



BOOK REVIEW: HENRY L. THOMPSON'S (2010) *THE STRESS EFFECT*

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Stuart A. Allen

University of La Verne, USA

Henry L. Thompson's (2010) *The Stress Effect* provides a unique exploration of the impact of stress on leaders' decision-making, viewing the leader through the lenses of cognition, emotion, and stress management, and providing practical insight on how to cope with and avoid stress. Thompson's submission provides a well-grounded understanding with useful anecdotes and examples, as well as a practical primer for stress resilience.

Henry L. Thompson's (2010) *The Stress Effect: Why Smart Leaders Make Dumb Decisions* provides a valuable contribution in an area that has been somewhat neglected amongst recent leadership books—the issue of leadership and decision-making under stress. While this topic might at first be seen as somewhat narrow, it is important to remember that leadership and decision-making frequently take place in a context of stress, making this topic broadly applicable to leaders and leadership scholars.

Considering recent concern about stress in the workplace (e.g., Lafair, 2009), Thompson's book is recommended as vital reading for leaders and leadership scholars. Despite the gamut of emotional intelligence and leadership books in the last two decades, many do not directly address the challenges of stress in leadership, and few hone in on the critical topic of stress and its impact on the leader's ability to make good decisions. This book is not an in-depth exploration of decision-making theory and techniques, but rather Thompson helps readers understand how dumb decisions are made and how organizations and leaders can work to manage the effects of stress.

Content

The book begins with a powerful nosedive into a second-by-second experience of Captain Sullenberger and First Officer Skiles as they piloted a US Airways Airbus A320 into the Hudson River in January 2009. This highly publicized event provides a useful backdrop to various portions of the book as the author explores the cognitive and emotional processes that this flight's leadership team applied in a relevant, real-time event that lasted less than five minutes. While it is a common approach for recent leadership books to prey upon major media events, corporate failures, and heroic leaders' rhetoric on their leadership experiences, Thompson handles the Hudson River landing story unobtrusively, focusing the use of the story in a manner consistent with the overall purpose of the book. Through an insightful analysis of this event, Thompson begins the book's exploration of leaders functioning under stress.

After the introduction, Thompson (2010) moved into his opening chapter on how leaders make 'dumb' decisions, thereafter structuring his book broadly around the connections between cognition, emotion, and stress and the outcomes of decisions. While the cognitive and emotional components of the model address their namesake, the stress management component addresses a broader spectrum of stress management issues, including identifying stressors and relaxation. Chapters two through five provide insight into the anatomy of decision-making through the lenses of cognition, emotion, and stress, while chapters five through eight provide readers with insight into practicing the changes needed to cope with and reduce stress. Thompson concluded *The Stress Effect* with a chapter focusing on his trademarked 7-point graphic ARSENAL model, which explores best practices for stress management in Awareness, Rest, Support, Exercise, Nutrition, Attitude, and Learning. Thompson also provided many other models in the book, including a seven-step problem-solving model, a perception-to-action model (called PAMA), and stress-resilient system model.

Compared to the Rest

While comparable texts have been published in the area of emotional intelligence dealing with leaders' thoughts and emotions and which include personal applications for self-leadership, few focus directly on the issue of stress and decision-making. Relative to the flurry of interest in emotional intelligence in the popular literature, Thompson provides a more even-handed account of the role of emotional intelligence versus cognitive intelligence in effective leadership. Many other popular press texts have elevated emotional intelligence as being disproportionately more important than cognitive ability, subsequently ignoring the role of cognition and cognitive ability in being an effective leader.

Books published in recent years that might compare with *The Stress Effect* include *Resonant Leadership* (2005), by Boyatzis and McKee; *Primal Leadership* (2002), by Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee; and *The Leadership Mystique* (2009), by Kets De Vries. All of these books touch on some stress related issues as well as effectiveness in the inner emotional being and the cognitive world of leading. While there have been a number of books published in popular self-help areas that address cognition, emotion, stress, and balance, none appear to address the issue of stress, decision-making, and leadership with the integration of academic substance and practical application that Thompson does.

