

Amrop Leadership Series

Personal Governance - 5

Principle IV -
Pressure and Stress,
Coping and Coaching

By
Fredy
HAUSAMMANN



Amrop

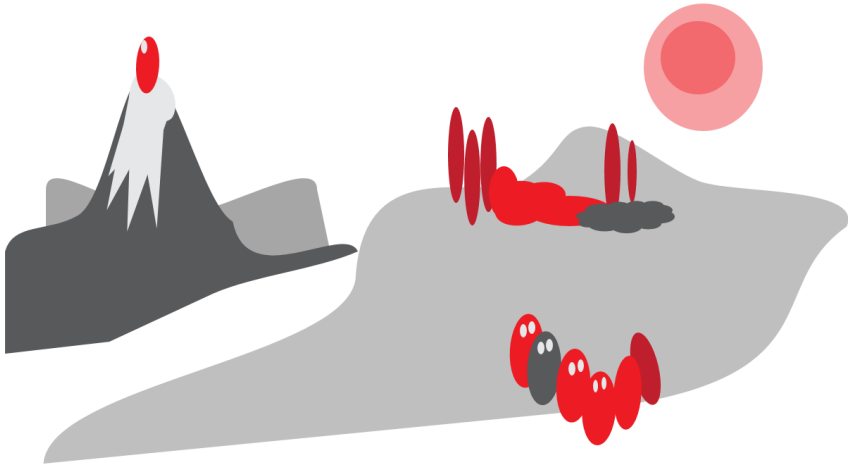
Leaders For What's Next

Personal Governance – 5

Principle IV – Pressure and Stress, Coping and Coaching

Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction	5
Managing Our Resources.....	6
The Right Dose for A Sustainable Workload.....	9
Stress, Stressors and Managing Them.....	12
Salutogenesis and Sense of Coherence (SOC)	14
Coping Strategies.....	16
Reaching Out.....	20
Credits, About Amrop.....	23



Executive Summary

Recent months have seen at least three cases of CEOs suffering the physical effects of overload – a heart attack, an on-stage collapse, hospitalization for severe pneumonia. All were aged under 60, as was the former Chief Executive of a major insurance company, who took his own life following his resignation.

But senior executives get very little sympathy for personal stress. When in 2011 the embattled CEO of Lloyds Banking Group took time out due to fatigue, the British newspaper The Guardian cited a poll on its website with 54% of respondents saying the Lloyds boss was “paid well enough to take it.” And studies have mainly focussed on the woes of lower grade employees with little control over events. But attention is slowly shifting to leaders. After all, they are entrusted with the sustainability of the systems in which *all* employees should flourish. Their health, and their corresponding ability to take wise decisions, is no luxury. Managers with good Personal Governance know and recognize their stressors. They can tell what is the right workload – for themselves and for others.

Anxious Leaders Are Risk-Averse Leaders

A 2015 study from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana found that “anxious executives take fewer strategic risks, especially when things are going well”. The researchers detected “a pattern through which anxiety causes top executives to avoid potential threats.”

Leaders Lack Sources of Renewal, and Fail to Provide Them

An 2014 study found that whilst 79% of executives recognized the importance of renewal, only 35% said their firms had supportive programs. Only 50% encouraged renewal activities among their staff.

Managing Stress is About Striking a Balance and Staying Vigilant

The right workload, or ‘personally-manageable average’ means that our proportion of salutogenesis-related (health-promoting) factors is significantly higher than the pathogenic (disease-causing) ones. For good Personal Governance we need to be alert to the latter, to avoid progressing from a resigned state of work dissatisfaction to a state of chronic stress.

Managing Our Resources is a Top Priority

Leaders must treat human resources with as much care and forethought as financial ones, and avoid thoughtlessly exhausting employees with an overload of ‘investment-focussed demands.’ Activities with a high, energizing ‘flow’ quota are an ideal focus for our resources. Unfortunately, in today’s workplace of multi-tasking and constant e-distractions, it can be difficult to find flow. Still, it’s essential to recognize the resources we devote to constructive activities versus demanding ones, strike a balance and achieve a strong ‘sense of coherence’ (SOC). SOC helps us answer three critical questions: “why should I do this? Is it manageable for me? Does it make sense to me?”

The Pain Threshold Has a Domino Effect

For senior managers, the ability to put up with an untenable workload, (crippling agendas, workloads, long working hours and heavy responsibilities) has a paradoxically infectious appeal. To belong to the club, it feels like a good idea to follow suit. But the effect is also cascading downward to junior functions. Their reward systems are engineered more around

functional goals than workloads, creating an unfair exchange. When the right workload is exceeded time and time again, distress results. *In the full article you'll find a checklist to help you determine how manageable your workload is.*

You Can Have Too Much of a Good Thing

Drawing up a 'Personal Stress Inventory' can help us identify our stressors, and foresee which of these risk bundling and harming our sense of coherence, and ultimately, our health. Even positive stressors (*eustressors*) can cause distress, if they start to accumulate.

From chronic stressors, to stressful life events, a host of Apps now enable us to assess our stress. For a research-based approach, we recommend a tour of the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

In this article you'll find a checklist to help you identify your stressors, and find out how well you are handling them.

Salutogenesis is a Holistic Approach to Life

Because both health and illness factors are a natural part of life, the 'salutogenesis' concept recommends that we discount a one-sided focus on deficits. Instead, we should look at moving in the direction of wellbeing along a 'health-illness' continuum, using our coping resources in the best way possible.

Increasing the 'manageability' of our stressors will promote our SOC; our confidence that that things will work out as well as we can reasonably expect. In the same vein, Personal Governance is designed to enhance our 'positive inner attitude' regarding stressors and challenges.

