

# Stress

The Manager's Guide to Taking Action in Time

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# Preface

This guide is written for you who want to be better prepared when stress appears in your team or yourself. You will gain insight and tools to:

- understand how stress can look very different and detect early signs in time
- have important conversations with confidence
- create a framework where well-being and results can go hand in hand.

Stress rarely occurs in one place. It grows in the interaction between the person, the tasks and the organizational framework. You can't control what happens in employees' private lives, nor can you eliminate all stressors at work, but you can make a bigger difference than you might think.

The biggest barrier to prevention is not lack of knowledge. It is the expectation that someone else will take the first step. Therefore, your most important task as a manager is to invite dialogue, set direction, and create a space where well-being is a shared responsibility – not something that either you or your employee should undertake alone.

This also applies between managers. Strong leadership communities make it easier to share pressure, face doubts and support each other before the load grows.

As a manager, you can create the safety to talk openly about pressure and vulnerability. You can support when the load becomes too great, and you can adjust the frameworks that affect well-being. But you can't carry others if you yourself are about to fall over.

Stress does not only affect the individual, but the entire community and requires leadership that takes responsibility. It is a shared responsibility that you, as a manager, help shape.

Enjoy your reading.

Kind regards AS3

# We talk more. Stress is still growing.

**Even though we have never had more knowledge, more measurements and efforts, the number of people affected by stress has not decreased - quite the opposite.**

According to figures from The Danish Health Authority, the proportion of adult Danes with a high score on the stress scale has increased from 21% in 2013 to 29% in 2021 - and for the vast majority, work plays a significant role.

Although the latest national figures are a few years old, there is little evidence that the trend has reversed. In recent years, work life has become increasingly complex, there have been more frequent changes and a faster pace of work – factors that all put additional pressure on both managers and employees.

Every year, thousands of employees are on sick leave due to stress, and it costs society a staggering DKK 16 billion annually, according to figures from the The National Research Centre for Working Environment.

Behind those numbers are people and workplaces that are at the heart of it. We clearly feel this at AS3, where we encounter stress from both sides. We advise organizations on creating sustainable frameworks, and we help the employees who are affected.

Each year, we follow close to 10,000 stress cases, which gives us a unique insight into both the individual causes and consequences and the organizational patterns behind stress.

Our data shows that stress is rarely caused by one thing. It is almost always the result of multiple factors in private life, work, and the surrounding framework. Relationships, tasks, organization, culture and personal resources influence each other; and when several small stressors pull in the same direction, the overall load can sometimes become overwhelming.

Stress is not always a simple problem with one explanation. It often emerges where different stressors meet, and therefore prevention requires a broad and nuanced view.



# Patterns, myths and early signs of stress

Stress is not a diagnosis, but a condition. It is the body and brain's way of responding when demands exceed resources over time. Short-term stress is a natural reaction that can be both healthy and motivating. It makes us sharp and decisive. But when the pressure persists and the balance tips, stress begins to drain rather than drive us.

We can get used to more than we can handle. When the load increases gradually, both body and mind adapt – even if the pace or pressure is not healthy for us. It is this gradual adaptation is what makes stress so hard to detect and difficult to detect in time.

Stress is often reduced to one explanation: “too many tasks, too fast pace, too few hands.” But the reality is much more complex. Stress arises in areas of tension – where something in working life doesn't align: between demands and resources, between responsibility and autonomy, between values and reality.

Two people can be in the same situation but react very differently – depending on their experiences, values, resources and relationships. Therefore, as a manager, it requires insight, curiosity and patience to understand what is actually happening.

You can be busy without being stressed – and stressed without being busy. That's why you can't just look at the calendar. You have to listen to how your employee is actually feeling – with the tasks, the colleagues and you as a manager.

Stress is surrounded by many myths that can make us look at the problem – or at each other – in a distorted way. As a manager, it is important to know the myths because they often stand in the way of openness and talking about stress in a realistic and constructive way.

## Myth

Stress affects those who are weak or particularly vulnerable.

Stress occurs when we work too much.

Stress starts at home – the employee must deal with it themselves.

The more we talk about stress at work, the more people experience stress.

A stressed employee should always be placed on sick leave.

## Reality

Stress often affects the committed and conscientious.

It is often an imbalance between demands and resources that affects our well-being.

No matter where the stress begins, it affects work and requires your support as a manager.

Silence promotes and exacerbates stress. Openness helps and prevents.

Often, early support and adjustment of tasks work better than isolation and sick leave.

## Know the signs of stress

Stress manifests itself differently from person to person. Not everything is visible from the outside, but you can learn to spot patterns when you know what to look for. Trust determines whether the employee shares what is causing pressure – but your knowledge of the employee determines whether you see it, even when it is not said out loud. What is crucial is not one sign, but changes in behavior and energy over time. Look for what has changed compared to how the employee usually is.

### Physical

- Pain in the neck and shoulders
- Headache
- Digestive problems
- Chest pressure
- Allergies break out or get worse
- Sensitivity to sound and light
- Heart palpitations
- Sleep problems

### Psychological

- Anger
- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Shame and low self-esteem
- Mental clutter
- Persistent concerns
- Memory problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Lack of overview
- Mental blackouts

### Behavioral

- Social withdrawal
- Hectic activity and speech
- Passivity and apathy
- Heavy consumption of stimulants or food
- Lack of appetite

### How to use the overview

1: Look for changes in behavior and energy compared to how the person usually is.

2: Look at the totality of physical and behavioral signs. Perhaps the employee also shares experiences of psychological and cognitive changes.

3: Know both yourself and your employees. A lot of people have typical “first signs” when pressure increases – and former employees with a history of stress often know them well. The better you know these patterns, the easier it is to detect changes in time.

4: Use the overview as a support in the conversation – not as a checklist. Stress manifests itself differently from person to person, and not all signs are on the list.

5: Beware of false positives and false negatives. Some reactions may resemble stress without actually being it, and others may be overlooked because they do not resemble the classic signs.

6: Respond early and curiously, for example, ask: “I’ve noticed that you seem quieter than usual – how are you doing?”

## The well-being scale – from green balance to red alert

Stress rarely occurs overnight. It usually starts with small shifts. A little less energy, a little shorter temper, a little fewer laughs in everyday life.

But in a busy work rhythm, the early signals can be difficult to spot, both for the individual, for colleagues and for you as a manager.

That's why you need a language that makes it easy to talk about well-being in everyday life. A language that doesn't make the conversation heavy, private or clinical, but that encourages reflection and shared responsibility.

The well-being scale makes it easier to put emotions into words, without anyone having to explain or defend themselves. For example, it may be easier to say:

"I'm a little yellow today."  
than  
"I am under pressure."

When you use the colors as a common frame of reference, it becomes clearer when the balance starts to tip.

You can also use colors in the individual conversation with an employee as a simple way to open the dialogue about how they are feeling right now.

The more often you take your temperature together, the less risk there is of small stressors growing larger.

### Tips for the manager

- Repeat the assessment regularly so that you see the development, not just the moment.
- Listen for the energy and look at the body language.
- The well-being scale is a dialogue tool, not a diagnostic tool.
- Don't save the scale for crises, use it preventively.

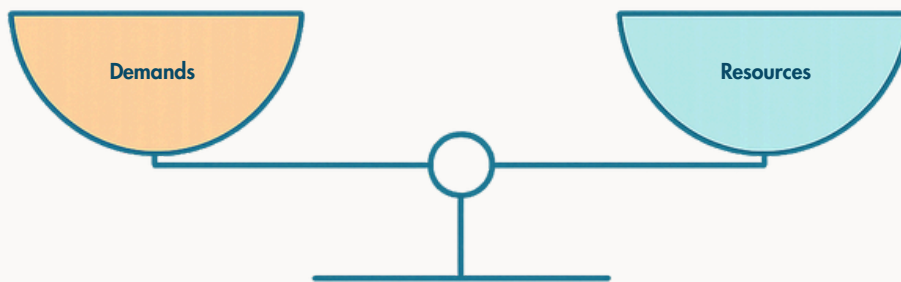


Green zone – daily well-being	Yellow zone – reduced well-being	Red zone – severe strain
<p>Tasks and resources are aligned</p> <p>There is energy, overview and enthusiasm for collaboration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus as a manager:</li> <li>• Maintain the rhythm, clear goals and realistic priorities.</li> <li>• Celebrate progress and recognize effort.</li> </ul>	<p>The pressure is increasing. The pace goes up, and the quality goes down.</p> <p>Restlessness, sleep problems or short temper may occur.</p> <p>Focus as a manager:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cut back, help with prioritization, do short check-ins and restore the rhythm.</li> <li>• Remove low-value tasks, clarify expectations and agree on breaks.</li> </ul>	<p>Persistent symptoms and loss of overview.</p> <p>Firefighting, forgetfulness, and social withdrawal.</p> <p>Focus as a manager:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relieve the load immediately, create calm and involve HR/AMR/TR.</li> <li>• Make a gentle plan for adaptation or temporary absence.</li> </ul>

Tool: Balance Scale for your team

## Find balance in the team

This exercise helps you gain a shared, concrete perspective on the balance between the demands of your work and the resources you have to meet them. Demands are not a problem in themselves, they are both necessary and meaningful, but they can be burdensome if the resources don't match.



### How to facilitate as a manager

#### 1. Draw the weighing scale

- Left side = Work demands
- Right side = Resources to lift them.

#### 2. Put the specific demands into words

Ask everyone to write down on post-its: "What demands, tasks or work situations are taking up the most space right now?"

Give examples to make it concrete:

- An important deadline
- Procedures that take time
- A complex task
- Cross-pressure between priorities
- Extensive cross-functional collaboration
- An urgent task that falls on top of the planned

#### 3. Collect and sort

Place the notes in the left bowl and group them:

- What demands are necessary and rewarding?
- Which demands become burdensome because something is missing?

#### 4. Find the resources and the lack of them

Ask everyone to write down: "What helps you meet the demands, and what do you lack?" - and collect them in the right bowl.

Examples of resources:

- Time and prioritization
- Clear mandate / clear decisions
- Support from colleagues or manager
- Quiet time for reflection
- Competencies

#### 6. Agree on adjustments and make responsibility clear

Look at the weight together:

- What works and should be maintained?
- Where is adjustment needed?

Then agree on three specific changes, e.g.:

- "On a weekly basis, we prioritize what is most important."
- "We regularly set aside time for collegial sparring."
- "We have focused work time every day from 8-10."

For each agreement it must be clear:

- What do the individual team members do?
- What is your responsibility as a manager?
- What do you take forward and follow up on?

Write down the agreements with who does what and when. Focus on what you can adjust now and be clear about what requires management action.

