



# NAILING IT

WHY SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP  
————— *DEMANDS* —————  
SUFFERING & SURRENDER

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FOREWORD BY CAREY NIEUWHOF



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Nailing It* by Nicole Massie Martin.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

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# THE REALITIES OF STRESS AND SUFFERING IN OUR PRESENT AGE



## COMPOUNDED PERSONAL STRESS

It was Friday at 6:13 p.m. He kept telling himself that he would stop after that one last email, but there were so many “lasts” that he lost count. He needed to respond to the issue that came up about the building so that everyone could get into the office on Monday. He had to reply to the legal team to make sure the organization was properly protected. He had no choice but to reply to one of his direct reports about a personnel issue that would likely lead to a dispute. He knew he could not ignore the message from the finance team asking for salaries and headcounts to determine the next steps in a potential reduction in force.

Like a good teacher, he answered each email in turn, responding as directly as possible, resolving each question quickly so that the next problem could step forward. This was how he was taught by his predecessor. “Real leaders

start early and stay late” was the refrain that echoed in his head every time his eyes fought against the heaviness of exhaustion. His brain was beginning to enter the fog zone as answers jumbled together and words lost their distinction. He had just been promoted to the C-suite above his peers, and it felt like they were all waiting to see him fail. But it was difficult to juggle the demands of a new job with the increasing demands of his aging mother. He moved into her neighborhood a few months ago to make sure he could check on her frequently, but her memory loss seemed to be more prevalent with each passing week. When he brought her dinner after yet another late night at work, he was heartbroken to hear her call him by the neighbor’s name. With so much stress in the office and so much stress at home, his life felt like an unstable stack of Jenga blocks, just waiting to fall on the next turn.

It was Thursday at 2:55 p.m. She sat at her computer with her to-do list on the left, food behind the screen, and two stale cups of coffee on the right. She had fifty-five tabs open on her screen, all demanding immediate attention. Her work screen reflected emails that needed responses, messages from colleagues that were still unread, and a task list that reprimanded her every time she saw it, rebuking her for all the boxes left unchecked while new tasks waited impatiently to be added. Her “side-hustle” screen revealed the fact that she was far too busy to even have a side hustle, but the necessary items left in her Amazon shopping cart said otherwise. Her “kids’ stuff” screen was also open, punishing her for not staying on top of school supplies or camp



registrations that would soon accumulate late fees. Her Zoom screen was in full-blown meeting mode, but she had perfected the art of keeping her eyes in one place, hoping that her colleagues could not tell that she was also responding to a text from her sister at the same time.

When her phone rang, she noticed the time and realized how quickly 8 a.m. turned to 2:55 p.m., which was five minutes past the time to leave the house and pick up the kids. With thoughts scattered, heart racing, and so much left undone, she typed her goodbye in the Zoom chat and grabbed her keys, knowing that all the screens she'd left behind would be anxiously awaiting her return.

I wonder if anything in these stories resonates with you. Maybe you can identify with what it means to juggle the demands of work and family at the same time. Perhaps you understand what it feels like to carry the invisible burdens of weighty decisions that keep you up at night. No one has to tell you that we are living in stressful times because you already know it. You feel it every time you wake up and fight it every time you lie down.

Stress can be defined differently for each of us and can be triggered in a variety of ways. My stress often comes from my inability to say no and from my tendency to take on more than I can possibly do at one time. Your stress may come from relationships or work or other areas that trigger the worst parts of who you are. Regardless of its origin or nature, every single one of us experiences stress of some kind during various parts of our days. For the most part, stress can be a helpful motivator to drive us to get things

done and to move things along in our lives. Yet, for many of us, stress can be a distraction from ourselves, from others, and even from God. When we are stressed, we cannot focus on other people and often struggle to figure out our needs. At the peak of our stress, when we are most in need of God, we are also most prone to turn away from God, trying to find quick fixes to problems that only God can solve. While humanity has always struggled with the daily challenges of work, care for family, personal health, and communal well-being, you and I must now deal with the compounded nature of these stressors. The simplicity of dealing with one stress at a time is gone and the complexity of simultaneously navigating multiple realities has come.

