



MOTIVATING AND LEADING STAFF THROUGH STRESS AND ADVERSITY

November 18, 2021



OVERVIEW

- This resource explores strategies that school leaders can utilize to motivate staff through stressful and challenging times.
- Strategies referenced in this resource provide a foundation to expand or refine school leaders' abilities and knowledge to promote staff's wellness and ongoing engagement in their profession.
- Please note that the discussed strategies are not all-inclusive of those actions that leaders may potentially implement.
- Please note that these strategies must be adapted for the target staff population and based on current dynamics in the school community.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

- You can reference this resource to bolster your knowledge of strategies to increase and sustain staff members' professional motivation and support their health and wellness
- Each section addresses one strategy via the following content:
 - A brief description of the strategy's use case
 - A short explanation of how to implement the strategy
 - Two lists of questions—one that you can use to reflect on strategies and one that you can use in conversations with staff
 - A catalog of resources for additional review

HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS RESOURCE

- This resource relies on a Navigation Panel to provide access to content
- To access any section, click on the corresponding **GO TO STRATEGY** button within the Navigation Panel.
- The bibliography of sources used to construct this resource is accessible via the **GO TO BIBLIOGRAPHY** button in the Navigation Panel and at the bottom of any page in the strategy sections.
- You can return to the Navigation Panel using the **RETURN TO NAVIGATION PANEL** button at the bottom of any page in the strategy sections and bibliography.

NAVIGATION PANEL

Communicate with Staff Around Their Needs

GO TO STRATEGY



Create Agreements for the Professional Space

GO TO STRATEGY



Help Staff Understand Stressors

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Model and Support Motivation and Wellness

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Expand Staff Knowledge of Available Supports

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Encourage Work/Life Balance

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COMMUNICATE WITH STAFF AROUND THEIR NEEDS

USE CASE FOR THE STRATEGY

- Approximately one-fifth of adults experience mental health challenges, but less than half of those individuals will receive support to address those challenges.
- Mental health challenges can trigger or exacerbate physical health challenges.
- When their mental or physical health needs go unmet, staff are less likely to accomplish all their duties and more likely to see a drop in the quality of their work.
- In contrast, mentally and physically healthy employees are likely to be more productive and to complete higher quality work than those whose health needs are unmet.



HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGY

Gather formal data on staff wellness

- Administer surveys to all staff to identify common challenges to their mental and physical health
- Track changes in staff attendance and performance
- Provide access to voluntary health screeners for individual staff

Engage individual staff around their needs and challenges

- Host regular check-ins with staff during which you can discuss their professional work and personal lives
- Ask staff to be transparent about challenges that may be impacting their overall wellness so that you can offer appropriate support
- Teach staff to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness in themselves and their colleagues to identify persons in need of support



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- ① Based on available data, what common needs do staff have regarding their health and wellbeing? How can we address those needs via targeted actions?
- ② Are there any recent events or challenges that have resulted in notable changes to staff's wellbeing (e.g., COVID-19, community trauma)? How might we assess these changes?
- ③ How can we encourage openness and transparency among staff? How do we increase their comfortability in discussing their mental, emotional, and physical wellness and in sharing about the challenges they may be experiencing at work and home?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS TO USE WITH STAFF

- ① How satisfied are you with your work and your professional responsibilities? Are there any challenges or needs that I can assist you with?
- ② Is there anything occurring in your personal life that I should be aware of and that you are comfortable sharing with me? Do you believe that these items have impacted your ability to perform your job well? Is there anything that I can do to support you at work as you deal with these issues in your personal life?
- ③ Generally speaking, what steps can I and our organization take to support your wellness and keep you motivated? Do you feel we are doing enough already, or can we do more?



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REVIEW

- **How to Support Staff Who Are Experiencing a Mental Health Problem ([available here](#)):** You can use this resource to help establish a work climate in which conversations about mental health are destigmatized and where mental health supports are an expectation.
- **How to Take Stock of Mental Health in Your Workplace ([available here](#)):** You can review this resource to support the process of collecting and analyzing data related to staff wellness.
- **Assessing Wellbeing in Schools: An Educator's Practical Guide to Measuring Wellbeing ([available here](#)):** You can reference pp. 68-90 of this resource to identify potential measures of adult wellbeing to administer to staff.





