

## ARTICLE TITLE:

### **Manage Your Stress by Monitoring Your Body's Reactions to It**

*Leaders sometimes check in with everyone but themselves.*

## INSTRUCTION:

Before reading the following article, set the timer on your phone/watch to record your reading speed. Stop reading when instructed in the article & stop the timer. Make sure you write down the time.

## ARTICLE:

Jack is well-known in his company for delivering growth through high-performing, cross-functional teams. Where others get stuck in silos, he fosters innovation through collaboration. But these days, when you exit the elevator on his floor, you sense fear wafting through the halls. He's nine months into a new role as Business Unit Leader, and a lot has changed. So far his tenure is marked by poor communication, eroding morale, and weak results. Managers aren't even working together anymore. They retreat to their corners and protect their turf.

Jack prides himself on leading with an approachable, down-to-earth style. He's always had an open door policy. He champions high potentials. He plays right-field on the company softball team. But this new role is challenging. He's working harder than ever. Losing sleep on red-eye flights. He's frustrated that people won't get on board with his strategy. And shocked he can't get traction building trust. The ultimate team player in the past, Jack now feels isolated from nearly everyone around him.

Pushing himself as hard as he can, Jack doesn't notice the pressure is getting to him. He doesn't recognize how defensive he feels, or that exhaustion has overwhelmed his previously upbeat mood. In the past Jack's exercise routine alleviated stress. But now he's irritable and frequently annoyed, blind to the cost of skipping trips to the gym. Jack still sees himself as a cheerleader, unaware of how dramatically his inner world has changed. Everyone around him sees it clear as day.

### **Looking for Insight in All the Wrong Places**

Senior leaders have a keen eye for what's happening around them. On a large scale, they watch markets and world events closely. Closer to home, they follow shifts in customer values that could impact their reputation and bottom line. In their own backyard, they judge business results and the people who produce them. They're always looking around for potential roadblocks.

Like Jack, what many leaders fail to notice is what's going on *inside of themselves*. This is a costly oversight. There is a straight line from the inner life of a leader to the actions they take, the relationships they build, and the impact they create. You can't understand what's going wrong *around* you if you don't understand what's going on *inside* you. What can you do to steer clear of this common leadership pitfall?

## Develop Your Lookout

The first step in getting out of your own way is to develop what I call your inner Lookout.

In the world, lookouts watch for things going wrong, so they can raise a flag. Salespeople are "lookouts" in department stores, trying to spot shoplifters. Fire watchers are "lookouts" in national forests. You have a built-in Lookout in your mind, designed to keep watch over you. Specifically, your Lookout pays attention to what's happening inside you: the tightness in your stomach; the surprise when your proposal isn't chosen; the joy of making your mentor proud. You have thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations all the time. In the course of a busy day, you likely don't notice them. Tapping into your Lookout can change that.

If you're like most people, you already use your Lookout in certain situations. So you know how it works. If a car cuts you off, your Lookout notices your urge to "strike back," so you don't. When you get annoying emails, your Lookout spots your irritation, so you don't reply. In cases like these, you avoid destructive behavior because your Lookout recognizes your reactive impulses before you act on them.

When the stakes get higher, so does the strength of inner reactivity. Under strain, your blood pressure and heart rate rise. Stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol flood your body. Survival instincts kick in, sending oxygen away from your brain and toward your limbs, so you can make a break for it. All of this makes it harder to think clearly. Your perspective narrows. The number of possible solutions you can generate drops. At the same time, emotions like anxiety spike. You might feel afraid and want to hide. You might feel angry and want to fight. All of this happens beneath the surface, whether you notice it or not.

Without using your Lookout, you'll follow these instincts wherever they take you. That's how you end up in bed at night, wondering how things went off the rails. When you feel calm again, it can be hard to imagine why you acted the way you did. If you rarely slow down and catch your breath, you might be living in this state quite often. If your Lookout doesn't make some noise, you're at risk of turning into Jack: a leader with a great track record who doesn't notice that he's boiling inside and burning things down.

## Where Do You Start?

The more you use your Lookout, the more it notices things – and the more useful it becomes. Here are some ways to get started. If you pick a practice and stick with it for 30 days, you'll start seeing results.

- **Take an Inventory.** Once a day, pause what you're doing, and turn your attention to yourself. Ask yourself: What's on my mind? What do I feel? Is my body calm or agitated — what physical sensations do I notice?

- **Label Your Thoughts and Feelings.** Once a day, tune in closely to your thoughts or emotions. Detach a bit from *having* the thoughts or feelings, and *label* them.

-----STOP READING & RECORD THE TIME -----  
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**You just read 903 words. How long did it take you? Below is the rest of the article for your interest.**

For example, if you're thinking "things like this never work," you might give a label like "skepticism" or "cynicism" to the thought, and "discouraged" to the feeling.

- **Listen to your Lookout.** Once a day, pause for a few minutes and prepare to take some notes (grab your phone, paper, etc.). Ask your Lookout: What do you notice right now about me? Then write down observations from the Lookout's point of view. For example, your Lookout might say: "You seem bored" or "You're excited about the new client, and you're cooking along with the project plan."

Exercises like these tap into the Lookout's perspective. That enables you to observe and notice your internal experience in real time. By practicing in moments of low stress, you'll hone your Lookout skills. Then when the stakes are high and the heat is on, your Lookout will recognize what's happening and let you know before you do things you'll regret later.

You react to things, big and small, because you're human. Those reactions include thoughts, emotions, and physical responses. The problem isn't reacting – *it's not noticing your reactions*. If you don't see what's going on inside you, you'll act impulsively, at times destructively. Like Jack, you'll do damage to your reputation or even to your business. Instead of causing havoc, you can get out of your own way. Develop your Lookout over time, and call on it when it matters.

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