Managers Are Dealing with Stress—And Thriving!

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Today's local government managers face many challenges. Their jobs require them to balance competing interests and expectations constantly within local government and in the local community. Public programs continually exceed fiscal resources. Labor relations often are problematic. State and government regulations and standards are weighty and limiting. And managers often contend with inadequately trained and paid staff while managing complex bureaucracies. In short, they usually work in highly stressful environments.

Yet data reported in a study on California city managers done a decade ago suggest that they suffered less personal distress than practitioners of other professions. In fact, these managers seemed to thrive. This article reports on a 1998 sequel we have conducted to the previous study, with results that should interest all local government managers.

Specifically, the following questions are addressed in this article:

1. What were the characteristics of the 225 local government managers who responded to our 1998 survey, and how do these characteristics compare with those of the 219 managers who responded a decade ago?
2. What were the most commonly reported perceived

stressors in 1998, and how did these compare with a decade ago?
3. How did city and county managers cope with stressful events in 1998?
4. What were the levels of manager stress, job satisfaction, and mental and physical well-being in 1998, and how did these levels compare with 1988?
5. What were the work circumstances and personal characteristics, attitudes, and habits of 1998 managers who seemed to thrive under the pressures of this demanding profession?
6. Most important, what can we learn from these findings that could be useful to current managers striving to minimize personal distress and to thrive under pressure, thus enhancing their professional performance and their long-term personal well-being?

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Personal characteristics. As shown in Figure 1, 53 percent (225) of the 424 California city managers responded to the 1998 mail survey, compared with a 54 percent response rate in our previous study. The average age of respondents in 1998 was 49 (in 1988, 46).

Whereas only 3 percent of respondents were female a decade ago, that figure was 10 percent in 1998. As to the education levels of the two samples, the most noticeable difference was the slight increase in the proportion of respondents holding advanced degrees, with the M.P.A. degree increasing the most. In 1998, only one in four respondents (24 percent) reported just a bachelor's or associate of arts degree, although some of the 16 respondents who designated "other" might have completed less than an A.A. degree.

In both years, a sizable majority reported being married (87 percent), and an identical proportion in both years (9 percent) reported that they were divorced at the time.

Figure 1. Characteristics of Survey Respondents, 1988 versus 1998

	1988	1998
Returned Surveys	219/404	225/424
	54%	53%
Gender		
Male	97%	90%
Female	3%	10%
Education		
A.A.	2%	1%
B.A./B.S.	26%	23%
M.A./M.S.	26%	23%
M.P.A.	38%	44%
Ph.D.	4%	2%
Ll.D.	3%	1%
Other	1%	6%
Number of Employees		
<50	—	24%
50–99	—	18%
100–199	—	17%
200–299	—	10%
300–499	—	16%
500>	—	15%
Mean	—	422
Median	—	120
City Budget		
<$5 Million	24%	14%
$5–9 Million	21%	14%
$10–49 Million	40%	44%
$50–99 Million	11%	14%
$100 Million>	1%	14%
Number of Direct Subordinates		
1–6	26%	29%
7–9	34%	37%
10–15	26%	31%
16>	14%	3%
City Size		
<10,000	29%	24%
10,000–49,999	23%	46%
50,000–499,999	46%	28%
500,000>	2%	2%
Independent Authority		
A Great Deal	52%	50%
Quite a Lot	40%	40%
Some	7%	8%
Very Little	1%	2%

Work circumstances. Figure 1 displays the number of employees in the local governments administered by the managers in our latest study. In 1998, the median number was 120 employees and the mean 422, the difference between the two reflecting the skewing effect of a few large cities. About four in 10 respondents were from cities with fewer than 100 employees, while 15 percent were from cities with more than 500. Because this question was not asked in 1988, we cannot compare the two samples in this respect, but we do note a substantially higher average number of subordinates directly supervised in 1998 compared with 1988 (10 versus four). Figure 1 also includes data on the size of the local budget and the population size for respondents' localities in both studies.