#### 7. Follow up

Bring the Team weight back after 3-4 weeks:

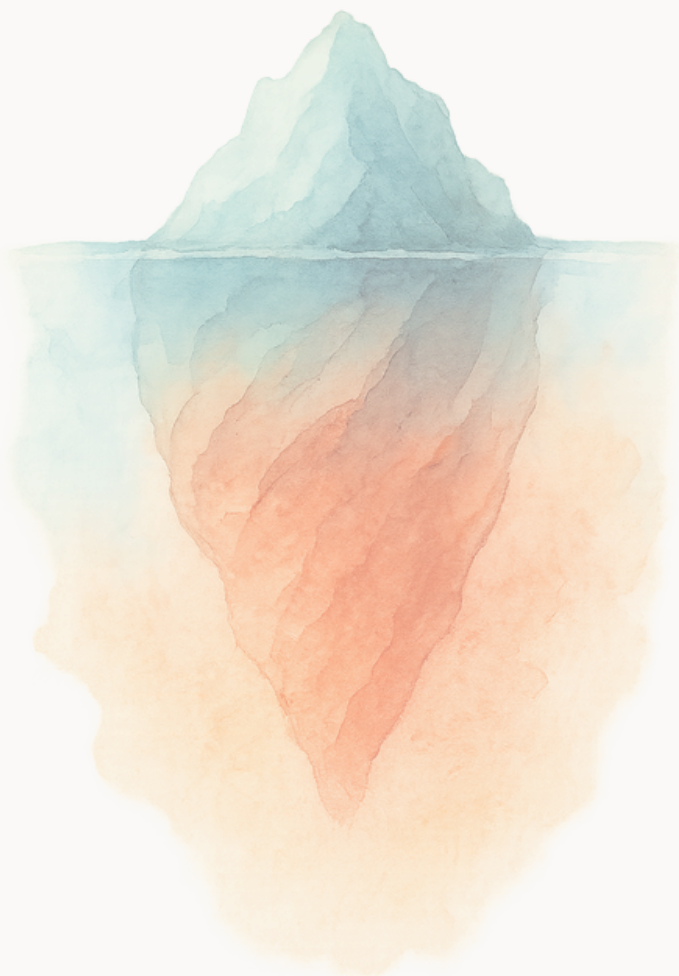
- What is better aligned now?
- What is still out of balance?
- What is the next adjustment?

## Shame hides stress

A lot of managers only notice stress after it has set in. Not because they are inattentive, but because the employee – consciously or unconsciously – keeps it hidden.

Shame is a social emotion. It is about how we think others see us. When an employee feels stress, an internal narrative is triggered in many: "I should be able to handle it," and when the body starts to protest, shame says: "You can't show it."

For some, it's not an active choice. It simply doesn't fit with their self-perception to be stressed – "I'm not like that" – and so they don't see or take the early signs seriously.



Shame arises in the gap between demands and self-image: between what one expects of oneself and what one can actually deliver.

When pressure persists, and the urge to live up to expectations remains, shame starts to grow. It protects the self-image, but at the same time hides the problem. In short: The more shame, the less openness – and the harder it becomes to help.

That's why a lot of people feel the pressure long before it becomes visible to others. They work harder, arrive earlier, leave later and respond faster. Behind the high performance and the fear of being "exposed" often lies shame. And that's why lack of well-being is often only discovered when it has developed into serious stress.

### What is not being said

Shame rarely shows itself directly. You discover it between the lines.

Be aware when an employee:

- works more and speaks up less often
- is very self-critical and undermines own efforts
- avoids feedback or recognition
- withdraws from the community

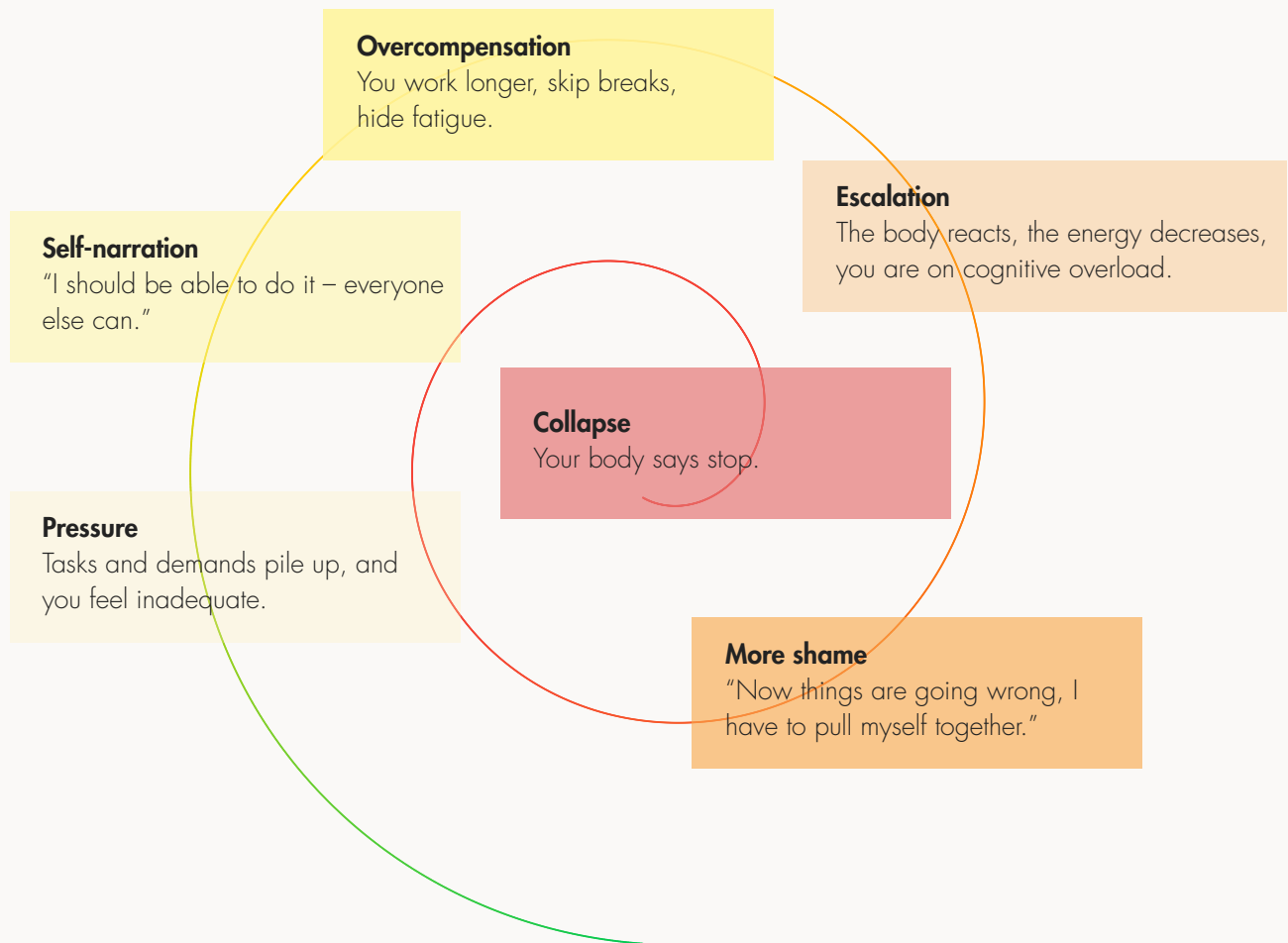
At the same time, it is important to remember that only a few employees go to their manager when they are unhappy, even if you may experience the relationship as trusting.

You can't demand openness, and you can't force it. But you can make sharing easier by being clear, accessible, and consistent in your listening.

Your most important task is to make yourself available and create a safe and confidential space where the employee knows it is okay to say it out loud.

## The stress spiral: “I should be able to handle it”

Shame is the silent companion that causes stress to grow in secret. Shame and stress reinforce each other and start a negative spiral that many know all too well.



### Typical reactions to shame in work life

#### Overcompensation

You work harder to prove your worth and hide feelings of inadequacy.

#### Distorted self-image

You see yourself as inadequate or incompetent, even though those around you perceive you as competent.

#### Controlling behavior

You try to regain a sense of control by controlling details, processes, or colleagues.

#### Withdrawal

You stop sharing concerns or asking for help – and instead isolate yourself.

#### Perfectionism

You raise your standards further and become critical, both of yourself and others.

#### Overly responsible

You say yes to too much, taking responsibility for other people's tasks to avoid disappointing.

Tool: The Trust Key

## Break the shame with understanding and acceptance

As a manager, you cannot eliminate shame or resolve stress with a conversation, but you can make it safe to talk about and thus give your employee peace and relief because their thoughts come out in the open. The purpose of this conversation tool is to help you recognize and engage in dialogue about stress and shame reactions, so that you and your employee can talk openly about what is creating stress before it becomes serious.



### After the conversation – what did you learn as a manager?

- What worked in the conversation, and what was difficult?
- What did you learn about the employee?
- What did you learn about your own way of being and reacting?
- Is there anything you would do differently next time?



### Keys to breaking shame

1. Observe: Look for overcompensation, overwork, excessive control, negative view of one's own abilities.
2. Share your observations calmly and neutrally. "I feel like you are withdrawing from the community, what do you think?"
3. Verbalize that stress can come from many things, it doesn't have to be just about being busy.
4. Normalize the thoughts and reactions the employee experiences. These are natural signs of overload, not personal weakness.
5. Listen without interrupting and give the employee space to think, talk, and be quiet.
6. Normalize the experience: "A lot of people have that experience, it's completely normal, but I'm sorry you feel that way."
7. Give the employee space to react, perhaps cry or be quiet. You don't have to be a friend or a psychologist, but you do have to stay in the room and show that the reaction is okay.
8. Share your experiences and share what you do when the pressure increases or you find yourself not succeeding.
9. Offer your support and agree on a concrete step, such as shared prioritization, relief or external help. Agree to talk together once a week.

# Three pathways to stress

## Three strategies as a manager

Stress does not affect everyone in the same way. Some suddenly collapse from one day to the next. Others feel their strength draining away little by little. And some struggle for a long time under visible pressure that no one helps to resolve. As a manager, it is important to recognize the pattern, not just the degree of stress. This requires a trusting relationship and frequent dialogue with your employees.

### The sudden stress pathway

*"It came like a bolt from the blue."*

Everything seems stable until the employee breaks down. Typically a high-performing person who rarely shows weakness.

- Predisposing factors: Strong self-perception, "I can handle anything", a culture where stress is seen as weakness.
- Reinforcing: Denial and silence – people don't talk about it.
- Expression: Sudden physical or mental collapse.

### The insidious stress pathway

*"I just need to get through this week."*

Energy and commitment disappear gradually, without drama.

- Predisposing factors: Strong performance culture, identity closely tied to work.
- Reinforcing: Blame and comparison, "Maybe it's just me."
- Expression: Declining energy, withdrawal, more minor mistakes.