We Need to Cope Better With Coping

Leaders need to design coping strategies in 3 main areas. First, mastering professional situations and action planning. Second, in our personal relationships with third parties, and third, our relationship with ourselves and the clarification of our role. Assessing our stressors and the ways in which we react to them, working on our SOC, will give us a more agile range of coping strategies. Cultivating a palette of private activities and 'passivities' and practicing them regularly is key. Why? You can't jog with a knee injury, but you can still recharge your batteries by playing guitar.

The full article contains a set of self-check questions to help you pin down your coping strategies.

Leaders Must Learn to Share Problems

Leaders have no trouble engaging consultants to address organizational issues. They can share problems, to a point, with colleagues who are involved. But many also feel they must be on top of everything, and are inhibited by fears of not being good enough, or of losing control. So leaders feel less able to proactively engage an executive coach to accompany them in painful situations. Instead, they wait for crisis point. Leaders with good Personal Governance are enthusiastic coachees. They relish self-reflection, know their limits, and have a strong sense of coherence. With their coach close to hand, they have learnt to work with this trusted advisor in a way that is not only effective, but preventative.

How willing and able are you to share your problems? In the full article, you'll find a set of diagnostic questions.

Personal Governance – 5

Principle IV – Pressure and Stress – Coping and Coaching



Managers with good Personal Governance know and recognize their stressors. They can tell what (work)load is most appropriate for themselves and others.

The new CEO of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz, is hospitalized in Chicago following a heart attack. Harald Krueger, the CEO of BMW, collapses on stage at the International Motor Show, his first appearance in the post, after a “period of extensive travel.” And as Canadian pharmaceuticals major Valeant faces criticism from lawmakers and two federal probes, its CEO Michael Pearson is hospitalized with severe pneumonia. All three executives were aged under 60 at the time of their troubles. And all three incidents occurred in 2015.

Back in 2011, the business world was shocked by the disclosure that António Horta Osório, the CEO of Lloyds Banking Group, was taking time out due to fatigue. The bank’s share price was being battered by the euro crisis, and Osório was grappling with mass sackings, angry unions, and the scrutiny of the British Government, (who retained a 41% stake in the business following the 2008 taxpayer bailout). Reporting on the story, British newspaper The Guardian cited a poll on its website with 54% of respondents saying the Lloyds boss was “paid well enough to take it.”

But just how high a price should senior executives have to pay? Switzerland alone has seen five suicides of senior executives at major companies in the last eight years. In May 2016, the former Chief Executive of Zürich Insurance killed himself at the age of 59, just months after his resignation.

Whilst 79% [of executives] recognized the importance of renewal, only 35% said their firms had programs to encourage supportive activities. Furthermore, only 50% encouraged renewal activities among their staffs.

Top Management Stress is Coming Under the Spotlight

It is true, and to a certain extent understandable, that highly-paid senior executives get very little sympathy when it comes to personal stress. And research has mainly focussed on the link between stress and lower grade employees (and their lower levels of control over events).

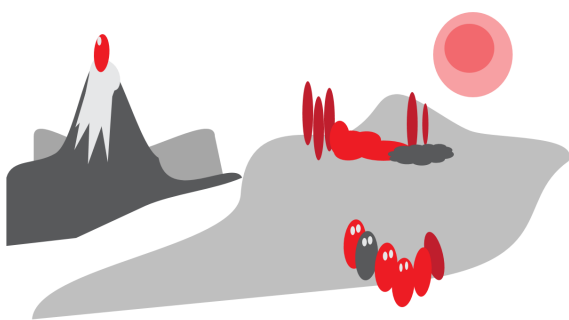
But the attention of researchers is slowly moving to the stress endured by leaders at the apex of organizations. After all, these are the people entrusted with the sustainability of the systems within which *all* employees should not only survive, but flourish. The health of leaders, and their corresponding ability to take wise decisions – is critical.

Are Anxious Leaders Hiding in the Cupboard?

In September 2015, four researchers from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, the US, confirmed that “despite abundant anecdotal evidence that many top executives experience anxiety in their jobs, the upper echelons literature has remained largely silent on the organizational implications of job anxiety.” Analyzing 154 major strategic decisions made by 84 top executives of large organizations in a range of industries, the researchers collected data from personal interviews with executives and surveys of their decision-making teams. Summarizing their findings they stated that “anxious executives take fewer strategic risks, especially when things are going well.” They further argued that: “anxious executives focus more on “buffering” themselves from threats, and find that they surround themselves with close supporters when times are tough. Our results demonstrate a pattern through which anxiety causes top executives to avoid potential threats.”

Leaders Lack Sources of Renewal - and Fail to Provide Them.

In 2014, Leadership Development Professor James R. Bailey reported in the Harvard Business Review on the results of his interviews with 127 executives from 18 countries, exploring their sources of renewal “in the face of relentless tension.” Whilst 79% recognized the importance of renewal, only 35% said their firms had programs to encourage supportive activities. Furthermore, only 50% encouraged renewal activities among their staffs.



Stress Is a Business Issue, and a Societal Issue.

Stress is a critical part of Personal Governance. It is time to open the black box of senior management stress, and this is the subject of Principle V.

We know the saying: “*everything in moderation.*” But finding and leveraging the right ‘load’ for the various components of our lives, (work, sport, food, drink, to name the most obvious), is a very individual matter, even if we can rely on our social entourage to keep a close eye on how we solve the equation, and to have their own opinions and judgements about it.

In Personal Governance we can define the right load as a ‘personally-manageable average’. Of course, this average will rise or fall, depending on what situation we are in.

