

We each have the capacity to operate in what we might call our **zone of leadership**. In our zone, we are at our best: focused and centered, clear, able to access all of our intelligence and life experiences, alert and attuned to our environment, and fully present to meet the demands of the moment.

When we are in the zone, we're not perfect. We'll still miss things and make missteps. But our track record as leaders is usually pretty good.

Here's a challenge that all of us face: we're also capable of showing up in a dramatically different zone – one where we're really off our game. We might call this the **zone of stress**. We're feeling overwhelmed and uncentered, agitated or lethargic, not tracking our environment, unsure of ourselves and not trusting our instincts, and hesitant or impulsive. Needless to say, when we act from the zone of stress, our track record as leaders is not so good.

It often feels like these two states of being just descend on us, like weather fronts. Some days we're on; other days we wake up and we're off from the moment we get out of bed. Sometimes we start in a good place, but something happens to throw us off-center and we spend the rest of the day unable to get back in the groove.

Here are four provocative propositions:

Provocative proposition #1

Stress is not directly proportional to how much we have to do.

We often feel that we're stressed because of how much is on our plate. We may even feel like we're juggling a dozen spinning plates, afraid to relax our vigil even for a moment, lest the plates start smashing on the ground. But consider this . . . Some mornings, we wake up and we're in the zone. We have a huge number of items on our to-do list, but we're like an Olympic athlete or aikido master, meeting every challenge with confidence and grace. At the end of the day, we feel great and look back on our accomplishments with pride. The next morning, we might wake up and our energy is already off. We may have considerably less on our list than yesterday, but we feel overwhelmed. As the day progresses, we feel more and more stressed, while managing to accomplish a lot less. Things that yesterday felt completely manageable today feel daunting. We end the day feeling burned out.

While the length of our to-do list can be a factor in feeling off and overwhelmed, it is not the primary determinant.

Provocative proposition #2

No one and no thing can *make* us feel stressed.

Events happen – many beyond our control. Some are very challenging. We don't always get to choose events that come our way, but we do have choice about how we respond to them.

The great inventor, Thomas Edison, was asked by a colleague if he was discouraged by his repeated lack of results in trying to create a new kind of storage battery. With a smile he replied, *"Results! Why, man, I have gotten a lot of results! I know several thousand things that won't work."*

I was co-facilitating a mediation between a large group of labor leaders and senior managers. Things got very heated. People got on their feet and started yelling. It looked possible that a fistfight might break out. Still working through my lifelong avoidance of conflict, I began to feel stressed. I turned to my co-facilitator, who said with a big smile on his face, *"Now, it's getting fun!"*

Our experience of events being stressful or not can even vary from hour to hour, depending on our energy level. In the words of the Roman philosopher, Marcus Aurelius:

"If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

Provocative proposition #3

Stress is resistance to what is happening in the moment, or thinking about the future from a place of fear

Much of our stress is a result of fighting losing battles with reality. Something is happening that we don't like.

"I don't want to have to work late tonight."

"I don't want this person to feel the way they feel."

"I don't want to have to re-do this proposal."

"I wish I didn't have to deal with this person."

Sometimes we can actually do something to change the things we don't like, but we expend tremendous psychic energy in futile fuming and resistance to the reality of what's happening – none of which helps us deal with the situation.

"Acceptance is not submission; it is acknowledgement of the fact of a situation. Then deciding what you're going to do about it."

– Kathleen Casey Theisen, American sociologist

Provocative proposition #4:

We are not at the mercy of our state of being

There are habits that help us to operate more consistently from our zone of leadership. Just as there are unwholesome habits that predictably generate more stress, we can also learn to consciously shift our state of being from the zone of stress to the zone of leadership.

GET IN THE ZONE WITH 5 HABITS

Self-care

You've probably noticed that you're not at your best when you're over-tired or your blood sugar levels are too low. That's because you're human and have a body! One of the most direct and effective ways to support being more in your zone of leadership is to get sufficient sleep, regular exercise and proper diet.

See our tool: [The Wellness Index](#)

"Self-care is never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others."

– Parker Palmer

Managing your load

Sheer overload is one of the greatest detractors from being in the zone. Too much to do creates stress, inhibits strategic thinking, and typically causes us to sacrifice the important in favor of the urgent.

See our tool: [Managing Your Workload](#)

"The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say no to almost everything."

– Warren Buffett

Personal productivity

Too much mental clutter is a barrier to the heightened awareness characteristic of the zone. Productivity experts stress being in the zone as the key to high performance and suggest various techniques such as excellent information storage and retrieval systems that reduce mental clutter, and setting aside specific, distraction-free times for higher-level thinking. For further information, read *Getting Things Done* by David Allen, the guru of personal productivity.

"There is usually an inverse proportion between how much something is on your mind and how much it's getting done."

– David Allen

"We have confused activity with productivity."

– Diane Fassel

State-Shifting

No matter how well we eat and manage our load, we will still have times of slipping into our zone of stress. Fortunately, there is a wide range of tools and practices that can help us shift almost instantly back into our zone of leadership.

For a great menu of these tools, see our article: [The Art of State-Shifting](#)

“Each of us has that right, that possibility, to invent ourselves daily.”

– Maya Angelou

Commitment

Perhaps the most important thing we can do to increase our time in the zone is to really understand its importance to our success as leaders. We need to commit to prioritizing the habits and practices that support our dwelling as much as possible in our zone of leadership.

“There's a difference between interest and commitment. When you're interested in doing something, you do it only when circumstances permit. When you're committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results.”

– Art Turock

In conclusion

While we want to be compassionate towards our human emotions and moods, we want to also learn how to take greater responsibility for our own state of being. In our busy work lives, there will always be moments that challenge our sense of balance. In each of these moments, we have choice about how we show up. With practice, we can learn to work more and more from our zone of leadership.

When asked by a student,

“Master, how do you stay centered all the time?”

Morihei Ueshiba, founder of Aikido (a martial art form), responded,

“I'm not centered all the time. I simply recover faster than before.”