When asked "How would you describe the independent authority in your job?" managers gave nearly identical responses in the two surveys, with about half indicating "a great deal" and only small proportions responding "very little" or "some."

The average length of time spent as a city manager in 1998 was 11 years, while the average tenure in the respondent's present position was six years. Both these figures are nearly identical to those of 10 years ago (10 years and six years respectively).

Perceived Stressors

As noted at the outset of this article, the contemporary manager functions in a complex, challenging, and rapidly changing context, both within the local government and in relations with external entities. Thus, managers are faced with a host of potential stressors. With the aid of several managers a decade ago, we developed a checklist of 40 such potential stressors. In both surveys, we asked respondents to indicate how often each potential problem had been "a source of stress for you during the past year." Response alternatives were "almost never," "sometimes," and "frequently."

Figure 2 presents the 10 highest-scor-

ing perceived stressors in 1988 and 1998. Eight items appeared among the top 10 in both years. Dropping off the 1998 Top 10 List were "pressures from individual councilmembers" and "chronic overload." Appearing in this list for the first time in 1998 was "staff not sufficiently competent or responsive," which was the highest-scoring item of all. The highest-ranking item in 1988 ("having to tolerate councilmembers who spend too much time on trivial matters and too little time on larger policy matters") moved to the number-four position in 1998.

Some of the perceived stressors appearing at both times relate to the process by which managers carry out their jobs (e.g., "constant interruptions in your work," "having to discipline or fire employees"), while others have to do with the challenging conditions under which they function (e.g., "too little funding to provide the needed level and quality of services," "regulations from state and/or federal governments"). Still other stressors relate to the personal aftereffects of job demands ("weight of responsibility for entire city government," "work intrudes into personal or family life"). In a later section of this article, we will examine the characteristics and habits that define those managers who cope effectively with these demands—indeed, who thrive on them—as compared with those who seem to struggle.

Figure 2. Top 10 Perceived Stressors, 1988 versus 1998

1988

1. Having to tolerate councilmembers who spend too much time on trivial matters and too little time on larger policy matters.
2. Constant interruptions in your work.
3. Too few staff.
4. Too little funding to provide needed level and quality of work.
5. Pressures from individual councilmembers.
6. Work intrudes into personal or family life (e.g., after-hour calls, evening meetings).
7. Chronic overload.
8. Weight of responsibility for entire city government.
9. Having to discipline or fire employees.
10. Regulations from state and/or federal governments.

1998

1. Staff not sufficiently competent or responsive.
2. Too little funding to provide needed level and quality of services.
3. Inadequate financial support from state and/or federal government.
4. Having to tolerate councilmembers who spend too much time on trivial matters and too little time on larger policy matters.
5. Weight of responsibility for entire city government.
6. Constant interruptions in your work.
7. Too few staff.
8. Regulations from state and/or federal governments.
9. Work intrudes into personal or family life (e.g., after-hour calls, evening meetings).
10. Having to discipline or fire employees.

How Managers Cope with Stressful Events

In the 1998 survey, we measured personal coping styles by means of the COPE scale, which is widely used by stress researchers, by which respondents are asked to indicate "what you *usually* do when you are under a lot of stress." The gist of 53 different statements was condensed into 14 distinct coping styles. Figure 3 displays these 14 coping styles as they ranked in our 1998 survey, from most- to least-often used.

Examining the leading coping styles, we find that managers tend to turn most often to proactive responses to adversity. Topping the list was planning (e.g., "I try to come up with a strategy about what to do," "I make a plan of action"). Next most often, they employ active coping, doing what is needed to solve the problem ("I take additional action to get rid of the problem," "I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it"). These proactive steps are consistent, of course, with the broader, self-directed behavioral patterns needed in successful local government management.

Next in the ranking of coping styles was reinterpreting the situation, searching for something positive or beneficial to growth ("I look for something good in what is happening," "I try to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive"). This response is consistent with the second-century Greek philosopher Epictetus's astute observation: "People are disturbed, not by events but by their view of those events."

