



Stress, gender, and leadership

A research study from
The Myers-Briggs Company

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Do leaders experience more or less stress than the rest?

What images come to mind when you think of people in top executive leadership roles? Many people naturally think of these positions as high-powered, stressful, and demanding. However, research suggests this may not be the case. We wanted to understand how stress affects leaders at different levels in an organization.

What factors affect stress in leaders?

Research suggests three key things affect how stressed people feel at work¹:

1. Demands – the higher the demands placed on you, the higher the stress
2. Control – the more control or choice you have, the lower the stress
3. Support – the more support, resources, and time you have, the lower the stress.

It's likely that managers have more demanding jobs. However, leaders with more authority and power can feel a greater sense of control over their work lives. So, despite higher demands, leaders could feel more in control and, therefore, less stressed².

In research by the Centre for Creative Leadership³, leaders said they experienced stress from their managers, colleagues, and direct reports. This suggests different factors (and different people!) may add to, or reduce, stress at different management positions. There is unlikely to be a simple relationship between organizational level and stress.

Our research

In several of our previous research studies, we have looked at the stress levels of people at different organizational levels. We have investigated stress in the context of the "always-on" culture, where people find it difficult or impossible to switch off; stress related to email usage; and stress in the context of cybersecurity. By looking at all three studies together, we have been able to identify some common patterns. These findings are based on data from a total of 1182 women and 485 men.

¹Karasek, R.A., Brisson, C., Kawakami, N., Houtman, I., Bongers, P., & Amick, B. (1998). The job content questionnaire (JCQ): An instrument for internationally comparative assessment of psychosocial job characteristics. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 3, 322-355.

²Sherman, G. D., Lee, J. J., Cuddy, A. J., Renshon, J., Oveis, C., Gross, J. J., & Lerner, J. S. (2012). Leadership is associated with lower levels of stress. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109(44), 17903-17907.

³Campbell, M., Baltes, J.I., Martin, A. & Meddings, K. (2007) "The stress of leadership." Center for creative leadership 10.11.

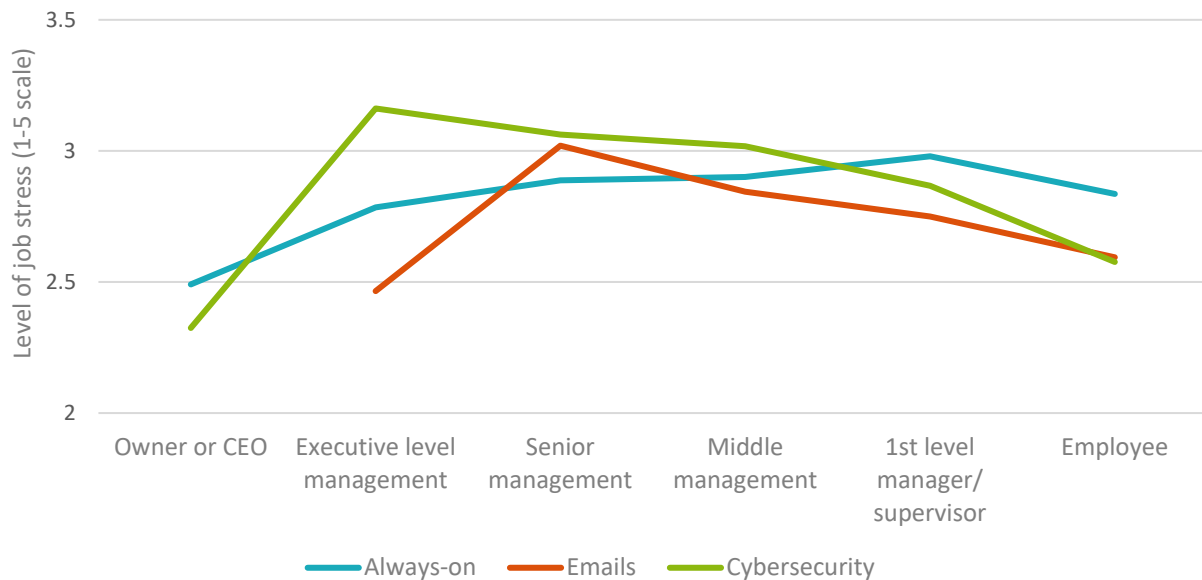
Key findings and conclusions

Middle and senior managers report the highest stress levels

When looking at overall stress levels of leaders, we found a similar pattern across all three studies. Stress levels peaked in middle and senior management positions, but stress levels tended to be lower in non-managers and top executive positions. Being at the top and bottom of an organization seems to be least stressful.

