Managers' mental health during the pandemic – the good, the bad, and the ugly

*The job of a manager is often stressful during normal times. But a pandemic changes everything. **Lorenz Graf-Vlachy** finds that one of the factors affecting manager's mental health during the COVID-19 crisis is having to perform tasks that they feel they shouldn't have to be doing. He discusses how organisations can help managers overcome their distress.*

Managing an organisation is usually a stressful job. Leading others and being responsible for others' work without having a direct impact on the output, is not an easy task in the best of times. In fact, management is one of the occupational groups with the [highest rates of suicides](). But how does a pandemic affect managers' mental health? Who is particularly affected and why?

In a [recent study](), we surveyed more than 600 experienced managers across the globe to assess their mental health, and to understand what influences it. We made several key discoveries.

First, the (kind of) good news. Overall, our survey respondents reported comparably low levels of mental health issues. This might be partially explained by the fact that the people we surveyed were alumni of one of the most selective global management consulting firms. They all first went through an extensive screening process and later doubtlessly experienced gruelling working hours and stressful assignments during their consulting careers. We thus might have had a sample of managers who were particularly resilient to begin with. Of course, this does not mean that the pandemic did not affect them, and that they did not have mental health issues. In fact, about five per cent of the sample reported clinically relevant levels of distress, and about ten per cent reported moderate or severe anxiety or depression.

Second, the bad factors that drove mental health issues. For one, younger managers were affected much more than older managers across the board. This might simply be because younger managers had less experience and thus found it harder to adjust their management work to changing circumstances. For another, relative income (compared to others in their country) was related to anxiety and depression, with poorly paid managers being more likely to suffer from mental health issues. Finally, and perhaps not surprisingly, those who were temporarily not working during Covid-19 also reported greater distress.

Third, and perhaps most interestingly, the ugly truth of managerial work in a pandemic. In our study, we asked managers to report how many [illegitimate tasks]() they had to perform due to Covid-19. Illegitimate tasks are tasks that a person feels they should not have to perform. On the one hand, such tasks might be viewed as unreasonable, e.g., because they are outside a manager's professional role or at odds with a manager's experience level. On the other hand, illegitimate tasks can be tasks that are seen as unnecessary, e.g., because they could have been prevented from arising in the first place, or because a manager simply cannot see what purpose they serve. Our results showed that unnecessary tasks were significantly related to both managers' distress and depression, and that unreasonable tasks were associated with managers' distress, anxiety, and depression.

While our study did not collect any evidence on what kinds of illegitimate tasks managers had to perform, it is easy to speculate. The sudden shift to remote work and the substantial disruptions of work processes in the earlier phases of the pandemic likely caused a lot of work that was not commensurable with managers' view of their own responsibilities. When the assistant is no longer in the room next door, managers might have to perform menial tasks themselves all of a sudden. When remote work makes delegation harder, managers' might feel that they had to "micromanage" their subordinates more than before. Also, support structures in managers' personal lives might have crumbled. With lockdowns in many countries, childcare was frequently limited, possibly leading to the "illegitimate" task of caring for small children or home-schooling older kids.

Of course, one can debate if any of such tasks should rightfully be considered as illegitimate, or whether managers were simply used to a certain level of support they should not be taking for granted in the first place. But this does not change the fact that the perception of illegitimate tasks was strongly linked to managers' mental health.

Organisational leaders (ironically, managers themselves) and human resource departments should thus pay attention to such tasks in situations of crisis like a pandemic. Leaving managers, often some of the organisation's most expensive and impactful people, alone with illegitimate tasks may backfire. Not only may managers themselves suffer mental health consequences, but if mental health issues affect their leadership work, this may have substantial negative impacts on subordinates, too.

Specifically, organisations should consider how to address illegitimate tasks. Beyond the obvious need to offer support with any unavoidable mental health consequences, they might wish to do two things: For one, they should offer managers adequate support in identifying, removing, automating, or reassigning illegitimate tasks. For another, they may also help reframe, explain, and justify certain tasks that initially seem illegitimate to make them legitimate parts of managers' roles.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on [Predictors of managers' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), European Journal of Psychotraumatology.*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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