Take the 2020 pandemic, for example. It was never simply that the Covid-19 virus spread and extended quarantines were distressing. It was also the fact that the pandemic piled on top of family stress, which sat on top of pre-existing emotional trauma, which sat on top of relationship strains and difficulties at work and lack of connection at church and everything else. Nations have always had socioeconomic disparities, but the lack of natural resources today and lack of access for those most impoverished seems to have grown over time. Communities have always wrestled with divisions, but the overexposure to media coupled with the algorithms that keep people talking to people like themselves have expanded the walls that divide us today. While humanity has always wrestled with a multiplicity of tensions, what we feel and experience now is what some might call “a perfect stress storm” with

potential to affect us internally and externally, personally and collectively, nationally and globally. And this is what we bring with us to the workplace.

Chances are that you already know this. You can tell that people on your teams are a little more on edge now than they were before. Meetings seem a little more strained now than they were before 2019. Colleagues may seem more sensitive, more easily offended, more likely to be absent physically, emotionally, or mentally. This was especially true in 2021 when management professor Anthony Klotz coined the phrase “the Great Resignation.”<sup>1</sup> At that time, he anticipated that the increase of four unique trends at the height of the pandemic would lead to a massive resignation of the American workforce. He attributed this phenomenon to “an existing backlog of resignations as some workers chose to stay in their jobs because of the uncertainty resulting from the pandemic, widespread burnout among workers, widespread re-evaluation of priorities and values among workers and the reluctance of some workers to give up remote work.”<sup>2</sup> While Klotz believed the resignations would eventually subside as workplaces became more tolerable and people found themselves in more meaningful roles, the lingering effects of this moment in history will take many years to resolve. In the past, we could get away with not focusing as much on the needs of the workforce, believing that a paycheck would be enough to keep employees engaged. Instead, this new reality teaches us that people are demanding more from their workplaces and even more from faith-based organizations where they serve. And when

they do not receive what they need, they will resign or, even worse, quit quietly.

This idea of “quiet quitting” followed the trends of the Great Resignation with employees checking out of jobs they did not want. In 2022, Gallup found that more than 50 percent of the American workforce had quietly quit, performing at bare minimum levels for their jobs or less.<sup>3</sup> They were unwilling to do anything more than what was listed on the job description, silently separating themselves from any organizational affiliation. This was a significant problem because it signaled a noteworthy disconnect between employees and employers.<sup>4</sup> People became less engaged with their organizations because they did not feel that their work mattered. They did not feel cared for, they did not have clear expectations, they did not have pathways for growth, and they no longer felt part of something meaningful.

This was especially true for younger workers who were often at lower positions within organizations. During the pandemic, they felt even more isolated from their workplaces and colleagues, creating a greater rift between them and the people around them. They became disillusioned, lacking the mentorship and guidance necessary for future success. This only compounded the stress affecting younger workers and increased their anxieties around life and work. According to the American College Health Association, college graduates are entering the workplace with higher levels of anxiety and depression than the generations that preceded them.<sup>5</sup> They have learned to survive work, but their acute awareness of mental health makes them

unlikely to thrive or to stay when the workplace becomes emotionally unhealthy.

Women also experienced increased stress during the pandemic and in the years that followed. Women with children found themselves doing everything imaginable during the pandemic when many children were in virtual school at home. They were acting as coach, counselor, teacher, housekeeper, chef, and more, all while trying to maintain some sense of sanity themselves. Single women often kept longer work hours during the pandemic with less time or space to connect with friends or participate in community. Loneliness among women skyrocketed as social spaces became more limited, and many women began turning to other comforts to ease the pain. In 2019, the National Institute of Health found that rates of alcohol use disorder (AUD) increased in women by 84 percent over the past ten years relative to a 35 percent increase in men.<sup>6</sup> The normalization of alcohol use as a means of coping with stress was already rising before 2020, making this pandemic the perfect storm for the rise in alcohol-related deaths among women.<sup>7</sup> While some of these realities will subside over time, the lingering effects of these challenges will continue for many years to come, reshaping the workplace as we have known it.