Finding the right load means that in our professional or private activities, the proportion of *salutogenesis-related* (health-promoting) factors¹ should be significantly higher than the proportion of *pathogenic* (disease-causing) ones.

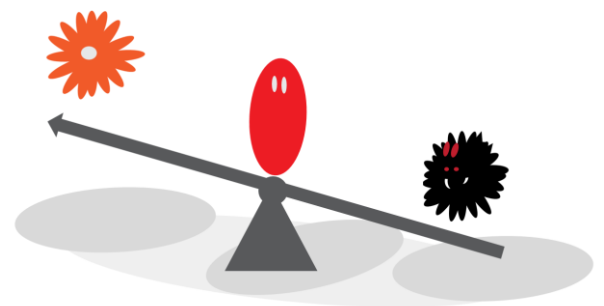
For good Personal Governance we need to be particularly vigilant about pathogenic factors.

Especially when they accumulate, factors that cause us distress can become chronic and pathogenic. In the first instance, distress factors just tend to cause a state of resigned dissatisfaction with our work. But they can produce work-related stress further on.

Knowing what our stressors are, and recognizing when they surface in different situations, are of critical importance when it comes to handing our different ‘loads’ in a constructive way.

To manage stress successfully, we need to carefully handle our personal resources. Let’s take a look at this now.

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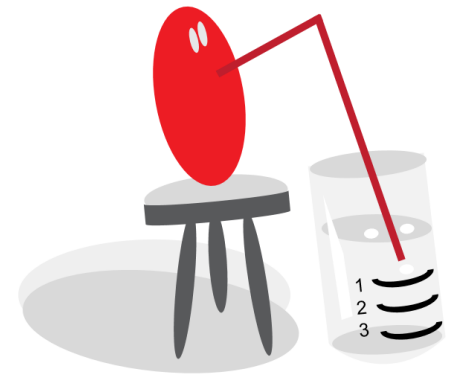


¹ Salutogenesis is a medical prevention concept. It deals with the factors that maintain our health. It became known through the work of the US-Israeli medical sociologist, Aaron Antonovsky. At the center of the model, presented by Antonovsky in 1987, we find the concept of ‘sense of coherence’ – our core attitude towards the use of the resources we have at our disposal, when it comes to maintaining a healthy state.

1

Managing Our Resources

Managing all the components of our (workload) goes hand-in-hand with managing our resources as a top priority. Whether personal or third-party, it's important to view resources as *renewable energy sources*, drawing on them in measured doses to assure their long-term vitality and availability.



As managers, we must call upon the resources of our colleagues and direct reports in a well-reflected way, and take a long-term perspective. We need to reinforce the 'salutogenesis-related' aspects of their work. When we do this, the positive effect on people is multiplied, because capable teams constantly exchange and share resources. So we can optimize resource management on several levels: individual, team and organization.

Human Health and Corporate Wealth are Interlinked

Managers must constantly weigh up how to use which resources and aim for the highest positive impact and the lowest wear and tear. In the same way as thinking about strategy, it's about anticipating consequences, taking the context and players into account. Economically-speaking, this is like the deployment of a company's financial means, (something which successful firms do well). Just like other kinds of capital, human capital has a 'Net Asset Value'. When employees are thoughtlessly over-exploited and over-burdened with 'investment-focused' demands, they end up exhausted and – at least temporarily – worthless. Yet a company's Net Asset Value largely rests on the value of its human capital.

Flow Activities are a Prime Commodity – And Hard to Find

Activities with a high 'flow' quota are amongst the best ones in which to invest our personal resources. A core condition of a 'flow activity' is that it captures our undivided attention (without distractions). However, 'flow' is rarely possible in a workplace of multi-tasking and disturbances (email alerts, flashing voicemail signals, buzzing smartphones). Flow experiences are reduced to just a handful of activities that we can carry out in a concentrated way. Yet these experiences are some of the most valuable of all.

What Gives, What Takes? The Most Important Balance Sheet of All

Overall, we have to recognize the resources we devote to demanding activities and the resources we devote to constructive ones, striking a balance between the two. The goal is to have enough flexibility and energy in reserve to meet new and unexpected demands and secure a strong '*sense of coherence*' for as long as we can. (You can find out more in Part 4 of this article: '*Salutogenesis and Sense of Coherence*.') This means we have to manage and contain our workload.

2

The Right Dose for a Sustainable Workload

What workload is the right workload? In which situation/s and over what period of time? We can only answer this on an individual level. For Personal Governance, 'right' means being able to manage our workload long-term, in a way that nourishes our 'sense of coherence.'

Do you feel dissatisfied with your work-life balance? If the answer is 'yes' then this is a signal that you are dealing with a weak or 'mixed' SOC and an poorly-adjusted workload. Different levels of dissatisfaction can surface within - and beyond - a long-term tolerance barrier. Only you and your social entourage can decide where to set that barrier.

When dissatisfaction persists over a long time, this weak SOC can sooner or later cause a drop in work satisfaction, and a rise in stress. Almost every (work) activity has its share of pleasure and fulfilment (salutogenis-related factors) and its share of pathogenic factors.

But how can you recognize a pathogenic factor? The vital signs are as follows: *it will feel difficult. It will give you little or no pleasure. It may even be difficult to bear.*

If it Ain't Hurting, it Ain't Working - the Irresistible Rise of the Pain Threshold

The concept of work-related stress comes from industrialization, in the sense of "I'm suffering under the weight of my work." Yet it's something that senior managers very rarely put on the table - even though it's difficult to imagine any top management function that doesn't demand a high pain threshold.