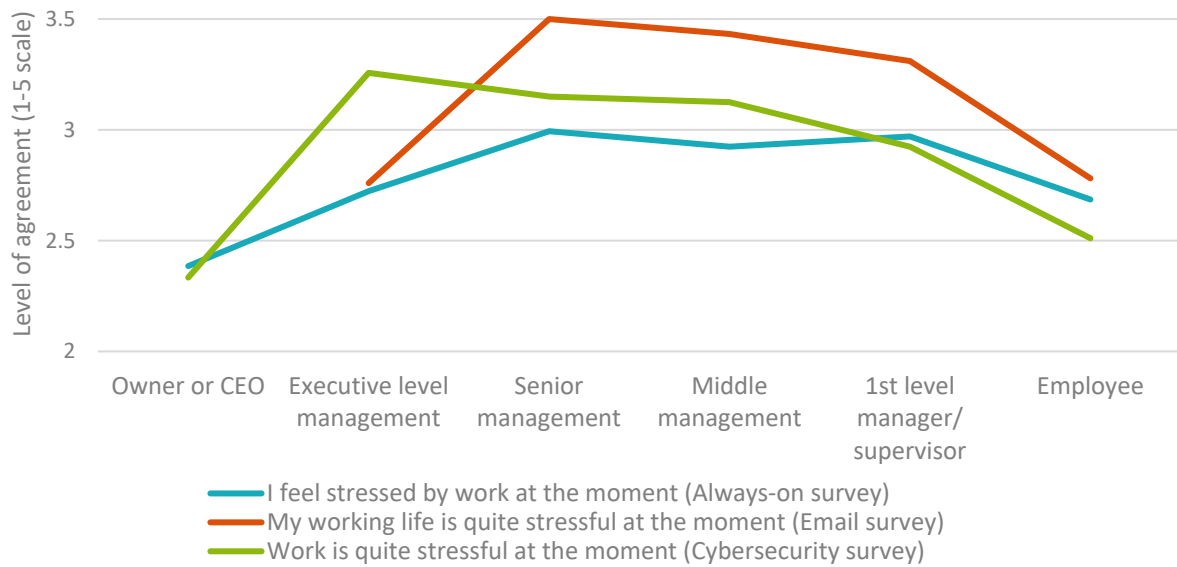
Owners or CEOs reported the lowest levels of stress, but many of these were self-employed rather than working in large organizations.

Average levels of job stress for people at different organizational levels



In each of the three studies we asked people to say whether they agreed with the statement “work is stressful at the moment” or similar. The same curved pattern was found, with stress levels peaking at middle management and senior management level.

Average levels of agreement with the statement "Work is stressful at the moment" at different organizational levels

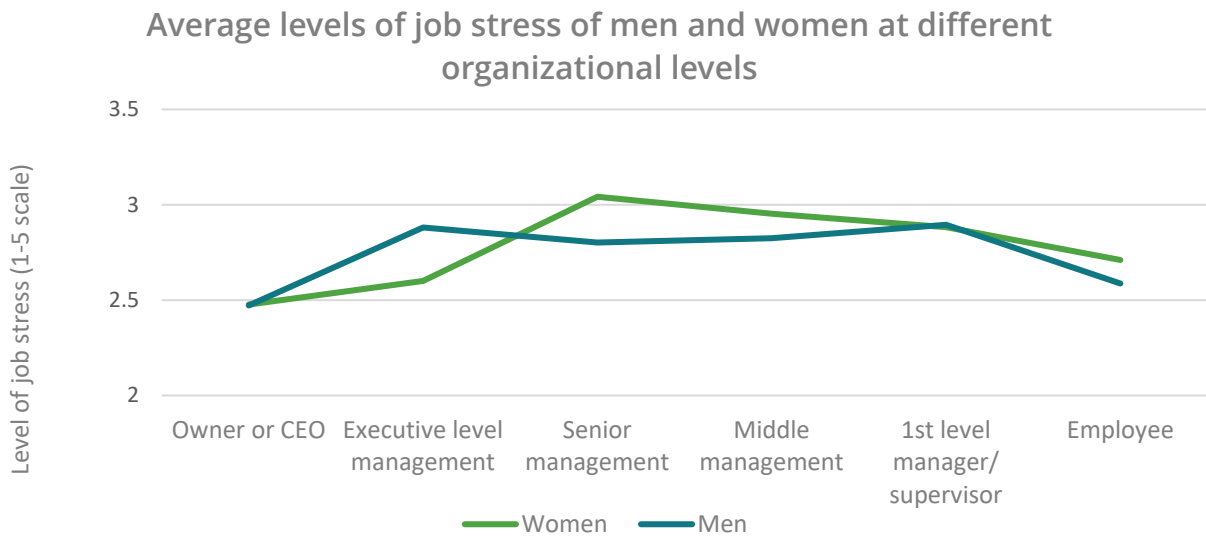


However, there's a different picture when we look at differences between men and women at different levels.

Men and women leaders have different stress levels

Although there was some variation across the three studies, we found that stress levels for women were more extreme. Stress levels peaked at Senior management level and then dropped significantly at Executive level management level. The lowest stress levels were, again, reported at “owner or CEO level”, many of whom were self-employed.

For men, the pattern was less obvious. Non-managers and Owner/CEOs tended to report lower stress levels, but overall, it seems that the pattern is simply flatter – there is less variation in stress levels for men at different levels.



A similar pattern was found when people were asked to rate how much they agreed with some version of the statement “Work is quite stressful at the moment.” For women, there was a curved relationship between organizational level and stress. For men, there was a flatter relationship between level and stress.



Women report higher stress than men at middle and senior management positions, but significantly lower stress at executive level

Overall, if we compare stress levels of men and women leaders, we find the biggest differences at middle and senior management level. Here, women tend to report higher job stress than men. However, at executive levels, women's stress levels drop significantly.

There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, middle and senior management positions may be more stressful for women than men. These positions are often characterized by a need to prove yourself as a leader. Once executive level is achieved, that pressure diminishes as you have already proven your competence.

Another possibility is that women who are better at dealing with stress (whether that's natural or learned) are the ones that tend to make it into executive level management positions.

Finally, there are other factors, for example age, that can affect stress levels and leadership position. We experience predictable life changes as we advance through life, such as starting a family, starting to look after parents and the effects of aging. These events can affect our stress levels and they may coincide with reaching middle and senior management positions. Owners and CEOs are likely to have more control over their work, helping to reduce stress.

Considering all the factors that affect leaders can help organizations reduce biases when selecting leaders and helping them to manage their stress levels as they progress.