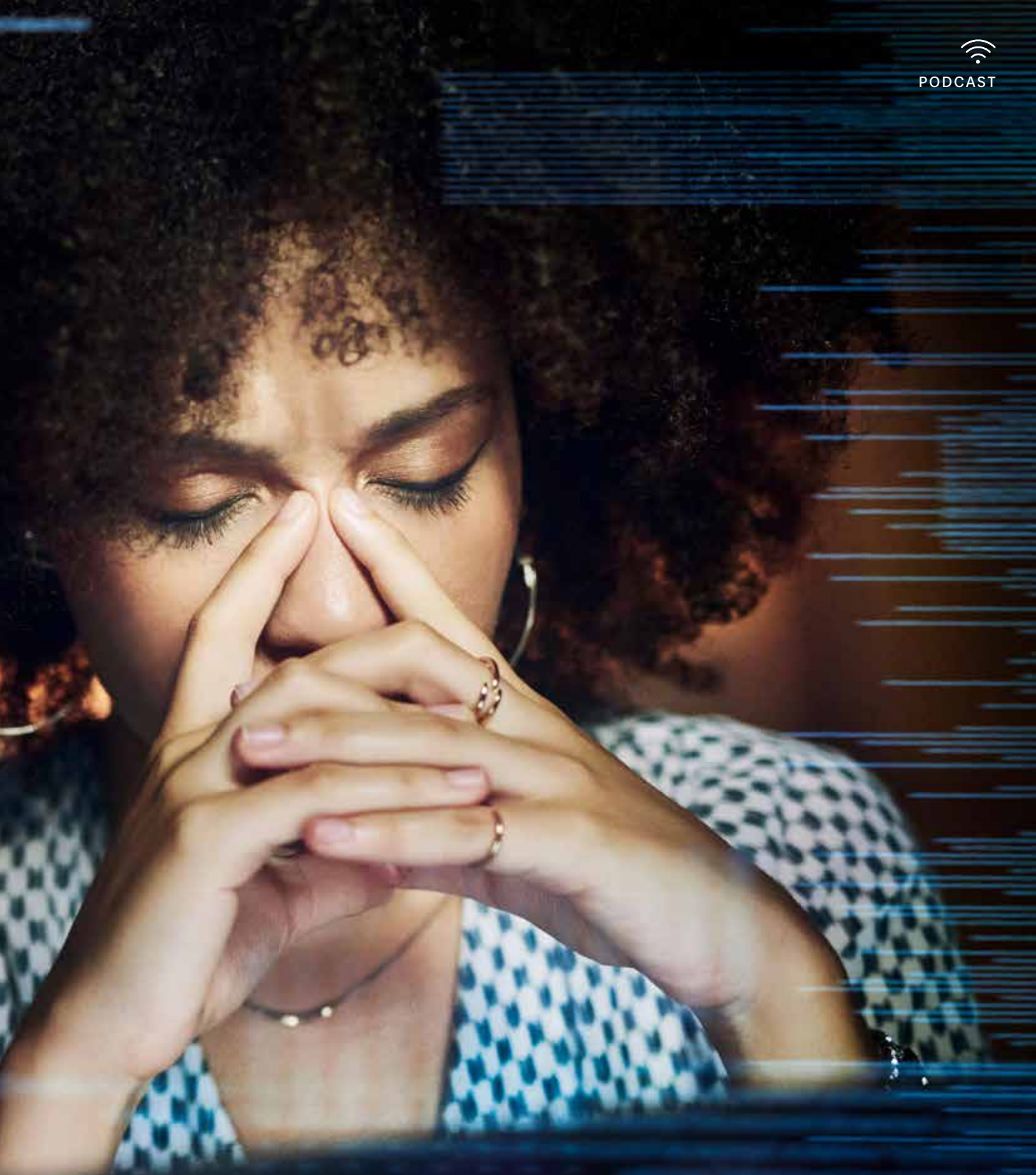


TAKE PAIISE



The discipline of pause is an essential leadership competency that will help combat stress.



BY CHARLES FRED

s talent development professionals, we continuously search for new ways to develop talent, particularly the capacity and capability to lead and inspire others. The self-discipline to pause—which is simple to articulate yet difficult to develop—before responding and reacting to a person or situation is one of today’s most important leadership competencies. However, it has somehow been muted by the constant stimulus of our frenetic, technology-enabled world. Void of this discipline, leaders run the risk of causing irreparable damage to their organizations’ overall performance.