The pandemic also proved to be stressful for some ethnic and racial groups, specifically in Black, Asian, Jewish, and Latino communities. In early 2020, news that the spread of Covid-19 originated in China led to a rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans.<sup>8</sup> People wanted someone to blame

and felt like Asians were ideal targets for their pain. While Black Americans remain the most targeted group for hate crimes, they too saw an increase in traumatic murders and hate crimes during this season. Millions of people watched as George Floyd's life was snuffed out as he suffocated under a police officer's knee, further underscoring the racialization of death for petty crimes. Black men dying for small infractions has become a common occurrence in America, and while some called 2020 a year of "racial reckoning," others felt that nothing changed. Jewish communities also faced increasing fear of crimes against them as antisemitic rhetoric and crimes rose as much as 36 percent in the years following the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> The growing harassment online seemed to be bolstered by political agendas that made even synagogues feel unsafe. Anti-immigration sentiments also grew, affecting Latino communities across the United States. Even those who grew up in America felt the tensions of victimization. These growing crimes and mounting statistics have created an environment of fear and lack of trust that affects how many people show up for work each day.

As if that weren't enough, Americans are experiencing the collective stress of growing political divides. In 2020, Pew Research found that more than two-thirds of the country believed we were more divided than we were before the pandemic. We are divided not only by who we vote for but also by the demonization of the other side. In 2020, 89 percent of Donald Trump supporters felt that Joe Biden's election would lead to lasting harm to our country, while

90 percent of Biden supporters felt the exact same about Trump.<sup>10</sup> The deep divisions of politics made everything feel political, from vaccines to criminal justice and even decisions made about schools. These strains were so palpable in families and in churches that people found themselves unable to have conversations with others who did not see things as they did. The idea of civil dialogue was nearly lost as violence grew against those with opposing views. This was no longer an issue of differing opinions. This felt like a division of values and expectations, affecting how we live, how we lead, and yes, even how we work together.

The stressors of our times are so expansive that it would be impossible to name them all. We can go through every category of people, every major life event, and every organizational flaw to find what we already know: stress affects us all in different ways and at different times. What is unique about this time is the fact that organizations and workplaces are not immune to the impacts of individual stress and trauma. In the past, leadership remained somewhat inoculated from the challenges of life around it, believing that leaders who were consistent in the pursuit of vision would most certainly succeed. But the stress and challenges of our times have caused a fundamental shift in how we show up in the world, how we show up in the workplace, and therefore, how we lead in the midst of it. We can no longer lead teams as if everyone is the same. We can no longer lead blindly, as if race, gender, age, politics, or other differences do not matter. Doing so would run the risk of compounding the stress people are already

experiencing, making the workplace potentially more toxic and the organization's mission less likely to be achieved. Instead, the best way to lead in times of immense stress, trauma, and pressure is not to avoid it but to enter into it. Rather than to ignore the stress that affects us and others, perhaps the calling from God is to enter into that stress as means of bringing radical redemption and hope for times like these.

## A THEOLOGY OF ENTERING IN

The scariest part about a haunted house is going inside. When you're standing outside, you can see what you are about to enter. The decor is so disinviting that everything around the house literally screams, "Do not enter!" Those who are crazy enough to take steps forward often do so at their own risk. They may even see a sign or hear a voice that says, "Enter if you dare," but if you can make it through the door, you're more than halfway through.

Knowing that Jesus entered humanity through his birth almost feels like entering a haunted house. I imagine the darkness of the world and the sin of humanity felt a lot like the signs and sounds that screamed, "Enter if you dare!" The risk of entrusting divinity in humanity was extremely high as light became life and Spirit took on flesh. But, despite the warning signs and the dangers, Jesus dared to enter the world haunted by sin to prove his love for all creation. He entered into the stress of the times, choosing to be born to a family that didn't even have enough money for a proper room. While he could have magically appeared

as a conquering adult king, he chose to enter this world through the stress and strain of childbirth, appearing as a helpless child. He entered into the tensions of both birth-rights and adoptive care, coming directly from God by way of the Holy Spirit, through Mary and cared for by Joseph. The stress of his birth was compounded by the stress of the required census, which was compounded by the vulnerable position of the Jews under the Romans, which was compounded by the complexities of a covenantal promise and the Jews' faith in a coming Messiah.