This high pain threshold is evidenced by the crippling agendas, workloads, working hours and scope of responsibility of senior managers. It often takes a Fateful Moment, such as the ones experienced by the four leaders in our introduction, to raise our willingness and ability to relieve the discomfort.

We also have to ask ourselves how long this situation has been going on in management circles, and where it came from. I hypothesize that we have to some extent imported it from a specific management culture, and haven't adapted or integrated it as well as we could have done.

In 1986, the Big Bang hit London's financial sector, and the relatively dependable and cosy life of its banking employees came up against the intensifying influence of faster, more competitive American counterparts. Other sectors, similarly. Today, the professional and financial expectations of Wall Street are more or less globally engrained. A period followed during which the 'up-or-out' or the 'live-to-work-and-get-rich' models were widely admired and became examples to emulate. In recent years, and especially in light of the 2009 financial crisis, the trend has slowed. European managers in particular have emancipated themselves from US norms to a certain extent.

I mention the US example because probably no model in recent economic history has had such a profound influence on other geographies. I believe that we're witnessing an inter-cultural phenomenon of workplace behavior - a kind of paradigm. Here are some features:

- Professional orientation is competitive and ambitious.
- The quest for monetary/material wealth takes high priority, has considerable weight, and is keenly focussed.
- Status symbols (such as luxury goods), indicative of social class and prestige, are proudly put on show.
- When a new role is in play, risk-ready managers embark upon adventures that over-expose themselves and their families to debt, relocation, and other socially drastic steps. In exchange they expect maximum financial compensation and this has become a central, technical point of negotiation.

As a natural consequence, the line beyond which a leader's workload is bearable long term is often crossed in international corporations (and not only these). Leaders set themselves goals (and tasks) that are out of step with local culture.

The Creeping Invasion of Workload

This doesn't mean that we should reduce our understanding of excessive workloads to 'US import' or 'cultural difference'. Overload is due to two important factors that are becoming increasingly visible in multinationals.



For managers, putting up with an untenable workload has an infectious appeal. To belong, to qualify as 'committed' it's may feel advisable to follow suit.

First of all, and as suggested in our introduction, an excessive workload is societally relevant. It isn't confined to top managers. It has a domino effect on entire teams - and beyond - to a large section of the workforce. For managers, putting up with an untenable workload has a paradoxically infectious appeal. To belong, to qualify as 'committed' it may feel like a good idea to follow suit.

Associated with this is a problematic, lateral, phenomenon. In more junior functions, reward systems are engineered more around functional goals than around workloads. So the balance of exchange is even less weighted in the employee's favor.

How Manageable is My Workload? Self-check Questions.

How do I establish the right workload for myself? (The Foundation Model for Time Structure and Time Investment can help answer this question. You can find more about this in Personal Governance 4, Principle III, Self-Reflection, Self-Assessment and Self-Regulation)

To what extent is my personal view of my workload aligned with the needs of my social entourage?

What are the most significant pressures (time-related, activities, conflictual relationships, etc.)?

What factors relieve that pressure?

Which pressures would I like to reduce?

How, and by when, can I reduce these pressures?

Which personal and external resources can I draw upon to make this shift?

What could be compromised or endangered by the shift? What are my doubts and anxieties?

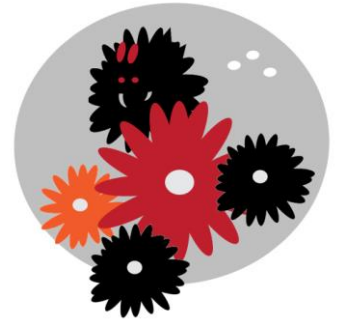
How can I secure and regularly check the shift?

When we persistently and significantly over-step the workload that is right for us, the result is distress.

3

Stress, Stressors, and Managing Them

Stressors, (pressures that lead to distress), don't just have to be professional. Our private lives can conceal a host of them. Here, we focus on professional stressors.



Stress cannot and should not be measured, defined, or 'normed' in any generalized way. Stress is whatever an individual feels it to be. There are a host of possible professional stressors, felt by different people to a different extent. So it makes little sense to set the main stressors in stone. It's far more a question of us as individuals knowing what are personal stressors are, and working on them. Here, it can make sense to draw up a 'Personal Stress Inventory'. We can assign weight to stressors according to their perceived load, in order to bring in targeted remedial measures.

What Could Be My Stressors? Some Examples

- Role conflicts (time, or content) – also see Personal Governance 4, Principle III, Self-Reflection, Self-Assessment and Self-Regulation.
- Combining line management and project responsibility
- Leading units and employees in several locations, coupled with intensive travel
- Change management or turnaround situations that imply an uncertain future for ones-self, and for one's employees
- Overload in a technical area/field of expertise – often combined with a lack of support from key senior stakeholders
- Micro-political hostilities and power struggles
- Area of concern is greater than area of influence: we engage (often without success) with a territory beyond our area of influence, putting a serious strain on our personal resources
- Absent or foggy development perspectives
- High financial reward, combined with content-related boredom
- High financial dependency upon an employer, on the basis of a high standard of living

Looking at the above list, however, it is easy to see how a combination of stressors can cause real distress and personal problems. These so-called 'stressor bundles' (Kernen, 2005) are a common cause of ill-health - and a weak SOC. So in Personal Governance, it's worth getting to grips with the abovementioned stressors, and to recognize and work on our stressor-bundles (never far off in management life).

We shouldn't automatically see stressors as negative – we can accept and work on them as part of 'normality.' Still, it's important to take care that even positive *eustressors* do not bundle, and become a source of distress.