Leaders’ behaviors affect organizational performance

The research firm TrueSpace made a significant discovery during a five-year effort designed to examine entrepreneurs of post-startup businesses (companies that survive and mature beyond the startup phase). The focus of its multiyear study was to uncover why these businesses, which showed early growth and success, eventually stagnated. The research team:

- identified a surprising pattern in the actions and behaviors of leaders struggling with the growth of their businesses

- found a problem in the way employees approached their roles, solved problems, and interacted with each other
- discovered that the poor-performing firms in the sample showed work environments of intense stress, which fueled unplanned turnover, employee disengagement, and chronically inconsistent financial performance.

Comparing the companies in the sample, the researchers successfully evaluated the influence of systemic stress as they conducted hundreds of exit interviews with employees who had voluntarily left their employment. The results show a significant delta—both qualitatively and quantitatively evident—between high- and poor-performing firms.

The findings pinpoint a primary source of unnecessary stress: leadership behavior—specifically, the inconsistent and emotional responses, decisions, and reactions to those they lead.

The stress epidemic

Few things constrain human cognition more than emotional pressures and stress. Stress, however, is not new, especially in a work environment. But temporary instances of stress and anxiety are different than the relentless burden to meet near-impossible expectations. Additionally, stress is contagious; it can be passed from one person to another just like a germ. Like any outbreak of a germ or virus, the way to stop it is to contain its source. To do so, it's necessary to first understand why people are not more emotionally resilient to stress and why it spreads so easily from one person to another.

Humans are physiologically ill-equipped to deal with a modern version of unrelenting stress. The human body flushes cortisol and adrenaline into the bloodstream, heightening a person's ability to react quickly. These hormones direct blood flow to the muscles, especially the heart. They prepare individuals to physically deal with the source of stress in whatever manner provides them the best chance of survival. This stress response perfectly fits the world in which our ancestors lived, one where any encounter presented life-threatening consequences.

As the world evolved, however, the rules of survival changed. Today, people live and work in an environment that demands mental acuity over physical agility. Rather than run faster or punch harder, individuals need to think more clearly and efficiently. And while yesterday's threats presented episodic life-threatening consequences, today's stress comes from a nonstop set of pressures and emotions. That means stress doesn't exist in the moments it takes to evade danger or fight a predator. Rather, it lives with individuals for days, weeks, months, or even years. It can make people feel remorse, steal sleep, and damage health. While cortisol and adrenaline kept our ancestors alive, they stunt our greatest tool in today's environment: cognition. So, when individuals require mental acuity, they experience diminished recall. When they need sharp thinking and problem solving, their minds are dull.

Researchers have long known stress is transmittable; it's called the *stress contagion effect*. In addition to having hormones juicing the blood system, people possess mirror neurons that draw us toward the emotions of others. When we hear others laugh, we smile. When we see someone yawn, we fight the impulse to mimic it. This urge comes from brain cells that tell us to copy the behavior of the person we are

observing. As humans, we are perfectly designed to enable the epidemic of workplace stress. With hormones crippling our cognitive abilities, and neurons to ensnare those observing bad behavior, it is no wonder the TrueSpace research shows how quickly stress can become a workplace epidemic.

Unlike the infectious nature of a disease, stress is different. Stress is airborne and technology-enabled. It lurks behind closed office doors and hides in emails and texts, but it's omnipresent. Unlike infectious bacteria, stress can be sent at midnight across the world from one carrier to an unsuspecting target with a perfect infection rate. The impact on those affected shows up as unplanned turnover, lost time due to illness, and poor overall performance.

Implications for leaders

All that is important information for leaders to know and understand because they single-handedly determine a business's stress level. Consider that assertion for a moment. It's a heavy burden but real.

TrueSpace research shows that the source of workplace stress is leaders' tone, pace, and behavior. They bring the capacity and capability to directly influence the organization's people, and for that matter, anyone who encounters their enterprise.

But the study did not reveal a pattern of malice among leaders. In fact, in many cases, leaders who were the most prolific spreaders of stress had no idea of their impact. They believed they were setting a tone for hustle and high performance.

That led to an examination of the leaders and what was influencing their behaviors and decisions. The result? A misaligned mental model.

