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How high-powered women handle stress

As women in executive ranks navigate workplace pressures, they're learning it doesn't have to be lonely at the top.



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Maureen Alphonse-Charles, chief operating officer of The Partnership Inc., incorporates violin playing into her de-stressing rituals.

By Kara Baskin | OCTOBER 25, 2015

Every morning at dawn, Whittier Street Health Center CEO Frederica Williams retreats to a quiet room to meditate, pray, and write in her journal over a cup of tea. Maureen Alphonse-Charles, chief operating officer of The Partnership Inc., unwinds by playing the violin. Copyright Clearance Center CEO Tracey Armstrong roots for the Patriots and cuts coupons (biggest savings: \$121). Hollister Staffing CEO Kip Hollister has a meditation room at her headquarters, where she leads classes for employees.

These women have reached career pinnacles, and with big responsibilities come big stresses. Each has carved out a singular way of coping, because they all know stress management is a business-survival skill. But since there have historically been few formalized outlets for stress relief among executives, it's also a skill that these women have had to develop on the fly.

A storm of sociological factors has complicated the landscape. There's little time to unplug with round-the-clock tech access, and icons like Sheryl Sandberg and Marissa Mayer have prompted women to lean in and redefine their notions of fulfillment. Still, the obligations of caring for a family remain primarily female responsibilities, and the corporate world remains dominated by men: Women account for less than 15 percent of executive officers nationwide. The struggle for gender parity is taxing, no matter how supportive male colleagues might be.

"It's a classic double bind," says Kira Hower, a Cambridge-based life and executive coach for women who hosts Life Design, a new body-mind workshop geared toward female leaders. Men are often celebrated for taking charge, but when women are assertive, they are often characterized as too aggressive. "In leadership, finding and using one's authentic voice, for both men and women, can be challenging," Hower says. "For women, though, there's much less flexibility — which is frustrating and stressful."

There are signs that times are changing, though. Exhibit A: the burgeoning niche industry of executive coaches, such as Angie O'Donnell, cofounder of Wellesley's 3D Leadership Group. In her office, O'Donnell says, male clients are usually concerned solely with skill-building while women focus on both that and work-life integration. "What we find is they're trying to do all of those roles," O'Donnell says, including caregiving. "They say: 'I need someone to help me figure some of this out. I am overwhelmed and in overdrive all the time.'"

It's a dynamic that turns many female executives into ad hoc mentors. Brookline's Allison Rimm was a senior vice president at Massachusetts General Hospital before becoming a sought-after executive coach specializing in leadership development and strategy consulting. While at MGH, her office became a sanctuary for overwhelmed colleagues. "You have these brilliant, creative, talented, hard-working women who are miserable because they lack any kind of sense of plan and prioritization in their own lives," Rimm says. "My heart broke. These people work so hard and are spread so thin and feel they can't do anything well."

Recently, a colleague overwhelmed by balancing a career with family obligations approached Armstrong, the Copyright Clearance Center CEO. "This woman started crying: 'Tracey, life is just passing by, the kids are getting older, and every night's pillow talk is who has drop-off, who has pickup, who has to get to the dentist.'" Armstrong listened and empathized — she had been there, too. They set a series of goals designed to let the woman spend more time with her family, including periodically working from home.

An occasional work from home day doesn't a revolution make, but it's progress. And in recent years many women have created companywide organizations offering guidance for their peers. One is Hannah Grove, a State Street executive vice president who participated in the 2010 launch of Leading

Women, a group within the company that mentors female employees headed for the executive ranks. It wasn't a corporate directive, either. "We came together of our own volition, driven by a shared desire to drive change as well as a shared responsibility to help women in leadership positions," Grove says.

Boston-based Bain & Co. started its Global Women's Leadership Council in 2009. It touches on all aspects of the female executive experience, with the aim of propelling gender diversity in the leadership team. Recently, it added programming to focus on personal wellness and stress management.

Of course, stress doesn't discriminate by gender. In some cases, Bain invites male executives and ensures its programming has a business bent, says council chairwoman Julie Coffman. "Look, men have a lot of stress in their lives. If you're going for gender parity, to say women need more support or stress relief in a cushy way takes you down a slippery path," Coffman says. "However, we are a minority that is trying to grow."

Sometimes, though, it can be tough — and politically unwise — to unburden oneself around workplace colleagues. Anticipating this, leadership coach Elaine Crowley oversees ExecConnect, a new group of roughly 25 female vice presidents and above who belong to the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association. The group meets at restaurants throughout Boston each month to discuss common career pressures, from communicating with colleagues to arranging child care. One caveat: Every attendee pledges that the discussions will remain confidential. "This is women coming together to get a sanity check on how to solve problems," says Crowley, who notes that pharmaceutical companies like Millennium, Shire, and Quest Diagnostics also have women's initiatives.

In some groups, there's even a move toward embracing stress as a sign of growth, reframing it as something to be valued instead of banished. The Partnership Inc.'s Alphonse-Charles is vice president of the Boston Club,

which provides programming and advocacy for female executive advancement. The club “values the juggle. It’s not juggle for juggle’s sake,” she says. “There is value. There is skill-building.”

Plus, it’s fun.

“Through my interactions with these women, they are always reminding me, ‘Maureen, have you taken the time to exercise?’ I’m a musician; they tease that out of me. It reminded me, *Oh, my gosh, you are a violinist!* Now I do it an hour every week. It’s a part of my de-stressing,” Alphonse-Charles says.

Meanwhile, as women in senior positions acclimate to power, it’s easier to be open with one another. “I’ve seen more women providing support to one another. I would say it’s gotten better,” Grove says. “Women were focused on driving hard, breaking through the glass ceiling 20 years ago. I’ve seen tremendous help along the way since.”

This can only boost the next generation of women. In fact, incorporating stress management is a savvy business strategy for the future, says Kip Hollister, who launched her office meditation sessions in 2013. “There are all these millennials who get it: Wellness is important. It’s part of leadership development. We have to meet the new generation where it’s at,” she says.

And, it’s hoped, meet one another along the way. “Women are fantastic mentors when they’re in a safe space without the interpersonal politics,” O’Donnell says. “Let’s get to the essence of what you want and who you are.” After all, she says, “it can be lonely at the top.”

But maybe not for long.

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