



Roundtable Mentor,
Cathy O'Neill, Senior Director of Patient Experience and Community Engagement at St. Joseph's Health Centre, St. Michael's Hospital, shared her strategies on how to get through periods of high pressure.

Mentoring **MATTERS**

Q *Lately, I've felt like I've been on a big losing streak at work. My part of the business is under a lot of pressure and we're struggling to meet our targets. I'm feeling really overwhelmed and exhausted and am starting to think that I'm not cut out for leadership. Should I find another role or stick it out?*

We live in a fast paced world where instant results are expected and pressure to succeed abounds. As a leader it's not a matter of "if" you'll feel overwhelmed by pressure but "when". In these moments of feeling overwhelmed, we as leaders, can lose our way and want to give-up. However, these moments also provide us the opportunity to stretch ourselves, be creative, find our courage and ultimately succeed.

Acknowledging that periods of pressure go hand in hand with being a leader is important, as is identifying strategies to succeed under pressure. While this isn't easy to do I have found the following strategies have helped me weather challenging and high pressure moments.

Let purpose drive you, not pressure. Being grounded in a very clear purpose has propelled me forward in some of the most challenging times in my career. My purpose is driven by supporting those who unexpectedly find themselves requiring care in our complex healthcare system, and making a difference in their lives when they are most vulnerable. I carry this purpose on my sleeve and share it with my team and colleagues, particularly in moments of pressure. By doing this I am less likely to bend to the pressure and lose sight of my goals. And, it reinforces the merit and purpose in what I do.

Be proactive under pressure. Setting and achieving goals are central to leading. When we get behind in achieving our goals, which leads to self-imposed pressure, it can be challenging to think clearly and make sound decisions. To combat this, I have found it helpful to stay very focused on the tasks at hand, proactively identify potential failure points and take measures to address those. This reduces the threat of falling behind and thus becoming overwhelmed.

Manage expectations. Pressure mounts when expectations are unrealistic - whether self-imposed or imposed by others. As leaders, we are prone to setting the unachievable expectation for ourselves that we have to be perfect. I have learned that I am more successful when I set realistic expectations for myself in the following ways:

- **Let go of the notion that I have to be perfect.**
- **Identify ways to achieve incremental and visible progress.**

- **Set clear boundaries to help balance the demands on my time.** Setting boundaries with my team is an example of this. As a leader I believe in an open door policy. However, in times of high pressure where I need uninterrupted time to meet the expectations of my job, I close my office door without guilt. I have a good rapport with my team and they know that a closed door signifies that I am focused and want to minimize interruptions. Conversely, they know that I will monitor my emails and if something is truly urgent they can alert me that way and I will respond without judgment. This is an approach that manages their expectations of my time and alleviates some of the pressure I am experiencing in that moment.

Ask for help. As leaders we have a tendency to equate asking for help as a sign of weakness. I would suggest the opposite. When I am under pressure, feeling isolated increases that sense of being overwhelmed. Here are some approaches that have allowed me to seek help and also maintain my sense of confidence:

- **Delegate.** Clear delegation of tasks to my staff in periods of high pressure mitigates the pressure that comes with feeling like I have to do everything myself.
- **Lean into peer support.** Turning to my "go to" colleagues who I trust and know will support me through challenging times keeps me from giving up and refocuses me on my successes and the road ahead.
- **Selectively seek boss support.** Choosing the right moments to seek help from my boss has proven invaluable, especially when the pressure I was experiencing came from not being clear on my boss' expectations.

In summary, feeling pressured and overwhelmed is inherent to being a leader. Giving up and throwing in the towel is easy. Working through periods of high pressure and not giving up is difficult. However, taking the more difficult route in times of pressure, excelling and successfully coming out at the other end is a fantastic feeling and one we should embrace as leaders.



Cathy O'Neill is currently the Senior Director, Patient Experience & Community Engagement for the newly formed health network of Providence Healthcare – St. Joseph's Health Centre – St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. In her role she leads the organization's strategy for providing the best possible experience for patients through positive change, application of evidence based practices and key partnerships within the organization and externally.

Cathy has worked in healthcare for over 25 years and is passionate about continuously seeking system and local level improvements to ensure all patients reach their full health potential and receive high-quality care that is fair and appropriate to them, no matter where they live, what they have or who they are..



Glain Roberts-McCabe is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.