The incarnation of Christ is God's voluntary acknowledgment of humanity's stress. Being born in a stressful time, in a stressful manner, was one of the many ways that God demonstrated his understanding of the traumas that negatively affect our lives. He did not choose to stand apart from our stress, though that would have certainly been an easier route. Instead, he chose to stand with us in our stress, being born as we are born, struggling as we struggle, taking in both personal and communal realities that cause stress to every generation. And yet, because he was born into this stress, his birth became the pathway to our redemption. Through his birth, Jesus modeled that even the most stressful situations can be redeemed and our darkest nights of pain can turn into the brightest days of hope.

In the first words of his Gospel account, John illustrated the redemption that happened when Jesus entered in. Mirroring the language of Genesis, John described Jesus as the Word who was in the beginning with God and who was God (John 1:1-2). He went on to say that Jesus was not only the

Word, he was also the incarnation of life, which is the light to shine in the darkness of our humanity (John 1:4-5). This light, John says, will shine in the darkness but will not be overcome by it. It will be present in pain but not overwhelmed by it. The light of Christ will exist in times of intense stress and struggle but will not be overtaken by them. By taking on flesh and dwelling among us, Jesus as the Word, the life, and the light modeled his power both to understand and transform everything we experience in this world (John 1:14). He simultaneously validated and diminished the darkness by showing up as light. As the One who is life and gives eternal life, Jesus validated and defeated death as we know it. With just his miraculous presence through incarnation, Jesus became the One who both understood us and changed us for all eternity.

Incarnation teaches us the value of validating our realities to diminish their power in the presence of God. But the only way to fully experience the redemptive power of this life as light is to fully understand the depths of the darkness. We have an invitation from God to understand stress and suffering by entering it as a means of redeeming it. While we cannot always change the things that stress us, we can expose them to the truth of God's Word so that he can redeem them for our good. Every stress and every struggle can be redeemed for God's glory and our good! Therefore, when we enter the realities of stress around us and take time to understand what people are going through, we make room for God to redeem that stress for God's glory and our good. We enter into the pain of



suffering when we learn the challenges that others face and are willing to understand with empathy and grace. Renowned psychologist and trauma counselor Diane Langberg said, “We are called to enter into relationships centered on suffering so that we might reveal in flesh and blood the nature of the Crucified One.”<sup>11</sup> When we enter the pain and suffering of others, we also enter the pain and suffering of Christ who stands in solidarity with us. This presence in suffering is not just for the sake of unity and comradery but for the purpose of redemption, bringing creativity, healing, and hope.

Every relationship presents us with an opportunity to enter the realities of others as Christ entered our realities through his birth. As leaders, we enter not simply to validate and understand but also to transform and create together what no one could create alone. Leadership that is both empathic and redemptive makes room to see people where they are while simultaneously bringing them to where they could be. This powerful experience allows team members, volunteers, and staff to feel seen and heard, giving them greater motivation to serve and grow with others. But the opposite is also true when leaders refuse to enter the stress and suffering of others. By rejecting the opportunity to enter in, we run the risk of assuming that everyone is just like us. We short-circuit our compassion by not truly understanding who and where people are. We limit our connections with shallow conversations that hardly ever allow people to be seen or heard. In the workplace, leaders who refuse to enter the stress of others are

more likely to run them over, using them like tools in a toolbox that can be easily replaced when they wear down. This further exacerbates stress for those who are most vulnerable, making them less effective for themselves, for their team, and even for God.

Entering the pain, stress, and trauma of others requires that we see our teams and organizations as places of healing and not simply places of work. It might sound idealistic, but given the depth of trauma that faces each generation and the intensity of stress that mounts with every passing moment, this might be a significant factor for employee recruitment and retention for years to come. People want to work where they feel valued and seen. They want to serve in contexts where leaders care about who they are and not just about what they do. Workplaces with demonstrative empathy and compassion are far more successful at keeping and recruiting new team members than those who are not. In this way, entering into the stress and pain of others is not simply good theology, it's also good sense.

