



Instincts ^{at} Work

Rethinking Stress: an adaptive mindset exercise for teams

Based on the work of Dr. Alia Crum (Stanford University)

In the journey towards mental toughness, it's important that you learn to shore up your own mind before you take your new skill set to your team. This is especially important during times of high stress and burnout - when your team might be barely holding it together, or your culture is poor.

When your team is suffering, your first instinct is likely to try and fix it, but because the healthcare industry is still struggling to adapt to a new way of doing things, you may feel like you're getting nowhere with your team.

The things you used to do to align them might not work anymore. Essentially, you are trying to fix the unfixable, which will very easily wear on you and weaken your team further.

It's important to understand that everyone has experienced the last few years differently. From personal, professional and global changes, much of what we expected from our day-to-day life has been shifted and remains in a state of flux and uncertainty. In the face of this

ongoing uncertainty, our brains often register a constant threat response that some people react better to than others.

For most people, stress is seen as a very negative thing, and they need to be encouraged to shift the way they view stress before they can welcome it as a positive influence in their lives. As a leader, recognizing the allostatic load that your team members are experiencing negatively will give you a solid footing to start rebuilding a positive team culture.

When a team member feels threatened, even if the feeling is subconscious, their capacities for relating, revealing, learning and achieving are greatly diminished. Their goals change, often resulting in negative consequences in their thinking and performance.

When they feel safe, understood and supported, however, they're capable of significantly more learning and innovation, and will likely be open to different perspectives than when they feel threatened.



An Exercise for Reframing Stress

YOU WILL NEED: Sticky notes, pens or pencils, an open-mind and at least 60 minutes.

As a leader, you can shift your team away from feeling threatened towards a feeling of safety by helping them reframe stress and uncertainty by setting up priorities, focusing on what can be controlled and changed, highlighting small improvements and calling attention to the progress that has been made.

Acknowledging your team's effort towards progress helps them feel safe, successful and worthwhile, thereby reducing their threat response and allostatic load. In time, their mindset towards stress will shift, and you will see your team culture improve, despite ongoing uncertainties.

Sit down with your team and go through the following exercise:

1 Acknowledge Stress

- ☐ Hand out a sticky note to each team member and ask them to write down something about work that currently stresses them out. Keep it anonymous to help people open up.
- ☐ Collect all the sticky notes and put them on the wall. If your team is comfortable with it, read all of the sticky notes out loud, making sure not to call out anyone in particular.

2 Reframe the Stress

- ☐ As a team, acknowledge that stress is present in everyone, and that it's okay because it means you care about something. If you didn't care, you wouldn't feel stressed.



3 Make the Connection

- ☐ Have your team members brainstorm what it is they care about that is causing them stress. Ask them to write it on a second sticky note.


For example, If you're feeling stressed because you and your team can't deliver excellent care, recognize that you're stressed because excellent care really matters to you.

- ☐ Collect all the sticky notes and put them on the wall. If your team is comfortable with it, read all of the sticky notes out loud and make the connection between each stressor and what it is the team member cares about. Keep it anonymous if you need to.

4 Make the Stress Work for You

- ☐ Instead of feeling disempowered and overwhelmed by stress, you and your team can use your sense of purpose to think differently about stress.
- ☐ Now that you've each identified something what stresses you out, and made the connection to something you care about it, it's time to brainstorm and discuss.

For example, If what you care about is excellent patient care, discuss recent examples of excellent patient care. Discuss how you're able to deliver excellent patient care despite the stress and limiting circumstances.

- ☐ Then, brainstorm other small improvements that the team can make to further deliver on their purpose.
 - ☐ Finally, focus on small, concrete actions and tangible deliverables that will allow your team to create improvement, direct their energy, and put their stress to good, purposeful work.
 - ☐ Record your thoughts on the following sheet, which you can print out multiple times if needed.
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What do we care about? What are our values?

How have we acted in ways that express these values lately? What are we proud of?

1.

2.

3.

What other small improvements can we make to live our values?

1.

2.

3.

List 5 tangible actions we're going to take to express our values?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Our plan for follow-up and celebrating progress is:



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