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The Alpha Edison Perspective

Regulating Emotions & Managing Stress during COVID-19

PERSPECTIVES

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Founder & CEO

Development:

Regulating Emotions & Managing Stress

As it becomes clear that Covid-19 is going to change our lives for the months – not weeks – to come, it's a good time for leaders to self-audit how they manage their emotions and stress for the sake of themselves and those around them. The rapidly advancing science of emotion has made it clear that identifying and allowing yourself to experience emotional states is better for mental health and decision making than suppressing emotions. At the same time, we can learn to control our emotions so that they don't control us – keeping poisonous ones like contempt at bay, while amplifying positive ones to make up for stretched virtual communications. Meanwhile, the body's physiological stress responses – likely to be more frequently activated these days – should be proactively managed to keep it from escalating to health-threatening chronic stress. Maintaining healthy levels of social contact, innovating around the type of stress-reduction activities which can be done inside the home, and bounding uncertainty so that energy is focused on the tasks within your control are proven ways to regulate and lower your stress response.

HOW DOES A LEADER PRESERVE CALM AND MAINTAIN VISION DURING THIS UNPRECEDENTED AND DIFFICULT TIME? IT STARTS WITH RECOGNIZING THAT TAKING CARE OF YOUR EMPLOYEES, YOUR CLIENTS, AND YOUR FAMILIES MEANS FIRST TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF.

The self-care plan we recommend developing should involve identifying effective coping and stress-relieving strategies, developing emotional intelligence to improve your mental state and interactions with others, and adopting healthy routines including a balanced diet, an exercise regime and an adequate (7-9 hours) of sleep a night.

In other words, *take the time to become even more vigilant about how you manage your own stress and emotions.* While it is important to do

so even when things are going well, there are a number of reasons why it's particularly crucial during this epidemic: your own well-being, the well-being of your stakeholders, and stretched communication.

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1

Your own well-being

You can't be effective in your role if you're not fully recharged and in control of your decision making every single day. By allowing stress and emotion to control you, rather than the reverse, you sacrifice valuable cognitive capacity at a time when you might need it most. Operating under unnecessary cognitive overload leads to cloudy decision making and less effective interactions with others. Adrenalin may have gotten you through the first week or two – perhaps you were even enjoying the change of pace, like the first few days of a blackout – but our new state of the world is surely starting to take its toll. As strict social distancing measures continue to be extended, with some predicting that a form of social distancing may need to be in place until a vaccine is available, “toughing it out” through isolation, emotional fatigue and unmanaged cognitive distractions is no longer an option. It's time to self-audit the way you're working and adapt to the new normal.

2

The well-being of your stakeholders

It is safe to assume that your employees and clients have it worse than you do. Yes, perhaps some tiny fraction of them live in such economic and psychological security that this just feels like an extended “stay-cation.” But most of them are probably terrified. Many are experiencing high levels of anxiety about their job security (if not already coping with recent job loss or salary cuts), some of which may be amplified by spouses with whom they are now in constant close physical contact. Many are probably balancing working remotely with several children and an absence of nannies, worrying about older parents in care homes that no longer allow visitors – or feeling inescapably alone. In short, instead of wasting time feeling like a victim yourself, focus on extending empathy to your stakeholders. Their well-being is likely already stretched, and adding your own stress and uncontrolled emotion on top of their pile is suboptimal.

3

Stretched Communication

A large majority of communication is nonverbal, meaning that quite a bit is hidden when we aren't with someone in person. Yes, meetings continue over video conference and telephone, but vast amounts of information is lost in the absence of physical contact. Meanwhile, opportunities for miscommunication lurk in every online interaction and phrasing of a sentence. Clear and frequent communication is key to successful remote work, and that may not be as obvious to employees who have never worked remotely. Some may not be strong communicators in general – something which may have been less of an obstacle when in-person meetings allowed for interpreting their body language and asking lots of follow-up questions – but which may now present a serious challenge when attempting to decode their emails. You are therefore left with the difficult task of assuming the best intentions in your colleagues while anticipating frustration with some interactions, and mitigating your own emotional swings which are bound to come with stretched communications.