### The escalated stress pathway

*"Why is no one listening to me?"*

The employee is aware of the problem, but experiences a lack of action from those around them.

- Predisposing factors: Unresolved problems, unclear frameworks, lack of management response.
- Reinforcing: Repeated attempts to shout without effect - helplessness.
- Expression: Anger, frustration or resignation.

The case stories in the e-book are based on anonymized experiences from AS3's consulting. They reflect typical patterns, not individuals.

## “It came like a bolt from the blue”

Peter is an IT consultant in a busy operations department. He has been with the company for eight years and is known as one of the stable and capable people. If there is chaos, people go to Peter. He can always take over, find solutions, keep a cool head.

The last few months have been extra busy. New IT system and lots of error messages. Peter has taken over, as usual. “I’ve got this,” he says when colleagues ask. He works from home in the evenings, answers emails from the children’s handball hall and skips lunch to stay on top of things.

He feels pressured and frustrated because he can’t complete his tasks properly, but thinks that’s just the way it is. When a colleague notices that he looks pale, he shrugs.

One Monday morning he gets in his car to drive to work. He turns the key but can’t start. His hands shake and tears flow for no reason. He calls his boss and manages to stammer out:

“I can’t do it anymore.”

Only then both he and his boss realize how long he has been working overtime. He has suppressed the signals for so long that his body finally made the decision for him.

*The sudden collapse happens when pressure is hidden behind performance and signals remain unspoken. Your job is not to see everything, but to ask questions, even when everything on the surface looks well-functioning.*

## Recommendations for the manager

### Look beyond the resilience

As a manager, you need to be aware of those who take on a lot of responsibility, rarely speak up, and always deliver – even when the pressure is on. Make it clear that well-being is not an individual matter, but a shared responsibility.

### Don't wait for clear signals

Talk to the employee about workload, pace, and recovery, even when everything seems to be working well. Ask specifically what the work costs and how you can support before the limit is reached.

### Take responsibility if the collapse happens

When an employee breaks down, you need to act quickly and clearly. Acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, help with sick leave and strong support, and agree on the next steps. Maintain contact during the absence and plan a gradual return with support, clear frameworks, and adjusted expectations.



## “I just need to get through this week”

Maja has been a personal assistant in the company for a year and is already involved in many different tasks. She is well-liked, helpful and the one who always sticks to the details when others lose track. The management has great trust and high expectations of her.

But in the last six months, something has started to change. She leaves a little later, smiles less, gets irritated more quickly. She forgets small appointments, withdraws from others and says more often: “I just need to get through this week.”

Maja thinks that the tasks are just a little difficult right now. That it will probably get better when they get the new colleague who can help her. Or when the annual report is in. But the weeks go by, and she becomes more and more anxious and worried about making mistakes, forgetting things or not doing it well enough.

Her colleagues notice the change, but no one says anything. It feels too small to address, and Maja herself doesn't want to make waves, she wants to show that she's still in control.

When she finally makes a minor mistake on an assignment, she breaks down in the office. Not because the mistake was big, but because it was the last straw. She has been in the red for a long time, without anyone reacting to it.

*The insidious process develops when stress slowly normalizes and energy leaks out without anyone reacting. Your job is to respond to small changes and adjust the framework before wear and tear turns into stress.*

### Recommendations for managers

#### Be aware of changes

Notice small shifts in energy, behavior, and engagement. If Maja is usually social but withdraws, that's a signal. Put words to what you see without concluding: “I notice that you seem more tired than before – how are you feeling right now?” Make it legitimate to talk about stress, even before something is seriously wrong.

#### Make the unsaid sayable

In gradual stress development, excessive pressure often becomes normalised. As a manager, you need to help put into words what has slowly grown: pace, complexity or expectations. When “it's probably just a busy period” repeats itself, it's a sign. For example, say: “This has been going on for a long time, it's not certain that it will resolve itself.”

#### Help with adjustments and recovery

Review tasks and expectations together: What can be simplified, postponed, or shared? Talk about breaks, recovery, and pace. Small adjustments early on can prevent the development of stress.



## “Why is no one listening to me?”

Sarah is a psychiatric nurse. She is experienced, professionally strong and known for staying calm, even when the department is under pressure. She takes on extra shifts, helps new colleagues and is often the one who stays when a colleague is sick and no one can take over.

For a long time, she has been pointing out that there is not enough time or resources to solve the tasks. There are more patients with complex needs, too few experienced colleagues and almost no breaks during the shift.

She has said it at staff meetings, written emails of concern and raised it with her manager. The answer is often the same: “We know – we do what we can.”

One evening she is given responsibility for several patients with severe outward aggression. She says it is not safe, the manager nods but asks her to “hold on a little longer”. Sarah doesn't feel she has a choice. Later on the shift, she raises her voice to a younger colleague. Not because the colleague has done anything wrong, but because she is pushed to the limit.

She feels tremors in her body and a knot in her stomach that won't go away. When she goes home, she is both angry and resigned. What's the point of speaking out when nothing happens anyway?

*The escalated process occurs when problems are known but not handled, and frustration turns into powerlessness. Your task is to take responsibility, act visibly, and show that speaking up is worth it.*

### Recommendations for the manager

#### Take the signals seriously

When an employee repeatedly says no to tasks, staffing demands or responsibilities, it is a warning sign. Acknowledge that attempts have already been made to get help, and be clear about the next steps – including what needs to be taken further.

#### Take ownership of what isn't working.

In Sarah's situation, the pressure is familiar: too few hands and too much responsibility. The powerlessness grows when you are left alone with the consequences. As a manager, you must make the burden a shared responsibility, be clear about what can be changed – and honest about what is a condition of the job.

#### Follow up – otherwise the powerlessness grows

Lack of follow-up is what turns frustration into resignation. Follow up, even if you don't have a solution. Provide status, set a time frame, and show that the matter is being addressed. It's not about being able to solve everything, but about taking responsibility and showing that speaking up is worth it.



# Four common stressors in working life

Stress rarely arises from a single cause. It develops in the interaction between demands, frameworks and relationships – where everyday life falls out of balance.

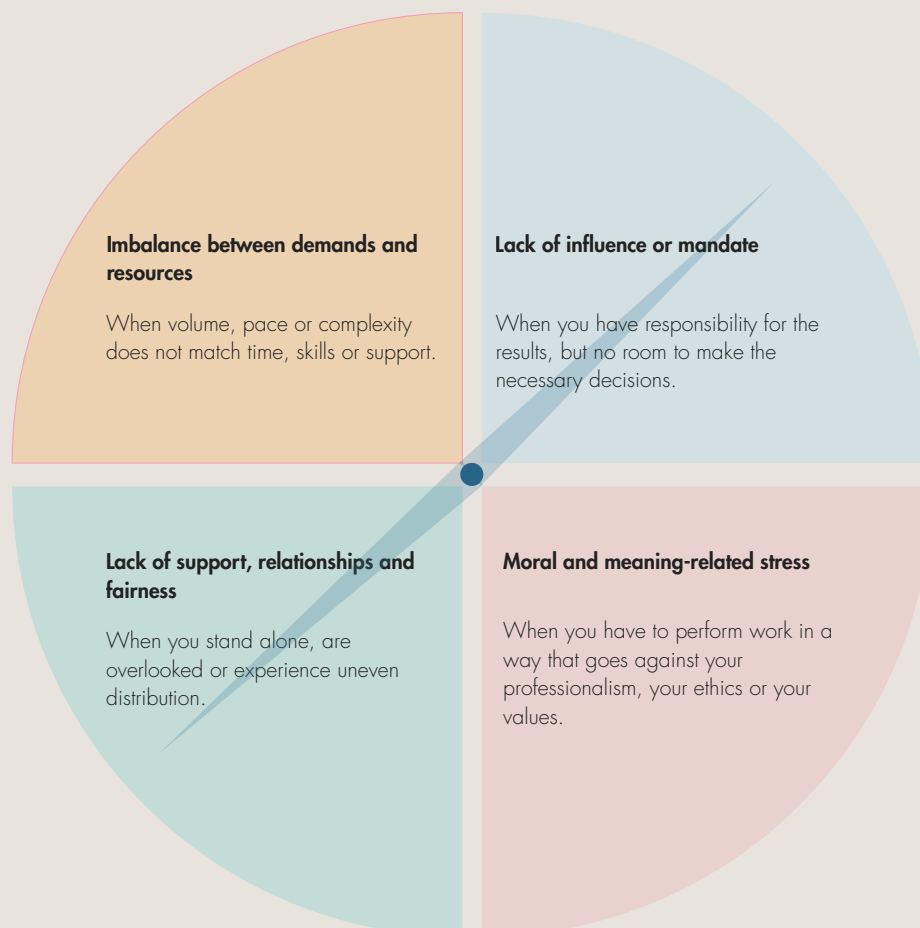
AS3's own data confirms this picture. The causes of stress are distributed almost evenly between the relationship with the immediate manager, collaboration with colleagues, tasks, process and structure, own capacity, work pressure, values and culture, and work-life balance.

In other words, there is not one dominant explanation – but many simultaneous stressors. For the manager, this means that stress cannot be understood or prevented by looking for one cause. It must be localized. Where in the work does the pressure arise? What specifically is no longer coherent?

In practice, we see that the stressors often accumulate in patterns. Not because reality is simple, but because certain imbalances recur across industries and roles. An employee may be under pressure on several fronts at the same time – but one burden will often dominate.

Therefore, the point of this chapter is not to simplify reality or put labels on people. It is to give you a compass: an overview that helps you find the direction for the right conversation and support where it makes the most difference.

The four common stressors are detailed on the following pages.



1: Imbalance between demands and resources

## Too much, too little, or too long

Stress often starts here - when the demands exceed, or do not match, the resources the employee has. It can be about time, staffing or skills, but also about internal demands such as perfectionism, loyalty or a high sense of responsibility. Like when an employee repeatedly delivers 110%, even though you have said that 80% is good enough.

The imbalance can also go the other way. When the challenges become too small, the tasks routine, and loss of meaning seeps in, another form of exhaustion occurs – boreout. These are two sides of the same coin: Energy and skills that are used up too much or don't find a place to run at all.

As a manager, you help by creating a match, not just relieving pressure. It's not always about removing tasks, but about adjusting ambitions, direction and resources. Sometimes you need to help the employee prioritize and let go, other times to find new energy, development and challenge.

### Typical characteristics

- Too many tasks in relation to time and staffing
- Changing or unclear expectations
- Lack of support or skills to carry out the task
- Routine tasks without challenge or development
- Inner demands and self-criticism that create more pressure than the external environment does



#### 1. Prioritize together

This creates ownership and makes it easier to distinguish between important and noisy tasks. It often makes it easier to talk about what can be removed completely or downgraded for a period of time.

