

He teaches executives to cool it—and survive

It's not only lonely at the top; it's nerve-racking.

"Today's corporate manager must not only be concerned with everyday administrative tasks but company visibility, federal regulations, environmental issues, affirmative action and corporate review boards," said psychologist James D. Papsdorf.

"But most worrisome of all is the absence of predictability. The larger your area of responsibility, the more people you are dependent upon; the more things that can go wrong."

Papsdorf, a University of Michigan professor, cited the manager who arrives at work and is told he must have a certain report on the desk of his boss by 5 p.m. that day. Filing that report means getting data from four other people, lower in the hierarchy, who may or may not get around to giving it to him.

"One of the most common themes that run through our Management of

Management Stress seminars is: How to deal with people you have to depend on but don't have any formal authority over," says Papsdorf.

"We suggest three kinds of tactics. The first is verbal persuasion, emphasizing the commonality between you and the person you're dealing with. 'I've got a problem and need your help; I'm sure you've been in a similar bind.'"

"The second is to emphasize you are making a routine request and the people you are calling should consider it part of their job to supply you with the needed information."

"The third resort is a veiled threat. 'I'm calling at the request of President . . .'

"It's difficult to employ any of these methods, however, if you're in a state of panic," Papsdorf said. He recommends what he calls "cognitive coping" to help keep yourself in a calm,

rational state of mind.

"Our lab experiments indicate that the way you label an event will determine your physiological reaction to it."

"Take the person who receives the memo about the report due by five o'clock. If he begins fretting and blaming himself ('If only I'd been prepared for this. I never do anything right'), he will likely trigger a number of physical reactions such as a rapidly beating heart, high pulse rate, perspiration, tight muscles and other symptoms of anxiety and tension."

"Recent studies on the central nervous system indicate that when this happens, a person is functioning from the right hemisphere of the brain, the side that is believed to control our emotional reactions," Papsdorf said.

"On the other hand, if he tells himself in a cool manner, 'This is an inconvenience but not a calamity, what he would be operating from the left hemisphere of the brain, functioning

rationally.

"We cannot always control our emotional behaviors," Papsdorf said.

"When a car suddenly darts in front of ours, we may instantaneously swerve to avoid the accident. Seconds later, we begin trembling uncontrollably. Apparently in these situations, the rational brain takes precedence and the emotional side lags behind."

"Suppose, however, a threatening situation is approaching and we are aware of it, like a speech we must make in front of a board of trustees. We can either succumb to our emotional side, which keeps insisting 'I must not look stupid, I must not make a mistake,' and work ourselves into a frenzy."

"Or we can firmly tell ourselves, 'It would be nice not to stumble and say the wrong thing, but if I do, the world won't come to an end.'"

Simply talking to ourselves in a

reassuring manner may keep us firmly in the left hemisphere of the brain, Papsdorf's research indicates.

He advises the speechmaker with stage fright to "acknowledge you're nervous. 'If I were playing golf with you people, I'd beat you blindfolded. But in this situation I'm less relaxed.'"

Finally, he recommends progressive relaxation exercises which a person can do unobtrusively before speaking in public or facing some other stressful situation. These consist of contracting and relaxing the chest muscles and then the thigh muscles, alternated with three deep breaths.

"At the same time, clear your mind of the upsetting worries and concentrate on the most relaxing scene you can think of," Papsdorf said. "Many people just go to the beach. They conjure up a very detailed picture of the hot sun, the salt spray, the waves gently washing over their toes."

"We don't know why it works, but the same exercise has been shown to be effective in helping cardiac patients lower their blood pressure and insomniacs fall asleep."

People who reach high level management positions are generally achievement oriented and accustomed to working under pressure, he said. They get things done, but they tend to stay there, deny fatigue and lose their tempers easily when frustrated. As a group, they also run a high risk of heart attack.

"Some studies have suggested that tenure in high corporate positions is diminishing and many executives are opting for early retirement. The pressure comes from many sources," Papsdorf said, "but the most aggravating factor is not being in control."

"While it's not always possible to be in control of events, you can take control of how you react to them."

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