?

Don't worry! From having trained and coached thousands of leaders, I can assure you that it's actually normal to have these kinds of feelings. You're just a human being trying to do a tough job.

Solution #1 Have compassion for yourself

Your job is hard to begin with, but a significant contributor to your stress is a nagging inner judge. Be compassionate with yourself.

Here's a quote from a CEO of a major corporation:

By far the most difficult skill for me to learn as CEO was the ability to manage my own psychology. Organizational design, process design, metrics, hiring and firing were all relatively straightforward skills to master compared to keeping my mind in check. Over the years, I've spoken to hundreds of CEOs all with the same experience. Nonetheless, very few people talk about it, and I have never read anything on the topic. The first rule of the CEO psychological meltdown is don't talk about the psychological meltdown.²

Solution #2 Get Connected

Top leaders tend to feel isolated. There are things you can't speak about with others. Breaking that isolation is important.

Here are some interventions:

- Cultivate a real partner in your organization – someone who is in tune with your priorities and someone you think you can trust.
- Find a colleague with whom you can do regular peer coaching.
- Join or help start a local support group for Executive Directors. (Leaders actually do this.)
- Form a kitchen cabinet: a small group of trusted advisors from outside your organization who can serve as a sounding board and support.

Solution #3 Establishing Work-Life Balance

Having priorities other than work is critical to maintaining some semblance of balance and personal fulfillment. Engage in recreational activities that actually help “recreate” you. Spend more time with family and friends. I ran a hospice program for a number of years. I never heard anyone on their deathbed wish they had worked more.

Solution #4 Care for your body

Stress often leads to poor habits of self-care. Then, failure to take care of ourselves leads to more stress. Countless studies show the impact of sleep, diet and exercise on not only our moods and self-confidence, but on concentration, analytic reasoning, productivity and executive judgment.

Solution #5 Invest in your own development

We often fail to take the time to invest in our ongoing professional development. Training, reading, coaching, ongoing education and self-reflection are critical for the lifelong learning that helps develop great leaders.

²

<http://www.businessinsider.com/whats-the-most-difficult-ceo-skill-managing-your-own-psychology-2011-4>

Solution #6 Connect to the source

Leaders need to draw strength and meaning from a connection to something larger than themselves. An active connection to our deeper sense of purpose, to a cause or community that we serve, might help inspire us and renew our commitment to the work.