

## **Leadership Barometer 205 Monitor Stress Levels**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**



Every leader should have a “check engine light” to monitor stress levels. To say that leaders have been under unusual stress over the past three years would be a huge understatement.

### **The function of a check engine light**

When something is wrong with the engine in your car, it is not always evident to you. The car seems to be performing normally. There is a problem lurking under the hood that will eventually need attention. The check engine light comes on so you can get it checked out before a catastrophic failure occurs.

### **My own experience**

For a couple of years in my mid-career, I was dealing with too many stressors in my life. My parents, who lived three hours away, were elderly and needed attention every week. My workload just went up by 30% as I inherited three large departments making a total of twelve reporting to me. There were some health situations in my family that were scary. My home needed some repairs and a fresh coat of paint, but I had no time.

I honestly did not feel as though the stresses were too much for me to handle. I was “toughing it out” on a daily basis. Then, one morning after eating a bowl of cereal, I stood up and collapsed onto the floor. Later that day I checked my blood pressure at a health station at work. It was off the charts.

### **How I monitor stress levels**

I started using blood pressure as a surrogate for my own check engine light. I read my pressure several times each morning. I throw away the high number and the low number and average the rest. That becomes a point on a graph that I have been maintaining for over 20 years.

Over 90 percent of the time I am within a small range in good control. Occasionally, for no apparent reason, the chart will bounce up to an abnormal range for several days. I am not aware of anything driving the change, but because of the signal, I can investigate. Usually, I can identify the source of additional stress and eliminate it. For

example, I might be taking some antibiotics because of an infection. I might be dealing with a membership issue in a volunteer organization. I may be concerned because a trusted friend is acting irrationally.

### **The cause is usually apparent**

Whatever the cause, I soon figure out the reason for my change in condition. Once I know the problem, it is normally an easy fix, and my pressure returns to the historic average.

### **Conclusion**

I recommend some form of a check engine light for all professionals. It does not need to be blood pressure. Some people monitor their weight, others have a spouse tell them when they seem off the deep end. The idea is to have some signal that taps you on the shoulder when things are abnormal. It can save your life.

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