The Author

Without reading the inside jacket, most readers would recognize Thompson's writing for his psychological education and predilection. Thompson runs a consultancy, High Performing Systems, as the founder, president, and CEO, but does not attempt to punt this organization as is ungracefully done in some other mainstream leadership texts. This gives the reader a sense of Thompson's genuine intention to benefit the reader in writing the book.

Thompson holds a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Georgia, but he also boasts a 21-year military career and was once a professor and department chair at this same university. He has a long history in working with leaders under stress, which began during his early military experience with stress on the battlefield. The FIRO-B®, Jungian type, teams, emotional intelligence, leadership, and chaos theory are just some of his many areas of expertise. As a speaker, author, and consultant, Thompson brings his military, Fortune 500 consulting, and personal experience to the reader. Having academic heritage in his approach, Thompson writes in a style that is illustrative and easy to read, but that is also anchored in theory and research.

Readers

The Stress Effect has the potential to be beneficial to both academic and leadership audiences. With solid reference to current research and current illustrations, examples, and anecdotes, this book provides easy reading for a range of audiences. This book sits on the edge of the fields of psychology, business, and leadership, with useful references to each of them. The book is definitely not a textbook, and it is not the anecdotal meanderings of many consultant- or leader-authors. Thompson recognizes academic research, writes for an audience interested in leadership in action, and finds a good middle ground between 'real-world' leadership and scholarly understandings.

Observations and Appraisal

Thompson's proposal in *The Stress Effect* cannot be reduced to any single solution or theory. However, his Stress-Resilient System Model summarizes the notion that leaders can maximize their ability to be effective under stress through developing emotional and cognitive competence combined with stress management, which includes reducing stress and coping better with stress. The book shifts from the conceptual to practical and utilizes about as much research commentary as the mainstream leadership reader will cope with. Thompson provides plentiful notes and references at the end of the book, demonstrating his grounding in current research and thinking.

While I would unashamedly recommend this book to fellow leadership practitioners and scholars, a few observations can be made. Of the 286 pages making up the chapters of the book, the bulk address understanding and knowledge instead of practical steps on how to make the changes necessary to become a more stress-resilient leader. It is often a delicate challenge for authors to balance knowledge and understanding versus a how-to-guide of practical steps for action without declining into a seven-steps-to-everything guidebook. Some of Thompson's suggestions for improvement include lists of techniques, but he infrequently explores these methods in depth or highlights how these techniques can make a difference. Most readers will get the message and know to start seeking and implementing changes, but a little more detail on

some practices might be useful for future editions. Like many other organizational leadership books, a workbook to follow *The Stress Effect* might be a useful supplement. Similarly, updates of the book every few years would keep the anecdotes and examples current.

While this book provides numerous useful and accessible models, diagrams, and tools (such as the monitoring dashboard, bubble model, and ARSENAL model), it is free from the somewhat trite now-assess-yourself and do-it-now exercises that often bulk up other mainstream leadership texts. The book is designed and printed to a high industry specification with an appealing cover and no noticeable production errors.

While Dr. Thompson provides anecdotes and illustrations from various arenas—including law enforcement, corporate, non-profit, sporting, health, and education—the book is peppered with military examples from Thompson's 21 years of service. While the military anecdotes might frustrate some readers, the inclusion of these personal examples and experiences gives the book a very authentic feel.

Conclusion

The Stress Effect offers insight into more effective leadership founded on a higher quality of decision-making through mitigating the impact of stress. This book is likely to be useful to a broad audience and has applicability to anyone involved or interested in leadership. When wading through the mass of books written on leadership, Thompson's addition is real, easy to read, and substantial. With few alternatives, *The Stress Effect* is a worthy text to arm readers in overcoming the effects of stress.

About the Author

Dr. Stuart Allen is an assistant professor of leadership at the University of La Verne, California. Stuart is a graduate of the Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at Regent University, with a special interest in the inner world of leaders and effective self-leadership. Stuart practiced as an industrial psychologist in South Africa for 11 years, taking on numerous leadership roles before transitioning into full-time graduate leadership teaching.

Email: sallen2@laverne.edu

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