CREATE AGREEMENTS FOR THE PROFESSIONAL SPACE

USE CASE FOR THE STRATEGY

- Clear expectations for professional performance and conduct help staff understand precisely what they need to accomplish to be successful.
- If expectations are set unilaterally by leaders without input, staff may view those expectations as an inhibiting factor in their ability to perform their jobs well and as a source of contention/dissatisfaction.
- In contrast, development of collaborative agreements between leaders and staff ensures that expectations are set via consensus that recognizes both groups' interests.
- Such agreements will reduce stress and motivate staff to work toward a collective vision of the professional space.



HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGY

Solicit input when assigning responsibilities and setting expectations

- Engage in conversations with staff to determine what they expect to accomplish in their roles and their understanding of organizational expectations
- Seek common ground between staff, your own, and organizational expectations to form a mutual understanding

Compose agreements to govern professional responsibilities

- Collaborate with staff representatives to compose draft agreements
- Submit drafts to the larger staff or representative body (e.g., teachers' association) for approval

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- ① What responsibilities do we absolutely expect staff employed as _____s to assume as a condition of employment? What additional responsibilities do we want them to assume if they have capacity?
- ② What have staff members communicated about the volume and intensity of their assigned responsibilities? Do they indicate having too much work, or are they comfortable with their current workload? Are there any tasks that should be removed from or added to their purview?
- ③ What mechanisms can we use to better clarify the responsibilities of staff members operating in specific roles? How can we better involve staff members in setting expectations for their roles?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS TO USE WITH STAFF

- ① What responsibilities do you expect to have as a basic condition of employment in your current role? What additional responsibilities might you assume if you have capacity and time?
- ② Do you believe that you currently have too much work, or are you comfortable with your current workload? Are there any tasks that you would like removed from your responsibilities and delegated to another staff member? Are there any additional tasks or responsibilities you wish to assume?
- ③ Do you feel that leaders—myself included—and other staff understand the demands of your position? What, if anything, would you change about how others understand your professional responsibilities?



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REVIEW

- **Creating Staff Shared Agreements ([available here](#))**: You can use or adapt this protocol to set expectations and norms for how you and your staff will work together to achieve desired outcomes.
- **Performance Expectations = Results + Actions & Behaviors ([available here](#))**: You can review this webpage to learn more about specific actions you may take alongside staff to clarify individual and group performance expectations.





HELP STAFF UNDERSTAND STRESSORS

USE CASE FOR THE STRATEGY

- To manage stress and sustain their motivation, staff must understand those aspects of their work and personal lives that result in stress.
- Such awareness will allow staff to prepare themselves to experience and manage stress.
- Self-awareness of stressors positions staff members to act independently and seek support before stress overwhelms them.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGY

Encourage staff to reflect during and after times of stress

- Ask staff to explore what specific behaviors, objects, people, and/or thoughts are causing them stress
- Help staff label stressors that emerge within their personal and professional lives or that are experienced when witnessing challenges impacting someone else (e.g., students, family members)

Prompt staff to consider how to prepare for stressful situations and mitigate stress when it does occur

- Ask staff what self-prompted actions or external supports have helped them relieve stress related to past and ongoing challenges
- Inform staff of upcoming stressors (e.g., personnel evaluations) so that they can plan accordingly



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- ① What are common sources of stress experienced by the various staff constituencies you oversee (e.g., teachers, support staff, bus drivers)? How do these stressors overlap between groups?
- ② To what degree do the identified stressors impact staff? How do these stressors impact staff's ability to be successful in their professional duties? How do they impact staff members' personal health and wellbeing?
- ③ In what ways can we prompt staff to recognize stressors before they arise and proactively plan to address those stressors when they do manifest? How can we help staff learn how to manage stressors productively while those stressors are in progress?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS TO USE WITH STAFF

- ① What are the most common or prominent sources of stress that arise within your professional work? How do you typically try to manage stress associated with these stressors?
- ② What are the most common or prominent sources of stress that arise within your personal life? How do you typically try to manage stress associated with these stressors?
- ③ How does the stress that you experience as a result of your personal life affect your professional work? Comparatively, how does the stress that you experience as a result of your professional work affect your personal life?
- ④ How can leaders—myself included—help you recognize and prepare for upcoming work-related stressors? How can you keep others appropriately informed regarding stress in your personal life?