Two further stressors deserve pause for thought: chronic stressors, and 'stressful life events'. Chronic stressors can have many sources, related to the individual, or the system. 'Stressful life events' take several forms. Retirement is one. Or a more heavyweight, complex role that places unexpected demands upon our shoulders. Or a death in our close entourage, redundancy, divorce. Such life events as these are building sites. Combined with everyday stress factors, they can produce a 'distress-overdose.' Good Personal Governance means developing a finely tuned sensory awareness for distress and its triggers - an early warning system for 'dysregulation' (Kernen, 2005). If, five times a week, you stand under the shower ruminating on problems and have difficulty celebrating the positive aspects of your life, it's time to reflect on the physical and mental symptoms of your distress, and install some coping strategies.

How Am I Handling My Stress? Self-check Questions

How and how many of the above-mentioned (possible) stressors have I experienced?
What combination of these stressors have I experienced?
How have these factors (and their combination) affected me?
How did I handle these situations? What action did I take?
How do I evaluate my current situation, when it comes to these stressors?
What other stressors are relevant for me?
How intuitively stressed do I feel, on a scale of 1-10 (where 1 = stress-free, and 10 = very stressed)?

How Stressed Are You?

A host of stress measurement Apps are now available online and worth a tour - do check their validity and user reviews. Do not see them as a long term substitute for professional or medical advice. Under certain circumstances, prolonged distress can lead to symptoms of *burnout*. The personnel department of Switzerland's Solothurn Canton published an awareness-raising leaflet which resonates well with our Question Catalog. It was based on the assumption that certain tendencies could make people susceptible to burnout:

- People who are especially devoted to their jobs, who take on too much work, for too long
- Empathic people, who identify too strongly with those for whom they are responsible
- Idealistic people, who set themselves unattainable goals
- Over-engaged people, whose investment in work is the result of an unsatisfying private life
- Authoritative people, who have a high need to exercise control
- Administrators who are chronically overworked and believe that they are irreplaceable.

But how can we measure it? The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was originally developed to measure burnout in the helping professions (nursing and social work, for example).² More recently, three of its authors developed the MBI General Survey for wider use. Three dimensions are measured: *emotional exhaustion*, *depersonalization* and *personal accomplishment*. You can find a link to this simple test in our Further Reading and Resources section.

² Christina Maslach, Susan E. Jackson, Michael P. Leiter, Wilmar B. Schaufeli, & Richard L. Schwab

4

Salutogenesis and Sense of Coherence (SOC)

Related to workload and stressors, we've looked at salutogen-related and pathogenic factors, and SOC. Understanding the links between work, health and illness has led to the

recognition that "salutogenesis-related and pathogenic factors (substances, functions) are present at all times, for all people – in every way – in every organization and in every society."³



The demands of leadership roles are often associated with pathogenic factors. So it follows that for many leaders it is difficult to stay psychologically balanced, and keep a strong SOC.

The concept of *salutogenesis* was not primarily designed for de-stressing harassed business leaders, but to deal with potentially pathological phenomena in the medical field. Yet leaders, of all people, could surely benefit from the approach when it comes to workload and stress.

Salutogenesis – A Holistic Approach to Life

The classification of people as either 'healthy' or 'ill' is replaced by a 'health-illness-continuum' (Antonovsky/Franke, 1997). Health and illness factors are part of the normal situation of any living being, so they are natural and acceptable. This means that instead of taking a one-sided focus on any particular deficit, on illness, or purely on stress triggers, we should take a holistic perspective.

Salutogenesis focuses on the possibilities of moving along the 'health-illness' continuum in the direction of health and wellbeing, using coping resources in the best possible way.

As stressors are accepted as part of normality, they are not declared unhealthy *per se*. On the contrary, they are potentially healthy. If we feel we successfully handle our stressors, then we ease negative tension and raise our confidence in our ability to manage demands.

This 'manageability' is a part of our SOC and is one of its three central components. These are 'comprehensibility', 'manageability', and 'meaningfulness'. (*Why should I do this, is it manageable for me, and does it make sense to me?*)

³ (Eck, 2004).

The three components have been translated into workplace terms⁴:

1. '*Comprehensibility*' describes the extent to which a work situation is perceived as structured, consistent and clear. (We only have to think about restructuring and change processes; people who find themselves in the epicenter often having difficulty understanding these).
2. '*Manageability*' describes the extent to which an employee feels s/he has the resources to cope with the demands in the workplace. (This point is closely connected with self-reflection, self-assessment and coping strategies).
3. '*Meaningfulness*' describes the extent to which a situation at work is seen as worthy of commitment and involvement. (This is connected to Personal Governance Principle I – striving for material wealth, satisfaction, sense and good luck).

From these three components comes the definition of SOC: "*The extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic, feeling of confidence that one's environment is predictable and that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected.*" This means:

- We are confident that the stimuli from our internal and external environments are structured, predictable and explicable
- We have the resources to meet the demands that these stimuli place upon us
- Demands are in effect challenges, worth our effort and commitment.

Personal Governance is designed to enhance *comprehensibility*, *manageability* and *meaningfulness*, and therefore, our SOC. When we are dealing with pressures, good Personal Governance will have the effect of a positive inner attitude - a feeling that we can rise to challenges, because we have the "commitment, dedication and readiness to tackle stressors." (Antonovsky/Frank, 1997)

How Strong is Your SOC ? Check Questions

How do I rate my SOC on a scale of 1 – 10 (where 10 = very high, needing no further development and 1 = very low, needing considerable development)?

How do I rate my SOC with regard to comprehensibility? (Same scale)

How do I rate my SOC with regard to manageability? (Same scale)

How do I rate my SOC with regard to meaningfulness? (Same scale)

How relevant is the SOC concept for me?

