

Check Your Stress for Your Health and Your Career

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Opening my email I noticed an article in my American Bar Association electronic magazine -- an article on workplace stress. The writer noted that many attorneys suffer from stress due to the pressures of the workplace. This article had me thinking about the project and program managers (PM) with which I have worked. Workplace stress is common to most professions, but as budgets have tightened and time to market has shortened in many industries, the stress a project or program manager is placed or places on themselves is increasing. While it is true that a project or program manager does not generally have a client's financial future in their hands or their life, there are times that in managing a strategic project or program, the PM may have the company's future in their hands in whole or in part. The PM may even have the current future career path of the executive manager, sponsor, or hiring manager in their hands.

Within the past ten (10) years, the push to have a project or program always on schedule and on or under cost has grown. Organizations believe that agile project management will cut costs and shorten schedules. PMs with certification are deemed to be competent, even though legally the certification at best demonstrates capability to be competent and at worse that the PM is a great test taker and not capable of applying the knowledge in an actual project or program. Organizations seldom establish mentorships for entry-level PMs. Instead, the PM may serve as an assistant PM on a project or program, but with little insight into the thinking and planning of the PM. I have written on the need for mentorship in the past, but it is becoming more critical. The reason one calls the act of being a PM, practicing project management is because each situation is new and unique. Something or more than one something about the project or program will be different. To practice a profession as in one I am familiar means that one receives critical input from a more experienced practitioner. One has in the more experienced practitioner a party with whom ideas can be reviewed before instituting any action or change; someone to review documents including planning and reporting documents; and someone to share their lessons learned. Being able to have a mentor to be a guide can lower the workplace stress and life stress of less experienced PMs, and, well, those PMs such as me who have many years of experience.

PMs should also be trained to handle stress filled situations. Delivering bad news to senior or executive management should not be an opportunity to create a lessons learned database that never is shared. Stress will rise once the PM is aware of issues or realized risk. The sooner it is shared with the client or management before they hear it from reports or others the less stress will be induced over a long period of time. Further, the PM should understand when to come prepared to discuss next steps or when to arrange another meeting. None of these skills come in training to take a certification test. They are lessons that can be learned either on one's own, which comes with risk of varying degrees; or the lessons may be learned from an experienced PM within the organization or outside. For example, preparing the client or

management about what could be risks on an ongoing basis is one way to lessen the impact of that stress-filled meeting.

Another way to reduce stress is to take a break before making a decision or running down the hallway with bad news. Take the time to breathe and think. Sometimes it may be walking outside of the office building, taking three deep breathes, or just closing one's eyes and visualizing the interactions. One needs to step back before making decisions that may have long-lasting repercussions.

Mentors have been mentioned, but just find a PM buddy. Finding someone who is willing to be at the other end of the phone, text, or chat can actually reduce stress. In fact, sharing your thoughts reduces stress by allowing you to talk about the situation and your options. In fact the act of talking or exchanging written information about a situation can restore a sense of self-worth and optimism, which will be needed when one must deal with the facts of the situation with a team or management.

If the PM has the luxury of “sleeping on it”—taking a night to allow the situation to just be, the PM should find ways to set it aside. Whether the PM indulges in a few minutes of meditation, exercise, an event that keeps him or her busy, or just goes to sleep, the PM needs to set it aside as when one goes back and reviews options one often finds new solution sets, team members who have also had time to think the solution through, or that the situation may be faced with a more relaxed attitude allowing one to face the client or management with an assured attitude providing the client or management the feeling that the PM has the situation under control.

Another technique that a PM can use to reduce stress is being honest about the situation. Honesty with oneself and with the client or management is necessary to reduce stress. Not trying to present a situation as being better than it is or worse to appear later a hero. Being honest, allows one not to have to remember how one characterized a situation later or try to keep the presentation of the facts the same from one group to another. Honesty is a true stress reducer.

One might think PMs are excellent at prioritizing, but managing one's work efforts versus that of the project or program can be a totally different skill. If one is not a natural at prioritizing and organizing yourself: take a class, learn from someone you know that does it well, break each issue or risk into manageable pieces and prioritize the work you need to do and that they others need to do. An example of the last item would be the owner of each risk on a project or program should not be the PM. The owner should be the party with the most control and technical knowledge to be responsible for the risk. Yes, the PM is always the point person for being responsible for the project or program, but delegate. In other words, take the “S” off your outfit and put it away—Superman and Superwoman are in movies and comic strips.

Avoid saying, “yes” to every request for your time that you receive. While one may feel it will look good to the client or management, one failure to deliver will wipe out all the past successes. One needs to know how much effort one can handle and be effective at handling the effort. One needs to learn about oneself and sometimes it will also mean asking that trusted mentor, fellow PM, or even friend to tell you about you and when they think you are beginning to be overcommitted.

A final thought on PM stress, find something to laugh at even if it is you. While being a PM is a serious job, as a human being one needs to laugh or smile. The amount of stress released by the simple act of laughing can mean the difference in being sick, placing too much stress on your team, and many other undesirable outcomes. I keep a Dilbert calendar just to remind me that most of my experiences are new. In fact, most of my experiences as a PM even one that consults have been captured in a calendar page.

Stress is something we place on ourselves or allow others to place on us. Preparation, remembering we are human beings and so are the members of our team, and finding that trusted individual we can count upon to listen, share, and perhaps provide us with direction can assist the new PM and the experienced PM. Stress is not something to ignore and I have seen PMs crumble, become sick, and yes, lose their position because of stress. Let's take care of one another and ourselves in this most rewarding profession.

About the Author



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Rebecca (Becky) Winston, Esq., JD, PMI Fellow, is a former Chair of the board of the Project Management Institute (PMI®).

An experienced expert on the subject of project management (PM) in the fields of research & development (R&D), energy, environmental restoration and national security, she is well known throughout the United States and globally as a leader in the PM professional world. Becky has over 30 years of experience in program and project management, primarily on programs funded by the US government. She is a graduate of the University of Nebraska's College of Law, Juris Doctorate (1980), in Lincoln, Nebraska and has a Bachelor's of Science (BS) degree in Education from Nebraska Wesleyan University. She is a licensed attorney in the states of Iowa and Nebraska, USA.

Active in PMI since 1993, Rebecca Winston helped pioneer PMI's Specific Interest Groups (SIGs) in the nineties, including the Project Earth and Government SIGs, and was a founder and first co-chair of the Women in Project Management SIG. She served two terms on the PMI board of directors as director at large, Secretary Treasurer, Vice Chair (for two years), and Chair (2002). She was elected a PMI Fellow in 2005. She has served as a reviewer of the Barrie Student paper for the PMI Educational Foundation for several years. She is also a member of the American Bar Association and the Association of Female Executives in the United States.

Ms. Winston periodically serves as an advisor to organizations such as the National Nuclear Security Administration (USA), U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on topics ranging from Program and Project Management to project reviews, risk management and vulnerability assessments. She has also been serving on the Air Force Studies Board for five years for the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. Since 2008 she has also served in the capacity of Chair of the US Technical Advisory Group and Head of Delegation for Technical Committee 258: Project, Programme, and Portfolio Management, as well as serving on the various Working and Study Groups drafting guidance standards. She has extensive recent PM experience in the areas of alternative energy, national defense and security, and has worked closely with local, regional and national officials, including Congress and the Pentagon. She is also a global advisor to the PM World Journal and Library.

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