Emotion Regulation

To that end, we present some tips for how to *recognize and regulate your emotions* during this difficult time. In contrast to the Mr. Spock view of emotions being antithetical to good decision making, more recent research shows just the opposite. Of course, intense “all-consuming” emotions can certainly disrupt cognition and lead to destructive thought patterns and, eventually, suboptimal decision making. But suppressing emotions has been shown to drain costly cognitive resources and even backfire by making the emotion stronger. Instead, if tamed and used properly, emotions can effectively direct attention and aid decision making in ways that are sometimes superior to “cold” rational states. In other words, effectively tuning into and harnessing your emotions allows them to function as information instead of distraction.

Emotion Regulation (cont.)

TIP #1: NAME THE EMOTION, AND ALLOW YOURSELF TO FEEL IT.

It might seem trite, but it's important to remember that nobody has lived through a COVID-19 epidemic before. These are uncharted territories for everyone which means that they will continue to evoke new emotions you may be out of practice managing. Identifying these emotions is a crucial first step: research has shown that people with more nuanced emotional vocabularies tend to be better at regulating their emotions. This is likely because each emotion is associated with a unique set of cognitive appraisals and behavioral tendencies, so correctly diagnosing what you're feeling can lead to a quicker resolution.

If you're not well-versed, or simply uncomfortable in the language of emotion (hint, if your emotional vocabulary stops at "I feel bad"), call on a friend who you consider a good listener and see if they can help you work through identifying what you're feeling. As with anything, increased practice accurately naming what you're experiencing will become easier and more gratifying with time.

Another important thing to remember is that not all emotions require "solutions." More specifically, the traditionally American emphasis on happiness and "positive psychology" misses an important caveat: the evolutionary role of emotions is to protect us, and so negative emotions are not only inevitable but actually serve an incredibly important survival function with respect to informing our decision making. As an example, people claiming they "aren't scared of COVID-19" aren't being praised for their lack of fearlessness, but are instead generally viewed as careless and foolish by those looking to stop the spread of this virus and get the economy back on track as humanely as possible.

TO GET YOU STARTED, HERE ARE SOME EMOTIONAL STATES YOU'RE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE AND SHOULD BECOME COMFORTABLE IDENTIFYING AND NAMING:

FEAR

This is an evolutionarily adaptive emotion produced in response to stimuli which predict danger: either an innate dangerous stimulus (e.g. a predator) or a cue which has been associated with something dangerous. Fear is an acute emotion in response to something imminent (a tangible threat), and functions to produce a narrow range of defensive behaviors (fight, flight, or freeze) – it is therefore more likely to be felt in discrete situations which are particularly scary.

ANXIETY

In contrast to the visceral nature of fear, anxiety is a cognitive emotional state which is often produced by a remote stimuli (which may be "imagined") and can be sustained over a long period of time (think of a constant, numbing pain as opposed to a sudden, sharp pain). Researchers have distinguished between "trait anxiety" (having a personality which is prone to anxiousness) and "state anxiety" (being in an anxiety-provoking situation). Those who are high in trait anxiety will be particularly prone to an overstimulation of this emotion during what is clearly an anxiety-provoking "state" of affairs. Anxiety leads to numerous behavioral responses, from less productive ones like rumination to more productive ones like planning and risk assessment.

SADNESS

While both fear and anxiety can be "towards" emotions, ones which motivate an individual to take action, sadness is typically considered an "away" emotion, one which leads an individual to go deeper inside themselves, and is therefore one of the more difficult to diagnose in another person. Extreme sadness, colloquially known as depression (although the latter has a strict clinical definition), is associated with lethargy, a lack of desire in activities or other people, and reduced communication. While sadness has been found to have a neutral effect on risk-taking, it is associated with a desire to move away from the status quo (i.e. change something about one's situation).

Emotion Regulation (cont.)

TIP #2: PROACTIVELY EXTINGUISH CONTEMPT.

