



A CCL Research White Paper

# The Stress of Leadership

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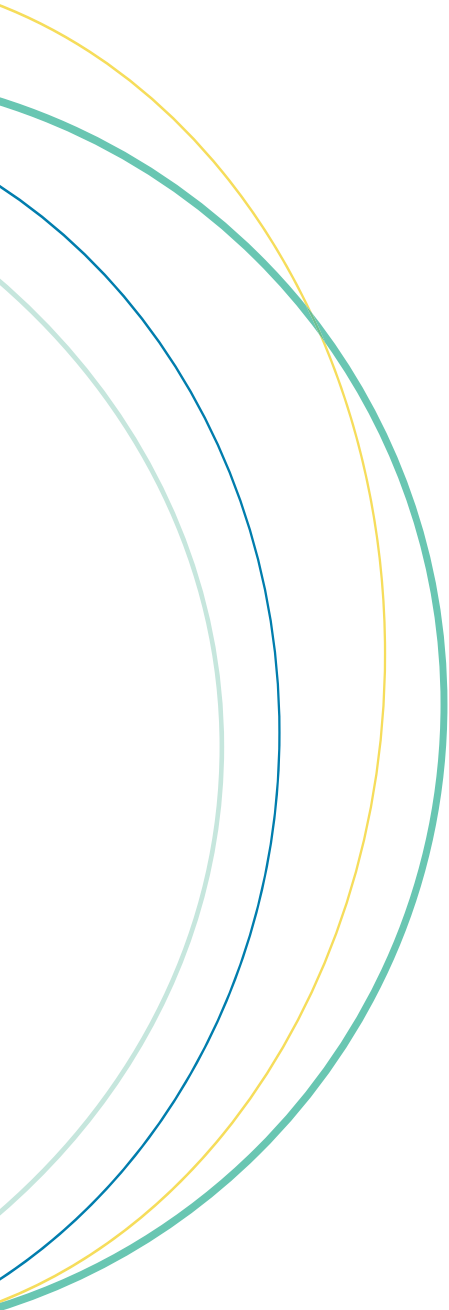


Center for  
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# The Stress of Leadership



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# The Stress of Leadership

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ideas2Action (I2A) project is a Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) initiative aimed at achieving our goal of “ideas into action” by providing relevant and timely research via technology to our open-enrollment programs. Two major research methods were used: a short in-class survey via computer kiosks and a volunteer Internet survey sent to participants two to three weeks after completion of their respective programs.

Over a three-month period in the summer of 2006, the I2A team collected data attempting to answer the question “How does stress impact leadership?” We received more than 160 responses to the in-class survey and 70 responses to the Internet survey. The typical respondent was a male between the ages of 41 and 50 representing upper-middle management or the executive level.

The major findings of this survey included:

1. Eighty-eight percent of leaders report that work is a primary source of stress in their lives and that having a leadership role increases the level of stress.
2. More than 60 percent of surveyed leaders cite their organizations as failing to provide them with the tools they need to manage stress.
3. More than two-thirds of surveyed leaders believe their stress level is higher today than it was five years ago.
4. Nearly 80 percent of surveyed leaders state they would benefit from a coach to help them manage stress.
5. A lack of resources and time are the most stressful leadership demands experienced by leaders. Stress is caused by trying to do more with less, and to do it faster.
6. Leaders experience stress equally between their bosses, peers, direct reports and customers, but the reasons for the stress are different depending on the source.
7. Physical exercise is the most commonly cited method leaders use to manage stress, yet only 10 percent of responses from surveyed leaders indicate their organizations provide access to gyms or workout facilities.
8. More than 90 percent of leaders cite they manage stress by temporarily removing themselves, either physically or mentally, from the source of their stress.
9. Most leaders use a variety of sensory pursuits, or physical stimuli, to manage stress regardless of the source.
10. Stress caused by task demands such as job responsibilities and decision making is often managed by engaging in behaviors that help the leader gain focus and perspective on the challenge.

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## 12A PROJECT PURPOSE

The purpose of the project is to provide our participants and clients with research that is timely and relevant to current challenges. The research questions are also designed to aid open enrollment programs in continuously updating our content and providing knowledge that is compelling to our participant groups.

The hope is that I2A will allow CCL to achieve its goal of “ideas into action.” The project is being piloted on the Colorado Springs campus this year with the intention of moving it enterprise-wide by 2008. During a three-month period of 2006, we col-

## SAMPLE AND METHOD

lected data from CCL participants via two complementary research methods. The first asked participants to complete a short survey via computer kiosks during their week-long visit to our campus. This data was returned to them by the end of their program week.