#### 2. Set the right pace

Stress is amplified when everything is perceived as equally important and equally urgent. Be explicit about prioritization: "This is urgent, this can wait." It gives the employee a psychological buffer.

#### 3. Highlight what works

Help focus on all that has been achieved, not just what is missing. This strengthens the sense of control, motivation and the experience of achieving something.

#### 4. Protect focus time

Small management actions – canceling unnecessary meetings, grouping tasks into blocks, moving tasks, providing clear briefings – can significantly reduce perceived strain.

#### 5. Make it legitimate to speak up

If the employee feels that it is taboo to say stop, the pressure will continue. Recognize that "I can't take on any more" is a sign of responsibility, not weakness.

#### 6. Adjust ambitions

Talk about expectations, both your own and yours as a manager, so that you are on common ground. Be curious about whether the employee experiences the right match between skills and tasks.

*Data from AS3 shows that 8 out of 10 people suffering from stress point to work pressure and work-life balance as a significant cause of reduced well-being. This shows how important it is that demands, work pressure and priorities are connected to life outside of work.*

## 2: Lack of influence or responsibility without a mandate

### Between control and powerlessness

We thrive when we have real influence over how work is done. Stress occurs when responsibility and mandate are not aligned. The employee is expected to deliver results, but the decisions are made elsewhere – and the consequences still end up with those who were not allowed to decide.

The opposite can also be tiring. Too much freedom without direction can be just as stressful as too little influence. When the employee constantly has to define tasks, find solutions, and guess at expectations, freedom turns into uncertainty, and uncertainty creates stress.

As a manager, you help by creating coherence. It's not necessarily about giving more freedom, but about clarifying what the employee has a mandate to do and where the framework lies. Sometimes you need to expand the scope. Other times clarify the task, direction and responsibility that can actually be acted upon.

#### Typical signs of this strain

- Unclear goals, roles and boundaries
- Lack of decision-making mandate
- Micromanagement and control
- Influence on paper, but not in practice
- Imbalance between responsibility and influence



#### 1. Make the mandate clear

Clarify which decisions the employee can make themselves and where the boundaries are. This provides peace of mind, prevents frustration over invisible barriers and removes unnecessary responsibility from the employee.

#### 2. Create room for maneuver in small ways

Even small pockets of self-determination can strengthen motivation. Let the employee choose the approach, sequence or milestones themselves, where possible.

#### 3. Give responsibility a framework

Be clear about what you expect the employee to take responsibility for, and what you as the manager are responsible for. You avoid the employee taking on too much responsibility, which can be a burden.

#### 4. Be a liaison upward

When decisions are made on a higher level, translate, explain and stand by them. A manager who communicates the 'why' reduces the feeling of powerlessness in the team or in the individual.

#### 5. Invite for joint adjustment

Have a dialogue with the employee about where things are going wrong and bring it forward in the system. This shows that you take the experience seriously.

#### 6. Follow up

Influence feels real when it can be felt. Check whether the agreed changes actually work in practice, and adjust continuously. This gives the experience of real room for action, not empty words.

### 3: Violation of support, relationships and justice

## We can handle a lot, but not alone.

Strong relationships and fair collaborations make us robust. But when support is lacking, justice is missing, or small conflicts simmer, even manageable tasks become overwhelming.

Like when an employee is left alone with a difficult case over and over again, while others turn away.

Often it is not the amount of work, but the feeling that one's efforts have no meaning that breaks people.

It's not just about collegial unity, but about the experience of being seen, heard and treated fairly. Injustice and loneliness are strong stressors.

As a manager, you help by rebuilding trust and community. Strengthen the experience of support, fairness and visibility. Show clearly that efforts are seen – and be present, especially when relationships are under pressure.

### Typical signs of this strain

- Lack of support from manager or colleagues
- Unfair distribution of tasks or recognition
- Conflicts that are not handled
- Influence on paper, but not in practice
- Experience of being overlooked or treated differently



#### 1. Look for invisible gaps

Stress often manifests itself as silence, irritation, or absence. Take small changes in mood seriously as they can be early signs of imbalance in relationships and collaboration.

#### 2. Create space for honest conversations

Invite dialogue about collaboration, support, and recognition, even when it's uncomfortable. When relational tensions are given language, they lose power.

#### 3. Distribute tasks openly

Explain why tasks and responsibilities are distributed the way they are. Clarity in decisions is perceived as much fairer than tacit distribution.

#### 4. Give concrete recognition

Praise is effective when it feels genuine. Point out behaviors, actions, and concrete efforts, and show how it makes a difference to the whole.

#### 5. Catch conflicts early

Small misunderstandings grow quickly in times of stress. Address them before they become personal and help parties rebuild trust.

#### 6. Create shared successes

Community is strengthened by succeeding together. Highlight the team's actions, behaviors, and achievements, and let everyone feel that their efforts make a difference.

*Data from AS3 shows that 6 out of 10 people suffering from stress point to, among other things, collaboration with colleagues or immediate manager as a significant cause of reduced well-being. This emphasizes that stress is not only about the tasks, but also about how we work and interact under pressure.*

## 4: Moral and meaning-related stress

### When you can't do what is right

Moral stress strikes when you cannot perform your work in accordance with your professionalism or conscience. You know how you should act – but the framework prevents it. Like when a manager is asked to “polish” a report that should be honest.

Over time, this kind of stress becomes burdensome because it is not about pace but about integrity. The employee loses pride and sense of purpose. When you have to compromise again and again, the meaninglessness becomes more draining than the amount of tasks.

As a manager, you help by restoring meaning, not just relieving pressure. Create coherence between professionalism, values, and framework.

Sometimes you need to protect the employee by adjusting the terms; other times you need to stand firm on what is important – and be clear when a dilemma cannot be fully resolved.

In these situations, leadership is about defining, prioritizing, and acknowledging the tension so that the employee is not left alone in an impossible cross-pressure situation.

#### Typical signs of this strain

- Lack of time or resources to deliver the quality you know is necessary
- Management goals or demands that conflict with professional standards
- Experience of letting down citizens, customers or colleagues
- Organizational barriers such as meaningless KPIs or documentation demands
- Conflict between own values and the organization's practices or decisions



#### 1. Acknowledge the dilemma

Don't start with the solution, but with understanding. When you put into words the tension between ideals and reality, you reduce the employee's feeling of being alone with an ethical problem.

#### 2. Talk about the value of work

Put into words why the work matters and what gives professional pride. This helps the employee find meaning, even when the framework is tight.

#### 3. Create professional freedom

Arrange regular times for professional sparring where employees can share and discuss difficult cases. This transforms powerlessness into reflection and creates a community around the difficult.

#### 4. Be transparent

When priorities or cuts cannot be changed, explain why. Being open about backgrounds and choices does not eliminate frustration, but it does reduce the experience of meaninglessness.

#### 5. Seek solutions in the possible

Ask: “What can we do within the framework we have?” This shifts the focus from the ideal to action, and helps the employee seek solutions and regain their power of action.

#### 6. Be a role model for integrity

Show that you navigate by values and work to ensure good ethics and professional standards. This builds trust and makes it easier for employees to do the same.

*7 out of 10 people affected by stress cite, among other things, stressors related to values, culture and social capital as a significant cause of reduced well-being. This shows how vulnerable well-being becomes when employees experience a breach of meaning, justice or professional values.*

Tool: The Stress Compass

## Find the direction for the right conversation

The Stress Compass helps you pinpoint where the stress arises, so you and your employee can address the issues that matter most. When you know the primary cause, you can better offer your help where adjustments and support will have the greatest impact.

### How to use the Stress Compass

#### 1. Ask one key question from each of the four fields

- Demands–resources: “How do you experience the balance between tasks and what you have to work with?”
- Influence–responsibility: “Do you have the freedom you need to succeed?”
- Meaning–moral: “When is it difficult to stand by what you deliver?”
- Relationwise fairness: “Do you feel seen and supported in your work?”

Be curious about where the conversation naturally unfolds. You don't necessarily have to get around all of them.

#### 2. Listen to where the compass points

The area where the employee talks the most, hesitates, or gets affected may indicate the primary stressor.

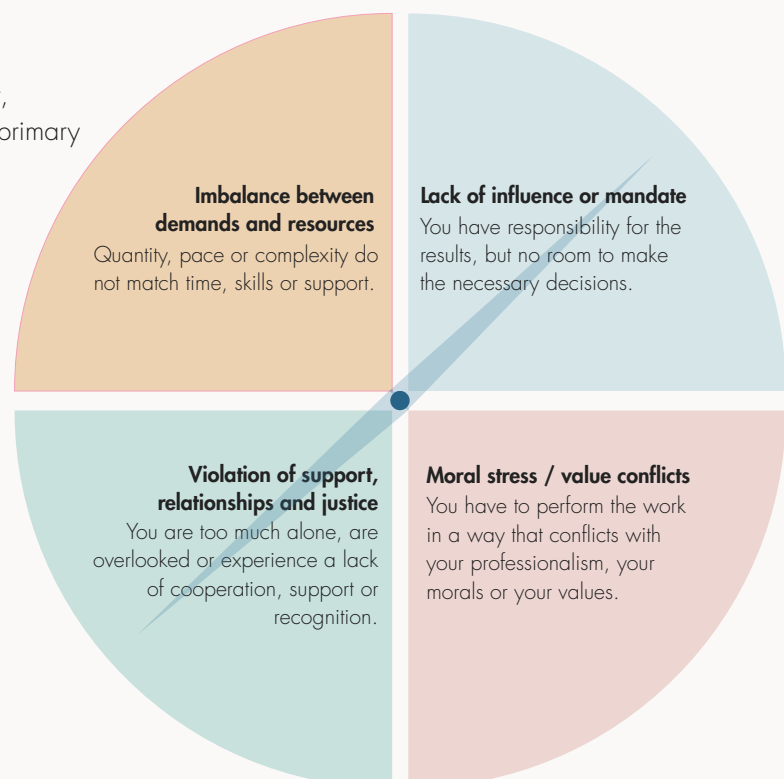
#### 3. When the direction is clear, dive one level deeper

- What exactly is creating the pressure?
- When is it most noticeable?
- What would make a concrete difference?

Keep the focus on context and framework – not personal mistakes or shortcomings.

#### 4. Agree on one small step in the right direction

Effective adjustments are often small: a clear priority, a clarification of mandate, a space for professional sparring, or a conversation about task allocation. One step can be enough to start the movement out of the yellow zone, as long as you follow up continuously.



# Build up resources with the six paths to well-being

You rarely prevent stress by simply reducing demands. It happens when you build something: the resources that make the team resilient, connected, and able to take on tasks in a sustainable way.