There are many useful emotions – including ones we associate as having negative affect – given their potential to be used as motivational fuel. A number of great innovations were inspired by anger towards an existing, inefficient way of doing things, and so we don't want to suggest that all negative emotions should be eliminated. However, there is one emotion to be mindful of extinguishing quickly, particularly during this period of living in close quarters, and that is contempt. John Gottman, a well-known marriage researcher, identified contempt as one of the "four horsemen" which predict divorce with 93% accuracy. Unlike frustration or disappointment, which are emotions you can experience towards someone you still respect, contempt is closely tied to feelings of *disgust*, or looking down on someone as if they are lesser-than. Intense physical proximity with your partner and children will be, at times, highly emotionally charged. Watch out for any signs of contempt, and if necessary, practice some of the recommended behaviors on the right.

TIP #3: BE EXTRA GENEROUS WITH POSITIVE EMOTIONS.

Your employees can't see your smile over the phone, and well-intentioned sarcasm gets lost over email, particularly to an anxious receiver. Make an effort to be extra conscious of your choice of words when delegating tasks and directing others, and be particularly generous with the gratitude you express for your colleagues and customers. This is a difficult time for everyone – particularly those who have had to take salary cuts or may be anticipating layoffs. So take advantage of amplifying the one thing you don't need to cut on the expense line: a positive attitude and confidence-inspiring demeanor.

Remote companies rely on a strong culture just as much, if not more, than non-remote ones. Committing to interact with kindness, which means giving employees the benefit of the doubt that slip-ups may be a function

of what is now a very stressful and anxious situation, will not only be appreciated, but also role model how they should in turn treat their colleagues and teams. It is through small deliberate actions that you create a foundation for a culture built on understanding and support. Finally, being generous with positive emotions shouldn't be viewed as being in conflict with the need to make difficult decisions. In fact, the more difficult the decisions you're making regarding where and how to cut expenses, the more important it is to maintain a positive, supportive culture for those who stay.

IF YOU FIND YOURSELF DEVELOPING CONTEMPT FOR SOMEONE, TRY:

PRACTICING DIRECT COMMUNICATION

Remember to lead with phrases like "I feel..." which focus on what you are, undeniably, feeling instead of accusations like "you intentionally did..." which inevitably make assumptions about the person's motives. The former approach increases the chance that the other person will listen and be open to changing their behavior once they understand how it impacts you.

BIAS YOUR ATTENTION TOWARDS THE POSITIVE

Being familiar with someone can mean noticing every small annoyance while no longer being impressed with their positive attributes. If you find yourself in this situation, you need to re-train yourself to notice and acknowledge the positive aspects of the person (you know, the reason you decided to have a relationship with them in the first place!) and even verbalize those acknowledgments so that they sense your effort and gratitude.

TAKE A WALK

Many fights have been avoided or severely de-escalated because one person sagely decided to give both parties some breathing room! Even an hour can significantly help lower your blood pressure and allow you to re-evaluate the situation.

This is not the time to isolate yourself from the few people you're still allowed to be physically close to. To the extent possible, view this as an opportunity to reconnect with partners and children who you don't normally have the pleasure of spending sufficient quality time with. Practicing these skills will serve you well in your business partnerships as well – a relationship which many company founders refer to as "the most important in my life, after my marriage."

Stress Management

The other area where it is important to bring attention is stress, and in particular highlighting some **tools for effective stress management**. While some people view stress as an emotion (e.g. "I feel stressed"), it is actually something which disrupts your homeostatic equilibrium and elicits a physiological *stress response*. Short bursts of stress (known as "acute stress") are actually healthy and helpful for focus, whereas extended periods of stress (known as "chronic stress") can have a number of dangerous health repercussions.

Individuals taught to perceive stress as helpful experienced a better ability to focus, higher levels of engagement, and fewer health problems

How you respond to stress is partly governed by how you perceive its role: if you view it as a threat, you are more likely to shut down and feel overwhelmed. If viewed as a challenge however, you may rise to the occasion and find ways to take control. In psychological "mindset interventions," *individuals taught to perceive stress as helpful experienced a better ability to focus, higher levels of engagement, and fewer health problems* than those who viewed it as harmful. Difficult times like this require reframing our perception of acute stress as a challenge which helps us build resilience to overcome, and mitigating long-term chronic stress to the extent possible.

