



Leaders need to take care of themselves

Barry VanderKelen

Pointing out that these are stressful times only adds to the stress level of the leaders of nonprofits.

The National Bureau of Economic Research now states that the current recession began in December 2007, and economic conditions have been deteriorating ever since. Requests for services are increasing while funding is decreasing. It's precisely at these times that leaders need to focus as much on taking care of themselves as they do on taking care of their organizations and clients.

Dr. Linda Hawes Clever observes that people take better care of their cars than themselves. "If you don't refuel or change the oil in your car, it will break down," she says. "People need to maintain themselves or they will break down physically, psychologically and spiritually." Clever is an internist, and a member of the Institute of Medicine and the National Academy of Science. She is the founder of RENEW, a San Francisco-based organization dedicated to helping people who juggle work, family and commu-

nity commitments regain their enthusiasm, effectiveness and purpose (www.renewnow.org).

Among other things, stress can interrupt normal sleep patterns and a lack of sleep impairs judgment. Problem-solving at home and work becomes more difficult. People under stress tend to sacrifice exercise, which leads to the deterioration of heart and brain functioning as well as the immune system. Some people manifest stress by developing backaches or pain in their joints. Stress can also push people into clinical depression; they feel helpless, mentally exhausted, and easily angered. Someone under stress can lose hope, become cynical and aimless.

"It cascades," Clever said. "Stress can literally make you sick."

Clever suggests some actions you can take to manage stress better. For instance, shift your thinking about time. Instead of finding time to exercise, schedule the time and treat it like any other appointment. Schedule time to go for a walk, call a friend, or take a nap.

Always being accessible leaves no room for concentrating on a task or decompressing. One way to be truly

away from the office while eating lunch is turn your cell phone off.

Perhaps you can combine two activities. For instance, if you have a meeting that doesn't involve reviewing documents, conduct the meeting while walking around the block rather than at your desk.

Most important, according to Clever, is to review your values and compare them to those of your organization. A lack of alignment can be a cause of stress. And if you've given your values lower priority, ask yourself why, and then find ways to lift them up.

Clever warns that regaining control is not easy. "This involves some grit. You must look honestly at what's going on," she says. If you need some assistance with this, contact a mental health professional just as you would an auto mechanic when you're having car trouble.

"You have to be No. 1 to yourself so that you can be the person your spouse married or the organization hired," Clever argues. "Taking care of yourself is not selfish, it's self-preservation."

Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at barry@slocf.org.