In general, a mental model represents how leaders see their role, and their

perception is based on past experiences, reinforcing actions, and role models. The prevalent mental model for many leaders is to become successful by getting more done in less time. That's an intractable mental model for many business leaders, because it's reinforced by stories and personas of well-known billionaires simultaneously running global businesses, traveling the world, and competing in triathlons.

Leaders perceive that these mythical beings don't need sleep, and they have discovered a way to get much more done in a day. Many leaders aspire to become like these outliers, which shapes leaders' view of what is important and encourages them to see that their role is to set a frantic pace for themselves and their organizations.

I'm not suggesting that we change the mental model from fast to slow. That wouldn't eliminate stress—only add to it. But a mindset of moving as fast as possible, compressing more into a day, and sleeping less is not working.

The discipline of pause

Leaders need a new mental model that enables them to see their role differently, decrease the spread of workplace stress, and enable them to regain control of the one thing they have power over: how they respond and react to others.

That brings us to the 24-Hour Rule, which is about the profound impact of pause—the notion of leaders creating a

space between themselves and the persistent and perilous stimulus from a frenetic world. It doesn't matter what kind of pause leaders choose to adopt, only that it provides mental clarity. Pausing resets their cognitive ability, gives them more control, and provides crucial perspective.

But let me be clear: Pause is not a delay; it's a discipline. It's not a waste of time; rather, it provides time to deliberate before leaders act. The 24-Hour Rule is a moniker—a way to better understand the concept—for the kind of pause that enables leaders to control how they respond and react to others, whether it takes five seconds or 24 hours. Most importantly, it does not interfere with leaders' ambitions or dampen the need to hustle.

There are great examples of people who practice the discipline of pause. In fact, they work in industries where every second carries the potential for life-threatening consequences. Their professions are defined by high stress.

Consider the healthcare industry with its practice of the surgical time-out, where the entire surgical team pauses to confirm it has the correct patient, procedure, and physical site for the surgery. Or think of commercial pilots who must pause and complete checklists before every takeoff and landing.

Being a leader may not have the same immediate consequences as performing surgery or piloting a commercial airplane. However, leaders directly influence the lives of the people they lead. Their role is more difficult than that of a surgeon in terms of leaders' potential to cause widespread harm. Unfortunately, leaders don't have a contained workspace or a controlled set of procedures to allow pause. Instead, they begin each day with unknown situations and variables well beyond their ability to plan and prepare for. For those reasons, a leader must use self-discipline—the ability to mentally call a time-out, to get rest, to run through a checklist—despite overwhelming temptations to react quickly or respond without pausing first.



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Gaining control

The TrueSpace research team discovered early on that pause was not a simple topic for leadership training. Gaining control of how leaders respond and react to others involves deliberation and intention. Both behaviors are nuanced and require context and recognizing one's assumptions. Each leader approaches this differently, so a prescriptive series of procedures is not sustainable. However, three fundamental steps can begin the process of developing the discipline of pause.

Leaders should start by being fully aware of stress in their work environment and how they are contributing to it. Unlike a fish unaware it's in water, stress is both measurable and obvious. Remember that leaders set an organization's, unit's, and team's tone and pace.

Next, leaders must make a commitment to pause, to gain control of how they react and respond to others. They should let people know about it and discuss how difficult it is. The mere fact that they are openly self-aware with their teams will reduce stress.

The final recommendation is for leaders to take a full week to try a few things that can help them gain control.

This effort needs to match their personality and work habits. They should write down what works and, more importantly, what doesn't work. After the week, leaders should take another look at the stress in their environment and get their teams involved in the conversation. Leaders should ask their team members to validate what they've done to lessen the team's stress and anxiety.

The profound impact

Pausing doesn't represent a skill that a person can learn; rather, it remains innate. Talent development professionals can't teach leaders how to pause, yet they can teach awareness of the problem and the solution to overcoming it. That falls within their scope and responsibility. The talent development function must begin tackling the epidemic of workplace stress by making leaders aware of the one variable within their power to wield.

Pause carries a profound impact on people's lives. In today's high-paced environment, many things fall outside leaders' control. However, they hold the power to decide how, when, and where they respond and react to others. By taking a breath and mindfully making the decision to pause, leaders give themselves, their organizations, and their co-workers the best chance for success.

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This article includes adapted excerpts from *The 24-Hour Rule: Leading in a Frenetic World*.



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