

Stamina: The Executive's Ultimate Resource

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Helen Hayes once made a shrewd observation that is as pertinent to business leadership as it is to her own profession of acting. Talent and ability are not enough, she said. "Nothing is any good without endurance."

We've all known intelligent and capable executives who have failed because they didn't have enough emotional and physical stamina. Ecclesiastes noted that the race is not necessarily to the swift. The challenge is to keep running. So, too, in business, what often counts is the ability to work consistently long and hard, especially under pressure and after disappointing setbacks.

Fatigue leads to a loss of efficiency. Impaired initiative, distorted judgment skewed perception of time and heightened anxiety. Perhaps most important fatigue erodes subjective standards of performance. As we grow more tired, we are ready to settle for less quality and accuracy. During World War II, Royal Air Force psychologists observed that pilots made the most errors as they drew their planes in for a landing on returning to their base from hazardous raids. The cause, said the analysts, was an "almost irresistible tendency to relax."

Scientists have long tried to isolate the physiological causes of fatigue. They are far from agreement. Some investigations, based for example on treadmill studies, have yielded data on the performance of both the muscular and nervous systems as energy is expended. One set of theories looks to body chemistry measured by the production of lactate in the blood, or a drop in sugar levels (which can often be counteracted quickly, as marathon runners do, with the ingestion of glucose or consumption of large quantities of oxygen). Rest and relaxation are obviously essential.

For most executives, problems of fatigue are probably not physiological. R.F. McFarland, who has conducted studies of people in stressful activities, concludes that "the metabolic cost of mental work is slight." What's most important is usually the emotional fortitude to go the extra distance.

There are those who need an immediate confrontation with failure to provide an extra lift. Edward Uhl, chairman of Fairchild Industries, quotes Archie Moore, the light-heavyweight champion, who was down for a count of nine but went on to win by saying to himself. "If I don't get off the mat I'll lose the fight." But though a fear of failure can be a goad to action for some people, in others it may serve as a brake. Al Masini, president of TeleRep, has commented that nothing raises the energy reservoir like success, nothing depletes it like failure.

If you find that you tire too quickly, you may want to ask yourself whether you are being worn down by various psychological stresses. Feelings of hostility which, must be repressed can consume enormous amounts of physical energy; you may want to think of letting off steam to a carefully chosen confidant. Chances are you will be tired. If you are uncertain what is expected of you, or if you are subject to conflicting expectations: if so, try to straighten out in your own mind at least, just what you want to achieve. And nothing can be so enervating as boredom: if you are bored look for different work that will stimulate rather than dull your energies.

In extreme cases, psychological fatigue may call for sustained therapy. But the average person who is capable of looking at himself objectively can usually do himself much good by following these principles:

- 1) Notice particularly what kinds of activity help you relax. Every executive needs to recharge his batteries, and it's important to discover what works best for you. For one individual, it could be music or an art gallery; for others, a steam bath, the golf course or just taking a walk.

2) Keep your sense of humor, which includes your ability to laugh at yourself. In his book "Anatomy of an Illness," Norman Cousins argues as do many physicians that laughter is an invaluable ally in mustering the energy needed to defeat disease. So too, an able business leader knows how to help his group discharge their tension by injecting an appropriate note of levity. Not much is understood about how humor works, but it does seem to relieve stress and to release constructive energies.

3) Acknowledge your areas of dependency. Once we admit that we are not islands of autarchy, and learn to delegate, we can multiply our own resources of stamina by recruiting the strength of others.

If we can acknowledge our need for others as part of our human condition, we can turn to them without feeling guilty or anxious that our dependency is a sign of weakness.

4) Recognize that you have failings as well as virtues—in other words, that you are human. Actually, a knowledge of your limitations can itself provide a source of energy because it tells you where to concentrate. How such a spur can lead to great achievement was illustrated by Somerset Maugham who, at the end of a brilliant writing career, revealed that very early he had discovered his own literary flaws. "I was tired of trying to do what did not come easily to me," he says in his autobiography. He was aware that he had a limited vocabulary, no lyric quality, no gift for metaphor and simile, no imaginative sweep.

"On the other hand," he says, "I had an acute power of observation and it seemed to me that I could see a great many things other people missed. I could put down in clear terms what I saw. I had a logical sense, and if no great feeling for the richness and strangeness of words, at all events a lively appreciation of their sound. I knew that I should never write as well as I could wish, but I thought with pains I could arrive at writing as well as my natural defects allowed."

As with most problems now bedeviling executives, much remains to be learned. We can expect a continuing demand for placebos and fast-cure; over-the-counter remedies. But the ultimate source of a manager's ability to stay the course must be self-discipline. Only then can he share the boast of a genius like Louis Pasteur: "My greatest strength lies solely in my tenacity."

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