

5 strategies to tame stress, avoid burnout in leadership role

FEB 6, 2017

Troy Parks

News Writer

The complexity of the health care landscape is driving more organizations to seek out physicians to fill leadership roles. But the stressors that come with those administrative roles are very different from those that a practicing physician might experience. A recent study examines how emotional intelligence—how you perceive your emotions—can help physicians in leadership roles cope with new stressors and avoid burning out.

In a recent study, Kandi Wiens, an executive coach and organizational-change consultant, and Annie McKee, PhD, a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the PennCLO Executive Doctoral Program, interviewed 35 chief medical officers (CMO) to find out how they cope with the inherent stress of executive-level positions and work better with the physicians and health care professionals they manage.

“The transition from a clinical environment to an executive-level administrative environment generates unique pressures and challenges for physician leaders that nonphysician leaders may not experience,” the study says. “When proper coping skills are not present, occupational stress can have a negative impact on a physician leader’s ability to lead effectively and may impact their emotional and physical wellbeing.”

Five strategies for coping with stress

Based on the interviews with CMOs, Wiens and McKee found the five emotional intelligence competencies of physician leaders who are able to manage the stress of their position.

Emotional self-awareness: Understand and be aware of your emotions, skills and abilities.

“A significant contributor to one’s ability to deal with a stressful situation begins with recognizing the presence of feelings of stress,” the authors wrote. One participant said, “When there’s stress at work, I

do recognize it. I know when I'm feeling stressed about something, and I think that's a start."

First, understand the sources of frustration or anxiety, and then examine those sources more deeply before responding to them, the study says. The CMOs described a "heightened sense of cognition as they consider their response options" when following this method.

Emotional self-management: Manage your emotions and behaviors.

When they did not appropriately manage their emotions, participants in the study described feeling more stress. "Emotional self-management during a stressful encounter often requires special effort at first to get to the point where it is mastered," the study says. "Managing emotional impulses is challenging mental work."

Breaking old habits to override emotional impulses can add to the burden of learning and possibly cause more stress, the authors wrote. Participants spoke of self-management as something that can be "stressful at first but becomes more natural with practice and self-reflection."

One participant described a stressful professional misconduct issue: "Those things are difficult to deal with because nobody who gets into these jobs really has the experience dealing with that kind of stuff. Even if you've been a division head, you deal with it in a different way. And it's stressful at first."

There are two ways to appraise a stressful encounter, according to the study: emotion-focused coping, or believing there is a lack of control over a situation, and problem-focused coping, or believing there is control over a situation.

Both techniques are effective ways to manage and understand emotions and behaviors within a stressful situation.

Empathy: Actively listen and seek to understand others.

It is important to be "attuned to others' perspective, attitudes and beliefs when having a difficult conversation with a colleague," the study says. Acknowledging the feelings and thoughts of others can de-escalate tension, the participants reported. They also discussed how focusing more on others and less on themselves reduces stress.

More than 65 percent of the CMOs interviewed shared examples of empathy as a way to deal with a stressful experience. "Actively listening to someone and understanding where they're coming from, and understanding who they are makes you much, much less likely to go off on them or get into a situation that's stressful with that individual," one CMO explained.

"Empathy builds on one's ability to productively manage emotions," the authors wrote. "Empathy is not about stifling emotions but, rather, appropriately expressing them. Appropriate expression of emotions

allows leaders to recognize and meet the needs of others, which in turn makes them appear more approachable to others and helps them de-escalate tensions when faced with a stressor.”

Teamwork: Stay connected to others.

Collaborating with others to achieve organizational and personal goals can be rewarding and can also reduce the impact of stress on health and well-being. The key components to teamwork identified by the study are offering support to others, encouraging cooperation and soliciting others’ input.

“Participants spoke of staying connected to trusted work colleagues as a means to help them work through challenges,” the study says. “Doing so, they say, helps them feel less isolated and provides them with valuable advice and input to help them deal with stress.”

“I think it’s very important you have a group of people who work for you,” one participant said. “I have five chairs who work full-time for me. I use them as a sounding board. I don’t have all the answers, I just don’t, and I really try to use them as sounding board for measuring what should be done and the tone and the nuance of the words.”

Conflict management: Acknowledge and manage conflict.

Of all participating CMOs, the study found that 89 percent reported conflict-management behaviors that contribute to their ability to deal with stress, including “bringing conflict out into the open by talking about disagreements with those involved ... [and] de-escalating emotions as a way to resolve conflict.”

“[CMOs] described examples of channeling their anxiety and emotions into problem-solving rather than allowing the situation to bother them,” the authors wrote. “They also spoke of not taking things personally when in a disagreement with a colleague. Doing so, they say, helps them keep their emotions in check and keeps them focused on resolving the disagreement.”

One participant said, “I relieve stress by acting rather than ruminating. Do the thing that needs doing.”

For more on tapping into your emotional intelligence, read Wiens and McKee’s article, “Why Some People Get Burnout Out and Others Don’t,” in Harvard Business Review.

More on this

- Building emotional intelligence in medical trainees
- Physician burnout: Detailing the impact, exploring solutions
- Cleveland Clinic’s approach to burnout focuses on relationships
- Avoiding burnout: Strategies for senior physicians