Chapter 4
Preventing Burnout: Stress Management Strategies for Administrators in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The essential administrator in higher education must maintain a healthy work-life balance. The process of attempting to balance the demands and expectations of career, personal life, interpersonal relationships, partnerships, and family has been explored extensively over the last decade. Achieving a sense of work-life balance is both physically and psychologically necessary to promote life satisfaction, wellness, and occupational success. Many challenges and responsibilities confront administrators daily, some of which they have little or no control over and are commonly labeled as stressors. A large number of publications and media address the topics of stress and burnout-related health issues which may lead to chronic illnesses. This chapter explores stress and strategies to help individuals in administrative careers cope with the day-to-day stressful events and/or situations in their personal or work-life. The information included will dispel the idea, take two aspirins and call the doctor in the morning!

INTRODUCTION

The essential administrator in Higher Education must maintain a healthy work-life balance. However, balancing work-life with personal life is a constant struggle. Many challenges and responsibilities confront administrators daily and may be commonly labeled as stressors. These challenges include: pressure to achieve unrealistic expectations; ironclad and unbending institutional rules and procedures; rapid technological advances; confusing change initiatives; budget decisions; faculty/staff turnovers; salary negotiations; and sixteen hour workdays. Stressors are identified as unpleasant events, issues, people, etc., which enters an individual’s life producing distress and distraction (Hackney, 2001). Therefore, administrators must not only be aware of their stressors, but must also understand the effects that work and life stress can have on mental and physical health, which may result in increased health problems.
Universities and colleges are highly stressful environments for administrators e.g. presidents, provosts, chancellors, vice presidents, dean/directors, and department chairs. While all employees, faculty, and staff, experience work stress, those in leadership positions have particularly stressful positions due to the high levels of demands associated with the leadership position (Hambrick, Finkelstein, & Money, 2005). Activities that may generate potential work stress for administrators usually focus on events or issues such as organizational and/or policy changes; program/university accreditation; shrinking budgets; student retention and enrollment; and environmental conditions that may pose some degree of challenge or threat (Hughes et al, 2009). A college dean warns concerned individuals that “college or university administration is a place where, despite our best efforts, connotations are all too often unpleasant, the disagreements over terminology are never ending; and just when you think an issue is solved, that one voice from the back of the room makes you reconsider everything” (Buller, 2012, p.xiii).

An important component of leadership development should include preparing administrators to manage work stress. Higher Education institutions are not very intentional or coherent in training administrators to handle their job responsibilities or work stress. A research study by Cipriano & Riccardi (2010) revealed that 80.7 percent of the department chairs responding to a survey had no formal training in their administrative responsibilities. Many of the publications, workshops, etc. typically focus on topics related to managing tasks and responsibilities related to the job, especially those earmarked for accountability and performance evaluation.

A dean emeritus at a Midwestern university describes a typical list of tasks and responsibilities he would encounter on any given day included: “meeting deadlines, listening to complaints, chairing a meeting or two, responding to irate parents, negotiating with faculty, and entreating (or castigating) state legislators” (Fish, 2004, p.C1).

### Focal Point of Stress

Stress! It’s all relative…and relatively easy to manage. I wrote this quote because of an event that occurred during enrollment in the doctoral program. One of my peers completing his doctoral dissertation on stress and I had a long conversation on the effects of stress in our lives. I recall the long debate we had regarding whether stress is relative. After discussing information he had written in his literature review, we came to the conclusion that stress is relative. I also recall the topic of relative risk in my biology statistics class. Wikipedia defines relative risk as the ratio of the probability of an event occurring (for example developing a disease, being injured, etc.). Probability is a measure of the likeliness that an event will occur. I hope these definitions explain how I reached the conclusion that stress is relative. The idea that stress is relatively easy to manage is discussed in the examples identified in the chapter.

I learned to develop resiliency to stress at an early age. During my preparation to take a test I would experience a great deal of anxiety which would give the sensation of butterflies in my stomach, so I wouldn’t eat. My parents suggested that I put the book and/or my notes under my pillow to help me remember the subject material. They assured me this would help me to remember and make the butterflies