



# Stress and burnout in process excellence careers

## The ever-revolving pursuit of process excellence can lead to high levels of stress

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[Michael Hill](#)

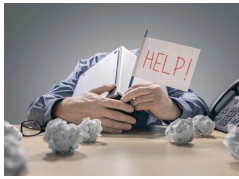
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Business process careers can be exciting and rewarding, but they can also be conducive to significant stress and burnout. The mission critical, performance-driven nature of business processes, coupled with evolving technologies, productivity/efficiency targets, changing markets and company cultures, strict deadlines and knowledge and skills expectations bring a certain level of pressure. Such factors in the ever-revolving pursuit of process excellence can lead to high levels of stress that, over time, result in burnout and exhaustion.

"Dealing with the pressures of modern business process-focused leadership roles can feel like a never-ending battle against stress and burnout," Dr. Danielle Kelvas, MD, primary care physician and CEO/founder of DKMD Consulting, tells *PEX Network*. "If you're in such a role, you're probably juggling a ton of responsibilities. You've got to keep processes running smoothly, make sure everything's efficient, embrace new technology, lead your team and push for continuous improvement." All the while, you're under the gun to hit those organizational goals and manage everyone's expectations, she adds.

This issue is especially prevalent in the manufacturing industry, where the emphasis on efficient business processes is paramount, says Liya Getachew, principal at Sendero Consulting.

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# Stress and burnout in business process roles

The predominant challenges that lead to stress and burnout in process-oriented roles include indirect oversight and separate reporting chains, slow progress, unrealistic expectations and the significant effort required to gain buy-in, according to Getachew.

"Business process leaders often operate within a reporting chain separate from the teams they are tasked with leading. This disconnect can cause significant stress as leaders may lack direct control or influence over these teams." Consequently, the changes process leaders aim to

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implement often compete with the existing priorities of the affected teams. "This competition for attention and resources can result in inadequate focus and support for the proposed changes, adding to the leaders' stress and potential burnout," Getachew says.

Process professionals also often face pressure to deliver rapid improvements, she adds. "For example, in the manufacturing industry, there is intense pressure to implement AI to increase overall operational efficiency. However, any AI implementation is complex and requires leaders to first comprehend its intricacies before identifying where it can be most effectively applied." Unrealistic expectations that AI will instantly improve efficiencies often lead to rushed implementations, resulting in incomplete solutions and, ultimately, slower than expected progress, Getachew says. "This slow progress, coupled with a lack of understanding or support from upper management, leads to frustration and stress for process leaders."

Furthermore, securing buy-in from various stakeholders requires substantial time and energy from process leaders, Getachew continues. "The effort to build consensus and drive collaboration can be exhausting, detracting from the time and energy available for actual process execution and improvement. This continual need for advocacy and alignment further contributes to the stress and potential burnout of process professionals."

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## Positive versus negative stress

It's important for process leaders to understand the difference between positive and negative stress, says Debashis Sarker, managing partner at Proliferator Advisory & Consulting and *PEX Network* Advisory Board member. "Negative stress, or distress, harms your health and manifests in physical symptoms like back pain, insomnia, sweating, appetite loss and increased heart rate. This happens because your body releases a flood of hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Imagine working on a process improvement issue with uncooperative and toxic stakeholders – that's a prime example of distress."

Positive stress, also known as eustress, is actually energizing, he adds. "It motivates you to excel and achieve the desired outcome. Think about tackling a challenging business problem with no clear-cut solution – the excitement of finding the answer can be a positive stressor."

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## How to reduce stress and burnout in process roles

There are a variety of strategies that can help business process leaders manage and reduce stress and burnout for both themselves and those around them.

### Don't be a superhero

First off, don't try to be a superhero. "Delegate tasks to empower your team and take some of the load off your shoulders," says Kelvas. "Get smart with your time – figuring out what needs your immediate attention and what can wait is a game-changer. Learn how to triage urgent versus important."