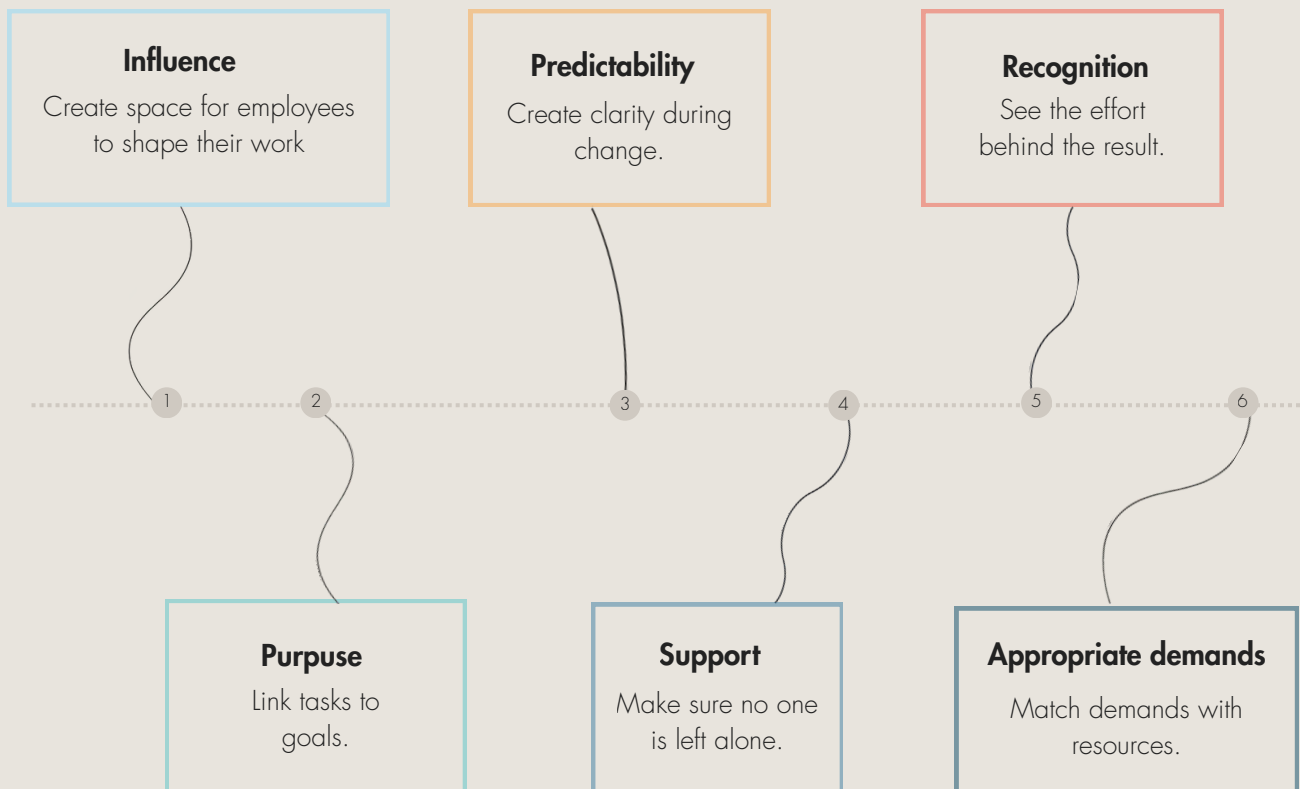
This chapter gives you a clear guide: The six paths to well-being. These are six factors that research consistently points to as crucial for whether employees thrive and can withstand stressors over time.

They are both simple and complex, because they not only address individual actions, but also the way the team works, speaks and collaborates.

The six paths act as a counterbalance to the stressors we encounter in working life. If the stressors are significant, the six resources are what lift the balance again.

When you work with all six, you not only create good well-being, you create a culture where stress is detected early and where the team has the language and courage to talk about it.

In the following, we review the six paths. Why each of them is important, when they are vulnerable, and what small things you can do in your daily life to strengthen them.



## 1: Influence – the feeling of being able to influence one's work

Influence is about more than being heard. It is about having professional freedom to solve tasks in a meaningful and effective way.

When your employees can influence their tasks, pace and priorities, they are less exposed to stress – even during periods of high demands.

### When the influence begins to slip

When influence weakens, a form of professional powerlessness arises. You can hear it in sentences like:

*“There’s no point in saying anything – the decision has been made.”*

*“I just do what I’m told.”*

That's not resistance. That's resignation.

### What can you do as a manager?

Involve employees in organizing the work – even small adjustments can have a big effect.

- Create clear frameworks, but allow room for flexibility within them.

Ask for input before making decisions and explain when something cannot be changed.

Make influence a regular topic in conversations and team meetings: “What do you need to be able to influence?”

## 2: Meaning – the work must provide direction and meaning

Meaning is a fundamental psychological driver. When our work is meaningful, our commitment increases, we can endure more, and we thrive better.

Meaning reduces the risk of burnout and increases the desire for learning, collaboration and problem solving. When meaning is lacking, even small demands become burdensome.

### When meaning is lost

You see it in three typical patterns:

- The employee works mechanically – without sparks.
- Small annoyances take up unnecessary space.
- Tasks that used to give energy are suddenly experienced as burdens.

### What can you do as a manager?

- Talk about the core mission regularly – why do we do what we do?
- Ask: “What tasks give you the most energy right now?”
- Match tasks to strengths and interests where possible.
- Share concrete success stories – including those that come back through the value chain, like when a customer praises your work. This makes the effort meaningful and present.

### 3: Predictability – peace of mind arises when you know what you are getting into

Predictability is not about avoiding change, but about making it manageable. Uncertainty is one of the most stressful work situations because it keeps the nervous system on alert.

And employees have different needs: Some need the short term – “What is expected of me this week?” – while others find solace in the long term: “Where is our department headed?” People operate with different time horizons, and both perspectives require clarity.

When your employees know what is going to happen, they can prioritize correctly and mentally prepare themselves. This gives them peace of mind, even during unpredictable and fast-paced periods.

#### What can you do as a manager?

- Inform earlier, even when everything is not in place.
- Provide small, frequent updates.
- Create structure with regular meetings, short status updates and clear expectations.
- Explain changes: “Here’s the background and what it means for you.”
- Make both the short and long horizons clear: What do we need to do now – and where are we going?

### 4: Social support – no one should be left alone with the pressure

Support is not nice-to-have, but a professional responsibility. It is about giving the employee access to help, sparring and presence when the pressure increases.

Social support directly reduces stress: You are stronger when you are not alone, and it becomes easier to speak up before stress builds up.

It is important to distinguish between practical support and moral support. Practical support is about the tasks – facilitating, prioritizing, and removing obstacles. Moral support is about the person – being recognized, encouraged, and taken seriously. Both forms are necessary, but at different times.

#### What typically goes wrong

The strongest employees often receive the least support – not because they don't need it, but because no one asks and because people mistakenly believe they “can manage on their own.”

#### What can you do as a manager?

- Be visible – short, frequent check-ins work better than infrequent, long meetings.
- Provide real help, not just encouragement: “What can we take off your to-do list?”
- Use sparring actively – it prevents mistakes and takes pressure off the employee alone.
- Facilitate support and collaboration between colleagues – this is often where resilience arises.

## 5: Recognition – being seen for one's efforts, contributions and value

Recognition is one of the strongest drivers of motivation and well-being – and one of the factors that disappears the fastest in times of stress. When we feel seen and recognized, we work with greater direction and less self-criticism.

Recognition is especially powerful when it touches on what we ourselves attach importance to – what we are proud of or put personal energy into. On the other hand, if we feel overlooked, the thought quickly arises: “Why bother when it doesn’t matter anyway?”

### Typical errors

- General praise without substance (“well done”).
- Focus on results rather than effort and learning.
- You notice a good effort, but don't voice it.

### What can you do as a manager?

- Be specific: “It was valuable that you... because...”
- Recognize the effort behind the task, it is often invisible.
- Put words on when someone is carrying extra so you show that you see it.
- Ask what the employee is proud of; it opens up insight.

## 6: Reasonable demands – the balance between pace, quantity and complexity

Demands are not the problem. Unbalanced demands are. Demands that are too high are tiring, demands that are too low can cause boreout, and unclear demands create uncertainty. But many are also pressured by their own, internal demands – they deliver 110%, even when 80% is agreed upon. For some, this is where it breaks down.

### Excessive external or internal demands

- Constantly working in “overdrive”.
- Pauses disappear and the pace increases.
- Priorities become unclear and mistakes occur.
- Shorter temper and lower quality.
- Delivers far above what was agreed (internal demands are more pressing than external ones).

### Too low or unclear demands

- Tasks drag on for no reason.
- Low commitment and initiative.
- Experiencing meaninglessness or stagnation.

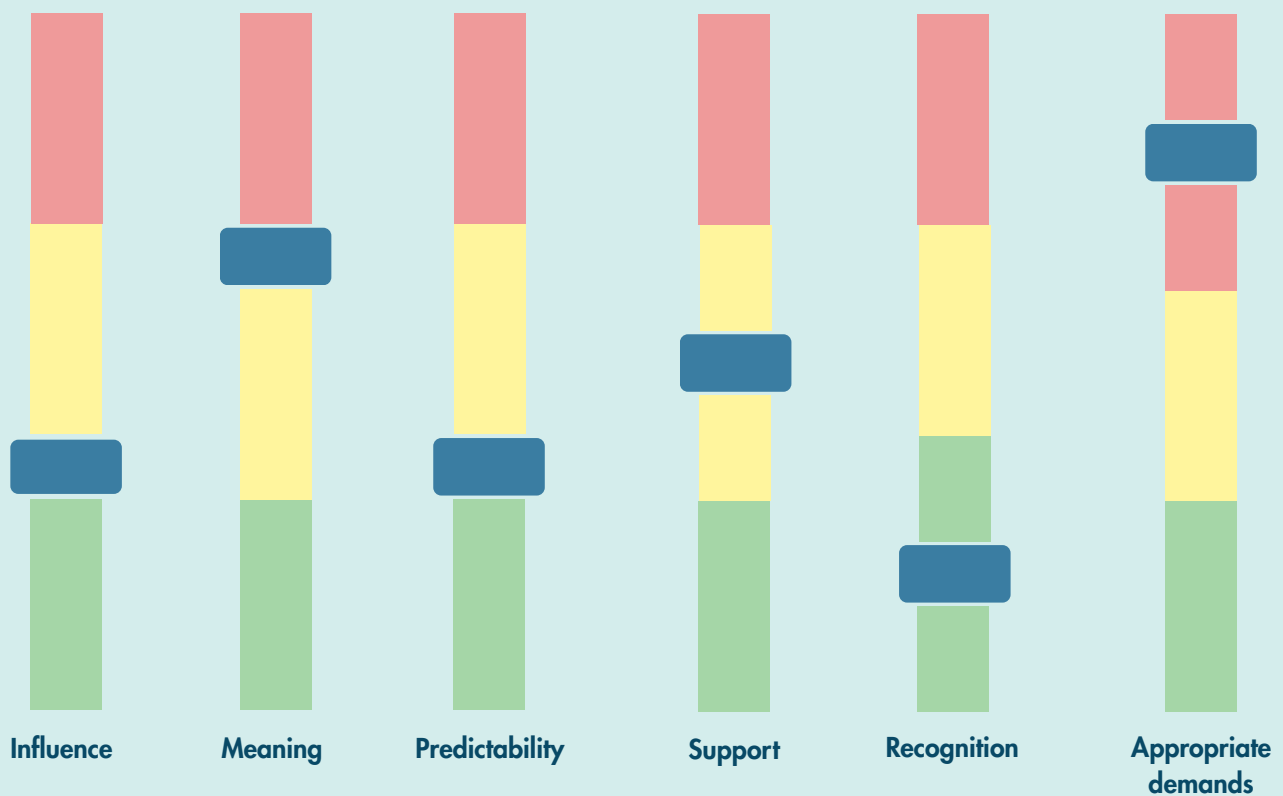
### What can you do as a manager?