The second method was an Internet survey that participants volunteered to take part in approximately two weeks following their CCL experience. This survey was much more in-depth and allowed the I2A team to better understand the high-level trends that emerged from the in-class survey.

The subject for this research was the impact of stress on leadership.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

### IN-CLASS SURVEY

Our initial survey about stress focused on high-level trends and was completed by participants attending one of our leadership development programs. The average participant was a male (78 percent) between the ages of 41 and 50 (46 percent) representing upper-middle management or the executive level (62 percent). See Figures 1-3 for more detail.

FIGURE 1

GENDER	PERCENTAGE
Male	78%
Female	22%

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## DEMOGRAPHICS (continued)

FIGURE 2

AGE	PERCENTAGE
26-30	1%
31-35	8%
36-40	24%
41-45	20%
46-50	26%
51-55	13%
56-60	8%
61+	1%

FIGURE 3

LEVEL IN THE ORGANIZATION	PERCENTAGE
First Level	4%
Middle Management	16%
Upper Middle Management	31%
Executive	31%
Top Management	19%

## POST-PROGRAM INTERNET SURVEY

Approximately one to two weeks following the program, those participants who volunteered received an Internet survey that focused on deeper, more qualitative questions about leadership and stress. The average participant was a 44-year-old male (61 percent) who is at the upper management level (35 percent) and works for an organization with 1,000 or more employees (54 percent).

FIGURE 4

GENDER	PERCENTAGE
Male	61%
Female	27%
Not Identified	12%

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## DEMOGRAPHICS (continued)

FIGURE 5

SIZE OF THE ORGANIZATION	PERCENTAGE
1 to 10	1%
10 to 99	5%
100 to 999	26%
1,000 to 4,999	20%
5,000 to 9,999	3%
10,000 or more	32%

FIGURE 6

LEVEL IN THE ORGANIZATION	PERCENTAGE
First Level	4%
Middle Management	8%
Upper Middle Management	35%
Executive	29%
Top Management	11%

## THE STATE OF STRESS TODAY

Is stress a factor in today's business world? If so, what is the impact on leaders? Based on the sample of leaders we surveyed, not only is stress a factor in business but leaders are increasingly susceptible to it.

Eighty-eight percent of leaders told us that work is a primary source of stress in their lives and that having a leadership role increases the level of stress (75 percent agreement). Further, about 65 percent of the sample believes that their stress level is higher than it was five years ago.

So the question now becomes: Are leaders able to manage that stress effectively? Well, based on our participants, about 85 percent believe they manage stress effectively. However, only about 28 percent feel their organizations provide tools to help them deal with stress more effectively.

Interestingly, even though a majority of the sample believe they manage stress effectively, they also would like to see more health and fitness components in their leadership training (86 percent agree) and believe they would benefit from a coach to help

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## THE STATE OF STRESS TODAY (continued)

them manage stress (79 percent agree). This apparent contradiction might be explained by the ability leaders have built to push through stress as opposed to truly manage it.

FIGURE 7

THE STATE OF STRESS TODAY	PERCENTAGE AGREE
Work is a primary source of personal stress.	88%
I would benefit from more health/fitness components in leadership training.	86%
I manage stress effectively.	85%
I would benefit from a coach to help me manage stress.	79%
My leadership role has contributed to higher levels of personal stress.	75%
I am more stressed at work than I was five years ago.	65%
My organization provides tools to help me deal with stress effectively.	28%

## SOURCES OF STRESS

Being aware of the sources of personal stress is an important step in managing and mitigating its negative effects. By first understanding where in the workplace stress emanates from, leaders can more effectively and directly manage it. The leaders surveyed provided a number of ways in which they manage stress, and they also provided insights into how they manage stress from specific sources.

