Consulting Stress Distress Eustress

Idea In Short

Consulting generates both destructive distress and productive eustress. Scope aggressively, focus on big rocks, avoid drama and assume good intent to convert harmful pressure into the energy that drives better client service and career growth.

Consulting Is Stressful

Traveling in a middle seat. Creating presentations from an empty, white PowerPoint template. Working with a new team. Meeting new clients. Learning on the job. Crunching data in a hotel room. Reworking data that was bad. Consulting is a launching pad for your professional career, but it is stressful too.

The pressure comes from every direction at once. Clients expect results on tight timelines. Partners expect quality and margin. Junior consultants look to you for direction when the path forward is unclear. The combination of novelty, ambiguity and accountability creates a potent stress cocktail that can either break you or build you.

Eustress Means Good Stress

Dr. Hans Selye (1907-1982) was a pioneering researcher in the field of stress. He coined the term stress, along with distress and eustress, which means good stress. At one point he had 40 lab assistants, worked with 15,000 lab animals and authored more than 1,000 research papers largely on the topic of stress. His workload alone sounds stressful. 1

It is now commonly accepted that stress can be damaging, both physically and emotionally. When someone is rude, underhanded or just difficult, you can feel your blood boil. The Mayo Clinic cites chronic stress as a risk factor for heart attack. No one likes stress, yet the research reveals a more nuanced picture. 2

Harness the Eustress

Good stress pushes us to be more productive, creative and effective in client service. It gets us moving and motivated. According to Selye's research, stress becomes destructive only when we cannot overcome it. Harnessing it, adapting to it and resolving it is how we benefit psychologically.

Interestingly, your body does not know the difference hormonally between good and bad stress. It is entirely your perception of the stress that matters. The same deadline that paralyzes one consultant can energize another. The shift happens in the mind, which means the tools to convert distress into eustress are largely within your control.

Scope Aggressively

Confusion creates anxiety on a project. This is magnified when you are the manager and you have two or three consultants looking to you for direction. Without knowing how broad and bad a problem is, you will never solve it. Whittle the problem down so you can put it in a box.

Ask what success looks like and who the audience is. Define the budget and time frame. Identify the first, second and third things that must happen. Decide what you will do if the data does not arrive by Wednesday. Clarify when to escalate to the partner and when to take it to the client. Be willing to ask the awkward questions up front. Do not wait until the end to discover you solved the wrong puzzle the wrong way. Reverse engineer the answer.

Focus on the Big Rocks

Focus on the customer and what she wants to achieve. In Lean principles, it is the critical-to-quality [CTQ] factors that define value, because that is what the customer is willing to pay for. Focus on the big idea. Everything else is fluff and not worth stressing about.

Identify the one thing that will create a chain reaction on the project, the first domino to knock over. Pin down the three most important inputs to the project's success. Define the big three outputs that will prove you did your job. Separate what is within your team's control from what you must leave to the client. Distinguish what belongs in this phase from what is phase two.

Avoid Drama

Some people create unnecessary drama. It is exhausting and it does not pay. A common refrain worth sharing with team members is that consultants do not get paid enough to fix adults. Their parents had the chance 30 years ago and missed it. That mid-career adult is not your child to teach.

People are messy. Even the nicest people can be dismissive or rude. Everyone gets hangry. Let undue criticism and ineffectual words roll off you like water on a duck's back. Protecting your energy from drama is a skill that compounds over a career.

Build Trust and Give Trust

Leadership speaker Andy Stanley talks about the daily choice you make when people disappoint you. You fill the gap, such as a late arrival to a meeting, with either suspicion or trust. He argues you must choose trust. Consulting done right is a win-win for everyone, so the job is to uncover and resolve trust issues.

Ask how you can make it easier for the client's IT team to deliver a data request. Question what prevents a vice president from seeing the upside of your approach. Explore why a manager is defensive and whether fear drives it. Determine how your team can follow through on promises to show reliability. Ask whether you are creating a safe, trusting environment, because if your directs do not trust you, your clients definitely will not.

Assume Good Intent

What if consultants stopped over-analyzing everything? What if they listened with the heart of a child? What if they filled in the blanks with useful, positive, win-win words? What if they became the consultant who was easy to work with?

Indra Nooyi, former chief executive officer of Pepsi, captured this mindset. She said to assume positive intent in whatever anybody says or does, because you will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problem becomes different. Napoleon Bonaparte offered a complementary warning: never ascribe to malice that which is adequately explained by incompetence. 3

Remember That the Project Ends

One redeeming feature of project work is that it ends. No matter how much you dislike the project, the client or even your manager, hang in there. It will change soon enough, and you can reinvent yourself on the next engagement. This temporary nature is a built-in safety valve against burnout.

Embrace the suck, to borrow a military expression that is both fatalistic and awesome. If you have a modicum of faith in your firm, client, team and statement of work, then the project is worth doing. With a leverage model, partners and a team will not let you fail. The work will get done.

Consultants earn their paycheck because clients farm out only their hardest problems. They learn what not to do on the next project and amass best practices. They gain a managerial eye that newer grinders need to benefit from.

Answer Three Questions

One mentor advised always asking yourself three questions to keep your career on track. What am I doing, which addresses the content of the project? How well am I doing it, which addresses performance? What have I learned, which addresses growth?

Using this simple rubric reveals that all projects have their pluses and minuses. Rarely is it all good, and rarely is it all bad. Re-orient your thinking and feeling about the project. Convert the lead distress into gold eustress.

Show Some Grace

If the client negotiated correctly, they gave you an extra-large project on a large budget with a medium timeline. You will be busy and running hard. As a minder, you will delegate responsibility to junior consultants, assemble deliverables and keep the client happy.

This means you will make mistakes, though usually not critical ones. Perfection is not the goal. Say you are sorry, think about how you will avoid the same mistake next time and move on. Grace toward yourself and your team is what keeps eustress alive.

Make a Great Story

Consulting is about craftsmanship. Getting better. Becoming so good they cannot ignore you. Being so good that you are a category of one. The key takeaways from today, this week and this project become your story. Personalize the experience and make it yours. That is how stress becomes a narrative of growth rather than a ledger of grievances.

- 1Hans Selye, Founding Father Of Stress Research
- 2Mayo Clinic Guide To Chronic Stress And Health Risks
- 3Indra Nooyi On Assuming Positive Intent

Summary

Stress is inevitable in consulting, but perception determines whether it harms or helps. Consultants who scope tightly, focus on critical outcomes, build trust and embrace the suck turn distress into eustress. The project always ends, so make it a great story worth telling.