- Prioritize clearly: “This now – the other waits.”
- Create a buffer – not everything has to be critical.
- Align expectations often, especially at high pace.
- Talk about internal demands: help employees find a realistic level.
- Look for hidden demands: social norms, pace, and performance culture.
- Provide appropriate professional challenges.

Tool: The Well-being Profile

## Create a shared picture of the team's well-being

The purpose of the exercise is to give you a quick, visual overview of how the team experiences the six resources, and to choose one or more areas that you want to strengthen together.



### How to do it

1. Explain that each scale is about the team's shared experience – not individuals.
2. Ask everyone to place a dot/post-it on the field (green, yellow or red) that best describes how they experience the resource in the team right now.

One color = one rating.

It's not precise, it's a temperature measurement.

3. Review the six resources one by one.
  - Where are there most markers in yellow or red?
  - Where are the assessments very different?
  - Which areas are strong – and why?

4. Choose an area you want to strengthen, the one you think will make the biggest difference in everyday life, not the most complex.

5. Agree on two concrete actions. They should be small, realistic, and quickly noticeable.

For example: clearer task prioritization, a regular weekly mini-update, more sparring on difficult cases.

6. Decide when to take the temperature again, e.g. in 3-4 weeks.

# Six everyday actions to build up resources

Small adjustments in everyday life create the strongest improvements in well-being when they are concrete and when you repeat them. One step at a time. Small changes, big effect over time.

## How to apply the actions

- 1: Choose one action per week.
- 2: Make it visible and consistent.
- 3: Talk to the team about what made a difference.
- 4: Only change actions once the current one is working consistently. This creates direction and anchoring.

### Influence

Ask: "If you could adjust one thing in this assignment, what would it be?"

Implement a specific change on the same day, whenever possible.

### Meaning

Give an employee specific feedback on something you have observed:

What happened? What did you notice? What difference did it make?

### Predictability

Give a brief overview of the coming week:

What is most important? What is new? What can wait?

### Support

Take a short check-in: "What would be most helpful for you right now?"

Offer concrete support, not just attention.

### Recognition

Share a short, concrete incident from the week where the team's work made a difference.

Tie it to the core mission and the concrete difference it made.

### Appropriate demands

Do a brief prioritization with the team—move, remove, or clarify at least one task.

Create both realism and air, without giving up ambition.

# Stress develops in groups and prevented collectively

Stress develops in the gap between demands, frameworks, culture and relationships. That's why you can be a skilled manager and still struggle against headwinds if the system around you is pulling in a different direction.

AS3's data shows that the causes of reduced well-being are distributed almost evenly between tasks, resources, relationships, leadership and work-life balance. In other words: no single link is dominant, and no one can solve it alone.

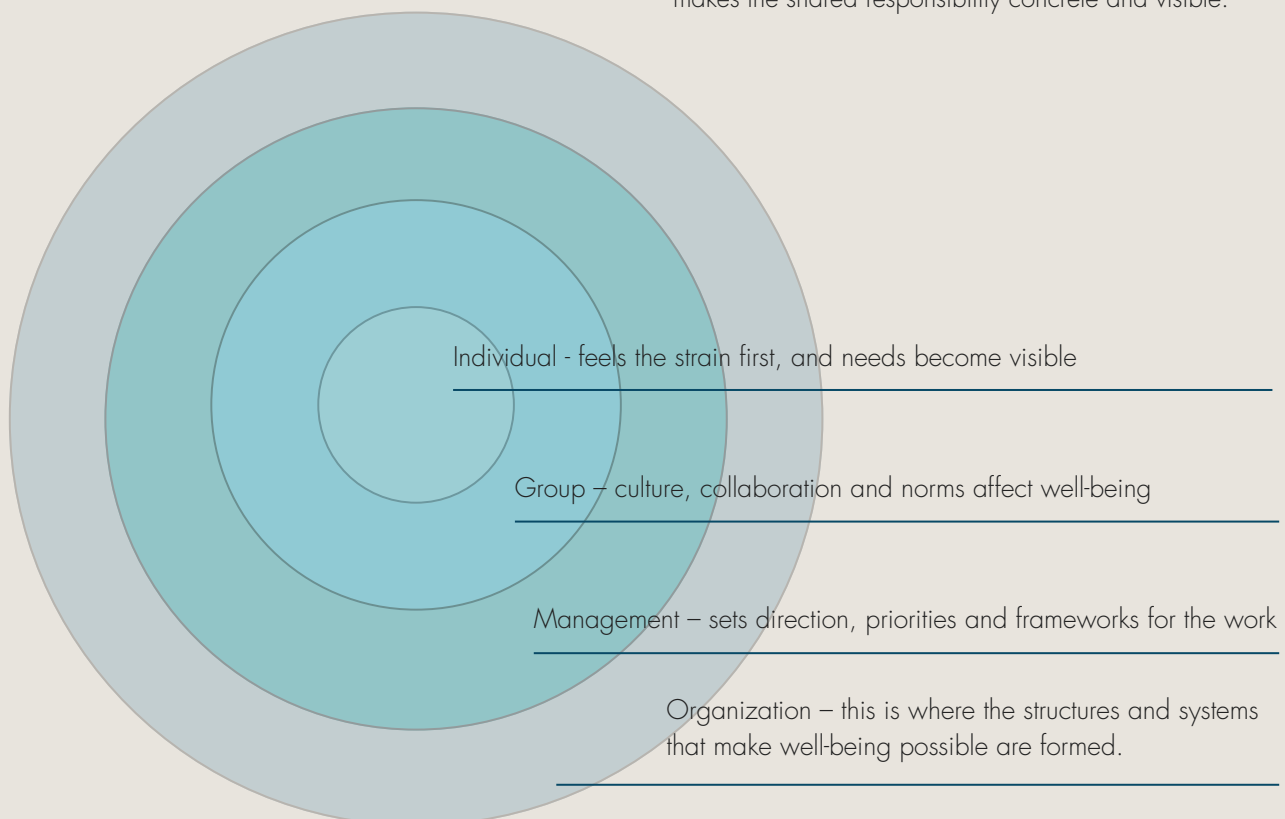
Yet stress is often placed in one place in the system: Some believe it is the manager's responsibility. Others point to HR.

Or one concludes that "Torben broke down because he is a perfectionist"; an explanation that only looks at the individual and overlooks what may have contributed at the group, management and organizational levels.

The consequence is that everyone points fingers, no one feels responsible, and prevention loses its power.

When multiple levels pull in the same direction, it significantly increases the preventive effect. Stress decreases, the climate of collaboration increases, and the sense of responsibility shifts from "someone should do something" to "we do it together," and the distribution of responsibility looks like this.

This is where the IGLO model gains its real value. It is more than a diagram – it is a management logic that makes the shared responsibility concrete and visible.



## Individual – where the signals arise (but are rarely said out loud)

Stress often first appears in the individual employee, but it is not always acknowledged – and even less often said out loud. Shame, perfectionism, loyalty and high internal demands cause many to push themselves further and explain away the signals.

Therefore, as a manager, you cannot count on the employee to take the initiative themselves. Studies show that only about one in three employees goes to their manager when they experience lack of well-being. The rest hope it will pass or try to cope with it themselves.

This means two things at the individual level in IGLO:

1. The employee has a responsibility to speak up – but is not always able to do so.
2. The manager has a responsibility to make themselves available and create a safe space – but cannot expect the employee to automatically use it.

Prevention cannot therefore be based on the employee raising their hand. It must be based on the relationship between you.

### Your task

Make yourself available, show interest, ask questions and help the employee put into words what they feel – even when the language or understanding may be lacking.

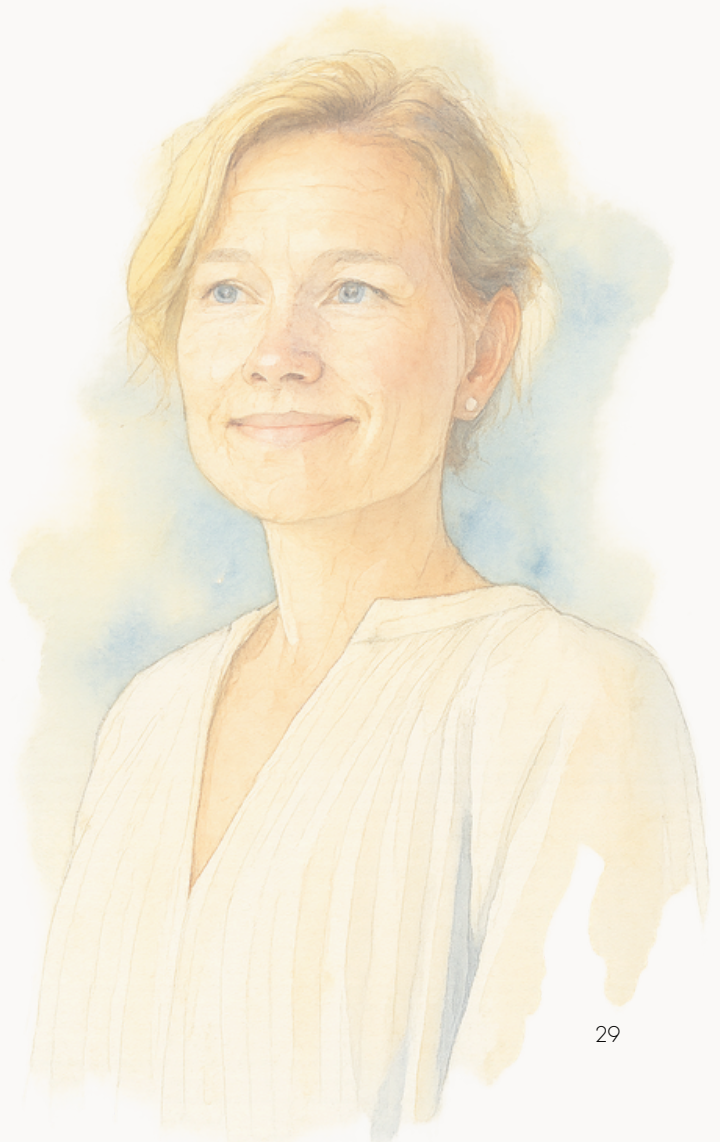
### Employee responsibilities

To respond to your own signals, speak up in time and contribute honestly to the common well-being – as best as possible.