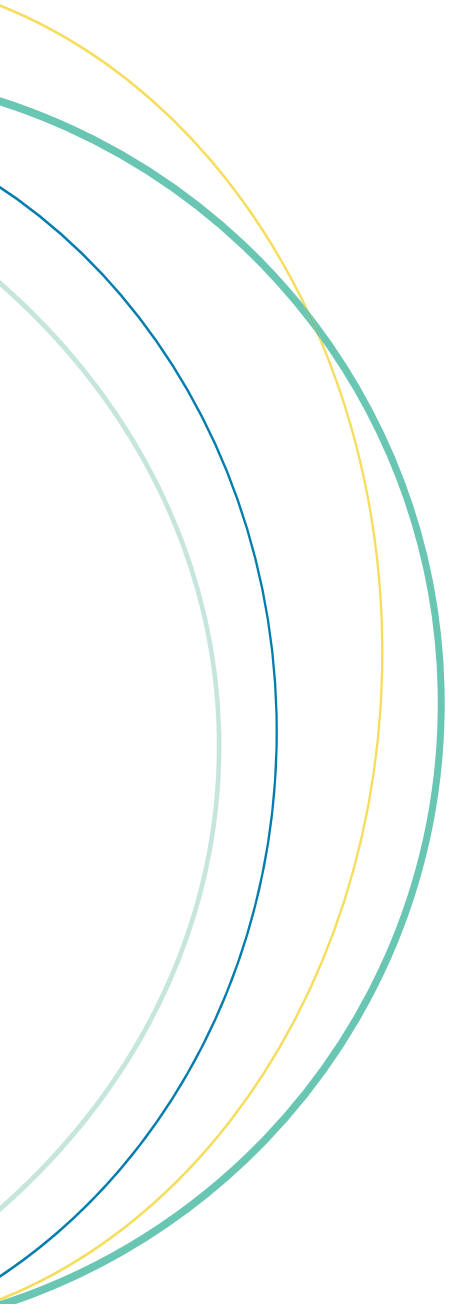
## DEMANDS ON LEADERS

As the number of demands placed upon leaders increases, so does the level of stress. Relationship building and dealing with conflict, as well as decision making and job responsibilities, are the most frequent demands contributing to increased levels of stress for leaders. Also adding to the sources of stress are leadership demands such as developing people and managing limited resources. Many leaders are also finding physical demands such as travel, work hours and the work environment compounding their levels of stress.

### *Leadership Demands*

When asked what demands contribute most to a leader's stress, 28 percent of responses described having a lack of resources and time. Stress is caused by trying to do more with less, and to do it faster. Workloads, budget cuts and travel are demands that create stress. Leadership demands that take time away from the

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## SOURCES OF STRESS (continued)

leader's primary job responsibilities are another source of stress. These demands include long or frequent meetings and navigating organizational bureaucracies.

Developing others (15 percent) is another leadership demand causing stress. Motivating employees, resolving conflicts and providing feedback were examples of stressful leadership demands. Establishing and maintaining relationships (11 percent) was also seen as a stressful leadership demand. These demands included dealing with difficult personalities and relationship building with peers and bosses.

### *Interpersonal Demands*

As relationships were a central theme of recent CCL polls and research, we asked participants to provide the interpersonal demands that caused the most stress for them as leaders. The most frequent interpersonal demand causing leaders stress is dealing with the negative aspects of interpersonal relationships. Twenty-one percent of responses revealed that leaders experience stress from interpersonal conflicts, political maneuvering and dishonesty.

Overcoming job-related constraints to maintaining interpersonal relationships (18 percent) is a source of stress. Leaders find it stressful allocating time to connect with others interpersonally because of meetings, travel and workloads. Additionally, personal insecurity (14 percent) dealt mainly with stress over how best to communicate and present to others. Examples include giving developmental feedback and being more patient with employees.

What are the leadership demands that cause stress?

FIGURE 8

SOURCE OF STRESS	PERCENTAGE
Resources/Time	28%
Developing Others	15%
Establishing and Maintaining Relationships	11%
High Expectations	10%
Personal Insecurity	10%
Team/Collaboration	8%
Change Management	6%
Miscellaneous	6%
Lack of Clarity from Above	3%



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## SOURCES OF STRESS (continued)

What are the most stressful interpersonal demands?

FIGURE 9

SOURCE OF STRESS	PERCENTAGE
Conflict/Trust/Politics/Confrontation	21%
Overcoming Job-related Constraints to Relationships	18%
Personal Insecurity	14%
Building/Maintaining Relationships	14%
Style Differences	10%
Performance Management	7%
Miscellaneous	7%
Work/Life Balance	6%
Influencing	2%

## ROLES AS SOURCES OF LEADER STRESS

Understanding the state of stress for leaders today means not only identifying what causes stress but also who causes stress. Because leaders must interact with different groups of people, stress comes from different places. While no one group appears to contribute more stress than another, groups such as bosses, peers, direct reports and customers contribute to an individual leader's stress in different ways.