Continuing down the list, it appears that respondents tended next to seek support from others about how best to solve the situation ("social support for instrumental reasons") while focusing their attention on the problem at hand and avoiding distractions ("restraint coping" and "suppression of competing activities"). Next most common were accepting the situation ("acceptance") and seeking emotional support from others ("seeking social support for emotional reasons"). Least common responses were the nonconstructive coping patterns of denial, behavioral disengagement, and alcohol/drug disengagement.

Indicators of Thriving

We used seven indicators of thriving in our study. As listed in Figure 4, the first of these tools was the 50-item Distress Symptom Scale, an indicator of self-reported cognitive, emotional, physical,

Figure 3. Coping Styles, Ranked by Frequency of Reported Use, 1998

1. Planning.
2. Active coping.
3. Positive reinterpretation and growth.
4. Seeking social support for instrumental reasons.
5. Suppression of competing activities.
6. Restraint coping.
7. Acceptance.
8. Seeking social support for emotional reasons.
9. Turning to religion.
10. Mental disengagement.
11. Focus on and venting of emotion.
12. Behavioral disengagement.
13. Alcohol/drug disengagement.
14. Denial.

and behavioral distress symptoms experienced in the past two weeks. The lower the distress score, the greater was the thriving ability of the respondent. Scores could range from a low of zero to a high of 500.

The mean scores in 1988 and 1998 were nearly identical: 30 and 29, respectively. Despite the presumed stress inherent in the management profession, these are among the lowest averages of any professional groups that have completed this scale. Apparently, most managers in our samples were adept at coping effectively with the challenges of their work.

The stability of these distress symptom scores through time is somewhat surprising in view of the 1998 answers to this question: "All things considered, how demanding is your job now, compared with five years ago?" About six respondents in 10 indicated their jobs were either "somewhat" or "a great deal" more demanding now. We also asked of 1998 respondents, "How would you describe your job-related stress level now, compared with five years ago?" Whereas about one in four (27 percent) responded that his or her stress level was "lower now," about half (51 percent) indicated that it was "somewhat" or "much higher." A low distress symptom score may be interpreted as an indicator of thriving under pressure.

Our second measure of thriving was self-reported health. Figure 4 shows that in both years a majority described themselves as "quite" or "very healthy." Although the proportion responding "very healthy" had increased slightly over time, there were still slightly more in 1988 who reported that they were either "quite" or "very healthy" (81 percent versus 75 percent).

Our third indicator of thriving was job satisfaction. Respondents were asked to circle a number between 1 ("not at all satisfied") and 10 ("completely satisfied") that best described "how satisfied you are with your job these days." The average response in 1998 was 7.5, compared with 7.4 in 1988—an insignificant change.

Fourth, we measured job satisfaction in a slightly different way by asking, "All things considered, would you choose this career again?" In 1998, more than two-thirds (72 percent) responded "definitely yes" or "probably yes," again suggesting a high level of job satisfaction and a widespread sense of thriving under the pressures of this sometimes-daunting career.

Our fifth measure of thriving was a happiness score based on the same type of continuum as we used to measure job

Figure 4. Measures of Thriving, 1988 versus 1998

	1988	1998
Mean Distress Symptom Scores[1]	30	29
Self-Reported Health		
Very Healthy	21%	25%
Quite Healthy	60%	50%
Somewhat Healthy	18%	22%
Not Very Healthy	1%	4%
Not Healthy at All	1%	0%
Mean Job Satisfaction Scores[1]	7.4	7.5
Would Choose This Career Again		
Definitely Yes	38%	34%
Probably Yes	39%	38%
Uncertain	12%	16%
Probably No	8%	9%
Definitely No	2%	3%
Mean Happiness Score[1]	7.4	7.5
Mean Optimism Score[1]	—	7.8
Mean Vitality and Energy Score[1]	7.2	7.3

[1]The higher the score, the greater the quantity or quality being measured: distress symptoms, job satisfaction, happiness, optimism, or vitality and energy.

satisfaction (i.e., 1 indicating "not at all satisfied," 10 indicating "completely happy"). Again, average responses were nearly identical, at a relatively high level in both 1988 (7.4) and 1998 (7.5).