An employee only dares to be honest when the following are present:

- Trust: You listen and don't use the information against them.
- Security: You can talk about stress and discomfort without it being interpreted as weakness.
- Predictability: You react calmly and consistently – even when it's difficult.
- Respect: You see the person - not just as an employee.

When this is in place, the chance that the employee will dare to say something increases – even before they themselves know if it is “bad enough”.



## The group — culture as a shared support

At the group level, stress prevention is about the rules the team lives by, even the ones no one talks about out loud. Three factors are particularly crucial to whether a team can handle hustle and pressure without breaking down.

### 1: Common norms

Well-being requires clear agreements about what we expect from each other, e.g. pace, quality and availability.

When norms are unclear, hidden expectations and individual interpretations arise – and responsibility becomes unclear. When standards are shared, everyone knows both when busyness is acceptable and when it is a shared responsibility to respond and adjust.

### 2: Psychological safety

The team must be able to trust each other's intentions, even when someone speaks up. It must be legitimate to talk about stress without being misunderstood, marginalized, or perceived as weak. Teams that say "we're under pressure" in a timely manner perform better, but this requires a culture where stress is seen as information about the task – not as a personal problem.

### 3: Fairness in distribution and prioritization

When tasks and responsibilities are perceived as fairly distributed, employees take joint responsibility. When they don't, people withdraw, talk past each other, and lose the desire to contribute. Fairness is not about everything being equal, but about priorities being clear and explainable.

### Your and the group's task

Put into words the rules and norms you actually work under – pace, quality, breaks and availability. Invite the team to define for themselves what is reasonable and when something is not.

As a manager, you set the direction, but the team shapes the culture. They must help keep the agreements, hold you accountable for them, and speak up when you drift away from them. In short: You start the conversation, the team keeps it alive.



## Management - your fellow managers and your own manager as allies

Preventing stress depends not only on you, but on the managers you stand shoulder to shoulder with. If you don't dare to talk openly about pressure and strain in your own management practices, you can't create openness among your employees either.

You can know a lot about well-being and still have difficulty moving anything if your management colleagues are pulling in other directions.

Prevention in the leadership team requires three things:

### 1: Professional courage

That you dare to have difficult discussions about pressure, capacity and priorities – even when the answers are not pleasant.

### 2: Shared commitment

That well-being is considered an integrated part of the management task and the organization's performance - not as an individual matter or an extra task.



### Your task

Bring prevention into the leadership group. Not just as information, but as a common professional discipline.

Talk openly about the stressors on yourself and your team, and about patterns that recur across the organization.

Identify and challenge the invisible norms you see. For example, ask at the next management meeting: "What behaviour do we actually reward, consciously or unconsciously, here?"

Use your manager as your ally. Share challenges, experiences and specific cases. This is how you support adjusting resources and frameworks.

### 3: Clear support

That you support each other when stressors are addressed and frameworks are challenged – even when it has consequences for plans and deliveries.

When the leadership team takes on this responsibility, something crucial happens: Well-being becomes a shared focus. Priorities become more realistic. And the organization gets a clear signal that pressure is not handled in silence but professionally.

## The organization – the framework that determines whether prevention is successful

Few people break because of the tasks alone. They break because of the framework around them. Policies, systems, technology, meeting structures, pace, accessibility and unwritten norms shape everyday life – and thus also well-being. When the framework creates pressure, it is useless to compensate on the individual or in the team. Prevention must be supported from the top.

In many organizations, there is a clear gap between what is said and what is rewarded. The values speak of balance, but practice rewards busyness, overtime and constant availability. This creates ongoing pressure – even where managers work seriously with well-being.

For prevention to be successful, three things are required at the organizational level:

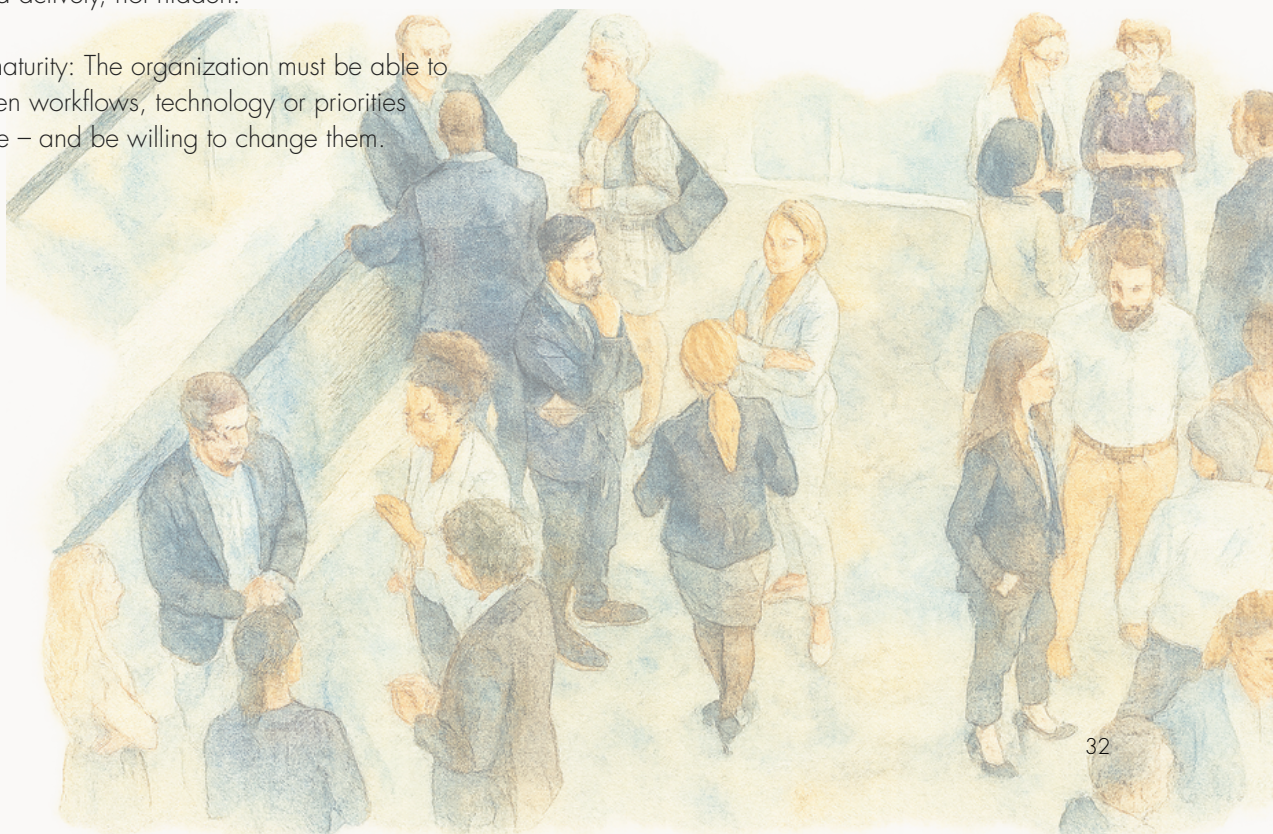
- 1: Cultural integrity: Values must be felt in decisions and priorities – even when it is difficult.
- 2: Transparency: Data about stress and well-being should be used actively, not hidden.
- 3: Structural maturity: The organization must be able to recognize when workflows, technology or priorities create pressure – and be willing to change them.

### Your task

Use policies on working hours, sick leave and stress actively as management tools. Use HR as professional partners who can qualify efforts – not just handle consequences. Raise fundamental problems in forums where frameworks and working methods can actually be adjusted.

Clearly point out systemic stressors such as long meetings, unclear priorities and cross-pressure so that the organization gets a realistic picture of everyday life.

Prevention only works when the framework supports the culture you are trying to create. Without structural support, well-being becomes a local project – not a shared direction.



# Your allies in stress prevention

When you activate your allies, you distribute both the demands and the responsibilities. Stress prevention becomes stronger – and easier – when multiple roles see the same signals and act on them together.

## HR and staff committee

HR and staff committees can elevate prevention from local efforts to shared practice and provide you with data, analysis and organizational anchoring.

*Invite HR to participate in dialogues about well-being and workflows and raise fundamental challenges in the right forums.*

## Health and Safety Representative (HSR)

HSR helps you understand pressures, workflows and blind spots in the work environment. Together you can react earlier and more competently.

*Create a fixed "well-being touchpoint" every month where you share signals and prioritize preventive efforts.*

**You as a manager**

## Union representative

Union representative can help you see what you don't catch yourself. What are employees recording and what patterns lie beneath the surface?

*Use union representative as a sparring partner about stressors and trends – not individual cases.*

## Management colleagues

You often encounter the same paradoxes and challenges, and a common management practice makes prevention stronger.

*Share current challenges at every meeting and get sparring. Over time, this creates a common language and common action.*

## Your own manager

When frameworks and priorities are not aligned, prevention cannot succeed locally. Your boss is crucial for direction, mandate and organizational support.

*Be clear about patterns and consequences. State what is possible within the framework so your manager can support you, provide resources, and remove barriers.*

# You can only carry others, when you stand firm

You are under pressure every single day. You have to deliver results, create well-being, navigate change – and at the same time be the person who makes others succeed.

At its core, stress in managers is no different from stress in anyone else. The symptoms are the same, and many of the things that prevent it are also the same: breaks, support, clear expectations, realistic tasks.

What makes the difference is the conditions. As a manager, you work in a cross-pressure environment where responsibilities, expectations and decisions hit you from multiple sides at once. – and where you are often alone with it.

The latest analyses of the managers' mental health show a sad trend: Managers are high on the stress scale. Many wake up not feeling rested. Many feel alone. Many feel that they "should be able to handle it" because their role expects it.

But it's important to understand one thing: Well-being is not just about your own discipline or your personal boundaries. Even the most capable managers will collapse if the structures around her are unclear, resource-constrained, or unrealistic.

Therefore, we cannot talk about the well-being of the manager without also talking about the conditions. Only when both things are in balance can you be the stable role model that others lean on. Stress in managers is not an individual problem. It is a systemic problem. And you are part of the system, not outside it.

But here's the truth, one we all too rarely say out loud: Manager well-being is not a luxury. It's a prerequisite for good leadership. Because you can only support others when you stand solidly yourself.

