

# Educational Leadership Sustainability: Maintaining Wellness, Coping with Stress, and Preventing Burnout

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## INTRODUCTION

Encountering stressors (i.e., pressure, conflict, change, frustration) are an inevitable part of life, and most people respond using unhealthy coping mechanisms. In fact, approximately one-half of the U.S. population disclosed that stress has led to their inability to sleep (McGonigal, 2015), thus catalyzing and perpetuating a movement toward ill psychological and physiological health. Explicitly, successful leaders are highly prone to experience a multitude of stressors related to their multidimensional career demands. Commonly dominating their life outside of work and excluding a work-life balance for ensuring sustained health and wellness. In hindsight, it has been proven that individuals who undergo high levels of stress for a long period of time and who are without supports and appropriate buffers (e. g., techniques for restructuring and converting stress as a benefit; motivational challenge, skill builder) often experience a decline in physical health and psychological wellness. Ultimately, affecting their work performance, daily functioning, interpersonal skill, and problem-solving abilities, which can inadvertently lead to burnout, career attrition, and an institution's educational failure.

In this chapter we discuss the following:

1. The responsibilities and stressors of leaders with specific reference to educational leaders,
2. The impact of stress,
3. The influence and need of professional support, and
4. The need for shared responsibility in supporting the health and retention of successful leaders.

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

### Impact of Stress

Healthy leaders ignite healthy environments that bolster positive cultures for organizational personnel, leading to the fulfillment of organizational goals, its mission, and positive performance outcomes (Kelehear, 2004). Leaders need to be emotionally stable in order to be effective (Garcia et al., 2014). A leader's overwhelming stress levels compounded by unhealthy coping approaches are known to negatively influence an organization's morale and culture; stimulating a stress and tension amongst those in the environment (Kelehear, 2004). Essentially, unhealthy stress "affects everything in our lives, from our

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eating habits to the most basic lifestyle behaviors and to everyone with whom we interact” (Seaward, 2006, p. xvii). Furthermore, unmanaged stress has negative consequences on an individual’s physical and mental health and is often signified by exhaustion and burnout (Boyland, 2011).

Organizational leaders encounter several stressors (i.e., personal relationships, work life balance, job responsibilities) that impact their well-being (Palmer et al., 2003). According to Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, and LePine (2004), there are two forms of stress: good stress and bad stress. Good stress (eustress) is perceived as challenges that can motivate action, work performance, and job commitment when having the proper growth opportunities and rewards (Palmer et al., 2003; Sogunro, 2012). However, bad stress is perceived as hindering circumstances without the proper resources, supports, or benefits (i.e., pay, respect, and worth), which interferes with work performance, as well as leads to employee dissatisfaction and attrition (Boyland, 2011; Sogunro, 2012). An individual who is experiencing acute or chronic stress leading to burnout and illness may show signs indicative of exhaustion, cynicism, short temperament, hostility, inability to concentrate, reduced efficacy, indecisiveness, disengagement, absenteeism, increased substance abuse, and other dangerous behaviors (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008; Guglielmi et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2003; Sogunro, 2012; Wells, 2013). Therefore, it is important to encourage and support leaders’ health through intentional coping mechanisms that replenish their work ethic and decrease the likelihood of burnout (Baloglu & Balgalmis, 2014; Sogunro, 2012). In fact, a research study conducted by Boswell et al (2004) with university staff ( $N = 461$ ) found a positive relationship between hindrance-related stress and work withdrawal behaviors (i.e., intent to quit, job searching, absenteeism) (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008). The study provided information for researchers to consider how the infrastructure and design of the job can contribute to the process in which individuals perceive and respond to stress, naturally affecting the employees’ job commitment, performance, well-being, and retention.

## Social Stress Theory

According to social stress and work socialization theories, there are four major constructs that can serve as a source of either stress or support for individuals, adversely affecting the individual’s health and behavior (Lleras, 2008; Sogunro, 2012; Wells, 2013). The four major constructs include the following: “personal, family, economic, and occupational circumstances” (Lleras, 2008, pp. 1291 - 1292). Essentially, the theoretical framework of social stress theory and work socialization theory is a nonlinear interactive process where an individual’s stress in one area of life (i.e., personal) affects other life components (i.e., work performance) (Aneshensel, 1992; Lleras, 2008; Robbins, 2013; Sogunro, 2012; Wells, 2013). For instance, job stress affects personal relationships, personal relationships affect psychological cognitive factors, cognitive factors can affect coping behaviors, coping behaviors can affect the physiological function, which all interact to affect the functioning of its entirety (Boswell et al., 2004; Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008; Palmer et al., 2003; Reynolds & O’Dwyer, 2008; Wells, 2013). Whereas, the aforementioned influences job performance, attendance, and career longevity (Boswell et al., 2004; Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008; Palmer et al, 2003; Reynolds & O’Dwyer, 2008; Wells, 2013).

## Stress Sequels

Experiencing high levels of stress over a long period of time causes the release of stress hormones, which has deleterious effects on one’s organs, tissues, breathing and cells (Sogunro, 2012; Wells, 2013). Prolonged stress at high levels diminishes an individual’s ability to identify and cope with stressors, leading to burnout and health issues (Boyland, 2011; Durane, & Bridgeleand, & Stern, 2001; Gorgievski

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