## DEBUNKING EMPATHY MYTHS

If entering into the stress and realities of others helps increase employee engagement, then why doesn't it happen more often, especially in Christian workplaces? Unfortunately, while the motivators for doing what is right may be clear, the incentive for doing what is wrong is often very appealing. The only way to change organizational and leadership behaviors is by naming the myths and lies we tend to believe and beginning the process of replacing

them with the truth. As we consider the importance of entering in, here are a few common misplaced reasons why we don't, and what we can do about them:

1. *Entering the stress and realities of others validates their dysfunction.* Not all stress is dysfunctional, and it typically does not last forever. While it might feel like we are endorsing where people are at the start, we do so as a means of bringing them into new realities through their role on a larger team. Acknowledging where people are in the moment is the start, not the destination.
2. *Showing empathy at work is a waste of time and money.* This can certainly feel true in the short term when, say, a manager is taking time away from a specific task to hear and understand the stress and pain that a team member suffers. But in the long term, empathy increases belonging, which creates an environment for greater productivity, not less. Taking the time to understand the pain of current team members is ultimately less expensive and time consuming than hiring someone else with presumably fewer needs.
3. *Entering into the lives of others is depressing.* It can be difficult to enter into stressful situations and stories that are not our own, especially when we have not been through similar pain ourselves. But Brené Brown suggests, “Empathy is a way to connect to the emotion another person is experiencing; it doesn't require that we have experienced the same situation they are

going through.”<sup>12</sup> We can add to this that empathy does not require that we take on the stress of others, simply that we hear, acknowledge, and strive to understand. Being a light in someone’s darkness does not have to dim your light.

4. *Weak people who need this level of care should not be working.* If this were the case, it’s likely that none of us would be equipped to serve in organizations at various points in our lives! Just because someone is dealing with stress does not mean they are incapable of working. In cases where this really is true and someone’s stress or pain is sincerely keeping them from doing the job, there are numerous health resources that can help both the staff member and the organization to get the additional support they need (some of these include the Society for Human Resource Management, local and national Employee Assistance Programs, or employer/employee health insurance benefits).
5. *We shouldn’t have to change the organization to accommodate a small group of hurting people.* The assumption that most people at work are stress-, pain-, and trauma-free while only a handful are not is simply not true. Stress and painful experiences are present in every person and in every generation. When we adjust to accommodate those who are most affected by stress and painful realities, we make the organization better for everyone, regardless of what they may be experiencing in life.

6. *The only people who need this level of empathy are women, young people, and minorities.* Every single one of us can be affected by the realities of stress, trauma, and pain, regardless of our gender, age, or ethnicity. To blindly assume that White people or men or older people do not experience stress is to miss an opportunity to demonstrate Christlike empathy for others. While some stressors may affect us differently and some groups may be subject to greater amounts of systemic stress, our ability to tend to the needs of all people will be critical to organizational success.
7. *The workplace is not a church.* As church attendance continues to decrease in America and Christians become less affiliated with religious institutions, it is very likely that the workplace might be one of the few places where people can feel the love of God. No, the workplace is not the place for Communion, Eucharist, baptism, or other sacraments. We are not obligated to keep people at work in the way that we would fight to keep them in our religious communities. But the calling to lead with empathy and compassion is not limited to the pulpit and the pews. This calling should permeate our lives, causing our teams and organizations to be transformed by the light and life of Christ, regardless of where we work.

We can no longer afford to see leadership apart from those we lead. Given all that people have gone through and all that now affects each generation, the only way we can

lead well now is by entering into the stress and pain of others with redemption, compassion, and grace. Redemptive leadership takes time to understand where people are in order to bring them to where they can be with empathy and love. In the words of practical theologian Rodney Cooper, “Redemptive leadership suggests that God does not use us *in spite* of who we are. He uses us *because* of who we are.”<sup>13</sup> When we make spaces within our leadership styles and organizations to enter into the stress affecting others, we reinforce this beautiful invitation to join where God is working (John 5:17, 19-20). The incarnation proves that we are loved, seen, known, and heard not in spite of who we are but because of who we are as precious and valuable children of God.



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