There is very little differentiation between bosses, peers, direct reports and customers in terms of each being a source of stress. Leaders agreed that customers (63 percent) and direct reports (63 percent) were most often a source of stress, but peers (62 percent) and bosses (61 percent) were not far behind. The implication is that leaders experience the same amount of stress from these various groups, but it also is the case that leaders experience stress from these groups for different reasons.

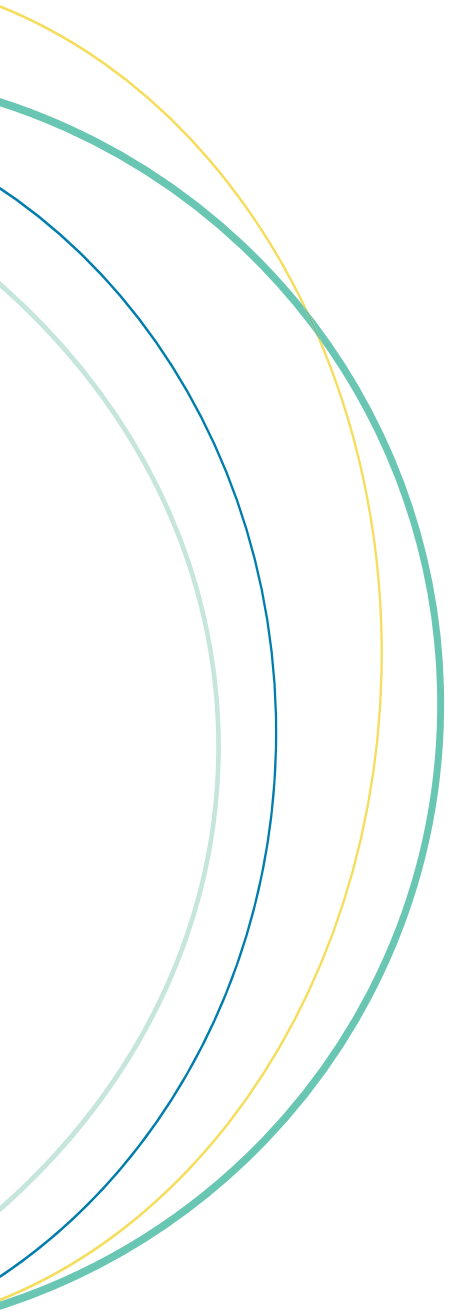
### *Boss as a Source of Stress*

Stress from one's boss tends to derive from feelings that he or she does not support the leader enough or show enough respect for the leader's authority. Bosses with leadership and management styles that differ from the individual leader are also sources of significant stress.

### *Peers as a Source of Stress*

Stress from peers, on the other hand, looks very different from stress caused by a boss. Competition and lack of teamwork are the primary sources of stress from a leader's peers. Peer behaviors that discourage teamwork and collaboration are causes of individual leader stress.

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## SOURCES OF STRESS (continued)

### *Direct Reports as a Source of Stress*

Stress from direct reports and customers is different in that it could be described as contributing either all or nothing. For instance, having direct reports with performance problems is a primary source of stress for individual leaders; but in the absence of performance issues, direct reports are less often a significant source of stress. The same holds true for customers. The primary source of stress from customers is unreasonable demands and expectations. However, when not perceived as overly demanding or unreasonable, customers themselves are less often a significant source of stress.

How does your boss contribute to stress?

FIGURE 10

SOURCE OF STRESS	PERCENTAGE
Respect/Support	24%
Style Differences	22%
Unreal Expectations and Demands	16%
Clarity of Strategy/Vision	10%
Not a Source of Stress	10%
Resource Constraints	6%
Personal Accountability	4%
Miscellaneous	4%
Developing Others	2%

How do your peers contribute to your stress?

FIGURE 11

SOURCE OF STRESS	PERCENTAGE
Competition/Lack of Teamwork	35%
Respect/Support	13%
Personal Accountability	10%
Not a Source of Stress	8%
Clarity of Strategy/Vision	8%
Unreal Expectations and Demands	6%
Style Differences	6%
Miscellaneous	6%
Resource Constraints	4%
Developing Others	2%

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## SOURCES OF STRESS (continued)

How do your direct reports contribute to your stress?

FIGURE 12

SOURCE OF STRESS	PERCENTAGE
Personal Accountability	42%
Not a Source of Stress	17%
Resource Constraints	10%
Developing Others	8%
Unreal Expectations and Demands	6%
Style Differences	6%
Respect/Support	4%
Competition/Lack of Teamwork	4%
Miscellaneous	4%

How do your customers contribute to your stress?