Sixth, we measured optimism as another indicator of thriving, again using the same type of 10-point scale. The higher the score, the greater the optimism. Measured only in 1998, the average score was 7.8, indicating a high level of optimism in our sample.

Finally, we assumed that the greater the sense of energy and vitality, the greater would be the ability to thrive under pressure. Therefore, we used the same type of 10-point continuum to measure self-reported energy and vitality. Responses were virtually unchanged over the 10-year time span of the two surveys (7.2 in 1988 versus 7.3 in 1998).

These findings suggest that most managers enjoy their work, suffer relatively low personal distress, and exhibit a generalized sense of emotional and physical well-being. In short, most managers seem to thrive under pressure in this demanding role.

What Distinguishes Those Who Thrive?

Enough variation appeared among our 1998 respondents to raise this key issue: How did high-thriving managers stand out from the rest? To state the question differently, what patterns of work circumstances, personal characteristics, attitudes, and habits seemed to distinguish those who were especially adept at thriving under pressure?

To address this issue, we combined the seven measures discussed above into a single "thriving" score for each respondent in our study. "Thriving," then, meant having low personal distress; high job satisfaction; a high likelihood of choosing this career again; high levels happiness, optimism, and energy/vitality; and good self-reported health. Now we could examine the associations of work circumstances and personal factors with thriving.

Work circumstances. Among our measures of work circumstances (size of budget, city population, and workforce; number of persons directly supervised; perceived amount of independent authority; amount of time in the profession and in the present position), only one circumstance was significantly associated with thriving: perceived amount of independent authority. That is, the greater the amount of reported independent authority, the greater the tendency to thrive. In short, circumstances seemed not to determine whether our respondents thrived, except for their amount of independent authority.

Figure 5. Significant Correlations with the Thriving Scale, 1998

	r[1]
Independent Authority of Job	-0.32
Type A	-0.37
Hostility	-0.31
Feeling Rushed at Work	-0.39
Feeling Rushed off Work	-0.24
Hardiness/Challenge Score	0.28
Hardiness/Commitment Score	0.54
Hardiness/Control Score	0.46
Sense of Control over Life	0.64
Sense of Control Over Job	0.68
Alcohol/Drug Disengagement	-0.21
Mental Disengagement	-0.19
Focus on and Venting of Emotion	-0.14
Positive Reinterpretation and Growth	0.18

[1]All listed correlations are significant at <0.05.

Personal factors. What did have an impact on thriving were other, personal qualities and habits. Several personal factors yielded statistically significant associations with thriving. One of these was the relative absence of the personality pattern known as Type A, which is characterized by a never-ending struggle to accomplish, to produce (hard-driving), to get more things done than time permits ("hurry sickness"); and by a generalized orientation of impatience, irritability, and anger-expression (free-floating hostility). Using a 10-item scale, we found, as shown in Figure 5, that the lower the Type A score, the higher the thriving score (r=-0.37).

Recent studies have identified hostility (cynicism, easily and frequently aroused anger, and a tendency to express that anger openly) as the most toxic component of the Type A pattern. We found that a separate six-item measure of hostility yielded results in the same direction: the less the hostility, the greater the likelihood of thriving (r=-0.31).

Not surprisingly, respondents with high Type A scores were significantly likelier to report feeling rushed both at work (r=0.48) and off work (r=0.33). Similarly, those reporting feeling rushed at work and off work were more likely to score high in hostility (r=0.22 and r=0.19, respectively). More important, feeling rushed at work significantly decreased chances of thriving (r=-0.39), as did feeling rushed off work (r=-0.24). In short, avoiding feeling "always" or "often" rushed substantially increased a person's chances of scoring high on our measure of thriving.