What would I need to change, to improve my SOC?

What strategies do I have at my disposal in order to raise my SOC long-term, and/or, keep it strong in a relatively stable way?

⁴ Vogt, K., Jenny, G.J., & Bauer, G.F. (2013).

5

Coping Strategies

Leaders with good Personal Governance have effective coping strategies close to hand and deploy them in an agile way. They check, change, and replace their coping strategies on an ongoing basis.

As we have seen, leaders face a core challenge, closely connected with Personal Governance. They need to be able to assess what the right workload is for themselves and for others. They also need to support both themselves and others in handling stressors in an effective way.

Coping creates room for maneuver for people and groups facing high-pressure situations and events. As such, it is a central life competence (Eck, 2004).

Coping is about how we deal with challenges, and the degree to which we and our entourage view our approach as successful and goal-oriented. We can translate coping into individual and collective coping mechanisms:

Individual Coping Mechanisms

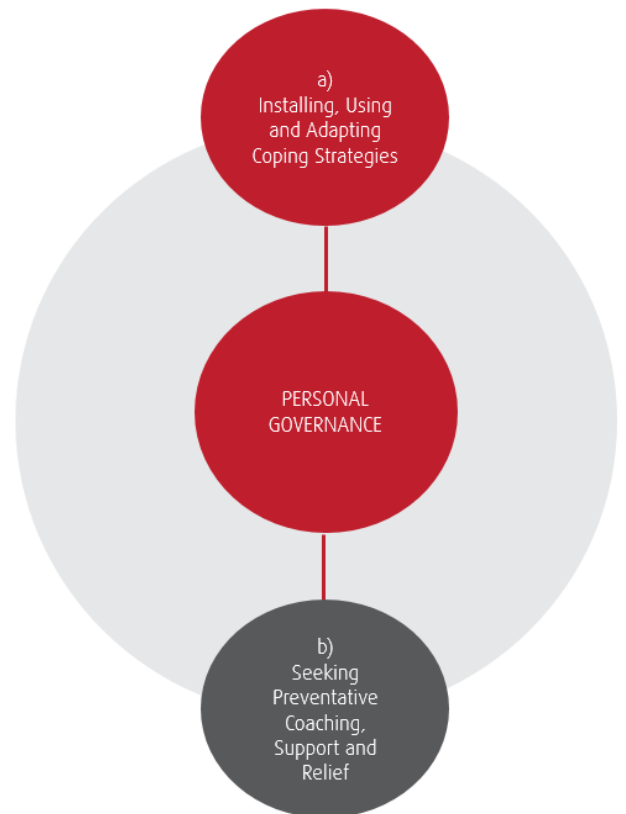
These are our own problem-solving abilities and strategies. Inappropriate strategies can make us ill, (the misuse of addictive substances is a common example in high-pressure managerial settings).

Collective Coping Mechanisms

These are sources of support provided by our positive primary social relationships (marital partners, family, close friendships), and secondary social relationships (work colleagues, neighbours, club members, and so on). Via these social connections, stressors can be reduced, and our health nourished.

To take a constructive approach to high-pressure situations, we have to be capable of assessing our own stressors and stress reactions. Otherwise it will be difficult to install effective coping strategies.

Coping is closely connected to our sense of coherence. A strong SOC enables a more agile approach to coping strategies, and positions us to deploy the ones that are best-suited to a specific situation. This will result in a wider and more effective coping repertoire.



In contrast, rigid behavioral approaches to handling stressors mean we always default to the same coping patterns. These can make us over-reliant on our existing perceptions as well the existing perceptions of other people. They only reinforce and consolidate our clumsy approach to challenges.

Coping With What? A Tricky Triad

Coping is everywhere and ongoing. We constantly have to deal with difficult situations. In the context of Personal Governance, three coping areas, roughly speaking, are at play:

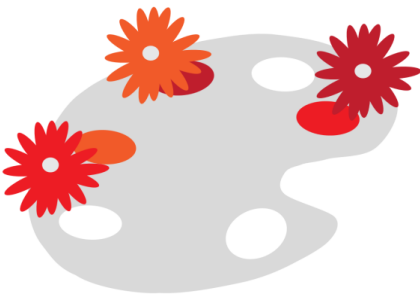
1. Mastering specific professional situations and corresponding action planning. The stressors described under 4 (or others), can be associated with these.
2. Personal relationships with third parties
3. Our relationships with ourselves and the clarification of our own role.

A Case in Point

Sebastian has a pivotal, global role in a multinational corporation. He is responsible for a unit of 3000 employees, in eight locations. His direct scope spans twelve managers: eight site managers, and four product managers. Sebastian currently lives in France; during the next two years, he has to coordinate a take-over there. His wife Carol lives in London with the kids. Sebastian spends a lot of time in these different locations, something which he has to manage, and does his best to spend his weekends in London with the family.

Four of the eight site managers have only recently joined the company. Two of the product managers have just resigned, and need to be swiftly replaced. The take-over and its multiple negotiations are taking up a sizeable chunk of Sebastian's time.

Sebastian reports to two superiors. His direct superior is located in New York, his functional superior in London. The latter also spends a great deal of time in Asia, due to projects there.



In which areas must Sebastian find coping strategies?

Mastering his specific, professional situations, and action-planning

- Handling geographical demands on his presence – striking a balance between in-person visits, flying in colleagues, conference calls and video conferencing, etc.
- Inter-role conflict between day-to-day business, and project management
- Recruitment to replace the new product managers, plus the retention of the existing managers

Personal relationships with third parties

- Handling private/family needs for his presence
- Making room for social time (partner, family, friends, etc.) – this is particularly challenging, given Sebastian's frequent travelling
- Onboarding of the new site managers, (without neglecting the existing site managers)
- Meetings with superiors in New York London, and Asia.

