How to tackle stress at the top despite its taboo?

Expectation of everyday top-performance can push senior executives to exhaustion in the competitive atmosphere they are working in, particularly as it appears to be taboo to speak about stress. Senior executives, who want to seem strong in front of staff and shareholders, will not allow signs of weakness or reduced performance as these could have a negative impact on their career progression.

It is hard to tell how many executives are affected by too high stress levels: A Financial Times article covering this topic suggests that “the rarity with which top executives admit to suffering from stress must mean boards are underestimating the occurrence of stress-related illness at the top – with potentially dire consequences.”

For the general working population in the UK, we know that work-related stress in 2015-2016 accounted for 37% of all ill-health cases and 45% of all working days were lost due to ill health. Evidently, there is a need for a rigorous approach to evaluate senior executive stress that can look below the surface and determine dangerous stress levels.

Together with colleagues from INSEAD, I have developed an interview protocol, drawn from studies on stress, that we call the ‘Stress APGAR’. Similar to the APGAR neonatal assessment used by pediatricians, the Stress APGAR method is easy to recall, quick, and indicates the danger zones that require urgent professional attention. This interview protocol is then supplemented with a psychodynamic lens, using psychiatrist Otto Kernberg’s RADIO indicators to enrich the data gathered.

The Stress APGAR protocol looks at the following dimensions:

- Appearance, e.g. sleep patterns, eating habits, exercise, energy levels
- Performance, e.g. ability to take decisions, concentration and memory, generating new ideas
- Growth and self-development, e.g. satisfaction with opportunities for personal growth and learning
- Affect management, e.g. ability to feel, understand and show emotions appropriately
- Relationships, e.g. perceived quality of relationships with their life partner, family, friends, professional peers and superiors

To arrive at a realistic assessment of a person’s functioning, an interpretive approach to collecting insights is taken. To give a practical example, the person doing the assessing might consider: Does the person look tired? Does the person seem focused, or rather jumpy? Does the person complain of being stuck in his or her work?
Insights can then be deepened using the five dimensions of the RADIO indicators. In looking for answers to the indicator questions, the assessor uses his or her gut instinct, as well as considering the facts:

- Reality testing, e.g. does the person show delusion?
- Affect management, e.g. do they show stable and appropriate emotions?
- Defences, e.g. does the person freeze in response to probing?
- Sense of identity, e.g. does the person seem to have a realistic sense of who they are?
- Object relations, e.g. does the person have primitive or mature relations with others?

The APGAR stress protocol may help prevent tragedies, by detecting subtle signs and symptoms of stress among a group of people who are often reluctant to talk about their problems.


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