

CEOs May Find It Lonely At The Top, But Not Stressful

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It's lonely at the top — and we often assume it's stressful too. Golf outings and retreats are designed to help executives unwind, but it turns out their underlings may be far more stressed out. A new study has found that as leadership rank increases, stress levels decline. Melissa Block speaks with Jennifer Lerner of Harvard University, the study's lead author.

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Melissa Block. It may indeed be lonely at the top, but apparently it's not as stressful as you might expect. New research finds that people in leadership positions show lower levels of stress and anxiety than workers further down the chain. Jennifer Lerner was on the research team at Harvard, which studied middle to high level officials from government, the military, business and nonprofits and she joins me to talk about what they found. Jennifer Lerner, welcome to the program.

JENNIFER LERNER: Thank you. Delighted to be here.

BLOCK: I gather in your study you measured both how stressed leaders said they were but you also took a physical measure through saliva samples. What did they show?

LERNER: The saliva samples are used to measure the quantity of a stress hormone called cortisol. And the higher the cortisol level, the higher the stress response. And what we found is that people who were higher on leadership status had lower cortisol levels.

BLOCK: Now were you testing these leaders while they were actually doing their jobs because if you weren't, I'm trying to figure out how that would correlate, how the samples you found would correlate with actual stress levels.

LERNER: So we bring them into my laboratory and they fill out a variety of different validated questionnaires and we measure their baseline cortisol. They actually drool into these special saliva collection devices, which is quite interesting since we have many high level leaders - military colonels and generals, et cetera.

BLOCK: It was really an experiment in humiliation as well as stress.

LERNER: But they actually are very happy to do it, so we did not measure what you might call cortisol reactivity which is if you give them something stressful to do and then you measure how much their cortisol levels rise. What we measured was baseline cortisol.

BLOCK: Well, what do you think accounts for the fact that people in leadership positions show lower levels of stress than the people farther down the chain?

LERNER: Well we actually have a study that gets at that. The second study in our paper is a new sample of only leaders. What we hypothesized and found is that when people have perceptions of control, then that reduces cortisol.

BLOCK: I wonder if it could correlate too with the fact that the higher up the chain you are, the fewer day-to-day decisions you might have to make that can just drive you crazy, cause all sorts of stress. That they're inoculated in a way from the things that can bog the rest of us down.

LERNER: Well, we don't have data on the specific question you asked, however, our

data indicate that it's not so much what you're doing as your perceptions of what you're doing. Many middle level managers can make decisions, but they don't have the control to implement them or, you know, to carry them out. So there right now in a lot of organizations are golf outings and stress-reducing activities for the top leaders. But this data suggests they're actually already doing pretty well, and it's more the middle managers who could benefit from having more of a sense of control.

BLOCK: And they're the ones who might need the golf outings.

LERNER: Exactly.

BLOCK: Might one explanation for what you found be sort of the inverse of what you're concluding which would be that the people who become top leaders already have less of a tendency to become stressed? In other words, that's how they rise to the top.

LERNER: Absolutely. It could be that the causality direction runs the way you're suggesting, or it could be the reverse that just being at that high a level, having that much influence, reduces the stress. Or, it could be both. And what we need to do in the future is test these different causal pathways.

BLOCK: Well, Professor Lerner, thanks so much for talking with us today.

LERNER: It's my pleasure.

BLOCK: Jennifer Lerner, with Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. She's the lead author of a new study showing that people at higher levels of leadership have lower levels of stress.

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