Relationship with himself, and the clarification of his own role

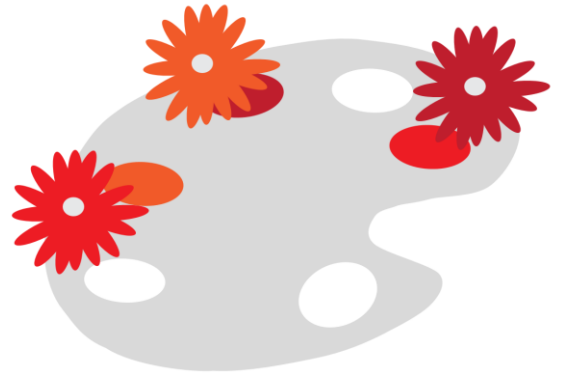
- Dealing with private needs for his presence and time for himself (cultivating his own interests and needs, self-reflection)
- Management of his time investment in general
- Delegation behaviors in light of multiple professional demands
- Communication of pressure factors to his superiors
- Assuring the right workload via organizational relief measures
- Taking personal measures to lighten the load

Coping spans a spectrum: from intervening directly to change the content of a high-pressure situation, to relief on a personal level. One solution is to look in a positive way at professional challenges that we have experienced. The risk of doing this lies in the fact that such experiences tend to go hand-in-hand with the professional situation that created pressure in the first place. So let's view this solution as a secondary source of relief, and park it for the moment.

It's particularly important to know which extra-professional activities and 'passivities' can support and energize us in high-pressure situations, and to draw up our personal Stress-Buster List.

A Palette of Strategies Paints a Better Picture

It's important to know which extra-professional activities and 'passivities' can support and energize us in high-pressure situations, and to draw up our personal Stress-Buster List. We can do this by looking back - analyzing which activities or approaches most helped us in high-pressure situations. Alternatively, we can experiment with new activities that we believe will have a positive effect.



It's a good idea to introduce some range into our palette. If our only stress-buster is jogging, for example, illness will cut it off. But if our palette includes painting, listening to music, playing an instrument, jogging, swimming, meditating, yoga and creative writing we'll almost always have one or more activities to draw on. Restricting activities to emergencies is not ideal, however. We should engage in and practice them on a regular basis.

The importance of extra-professional interests and passions for Personal Governance will be explored later, in Principle VI.

What Are My Coping Strategies? Self-check Questions

How intuitively flexible, or rigid, is my coping behavior in pressure situations on a scale of 1 – 10 (where 10 = a very flexible, rich palette, and 4 = a tendency to default to a few, similar coping strategies and a need to develop)

On what basis do I base my score – (using a striking example)?

Which pressures do I handle particularly successfully, in my view?

Which pressures do I have trouble handling?

How would I like to change my coping behavior/s?

Regarding relief activities that can be implemented at any time, how big a choice do I really have?

What does my Stress-Busting list look like?

What could help me to cope better, starting today?

Good Personal Governance means consciously handling high-pressure situations and being able to develop and deploy strategies to master them.

6

Reaching Out

Managers with good Personal Governance are in a position to take preventative advisory measures and get help in difficult situations via executive coaching.

How many senior executives have sought out executive coaching for stress? When it comes to organizational development, it's common to hire consultants and have them present strategies on a range of areas.

When it comes to ourselves, the reservations, skepticism and reticence are almost tangible. This is not universally true, of course. In the US, it is common to have an executive coach on standby. Other cultures may have more difficulty making use of this invaluable resource.

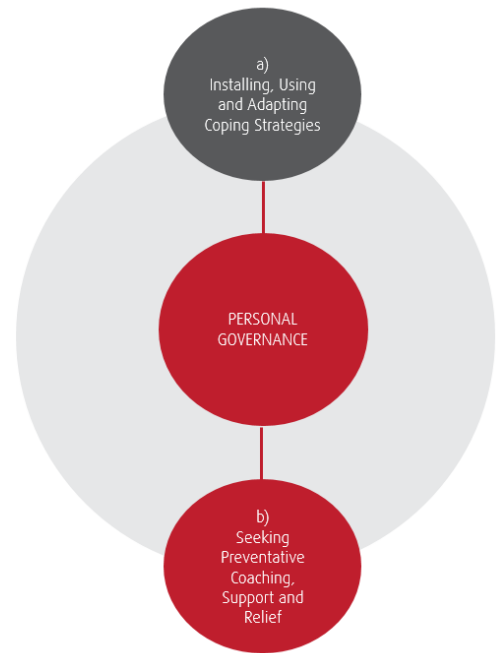
In Personal Governance Principle III, we looked at the Supervision and Intervention methods for managerial feedback and problem-solving in groups. Here, it's all about individual coaching. This means sharing our professional problems with a professional sparring partner, and doing this is a technique that deserves to be properly learnt.

Suffering in Silence

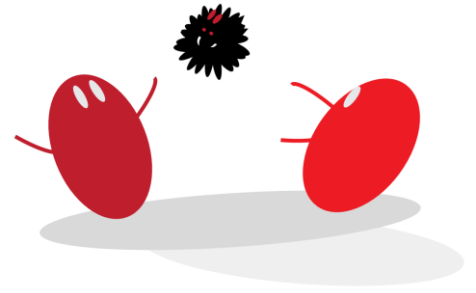
"For better or for worse" "A problem shared is a problem halved" – these are common parlance – at least in our private lives. Being able to share problems and high-pressure situations is an important coping strategy.

