

Business leaders need to become more stress savvy

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How business leaders cope under pressure has enormous implications for the workplace and the performance of companies in tough times.

Results from a new business survey show that South African CEOs feel less confident now than five years ago. Confidence levels have fallen to their lowest level since the 2008-2009 recession according to the Merchantec Capital CEO confidence index. Uncertainty ahead of this week's election, the weak rand and prolonged strikes are apparently to blame.

Almost 70% of the CEOs say they expect a negative effect on their company should the rand not improve soon and Adcorp labour market analyst Loane Sharp was quoted saying small-business CEOs were "the most gloomy" and saw a bad outlook for growth and an increase in employment numbers.

With business leaders feeling more stressed, the likelihood of conflict and tension arising in the workplace increases. How leaders act under pressure can make a huge difference to the way a business or organisation operates when the going gets tough, says Chris Breen, course convenor of the Leading Executive Programme at the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB).

"I think most high-achieving leaders are set up to lose. My obsession is with trying to find ways to help leaders become more intelligent in the moment by improving their decision-making skills under pressure," says Breen who has spent decades perfecting a rather unusual and unconventional approach to teaching leadership.

He says research shows that high achievers are less likely to take the time to check their data with others (especially if they are men) and are more likely to make poorer decisions than those who consult. In addition, people are trained to put systems, structures and processes into place, trying to control and predict business scenarios and economic trends.

"The bad news is that the world seems to have undergone a few changes in the past decade or so and is no longer nicely predictable. All our carefully learnt skills and automatic responses under pressure don't seem to apply at the most critical moments," says Breen.

He says the problem comes when leaders are unable to be flexible and adaptable. "We run organisations and want everything to be the same day after day. But the world doesn't work that way anymore." Breen tries to recreate common office dynamics and workplace scenarios, and then ratchets up the stress through a variety of techniques, to teach people how to respond differently and more effectively.

A key part of this is getting leaders to pay more attention to their bodies and their thoughts and feelings. "If you have a way of knowing what is going on in your body when it is triggered, then instead of doing what you've always done - and reacting - you can respond and be and act more intelligently," he says.

Breen's approach is unusual compared to other courses at the business school. Delegates are not given a timetable or much upfront information such as is common with other leadership courses in the market. "The world is not predictable so why should we be?" asks Breen. Yet his approach has a proven track record, says Associate Professor Kosheek Sewchurran of the UCT GSB.

"Over the years the feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive and shows his ability to shoot to the heart of our modern business dilemmas surrounding ethical leadership and social sustainability; issues that the GSB feels very passionately about."

Apart from the benefits to personal health and general office atmosphere, helping business leaders cope with stress in the workplace has a direct influence on productivity and profits as well. Stress is now being seen as the number one reason for sickness and ill health in the UK, causing the loss of over 105 million work days each year and costing UK employers at least £1.24 billion. "People tend to act like children when they are under stress. This course shows you how to remain in control of your emotions at critical times," says Breen. "Who wants a child in the boardroom making key business decisions during a stressful time?"

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