In a more holistic sense, work-life balance is always important – acknowledging the importance of life outside work and taking practical steps to ensure that boundaries between life and work are respected, adds Eloise Skinner, author and psychotherapist.

### Set realistic expectations

During any process implementation, setting realistic expectations is paramount, says Getachew. "Process leaders must communicate expectations not only with affected teams but also with stakeholders. Process changes may lead to an initial increase in work for the impacted teams. In order to push through this phase and begin to realize the efficiencies of the change, leaders should clearly define where the new process fits within existing team priorities."

This clarity helps establish realistic timelines and prevents overburdening, enabling teams to better understand the efficiencies the new process will bring. Moreover, managing stakeholders' expectations is crucial. "Process leaders must ensure stakeholders understand the realistic timeframe required for successful implementation. By aligning expectations with stakeholders, leaders can avoid the pressure to deliver rapid improvements, which often leads to rushed implementation and slow progress."

### Prioritize mental and physical health

Looking after your mental and physical health is another crucial element of addressing stress and burnout. "Whether it's hitting the gym, getting enough sleep or diving into your hobbies, make sure you're putting your wellbeing on the priority list," says Kelvas. "Practices like mindfulness and



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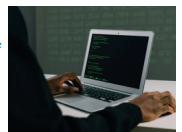
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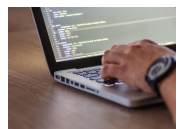


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meditation can also work wonders in keeping you focused and emotionally balanced – this has worked for me.”

As for your team, encourage everyone to find a good work-life balance – and respect those boundaries, Kelvas adds. “Don’t call your staff late at night. Celebrating successes goes a long way in boosting morale, as does giving people chances to level up their skills with training opportunities.”

### Lead by example

Process leaders can set the tone by cultivating a supportive environment and demonstrating authenticity in their own experiences and struggles. “This vulnerability encourages others to open up and seek help when needed,” says Graham James, director at Pluxee UK. “My advice to fellow business leaders would be to lead the charge in openly embracing vulnerability when discussing mental health struggles. Your employees will thank you for setting the example, and, in turn, will appreciate the open environment fostered as a result.”

### Enable workload and project ownership

On the autonomy side, leaders can help by enabling employees (and themselves) to take ownership over their workload and projects, says Skinner. “This could mean, for example, taking a lighter approach to management and allowing a degree of flexibility in how employees structure and execute their work. Autonomy could also be provided by allowing employees a voice when it comes to project selection or delegation, enabling employees to structure their main workload around their particular interests, passions or preferences.”

### Create safe spaces

Creating a space where everyone feels supported, especially when they’re feeling overwhelmed, is very important. “It’s all about building a culture that cares for mental health as much as business outcomes,” says Kelvas. If someone on your team isn’t doing well, always ask if there’s something going on at home first before putting them on a performance improvement plan (PIP).

“Create informal spaces similar to the camaraderie found in some ‘bro code’ environments, but open to everyone, regardless of gender,” adds James. “These spaces should encourage individuals to share their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment. Using inclusive language that avoids clinical labels and discreetly addresses mental health can help break down barriers and promote a culture of openness.”

### Achieve broad alignment and streamlined implementation

When implementing changes, it’s imperative for process leaders to ensure broad alignment among both management and their teams, reducing stress stemming from indirect oversight and separate reporting chains. “This requires clear communication of the specific changes being proposed and the time and effort required from impacted teams. By adopting this inclusive approach, teams feel involved rather than blindsided by process changes,” says Getachew. Additionally, active communication with managers overseeing affected teams is essential. “Ensuring managers are committed to supporting and effectively communicating these changes to their teams fosters alignment and cooperation.”

Once alignment and expectations are set, process leaders should focus on areas offering maximum return on investment (ROI) to streamline implementation effectively. “Implementing multiple processes simultaneously can dilute focus, create confusion and increase complexity within the organization. By prioritizing processes with the potential for significant ROI, process leaders can avoid stress and burnout.”



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