SESCO
management consultants

Stress Management: It's OK to Look Out for 'Number One'

Since the beginning of time, entrepreneurs have carried the weight of their organizations on their backs. In addition to meeting business goals and ensuring customers are satisfied, they also have the added pressures of attracting and retaining employees.

In addition, over the past two years, mental health issues of not only executives but also employees have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One recent study stated that eight out of 10 executives have occasionally experienced poor mental and physical health during the COVID-19 crisis.

In my 32 years of consulting with entrepreneurs and executives, I have never seen a more challenging work environment.

The "great resignation," tightening profit margins, challenges with supply chains, increased federal and state governmental regulations, constantly changing mask and vaccine mandates, increased minimum wages, increased liability - the list goes on and on.

In the past six months, calls from our clients concerning mental health and even suicide have significantly increased.

Another indication of how difficult and stressful it has been to own and operate a business in today's environment is that the number of SESCO clients in various industries have decided to give up and simply sell their company.

In addition to the personal mental and physical toll, the stress and pressure of running a business impacts the organization's culture. And as we all know, a positive employer-employee-customer culture is critical to the long-term success of any organization. What many business owners and executives don't understand is that their herculean efforts to manage their companies around the clock are not healthy for them. They're unhealthy for their organizations, too.

More time, focus and commitment to the business is not always what's best for the business. When the leader is stressed, employees and subsequently customers see it and feel it.
You may not think so, but as you are juggling balls and feel like you are being effective in ensuring your organization's success, you are creating a rollercoaster ride for everyone else. Our surveys reveal that employees certainly suffer directly and indirectly when owners and managers are not mentally or physically healthy. Poor workplace culture creates low morale, which leads to poor productivity, lots of turnover and poor customer satisfaction. Working harder does not ensure a more successful organization. In fact, many times, it ensures the opposite!

Many reasons

Why do business owners and executives not take care of themselves by achieving an effective balance between their work and their personal lives? Many of the common excuses we hear are as follows:

1. *"Without me, the business is nothing."*

2. *"Without the business, I am nothing."*

3. *"I don't have any hobbies anyway."*

4. *"Nobody can run the business as well as I can."*

5. *"I love what I do."*

6. *"If I'm not there, the business will fail."*

Many of these excuses are just that - excuses. The reason why most business owners cannot achieve a work-life balance is they simply cannot let go and transfer some of their power.

The process is harder for some than others due to their innate personality. However, all entrepreneurs and executives must prepare their businesses so they can achieve a healthy work-life balance and a healthy balance sheet. Subsequently, business owners and managers must ask themselves:

"How can I get my business to work without me?"

"How can I get my employees to perform the way that I do, but without my constant interference?"

"How can I systematize my business so that it can be consistent in the delivery of services?"

"How can I own a business - not a job?"

To answer these questions, you must ensure the following systems and processes are in place:

- Vision/strategic plan
- Position descriptions
- Operations manual
- Employee handbook
- Compensation plans for all levels of staff
- Effective managers
- Excellent communications

This brief, simple checklist is "a must" to prepare businesses to attain even greater heights. At the same time, it will provide peace of mind and help business owners obtain a work-life balance.

Once these basic systems and processes are in place to help undergird the success of the business, it is up to owners and executives to work on themselves and not in the business.

To begin achieving a reasonable work-life balance, it is critical that executives understand first their personality profile. What is their core personality make-up? This can be easily obtained by completing the DiSC® Personality Profile in a matter of minutes. It will identify strengths, as well as areas of improvement.

Individual personalities vary greatly, but here is a brief checklist to help you get started, no matter your personality:

1. Get comfortable outsourcing tasks and responsibilities. This is made easier if the necessary systems and processes are in place. Also increase your trust in delegating. It may mean even lowering your standards - reasonably - for you, as well as your staff. Completing a task as expected is better than perfect.

2. Learn to take care of yourself. Plan a wellness visit with your physician. With your doctor's assistance, establish a mental and physical improvement plan. Eating right, exercising, meditating and other simple activities are a must. We've all heard when traveling in an airplane, "If the oxygen mask drops in front of you, put it on yourself before you help others." You need to take care of yourself first or you won't be successful taking care of your business.

3. Give yourself permission. Executive burn-out is common, especially given the challenges of the last two years. To avoid burn-out, you must give yourself permission to enjoy the fruits of your labor. Avoid comments like, "This is what my family and employees expect of me" or "This is how we've always done it."

4. Evaluate and reevaluate your task list – preferably daily. Often burn-out occurs when there are numerous tasks that are not being fulfilled or when you have spent all day putting out fires. Delegating or outsourcing tasks that can be completed by someone else - many times at a cost savings - will allow you to focus more time and energy on projects that are rewarding and meaningful to the success of your business. As Michael Gerber told us years ago in his best seller "The E-Myth," "You must work on your business - not in it." Getting stuck working in your business and not on your business is a recipe for physical and mental illness, as well as organizational failure.

5. Reset priorities. Some owners, managers and executives find a "coach" who will assist them. Others will rely on spouses, mentors, clergy and others. Regardless, evaluate your priorities in your life and refocus those. Burn-out happens when we allow our lives to get out of control, blaming others instead of examining our own choices. Self-empathy is required. This is not selfishness. It is self-preservation.

6. Reexamine your life's intentions. Executives need to reserve time to reflect on their personal purpose and values, the bigger-picture vision and their day-to-day playbook. At work, conducting a team development/communication session on how everyone is working together can be an excellent tool.

7. Take a vacation. Even if you don't think you can afford to take time off or need to take a vacation, it is always important to get away. Remember that recreation is really just "re-creation." Taking time off is vital to not only yourself, but also your company and team, as it allows your brain to reassemble all of the pieces of the puzzle.

8. Take meaningful breaks. Schedule a time for meaningful breaks. Whether that is exercise, meditation, time with family, getting away from technology or simply going to lunch with a spouse, friend or co-worker. Stepping away can sometimes provide the necessary mental break to allow creativity to flow.

9. Commit. When you are committed to your goals, understand your team's strengths, know that customers are counting on you and have true passion for what you are doing, burn-out and stress will not be an issue. This is not to say that you will not get tired. We all do. When that happens, exercise the discipline to get more rest, eat healthy and learn how to say no.

10. Remember your personality and what motivates you. It is important when you feel stressed to take the time to reflect on what motivates you and inspires you to get up and do what you do daily. We get lost in the day-to-day activities of our jobs, we can forget the feeling of why we chose the path we are on.

11. Find activities you enjoy. Find sources of energy. These can be family, friends, sleep, quiet time, reading, golfing, fishing or any activity or thing that brings you refreshment and renewal.

In summary, don't be the person who says, "In my role, I'm the guy who catches it all. I don't know how much longer I can last!"

Stress and burn-out can be a slow fizzle. Before you know it, your personal well being - as well as your organization - is suffering. Prevention is always the best cure. You must decide whether you own a job and tasks that you do not enjoy or you own a prosperous, professionalized business that you can enjoy - and one that promotes good physical and mental health.

-Bill Ford, President and CEO of SESCO Management Consultants