TIP #1: MAINTAIN SOCIAL CONTACT.

You've surely heard this already, but social distancing does not mean social isolation. Humans are a highly social species, such that even the most introverted people are currently experiencing higher levels of stress due to a reduction in their typical amounts of human contact. Digital communication is not a perfect substitute for in-person time together, so don't assume that one email replaces one coffee. Deliberately check in with your colleagues and stakeholders more regularly than you would have if you were all still in an open-floor office space where casual contact was easier to maintain. While you personally may not have time for "virtual happy hours," encourage your teams to do them once in a while anyway. Allow employees to use the #random Slack channel to share home exercise tips, new recipes, and ideas for how to entertain the kids. Not everyone will feel a gaping hole in the absence of office small talk, but for those who do, it's important to offer and encourage new ways of connecting remotely. And if your office culture leans more towards being strictly professional, make an effort to remind your employees to schedule similar catch-ups with friends and family in order that they may maintain a healthy sense of social connection and support during this extended period of physical isolation.

TIP #2: INNOVATE AROUND STRESS-REDUCING ACTIVITIES.

You probably had a good routine going B.C. (Before COVID-19), incorporating stress-relieving activities throughout your days and week, perhaps even unconsciously. It's likely that many of those old ways of managing stress are no longer available to you under strict shelter-in-place and social distancing regimes. And while the first week without your usual gym visit or meditation class was probably manageable, as this state of the world is prolonged, it's important to deliberately engage in stress-reducing activities, even if that means re-inventing what you need in order to reduce stress. Opportunities to exercise, important for releasing feel-good endorphins, are more limited but can still be found in outdoor runs and bike rides, through practicing yoga, or following along with an online fitness class at home. Meditation practice can be similarly maintained by following along with apps, podcasts or videos. And then there might be a whole other range of homebound activities you never saw as opportunities for stress reduction which some people have discovered to be very therapeutic: from cooking to DIY projects to playing music. Be open to experimentation and take notice of which acts leave you feeling appropriately de-stressed at the end of the day.

Stress Management (cont.)

It won't be the same things for everyone, so remember to communicate with anyone you're sheltering in place with if you need to block out some quiet time in order to meditate or can't cover childcare during a run – and make sure to be equally open to compromise in order for them to get their regular stress-reduction in as well.

TIP #3: BOUND UNCERTAINTY.

One of the biggest contributors to stress is uncertainty. And if there's anything we still have in spades, it's uncertainty. We recommend fighting this by becoming organized, and putting the things out of your control into clear "bounds" that don't spill over or create unnecessary stress on aspects of your work which you can control. A well-organized, full calendar is especially important when working remotely. Move away from to-do lists, which will be overwhelming in length and mixed in how easy to accomplish is each item, to scheduled time on your calendar to work on the projects you can continue to advance on. For the things which are at a stand-still due to current uncertainty regarding capital or personnel, write them down for external memory and then store them away safely. Even better, write them as conditional "if, when" statements so that you document what obstacle needs to be unblocked in order for you to move on with this project. Some of those projects may die before they ever lift off as priorities and economic means change. Others may be re-prioritized when the world comes back to normal. But none of them are worth being allowed to take up precious cognitive load when you could be focused on other aspects of your work that you can continue to control and make progress on.

As Warren Buffet says, "only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked." Similarly, only when the going gets tough can you separate the true leaders from the rest. So while this piece started by asking how one can maintain the status quo of leadership, a better question is how each one of us can rise to the occasion and demonstrate true leadership in the face of adversity. One answer, as we've tried to make clear, is that it must start first and foremost with taking care of yourself.

For more information on the research and best practices with respect to emotion regulation or the physiology of stress, please reach out to Anastasia@alphaedison.com.