

The Microstress Effect with Rob Cross and Karen Dillon

“The problem is we’re getting hit with a volume, velocity, and pace of [microstresses] that our minds weren’t really designed to absorb.[...] Our bodies are reacting to this, and we slowly take ourselves out of things that add meaning to us.”

Rob Cross & Karen Dillon

Co-Authors, *The Microstress Effect*

This is an AI-generated, lightly edited transcript of a [Thinkers & Ideas](#) podcast interview published by the BCG Henderson Institute (BHI) on April 18, 2023. You can listen to this conversation on BHI’s website, [Apple Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#), or wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Martin Reeves:

I'm Martin Reeves, chairman of the BCG Henderson Institute. Welcome to our Thinkers & Ideas podcast, where we discuss important new books and ideas in business. Joining me today is Rob Cross and Karen Dillon. Rob is a professor of global leadership at Babson College in Massachusetts, and he writes about all sorts of things in the organizational domain: effective organizations, high performers. And Karen is a former editor of *Harvard Business Review*, and also a multiple-time author with well-known books such as *How Will You Measure Your Life*, *Competing Against Luck*, and *The Prosperity Paradox*. Together, they've created a new book, very interesting new book, which comes out in April 2023 from Harvard Business Press called *The Microstress Effect: How Little Things Pile Up and Create Big Problems*. They define what microstresses are, they explain how they impact all of us, and propose some strategies for dealing with microstressors. That's what we're going to be talking about today. Congratulations on the book and welcome, Rob and Karen.

Karen Dillon:

Thank you, Martin.

Rob Cross:

Wonderful. Thank you so much.

Martin Reeves:

Let's start at the beginning. Microstress, I think we probably all have heard the word but probably couldn't define it. What actually is the microstress?

Karen Dillon:

Well, it's, actually, you may not have heard the word because it's a term we came up with to describe something we were seeing in our research, but we didn't think we had the right language for. What we mean by microstress are tiny moments of stress that are caused by interactions,

routine interactions often, with people in our personal and professional lives. The moments are so routine that we barely notice them, but whose cumulative effect can be very debilitating.

Martin Reeves:

Should we be concerned about this, because if something is virtually invisible and small in effect, why is this more important than it might seem?

Rob Cross:

One of the reasons is that we don't tend to notice them if they're small moments. You sense misalignment with a colleague, and you worry about how you're going to solve that issue in the future. You see a teammate that needs to be coached for the third time, and you're wondering about how you're going to keep engagement. None of these things in isolation are actually big deals. Especially for highly successful people, you're taught to just overcome, overcome, overcome. The problem is we're getting hit with a volume, velocity, and pace of these things that our minds weren't really designed to absorb. We go through the days, and our brains aren't triggering any of these as fight-or-flight responses, and really getting our attention, like the demanding client or the really overly aggressive stakeholder in your lives. But our bodies are absorbing it.

What we know is that that stress just accumulates in the same way that more natural stress or conventional stress does, and it affects blood pressure, it affects mood in different ways. There's one study that we found that even showed that if we eat a meal when we're under this form of social stress, we metabolize that meal at 104 more calories on average. If you do that over the course of a year, that's 11 pounds that we're adding.

That's a really big deal. In various ways, our bodies are reacting to this, as well as the way we structure our lives and slowly take ourselves out of other things that add meaning to us, and has a pretty profound impact on our wellbeing.

Martin Reeves:

I guess in the way you've defined it, you've set up the first challenge, which is if these things are hard to notice, presumably part of dealing with them is to notice them. How do we notice the "hard to notice"?

Karen Dillon:

I think even just recognizing that there is something happening. The language I think we've given people, that recognizing there is something happening that is very real, you start to look for them and then you see them. I think once you go through this conversation with us today, you'll probably spot a few in your life. But recognizing and that what we've come to just think are routine interactions, and that we just have to bear just life, we just have to get through it, can actually have really long, ripple effects and affect us in really significant ways. Being conscious of what's happening to you and to the extent that you're causing it for other people, that can change your whole perspective on microstress, seeing it for the first time clearly.

Rob Cross:

I'd love to tease off of that for a second. If you go through all the interviews we did with really conventionally successful people, these were all from top organizations, and every organization gave us a set of their top performing women and top performing men. As we went through these discussions, there were two things that were really interesting. One is, the first ten minutes, it was always rainbows and lollipops. Everything is great and the persona was up, and then the cracks only started to emerge 30, 45, 60 minutes in, where you get down to the bottom of it. About 90% of the people were really struggling to keep up with things in their professional and their personal worlds, and feeling like they weren't doing great at either of them. But it was that accumulation of noticing where all this is coming from.

Martin Reeves:

I guess that tees up the next question for me, which is, I imagine that there's some stress, some intrinsic stress associated with just interacting with people and maybe trying to do difficult things. Perhaps there's part of this that we can't do anything about, but I guess the implication of writing a book about this is that we can do something about a large part of this. What's the tractability of the microstressors?

