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# Less stress when work relationships are good

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Managers who enjoy a good relationship with their employees, suffer less dangerous stress at work, according to a study of nearly 3000 managers.

It's tough at the top, people say. Managers have heavy responsibilities, both for their workers and for the organisation's results. They need to make difficult, and at times unpopular, decisions. Such factors will make us think it is stressful to be a manager.

Much research has been conducted regarding stress, but not many studies have looked specifically at stress among managers.

## Pressure and stress among Norwegian managers

Professors Astrid M. Richardsen and Stig Berge Matthiesen at BI Norwegian Business School have analysed the responses from over 2900 Norwegian managers.

The study measures four key stress factors: 1) Time pressures and workload, 2) Emotional strain, 3) Role stress at work (role conflict between the demands from the top management and from the employees) 4) Role conflict between work and private life.

More than six out of ten Norwegian managers (61.8 percent) indicate that they often or all the time experience time pressure or a heavy workload. Fewer than five percent say they rarely or never have time pressure at work.

“Although a clear majority of the managers experience time pressure at work, there are relatively few who have role stress at work, or a role conflict between work and private life,” the BI researchers conclude.

## Role stress at work

Only five out of 100 Norwegian managers experience role stress at work often or all the time, while just over one third (36.6 percent) feel it some of the time. A little more than one of ten managers (11 percent) experience a role conflict between work and private life often or all the time.

Managers who feel they have control of their work situation and great freedom to make decisions, experience less work pressure and emotional strain, and they also suffer considerably less role stress than managers who do not have such control.

The factors that contribute the most to the managers' workload and work stress, are the degree of unpredictability in the company and the unit they manage, and the amount of changes that have been made in the course of the last year.

### **Good relationships prevent stress**

Managers under a high work pressure considered their work performance and efficiency to be high, the study shows. This is probably because they quite simply spend more hours at work.

It is worth noting that managers experience significantly less stress when they feel they have a good relationship to their employees, and the employees show a positive conduct and confidence in their managers.

“The best thing a manager can do to prevent work stress, is to develop good relationships with the employees at work,” Astrid M. Richardsen recommends.

When the employees are happy with what the manager does, understand his or her challenges and participate actively in solving the problems, the manager will have less stress. This will probably be because the manager trusts the employees more and delegates more tasks to them. Hence the work pressure will decrease, Richardsen believes.

### **Four common stress factors**

Stress can come from many sources. Here are four common stress factors:

- Stress may relate to factors in the job itself (e.g. the work requirements facing the manager).
- Stress may be caused by the manager’s own reactions to a specific job situation (e.g. anxiety for how people will respond, a feeling of fatigue or exhaustion).
- Stress may be about how one handles work tasks that are challenging or straining (e.g. works harder, works overtime, takes work home).
- Any conflict between the demands at work and family considerations/leisure activities may also be a source of stress.

Managers who suffer work-related stress factors over time, may develop individual reactions such as frustration, irritation and anger, reduced self-confidence and depression. That again might lead to lower concentration, reduced motivation and work satisfaction, and a low work effort and performance.

According to the researchers, stress can impact the organisation in the form of e.g. reduced productivity and a poorer bottom line result. The perception of a high workload and role stress may reduce the manager’s loyalty and commitment to the organisation and make it more likely that he or she will look for a job somewhere else.

### **Ten tips for stress management**

Astrid Richardsen and Stig Berge Matthisen at BI Norwegian Business School have prepared ten research-based tips that may help managers to handle work stress.

1. *Identify the sources of work stress.* Knowledge makes it easier to implement stress management measures.
2. *Increase your general knowledge about stress.* How do various conditions for stress interact? What can be done about it?
3. *Have a healthy lifestyle.* Make sure you have sufficient rest and sleep, exercise and a healthy diet.
4. *Learn to rest and relax.* Muscle relaxation, meditation and tools that tell you whether your body really is relaxing, may be a help here.
5. *Manage your time more efficiently.* Identify the time thieves, and try to get rid of them.

6. *Increase your employees' skills.* By increasing the skills of your employees, you yourself will have less stress. You will feel more confident that the jobs you delegate will be done.
7. *Establish relationships for support.* Do you have someone to ask for help and support when you need it? Is there anyone you can go to with your joys and sorrows? Social support in everyday life is important for managers, too.
8. *Plan your career.* For managers as for others, a job or work commitment may have a "best before" date. Remaining too long in a job may lead to unnecessary stress or strain.
9. *Switch jobs in time.* Make the switch while you still have good control of the job and its related stress.
10. *Seek outside, professional help if the job becomes too much of a strain.* Major work stress can have serious consequences, both for the person suffering it and for his/her surroundings.

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