FIGURE 13

SOURCE OF STRESS	PERCENTAGE
Unreal Expectations and Demands	63%
Not a Source of Stress	17%
Style Differences	6%
Miscellaneous	6%
Competition/Lack of Teamwork	4%
Resource Constraints	2%
Personal Accountability	2%

## MANAGING STRESS

### INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES TO MANAGING STRESS

As previously detailed, leaders today are under a great deal of stress from a variety of sources. Yet, as leaders, they must find coping mechanisms that facilitate accomplishment of the ongoing demands of their multiple roles both at work and outside of work.

In our survey, leaders were asked to describe three ways they combat stress. The most frequent ways individuals report they cope with stress is through physical exercise and boundary maintenance (the deliberate separation of work and personal time). Gaining focus and outdoor hobbies such as golf, gardening, hunting and fish-

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## MANAGING STRESS (continued)

ing are also reported as important ways individuals manage their stress. It is interesting to note that only 10 percent of the coping mechanisms employed by our sample of leaders directly involve the sources of stress (Gaining Focus and Confronting Issues). This is a strong indication that it is important and critical for leaders to step away from their sources of stress in order to be more effective.

Being aware of the sources of personal stress is an important step in managing and mitigating its negative effects. The leaders surveyed provided a number of ways in which they manage stress; they also provided insights into how they manage stress from specific sources. The interplay between a specific source of stress and the techniques employed to manage stress produced by that source revealed two interesting trends.

### How do you as a leader manage stress?

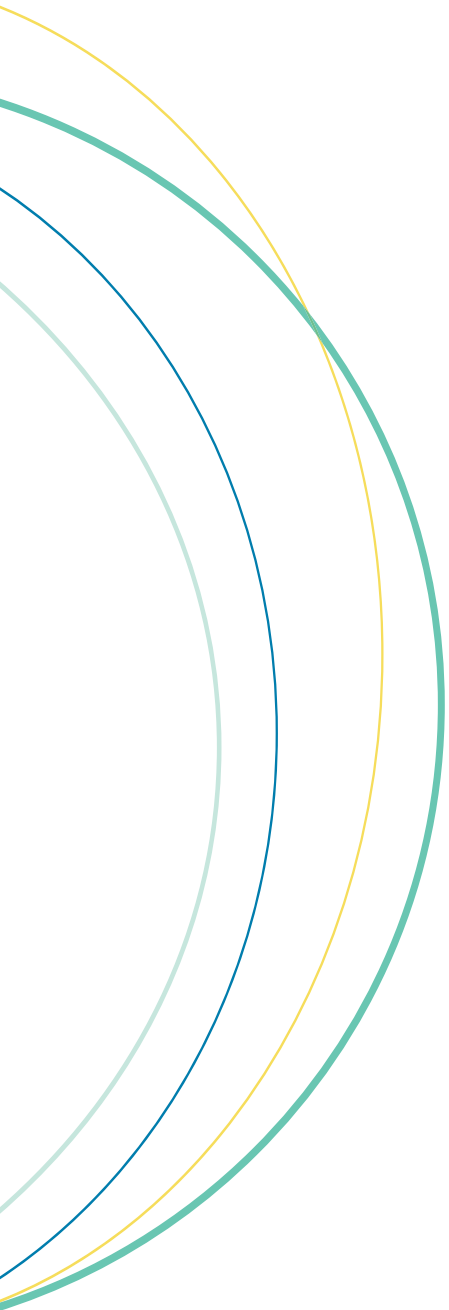
FIGURE 14

INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES	PERCENTAGE
Exercise/Physical Workout	22%
Boundary Maintenance	13%
Outdoor Hobby (golf, fish, hunt, garden, coach, etc.)	9%
Gaining Focus	9%
Support Network	8%
Rest/Breaks/R&R	7%
Indoor Hobby (read, card games, puzzles, etc.)	7%
Other Misc. (sleep, drive, shopping, etc.)	7%
Eat/Cook/Drink	7%
Technical Sensory Pursuits (TV, movie, video game, music, etc.)	5%
Retreat/Reflect	3%
Meditation/Breathing/Prayer	3%
Confronting Issues	1%

The first trend is that regardless of the source of stress – whether it is task, interpersonal, leadership or physical – most leaders use a variety of sensory pursuits to manage stress from that source. Sensory pursuits are described here as an activity that produces physical stimulation. An example of positive sensory pursuits would be running or exercising, while negative examples would be punching a wall or overeating. The frequency in which sensory pursuits are used suggests that it is important to have at least one positive sensory activity identified in a leader’s stress management repertoire.