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REVIEW

- **Manage Stress Workbook** ([available here](#)): You can review this workbook and lead staff through the activities it contains (e.g., setting goals for stress management, cataloging stressors in their lives, identifying the symptoms they experience when stressed).
- **Recognition, Prevention, and Coping Strategies for Teacher Stress** ([available here](#)): While focusing on teachers, you can view this video alongside or share it with all staff to explore techniques to recognize, prevent, and cope with stress.
- **Stress Management Worksheet** ([available here](#)): You can guide staff through this worksheet to conduct a quick assessment of what stressors impact them and to catalog action items to deal with those stressors.



MODEL AND SUPPORT MOTIVATION AND WELLNESS

USE CASE FOR THE STRATEGY

- Staff benefit from training, direct guidance, and supplemental programs in how to improve their physical, social, emotional, and mental wellness.
- Such factors help staff maintain a healthy equilibrium that allows them to cope with stress and persist when encountering obstacles in their personal and professional lives.
- Staff who are physically, socially, emotionally, and mentally well are more likely to remain in their positions, find satisfaction in their professional duties, and perform their work well.



HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGY

Adopt or implement programming focused on improving staff wellness




- Engage staff in a professional development program meant to develop their social-emotional competencies
- Advocate for the provision of voluntary wellness activities and healthcare services that staff can access as needed

Practice and model wellness techniques that staff can imitate

- Discuss your own mental health and staff may be more willing to communicate about their own and seek support
- Acknowledge staff members' accomplishments and contributions via verbal and written praise or material tokens



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

-  What supports and programs does our organization currently offer to support staff's physical, social, emotional, and mental wellness? Are these supports and programs accessible to all staff who need and/or want to use them?
-  In what ways might our organization expand available supports and programs to support staff's physical, social, emotional, and mental wellness? Are there any community providers or private vendors we can collaborate with to provide wellness-related professional development or healthcare and wellness services?
-  How do we as leaders model and communicate about the importance of physical, social, emotional, and mental wellness? Do we act in a manner consistent with the promotion of physical, social, emotional, and mental wellness?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS TO USE WITH STAFF

- ① What activities do you participate in and/or services do you access to maintain your physical, social, emotional, and mental wellness? How might our organization supplement those activities and/or services via additional wellness programs?
- ② What personal strategies do you use to maintain your physical, social, emotional, and mental wellness? How might our organization expand these strategies via professional development?
- ③ Do our organization's leaders—myself included—communicate about the importance of physical, social, emotional, and mental wellness and provide you with sufficient encouragement and support in this area? If not, what can we do differently?



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REVIEW

- **One Day at A Time** ([available here](#)): You can read through this blog series to learn techniques for stress management to model and share with staff.
- **CASEL Cares: Strategies for Being Your Best Possible 'SEL'f with Dr. Marc Brackett** ([available here](#)): You can view this webinar alongside or share it with staff to explore strategies that support overall wellness and persistence through challenges.
- **My Wellbeing** ([available here](#)): You may investigate this web resource to identify techniques to develop various adult social-emotional competencies.





EXPAND STAFF KNOWLEDGE OF AVAILABLE SUPPORTS

USE CASE FOR THE STRATEGY

- When staff understand what resources and services are available to support their wellness and reduce job-related stress, they are more likely to access those resources when needed.
- Simply having knowledge that supports are available and accessible *if needed* may help reduce staff stress.
- Staff likely have some resources already available to them which they may be unaware of or that they have difficulty accessing, necessitating additional publicizing of such resources.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGY

Publicize available supports using multiple channels

- Create a web-based or print inventory of available services through the district or community partners and directions for accessing them
- Host sessions in which staff groups can hear from providers to learn more about available resources and services
- Ensure that employees are fully aware of their job-related benefits