Managers often share business problems, at least to a point, with employees and colleagues (where these stakeholders are directly affected).

But when it comes to situations that tax them *personally*, managers can discuss these with very few people in their professional circle, and even then, only partially. Taxing situations go deep under the skin; they are associated with "not being good enough" or "losing control" or "loss of social prestige," existential fears, and so on. Problems such as these can be entrusted to external confidants, (for example, an executive coach). We can and should expect that any information will be handled on a strictly confidential basis, and that the outsider will take an external viewpoint, exercising the calming influence that distance can provide.



Next to employees and advisors, we can also share high-pressure situations with a third party who is affected by it. A client, for example. Of course, the commercial dynamic and client relationship have to be kept firmly in sight. But in the sense of high transparency, it can be a clever strategy. In an ideal case, the approach can provide relief for all the people involved, as the following case will illustrate.



Ideally, any problem-sharing intervention will have been pre-discussed, planned, and followed up with an executive coach who will help design a targeted coping strategy – one which also has a learning effect.

Seeking Guidance Can Be a Sign That We Know Where We are Going

Most often, people seek out executive coaching as a *remedial* measure in conflict and crisis situations. Granting ones-self *preventative* coaching seems to be somewhat thin on the ground. I hypothesize that managers who have a high degree of self-reflection, good self-evaluation and a strong SOC have more of a tendency to call upon preventative coaching. For them, this is only one of several coping strategies at their disposal, because they see preventative coaching as a support for the developing and diversifying other parts of their coping palette.

On the other hand, it follows that managers who think they must always be ‘on top of everything,’ who suppress their stressors and personal insecurities and put off working on them until a serious conflict situation arises will be less inclined to install preventative coaching. Once they find themselves in critical situations, they will find it more difficult to use coaching resources swiftly and effectively. Furthermore, the critical situation must be recognized in the first instance – ideally, before it reaches tipping point.

A well-reflected self-assessment and a good feeling for personal limits (as described in Principle III) help us to be better able to recognize the best moment to get external support.

Recognizing the need is the first step. Actually drawing on and applying support is the second one – and often feels difficult, due to our emotional and practical inhibitions.

Here again, the advantage of preventative guidance comes to the fore. When we regularly exchange with a professional coach, we have our resource close at hand – and can skilfully use it. Further still, preventative coaching can capture and work on conflict and crisis situations at an early stage in their escalation.

Personal coaching is a drastically underused resource, but it has enormous potential, and can be quickly and easily tapped into.

How Willing and Able Am I To Share My Problems? Self-check Questions

Self-check questions – our ability to share problems and allow ourselves to be personally guided in our professional domain

Am I able to share problems?

If yes, with whom do I habitually share problems?

What experience do I have of problem-sharing?

If none, why is this?

If none, with whom would I feel able and willing to share problems, if the need arose?

What are my experiences of personal guidance/personal coaching?

How would I estimate potential for professional personalized coaching for myself?

How and when can I use this resource for myself?

Good Personal Governance means being able to share our problems with others (employees, clients, etc.) and to get advice and support on time (prevention is better than cure).

References, further reading

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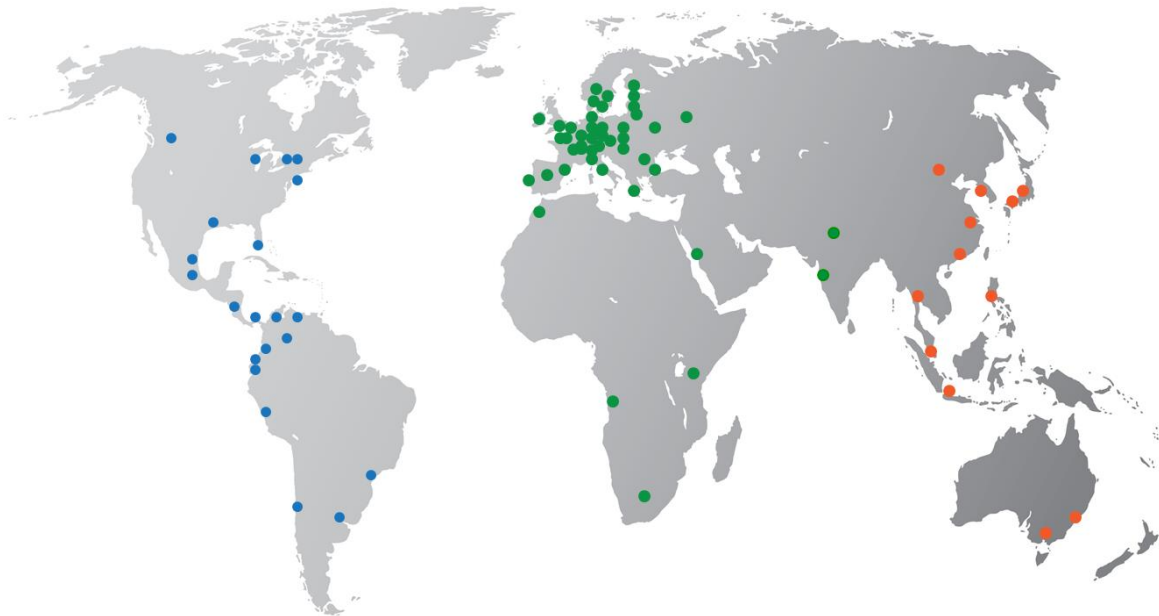
Credits

This article series is based on 'Personal Governance als unverzichtbarer Teil der Corporate Governance und Unternehmensführung' – Fredy Hausammann, (Haupt Berne, 2007). It was translated from the original German and adapted, with additional research, by Steffi Gande, Amrop.

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