



Don't Let Everything **You Love Kill You**

Be a healthy leader

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.



Late last year, an attorney whom I had known for over 20 years suddenly passed away. Then, more recently this year, three of my colleagues died unexpectedly within three weeks. With the exception of one, they were between 41 and 55 years of age. A somber fact is that for life to end at 41, middle age is just over 20. The causes of their deaths were cancer or substance abuse, and the cause of one death is shrouded in mystery. Many suspected quietly that it may have been suicide. These individuals shared two nexuses — they worked in the right of way industry, and they were leaders in their organizations, either as partners in their law firms or in governmental positions. They were strong and resilient leaders, or so I thought. With the exception of one, who was known to overindulge at business and social functions, I had no idea about what internal demons they confronted. They hid them effectively.

I knew them all exceedingly well. For decades, we had worked closely together, either as co-counsel or opposing counsel, and for some, as both. We frequently texted each other. Their contact information and text message conversations remain in my iPhone, and none of them will ever communicate with me again. I miss them, and their deaths haunt me.

Two questions about the end of their lives dominated my thoughts. First, why did they pass away so young? Second, could anything have been done to prevent these professionals from departing this world when they did? While I do not relish addressing the macabre subject of the unseasonable deaths of those in our industry, it has been weighing on me, and I think it definitely warrants discussion.

During COVID-19 and after, publications have focused on leaders identifying and addressing the signs and effects of stress on their team members, including burnout and mental health. Two articles were published recently in Right of Way Magazine on this subject: “Occupational Stress and Productivity in Right of Way” by Bradley Irby, DBA, which appeared in the November/December 2023 issue and “The Burnout Battle” by Jessica Rector, which appeared in the July/August 2024 issue. While my intent is not to diminish the importance of leaders being cognizant of the negative influence of occupational stress on the physical and mental health of those whom they lead, it is equally as important for leaders to be aware of the precarious position they face when exposed to ongoing work-related stress. If we as leaders are not healthy, then how can we lead effectively?

Leaders confront stress on all fronts.

For those in larger organizations who are middle-level managers, sandwiched between upper management and their employees, stress is generated by their bosses, team members, other project partners or stakeholders and clients. Unfortunately, corporate decision makers, who may be located across the country, are disconnected from those in the trenches but are making choices that have far-reaching consequences on others in the organization. For those in the industry who are at the helm of their firms, they avert the stress generated by upper management but face stress with others, such as payroll providers, financial institutions, insurance companies and company vendors.



Post-pandemic, managers are tasked with handling more projects or assignments with fewer seasoned professionals due to retirement by baby boomers or the exodus of talent from the industry caused by the Great Resignation. Such conditions can be brutal and lead to diminished quality of work product and precipitate delays. As right of way leaders know all too well, delays in our deadline-driven industry are catastrophic. A missed deadline can mean lost state or federal funding, sometimes millions of dollars' worth, impair a client's credibility by failing to deliver on promises made to constituents or damage the reputation of a manager's company. Supervisors' responsibilities include motivating their team members, at times when they are feeling overwhelmed by their workloads or are distracted by personal circumstances. When an employee becomes overwhelmed by assignments or utterly distracted by his or her personal life, or an employee abruptly leaves and is not promptly replaced, managers serve as the pinch hitters. In addition to their own job responsibilities, supervisors fill in when and where needed.

Like those they lead, managers also encounter personal challenges and turmoil. They have families. Some leaders are responsible for children, others are responsible for their aging parents, and those of the "sandwich generation" are responsible for both. Supervisors also contribute to their families' incomes, and some are sole breadwinners. Leaders have a plethora of responsibilities outside of their professional positions. However, unlike those they lead, managers keep their troubles, particularly personal ones, to themselves. They often serve as buffers between adversity and their team and internalize work-related and personal life stress.

The link between stress and well-being is uncontroverted.

Undoubtedly, the current state of the right of way industry affects its leaders' well-being. "Though there is not one agreed upon measure for well-being, studies often relate a person's well-being to their physical and mental health, substance use, stress levels, and job and relationship satisfaction," as discussed in a March 2023 article by Michael Fore and Erin Stevenson in the online mega journal, PLOS One. The link between stress and the effects on physical and psychological health is well-established and has only been exacerbated since the pandemic.

As to the physical effects, the Center for Creative Leadership's (CCL) December 2022 online article "What Drives Leadership Stress — And How to Deal" explains that stress stimulates two hormones, adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline creates the condition for plaque to build up in artery walls. "Over time, that can lead to an increased risk of heart attack," the article conveys. Cortisol reduces the production of the body's white blood cells. "Without adequate white blood cell production, your immune system is suppressed, and you're more susceptible to illness." It is common knowledge that the psychological effects of stress include anxiety, depression and even suicide. Stress can cause one to fail to cultivate good habits, such as healthy eating or exercising regularly, or even worse, develop bad habits, including self-medicating, through alcohol and other harmful substance overconsumption, to cope. Many right of way leaders love the industry and what they do in the industry, but over time, what they love to do can cause physical and/or psychological damage or demise, one way or another. The effect is reminiscent of a couple of lines from an Alan Jackson song. "Everything I love is killing me. Cigarettes, Jack Daniels and caffeine."

Leaders need to manage their stress as well as their teams.

Topical literature on leadership stress cites "resilience" as the panacea to combat stress. According to another online CCL article, "How to Help Leaders Cope with Pandemic Stress — 3 Research-Based Strategies," "[A]t the CCL, we define resilience as 'responding adaptively to challenges,' and view it as a whole-self effort that draws on physical, mental, emotional, and social areas of wellbeing." The article identifies several practices for building resilience, some of which include physical activity, sleep, mindfulness, gratitude and social connection. Other practices that I would add to the list are eating well, regularly visiting your doctor and dentist, establishing healthy boundaries, learning to say "no," maintaining a sense of humor and my "principle of substitution," which is, for each new responsibility or activity I take on, I eliminate another.

Another practice, which in my opinion is the most important, is to recognize when you need help and to ask for it, whatever help it is, whether with professional responsibilities, in your personal life or with your physical or mental health. Ultimately, all these practices involve self-care and preservation. While they may seem obvious, the chasm between what many leaders know they need to do to cultivate resilience and what they actually do to attain it remains wide. Some leaders believe that self-care is selfish. Others believe that they don't have any time to take care of themselves. Such beliefs can make you ill or even kill you. Never forget that any team, at work or at home, depends on a healthy leader. 🌱



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