The second trend is that when dealing with stress from task demands such as job responsibilities and decision making, leaders often engage in behaviors that help them gain focus on the task at hand. Focusing on the task by planning, organizing and pri-

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## MANAGING STRESS (continued)

Organizing appears to be an effective way of managing task-related stress. Specific behaviors mentioned were: frequently defining and clarifying expectations of the task, maintaining a project schedule, and completing tasks ahead of deadline. Gaining focus also includes putting the task in perspective with the overall goals of the organization. The behaviors associated with gaining focus could reduce stress during a task as well as help eliminate future stress before the task is started.

## ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES TO MANAGING STRESS

While leaders as individuals must take responsibility for managing their own stress, they also expect support from their organizations. Our survey asked leaders to describe two ways their organizations help them combat stress.

How does your organization help manage stress?

FIGURE 15

ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES	PERCENTAGE
HR/Wellness Training	15%
Flexible Schedule, Work-Life Balance, Telecommute	13%
Time Off, Vacation, Holidays	12%
Nothing/No Support	12%
Gym Facilities, Exercise Programs	10%
Wellness Events	9%
Miscellaneous	9%
360 Support	8%
Other (culture, amenities, physical space, etc.)	8%
Coaching	5%

The most frequent responses indicate that organizations have active and helpful human resources departments that provide wellness-training events which support employees in managing stress. Other support systems provided by organizations that support stress management include flexible work schedules, vacation/time-off/holidays and access to gym facilities. These responses support individual stress management techniques in that it's important for leaders to be able to step away from their sources of stress in order to be more effective leaders. An interesting finding is that 12 percent of responses specify that no support from the organization is offered to employees to assist them in managing stress. While this percentage is not overwhelming, it does speak to lost opportunities by some organizations to support and assist their employees to facilitate better individual and organizational performance.

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## TIPS AND TOOLS FOR DEALING WITH STRESS

With the challenges facing organizations and their leaders becoming more complex, coupled with rising uncertainty about the future, stress will only continue to increase. So, what can leaders do to better manage stress? Here are a few tips and tools:

### INCORPORATE HEALTH AND DIET INTO YOUR SCHEDULE

The University of Iowa reports that regular exercise not only reduces stress but also can help leaders reduce anxiety, improve sleep and boost immunity from colds and flu. Begin incorporating healthy practices slowly. Start with improving your diet. Add more fruits and vegetables while reducing added sugars, fats and sodium. Then, make a commitment to exercising (walking, yoga, weights, biking) at least 30 minutes twice a week.

### GET A "COACH" TO HELP YOU STAY ON TRACK

By soliciting a coach, he or she can help you organize and prioritize your life by uncovering ways to boost your energy and time. A coach will help you differentiate between what is essential or impossible and what is simply a pattern of behavior or habit you have created.

### CREATE YOUR PERSONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Make sure you have a support group in place that is helping you positively cope with stress and leadership. This diverse group should be made up of peers, your boss, a family member and a trusted friend. You should be clear about your goals around managing stress and have them help you stay on track.

### DO MORE IN LESS TIME BY PRACTICING THE ART OF RECOVERY

Athletes have long understood that pushing oneself hard at 100 percent capacity, 100 percent of the time results in little or no long-term gains in performance. Make sure that throughout your day you are allowing yourself real and frequent breaks. At the very least, make sure you are taking a 10-minute break every 90 minutes and that you allow yourself a vacation after an extended push on a project or assignment.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What are the sources of my stress?
- What can I do differently to relieve stress on my own?
- What support systems offer the most assistance to me in managing stress? How do I reciprocate and demonstrate my appreciation for the help?

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS (continued)

- As a leader, what can I do to help manage or relieve stress for others?  
Am I a good or bad role model for reducing and managing stress?

## RESOURCES

- The Center for Creative Leadership [www.ccl.org](http://www.ccl.org)
- The Energy Project [www.theenergyproject.com](http://www.theenergyproject.com)
- International Center for Performance and Health [www.icphbalance.com](http://www.icphbalance.com)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Michael Campbell](#) is a Senior Research Analyst at the Center for Creative Leadership. Michael's research focuses on understanding the behaviors and challenges of senior executive leaders, including such topics as selection, sustaining tenure and succession planning. Michael also helps organizations better understand their internal leadership through the creation and analysis of leadership profiles based on aggregated personality instruments and leadership assessments.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS (continued)

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