Encourage and incentivize staff to utilize available services

- Allow flexibility in work schedules to expand access to appointments
- Offer rewards or incentives for employees who successfully complete a wellness-related challenge
- Talk with individual employees about their plans to use available resources and services



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- ❓ Do we advertise/publicize all available services and resources? What channels do we use to promote awareness of available staff supports and knowledge of how staff can access those supports?
- ❓ Are there any available services and resources that are currently under-utilized by staff? How can we ensure that those individuals who would benefit from these services and resources know where, when, and how to access them?
- ❓ How can we communicate with individual and groups of staff members to bolster their knowledge of available services and resources? How might we encourage and incentivize them to access those services and resources from which they may benefit?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS TO USE WITH STAFF

- ① If you find yourself in need of wellness-related support, how do you research and identify potential resources and services? To what extent does this research involve tools and information available through our district?
- ② Do you find our organization's information about available wellness-related resources to be helpful? Is such information easy to locate and navigate? Is there enough information?
- ③ What preferences do you have for how our district disseminates information about your benefits and wellness-related supports? Do you prefer one or more of the following: email, web-hosted resources, print documentation, and/or word-of-mouth?



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REVIEW

- **What Mental Health Resources Can Be Easily Shared With Staff?** ([available here](#)): You can use this web resource to learn more about how to share information about wellness-related supports.
- **National Surveys Reveal Disconnect Between Employees and Employers Around Mental Health Need** ([available here](#)): You can read this article to learn more about mental health-related challenges experienced by employers and employees, including how to best communicate about available mental health supports.



ENCOURAGE WORK/LIFE BALANCE

USE CASE FOR THE STRATEGY

- Staff in any role perform an array of duties that compete with one another for time—often requiring staff to be at onsite beyond their normal work hours or to complete work at home.
- Such dynamics can lead to additional stress and burnout for staff members and can disrupt staff's ability to have a fulfilling personal life.
- Should staff reach a point of too much imbalance between work and their personal lives, they are more likely to seek alternative employment or exit the workforce.
- The point of “too much” imbalance between work and personal life will vary between individual staff members.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGY

Acknowledge the importance of staff's personal lives

- Regularly encourage staff to make time for themselves and their families and friends
- Inquire about and show interest in staff's personal lives
- Request that staff communicate about personal challenges impacting their work so that you can accommodate them to the extent possible

Maintain awareness of staff workloads

- Monitor employee stress and busyness levels
- Be willing to reduce or reprioritize work for staff as needed
- Encourage staff to reflect on the volume of work they currently have before agreeing to take on new assignments



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- ❓ How do we as leaders encourage—or discourage—work/life balance for our staff members? Do we possess knowledge of individual staff members' personal lives? Do we acknowledge the need for staff to take time for themselves and their families and friends?
- ❓ How well do we understand the workloads of individual staff and groups of staff sharing the same position? Do we monitor the ebbs and flows of their work to ensure they are not overwhelmed? Are we willing to hear the answer “no” when we ask staff to take on additional work?
- ❓ Do we maintain our own work/life balance and model work/life balance for staff? Do we openly communicate with staff about the importance of work/life balance?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS TO USE WITH STAFF

- ❓ Do you feel you have sufficient time and resources to complete your assigned work during work hours? Do you often work outside of scheduled hours or at home?
- ❓ What impacts does completing your work have on your physical, emotional, and mental stamina? Do you feel drained, overwhelmed, and/or tired after completing a workday?
- ❓ Does any extra time you need to work outside of scheduled hours impact your ability to engage in leisure or recreation? Does it impact your ability to maintain strong relationships with family and friends?
- ❓ Is there anything going on in your personal life that leaders—myself included—should be aware of? Is there anything we can do to support you at work so that you have sufficient time, energy, and attention to devote to this aspect of your personal life?



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REVIEW

- **Work-Life Balance for Teachers** ([available here](#)): You can read through blog posting to identify strategies to reduce the professional demands placed on staff.
- **Life Balance for Teachers – Model Policy** ([available here](#)): You can emulate this sample policy in developing formal documentation on how you can promote staff's work-life balance.
- **OSH Answer Sheets: Work/Life Balance** ([available here](#)): You can use this resource to learn more about how to launch and sustain new work/life balance initiatives.



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