Those who thrived also exhibited a pattern known as hardiness, characterized by "3 Cs": challenge, commitment, and control. We found that thrivers were more likely (r=0.28) to interpret stressors as a challenge rather than as a threat (r=0.28), to display a strong commitment rather than alienation (r=0.54), and to have a strong sense of personal control rather than of helplessness (r=0.46). In other words, thrivers showed a pattern of personal strength or hardiness, which past research has shown to provide distress resistance when dealing with adversity.

Two other measures of personal control also were found to be associated with thriving. One measure asked about respondents' sense of control over their own lives these days (r=0.64 with thriv-

ing), the other about feeling in control of "your own job" (r=0.68 with thriving). Predictably, a positive association appeared between the amount of perceived independent authority and the sense of job control (r=0.32). Our conjecture is that a causal sequence probably occurs: working in an environment with a high degree of autonomy increases a sense of personal control, which in turn boosts a person's ability to thrive under pressure.

Did thrivers cope differently with adversity from nonthrivers? Among the 14 coping styles referred to earlier, four showed a statistically significant association with thriving. Thrivers used three of the following coping styles significantly less than did nonthrivers: alcohol/drug disengagement (r=-0.21), mental disengagement (r=-0.19), and focus on and venting of emotion (r=-0.14).

Thus, respondents who thrived were significantly less likely to report using alcohol or drugs, to escape mentally, or to focus much time directly on their emotional responses to difficulty. At the same time, they were significantly more likely (r=0.18) to report interpreting adversity positively, in search of solutions or personal growth.

Several other personal factors were not significantly associated with thriving: age, marital status, academic degree(s), exercise (aerobic, nonaerobic, or none), number of exercise sessions per week, and length of each exercise session.

Implications for Managers

A common misconception about stress is that "the less the better." However, stress—the arousal of mind and body in response to the demands made upon them—can be positive or negative. Positive stress is helpful, even essential, for dealing with emergencies and reaching peak performance. Negative stress (distress) is arousal that is harmful to mind, body, and performance. Distress may result from underarousal (boredom or stagnation from understimulation or insufficient challenge) or from overarousal (circumstances in which perceived demands exceed perceived coping resources).

In most situations, to hope for an absence of stress is both useless and possibly counterproductive. Rather, the challenge is to manage stress so as to harness its positive potentials while minimizing its harmful effects. Just as in athletic training, pushing your limits is sometimes vital to meeting the challenges. Thriving under such pressures means moving outside your comfort zone from time to time. Those who do this are likely to be healthier, more satisfied, and more successful than those who either fold under pressure or avoid it altogether—in local government as in sports.

Our research findings suggest a number of ways in which a manager can strengthen his or her ability to thrive under pressure:

- Work with your council to maximize your independent authority in the local government manager role.
- Become aware of your Type A tendencies and take steps to reduce them, paying special heed to restraining hostility and alleviating chronic "hurry sickness."
- Nurture your habits of thinking ("self-talk") to interpret adversity as a challenge, to maintain a strong sense of commitment, and to sustain a firm sense of personal control over events (as well as over your reactions to events).
- When dealing with adversity, learn to reinterpret positively any seemingly negative events as you search for constructive solutions and opportunities for learning and growth. Avoid staying focused for long on negative emotions, and steer clear of mental disengagement and alcohol or other substances that might give temporary solace or escape.

Virginia Satir, the late renowned family therapist, stated near the end of her life, "Life is not the way it's supposed to be. It's the way it is. The way you cope with it is what makes the difference." Our findings underscore the belief that it is people's *interpretations* of potential stressors, rather than the events themselves, that determine whether they become "distressors."

For local government managers, thriving under pressure depends more upon personal attitude and coping style than on external circumstances, though having sufficient job autonomy to exercise independent professional judgment appears to help, too.

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