You must be able to say: "I am under pressure" – without fear that others will see you as a weak or bad manager. Because the truth is the opposite: The manager who is open and supported can also sense and support.

And you are contagious. You are a carrier of culture, whether you want it or not. What you do is copied. What you don't do is also copied.

Do you always walk quickly in the hallway? Then it quickly becomes the norm to signal busyness. Do you send emails at 10 pm? Then it is interpreted as an expectation. Do you calmly go home at 4 pm? Then you are saying that overtime is not an expectation, but an exception.

Your employees are radars. They read your energy, your breaks, and your work style. So taking care of yourself isn't self-indulgence. It's common sense. Both for you and for the culture you lead.

This chapter gives you an honest look at the unique circumstances that pressure managers and what you can rightfully demand from your organization. It also provides you with tools to navigate the inevitable paradoxes of the leadership role and a number of measures to protect your well-being as a manager.

## “I thought I just had to run a little faster”

Marianne is a team manager in a department that has gone through a tough restructuring. Four employees have been laid off, a fifth has subsequently resigned, and she now has a team that is restless and under pressure - at the same time that management expects the department to deliver as before.

She tries to keep both parties together. To the employees, she is the calm one who “will probably manage to pull it all together.” To the management, she is the loyal one who “solves things without making a fuss.” She compensates for the lack of resources by taking on more tasks herself, so that she can spare her employees.

It starts with small shifts. She skips lunch to be available. She takes the evening shift on email “just until the worst is over.” She tells herself, “I just need to run a little faster for a while.”

But the pressure continues. She is late for meetings, forgets appointments and has a short fuse in situations where she is usually patient. Her colleagues notice this, but interpret it as being busy. Marianne herself is ashamed and thinks: “If I can’t even manage myself, how am I supposed to manage others?”

When her boss asks her one day if she's okay, Marianne tries to answer professionally, but tears well up and she hears herself say, “I can't go on.”

For the first time in months, Marianne feels that someone is actually listening to how she feels, not just what she delivers. And she realizes how much and for how long she has felt alone.

### When responsibility exceeds capacity

Marianne's story shows how quickly leadership stress can develop in the cross-pressure between employees' needs and management's demands for performance. In that tension, it's easy to push your own well-being into the background.

Many managers are trained to ignore their own signals. They skip breaks, ignore fatigue, and keep their emotions under control in order to be there for others. This may work for short periods. But when it becomes a permanent way of dealing with pressure, the body loses its voice and stress increases.

When the manager stands alone without clear frameworks, priorities or sparring, the responsibility gradually becomes greater than the capacity. It creeps in as a slow draining of energy, direction and self-esteem.



## The leadership role comes with paradoxes that wear you down

As a manager, you are in a role where doubt is not just expected, it is a sign of health. You navigate complex situations where there is rarely one right answer. Managers who never doubt often overlook both nuances and signals from their team.

Yet many managers associate doubt with weakness and respond with quick, assertive behavior; but this can backfire in the form of hasty decisions, increased pressure, and decreased well-being, both for you and your team. Doubt is not your adversary. It is your indicator that something needs your attention.

*Below are five examples of paradoxes where doubt typically arises, and where the strain can grow if you are alone with it or do not give it space.*

### PARADOX 1

**You must take responsibility for the well-being of others – but no one is really responsible for yours**

You are both a culture carrier, a supportive conversation partner, a project manager and a problem solver. But who is that to you? Too many managers keep the pressure to themselves and think it is "part of the package".

### PARADOX 2

**You must create clarity – in the middle of organizational chaos**

Predictability is one of the strongest sources of well-being, but you often work with unclear priorities, changing decisions, and different signals from top management. You have to create what you lack yourself.

### PARADOX 3

**You must be authentic - but also an authority**

You need to be human, but not vulnerable. Robust, but not rigid. Accessible, but not burned out. There are almost no other roles in the organization where emotional labor takes up so much space.

### PARADOX 4

**You must deliver results – and at the same time be the one who ensure well-being**

It's a duality that pulls at you from every side. You are stretched out in a constant paradox: Performance and care. Pace and presence. Efficiency and humanity.

### PARADOX 5

**You need to be able to "do a bit of everything" - and be good at it all.**

Management is not one subject. It is ten, at least. Communication, project management, HR, strategy, psychology, facilitation, conflict resolution, economics, labor law, etc. No one can master it all, but many managers feel they should.

## Navigate the paradoxes without breaking down

Paradoxes are part of the job of a manager. You have to both create direction and involve, ensure well-being and keep pace, deliver results and take care of relationships. It's tiring because both considerations are right and can rarely be chosen separately. Think of it like a balance board: You're constantly adjusting. The goal is not perfect balance, but to feel when the balance boards tips – and adjust in time.

Below are three points of attention that will help you maintain balance in everyday life.

### 1. Replace “either-or” with “both-and”

Paradoxes often manifest as small tensions in everyday life.

Example:

A deadline is tight, and an employee says the pace is too fast. Instead of choosing between delivery or well-being, you can stick to the deadline, cut the task to what is necessary, and clearly state what should not be done now. You provide both direction and relief – by adjusting, not resolving the paradox.

### 2. Know your preference and step towards the opposite pole

All managers have a natural style. Some thrive on involvement and self-direction, others on pace and clear decisions. The challenge arises when you stick to your style, even when the situation demands something different.

Example:

You invite reflection and ask: “What do you think?” But the team is under pressure and needs more guidance. Your step towards the opposite pole can be a clear prioritization, concrete advice or a clear decision – even if it is not your comfort zone.

### 3. Stay in doubt a little longer

When you're under pressure, it's tempting to make a quick decision just to get some peace of mind. But paradoxes often require you to stay in doubt long enough to see both sides.

Ask: “What am I overlooking right now?” or “Who should I consult before I get stuck?”  
Doubt is not weakness – it is often a sign that you are seeing the complexity clearly.

## How can the organization support you?

As a manager, you rarely get stressed because you lack resilience. You get stressed when the conditions around you make good leadership unnecessarily difficult: unclear frameworks, changing priorities, conflicting demands, and systems that add friction to your work instead of improving it.

Leadership well-being is therefore never an individual project. It is a question of organizational maturity.

It's about whether the structures, relationships and workflows that surround you make it possible to stand strong - both as a person and as a manager.

Here are three things you can rightly expect the organization to take responsibility for if the leadership role is to be sustainable over time.

### Psychological safety in the management team

- Discuss dilemmas openly
- Share stressors without fear of consequences
- Align expectations across departments
- Decide on common priorities

### Clear management mandate

- Clear priorities and focus
- Clear decision-making mandate
- Support with prioritization and opt-out
- A manager who can answer "what is most important right now?"

### System support in everyday life

- Supports operations and decisions
- Reduces complexity
- Provides overview and reporting
- Makes the core task easier, not heavier

## ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

## Six actions to protect your well-being as a manager

The leadership role demands a lot from you – including taking care of yourself with the same consistency as you take care of others. Stress in managers is no different than stress in everyone else. It rarely comes from one thing, but from small shifts that accumulate over time: too little break, too many expectations, too much responsibility alone.

The most important thing is not major lifestyle changes, but the small actions you take every week to create overview, calm and support around you. Below you will find six simple practices that protect your well-being as a manager – even when the pressure increases.

### 1: Have a “Helicopter Meeting” with yourself

30–45 minutes, same time every week.  
Focus on: What is most important? What needs to go? What requires support? It's both planning and mental clearing that gives you direction.

### 2: Agree on structured availability

Agree on fixed windows where you are available and present. This minimizes interruptions and gives both you and your employees peace of mind. Clarity about access creates a better work rhythm for everyone.

### 3: Plan brain breaks

3–5 minutes every hour. Stretch, breathe, look out the window. Short breaks prevent mistakes, keep your focus sharp, and protect your mental capacity.

### 4: Know your triggers and respond early

Leadership stress often manifests itself as impatience, micromanagement, forgetfulness, short temper, withdrawal, or overcompensation. If you see two or more of these, it's a signal to adjust the pace and ask for support.

### 5: Use your leadership network actively

A well-functioning leadership team aligns expectations, sets shared priorities, decides what to cut and distributes responsibilities fairly. It prevents stress because you are not alone with all the trade-offs and decisions.

### 6: Seek protection from loneliness

There is a lot that you as a manager have to carry alone: information, doubts, concerns and decisions that you cannot share. That is why you need a space where you can unload, gain perspective and say things out loud before they take hold.

# Five things to take away from the e-book

## **1. Stress rarely has one explanation**

It arises from the interaction between demands, resources, relationships and frameworks.

## **2. Stress manifests itself differently from person to person**

Look for changes in the individual – not in relation to others.

## **3. Respond to shifts before they turn into collapse**

Small changes in energy, behavior, and engagement are often the first signs.

## **4. Find the right place to help**

Stress is rarely about everything; one stressor often takes up the most space.

## **5. Prevention is a shared responsibility**

Stress is prevented in communities through clear frameworks and building resources.

*You can't remove all pressure, but you can make stress visible, manageable, and shared.*

# Together for well-being. For the entire organization

As a manager, you bear a great responsibility for the well-being of your employees. You feel that every day. But you don't have to take on the task alone.

At AS3, we work with stress, well-being and a good working life from both sides of the table. Both where the organization needs to adjust the framework and where the individual needs help to get back on their feet.

## **When the organization needs to move**

Our organizational psychologists and management consultants help managers and HR translate good intentions into concrete practice, for example when:

- Managers must learn to prevent and manage stress
- Well-being is challenged in a department or team
- Changes, restructuring or layoffs put pressure on the working environment.

We bridge the gap between psychology and management, between people and systems, and our focus is always twofold: to create better well-being and at the same time ensure that the organization can deliver on its tasks.

## **When the individual employee is affected**

We also encounter stress up close. Our psychiatrists and clinical psychologists treat up to 10,000 people each year, many with stress as their main theme.

Here, our psychiatrists and clinical psychologists work with people affected by stress in programs where the focus is on understanding the stress, stabilizing the condition, and supporting a return to work.

The work gives us concrete insight into what happens when pressure becomes prolonged, and what actually helps people find their way back into working life. We take this knowledge back into our work with managers and organizations.

## **The bridge between well-being and operations**

Because we work with both the individual and the organization, we can help with solutions that are interconnected across the board: From developing the individual leader to adjusting tasks, collaboration, structure and management practices.

In short: we help you create a working life where well-being and strong results go hand in hand.

## **Contact us if you need sparring**

If you feel that you need sparring after reading this e-book – on your own role, on a stressed team or on a larger effort in the organization – we are happy to discuss how we can help.

Contact us by phone + 45 82 10 00 20 and email [info@as3transition.dk](mailto:info@as3transition.dk)  
You can also read more about us and what we do at [as3transition.com](http://as3transition.com)