

Work related stress and HR - Kate Lanz

Kate Lanz, an executive coach to senior leaders, looks at how a leader's sense of responsibility can wear down their resilience. She identifies what HR professionals can do to help relieve the burden.

Leaders are under immense pressure and strain not least because they are the ultimate bearer of responsibility for their organisation and employees. This responsibility can be an incredible burden and although leaders tend to be resilient, shouldering too much responsibility will not only wear them down, but can have an enormous impact for the organisation and employees.

How leaders respond to responsibility divides into two main patterns. The first is a fight pattern, which results in the leader taking on too much responsibility and is often characterised by the 'weight of the world on my shoulders'. The second pattern is a flight response where full responsibility is slightly evaded out of a fear that the task is too difficult. This creates a constant and vague feeling of running away all the time.

To define the different impacts on resilience, we first need to fully identify what we mean by the term. Resilience is the ability to stay consistently in touch with the aspects of oneself that drive competence, generate confidence and support performance delivery. Effective leaders need to be able to consistently do this for themselves in the first instance and in so doing create the environment for others to do the same.

It's vital that HR professionals understand what happens when a leader takes on too much responsibility and their resilience under pressure starts to reduce. They are then in a position to support leaders to spot the signals and move back into a more resourceful state.

When the pressure is high and sustained we feel stressed. This is a natural response and designed to help us survive as the brain decides whether we need to go into fight or flight mode. To put this into the context of leadership, when the pressure gets too much, many leaders will tend to go into a version of fight which is characterised by taking on too much protective responsibility for their people.

Here's an example drawn from coaching experience of a typical leader reaction. Amanda had just taken up her first CEO role having moved up from commercial director. The sector ran on tight margins and trading conditions were particularly tough. Amanda had a clear handle on what the business needed to focus on to deliver the results. She could see that teams were working very hard within their own capabilities but there were gaps. She needed to keep people motivated whilst she drove

initiatives to create culture change, brought in new processes and upgraded capability in key roles. There were several difficult business challenges within the first few months which meant Amanda found herself delivering bad news to the Board on a number of occasions.

This being her first CEO role Amanda was desperate to do well and demonstrate that she could turn the business around, showing the Board what she was capable of. What started to emerge was that Amanda was taking on too much responsibility for too much. Her brain was taking her into a fight reaction whereby she was overusing her “I can deal with anything” mind set.

Without realising it she was under-involving the senior management. They were not fully engaged in the issues and she was not getting buy-in, support and indeed the benefit of their experience. She also needed them involved so that they gave her the sufficient time and resources needed to make the changes and drive the business forward. Inadvertently she was creating the sense of being a fortress, which was having the adverse effect of driving their expectations even higher without the commensurate support.

Equally, Amanda was taking too much responsibility for the work of her direct team and their people. In her desire to protect them and keep them motivated during this time of culture and capability change she was not being transparent enough about the business pressures and difficulties. In a very subtle way she was infantilising them which disempowered them. She did not mean to - on the contrary she thought she was helping. It also unintentionally stoked their anxiety as they could feel there was more to the situation than met the eye and felt concerned about what their boss was not sharing with them.

Amanda’s legendary resilience started to wane. She was known as a tough cookie with endless amounts of stamina, but she found her temper becoming shorter. Her concentration and creativity in solving problems started to suffer, she felt more tired and less motivated than normal. Her resilience was starting to suffer and drop and there was a risk that her team would pick up on it and their anxiety would be contagious throughout the organisation.

Through coaching Amanda focused on the loss of energy and motivation as a clue to what might be happening. She soon became fast and adept at noticing the physical and energetic clues to indicate to her when her responsibility and resilience calibration might be slipping. She used this as an indicator to enable her to check in with herself and see where and how she could share some of the pressure in a productive way with colleagues.

As HR professionals it helps to pay attention to your leaders’ behaviours which indicate that their ‘responsibility-o-meter’ might be malfunctioning. Are there any noticeable changes in behaviour? What does the leader talk about with you? Are they complaining more about different sets of colleagues? Are they on a shorter fuse than

usual? All of these are indicators that a leaders' resilience is waning. Often these very driven personalities fail to notice this for themselves until it is too late.

If you pick up any of these signals investigate through questions how the leader is handling responsibility. How much are they involving bosses, peers and their teams in problem solving? How well are they engaging others in understanding the pressures they are under? Explore with them ways that they can engage others appropriately and productively in sharing the load.

Amanda's first move was to open up with her direct boss on the main board and bring him in to key discussions on business challenges. He had not realised some of the issues she was dealing with. His support of her approach went a long way to reducing the pressure she was creating for herself. She got her team engaged differently and more appropriately, she allowed others to help her think. This was sometimes tough for her as it left her feeling a little vulnerable but she could see that it improved her problem solving. She felt less stressed and her mood and resilience under pressure improved again. Shouldering too much responsibility had been the root of the problem.

Kate Lanz specialises in working with senior leaders
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