Karen Dillon:

Well, one thing you talk about just the inevitability of interacting with people. Yes, but you can change the interactions, you can change the context of the interactions. You can change how you come into that conversation, how you end that conversation. If you're aware that that conversation may be a trigger for you or for the other person, you can just approach it differently. I think just being aware that in normal, quick, hasty interactions with each other, we are potentially making things worse for both of us. Then, trigger effect on the rest of our team or the people in our personal lives, you can begin to shift the nature of that interaction in a way that doesn't necessarily trigger the microstress that the original interaction might have.

Martin Reeves:

Obviously, I'm not an expert on stresses, but I think I remember reading research that said that stress per se, not microstress, but stress per se is not a bad thing. It can actually enhance performance. But there's a point of diminishing returns that too much stress can be harmful to health and performance. Is the same thing true of microstressors that, to a certain degree, they can be helpful, and is it an issue of quantity or type in that case?

Rob Cross:

I think it can be in certain ways. I think for us in particular, it's a matter of when that stress creates a positive pull towards directions you want to take in your life that are meaningful for you and have impact for you. What we see is that the microstresses are insidious in some sense,

because they're not just coming from conventionally negative people, toxic bosses, other groups like that. In fact, many of them are coming at us through people we love and care about as well. To Karen's point, you're not going to adapt the relationship. You're not going to dump your child or your significant other out of your life because they happen to have a form of stress. Because there are positive things flowing in those relationships as well. The key is really to distinguish where are the routine interactions that are draining you, that are systemic enough that you should be doing something about? And finding ways to actually shift things. And the payback's huge.

What we know from social psychology is that the negative interactions typically have between three to five times the impact of the positive in our lives. Yet we don't do much in most cases about adapting that context that we've drifted into. We'll do gratitude, mindfulness, other things like that that help us persist. But we're not doing a lot in organizations to actually adapt the context and take some of those interactions away. And yet, it can have profound impact on our lives.

Martin Reeves:

You talk about different types of microstress in the book. Maybe you can guide us through the different types. I think you talk about microstresses that affect capacity, ones that affect emotion, ones that affect identity. What are some of the types of microstress that we might encounter in a typical corporate environment?

Karen Dillon:

We categorize them into three broad groups, and I think most of us will feel all of these in our life. But the first one is what you mentioned, microstresses that drain your capacity to get things done. The simplest way to describe this, there are five categories under that, but simplest way to describe it are things that show up on your calendar. They're clogging your calendar, you can't get through the day—a new task, a new ask.

It's just stuff that drains your capacity to do even your own work. You end up being infiltrated by other people's requests and work too. That's the most common and most visible form of microstress. And we all would recognize it by simply looking at our inbox or looking at our calendar in a given day. But the ones that are a little more invisible but equally taxing, maybe even more so, are the other two categories.

The second category is microstresses that deplete our emotional reserves. What we mean by that are just again, routine interactions. We're not talking about a really bad guy in our life. We're talking about having an interaction with a loved one that drains some of your emotional reserve that helps you get through the day. A really good example of that is something I think most of us can relate to, sadly, is you leave the house in the morning in a hurry. You exchange curt words with a kid or with your spouse, and you end up not feeling great about yourself all day. You're not bringing your best self to work. And it will be fine by the time you got home. It was a routine exchange over who's going to do a certain chore, who's going to pick up the kid, or whatever. But that's one that has depleted our emotional reserves just a little bit. We have those throughout the day from various people in our personal, professional lives.

We don't see them really and we don't recognize them, it's just life, air quotes, just life, but that really affects our ability to be effective in every way. Then the final category, probably the most invisible, but again, really deeply troubling to people, are microstressors that challenge our identity. There are things that make us not feel good about who we are, not in giant, life-shifting ways, but you may, for example, be part of a very aggressive sales team, and the push to call back your client and suggest something that's much more expensive than they can afford, or really high sales goals. Or someone who talked about in our research talked about having a boss who loved dialing for dollars, and it just was not who she wanted to be. The kinds of little challenges that make us feel like we're living up to other people's expectations and not the people who we want to be, can make a really big difference in, again, a day, a week, a month, or a year for us.

All of those things in those three different categories are hitting us throughout the day. We can handle one or two or three, but most of us have dozens in a day. Again, that cumulative effect literally, physiologically and emotionally, just builds up to the point where it does start to really make it difficult to live the life you want to lead to be overall in a good place.

Martin Reeves:

Just to double-click on a nuance there, clearly you described very well how this is a thing in the workplace in people's lives. Is this a medically acknowledged phenomenon too? Because I think stress started off as being something that management scholars talked about loosely, but there's not a body of evidence around the medical effects and the physiological effects. Are microstresses recognized medically at this point?

Rob Cross:

I think we're getting there. We know a couple of different dimensions of connectivity and how we're connected today have pretty profound effects. One is we know conventional stress, it raises cortisol levels, it affects our brains, it affects all sorts of negative things at certain levels out there. What we're understanding through this so far is that microstress, the body doesn't distinguish between forms of stress. It's just that the brain tends to recognize the big stress, and we invoke fight or flight, whereas these smaller moments we just persist through, yet our body's still absorbing it. We know that from the science out there. We're actually starting clinical work in other places that are starting to test some of these dimensions and effect on physical outcomes around blood pressure and other mechanisms like that as we advance the research.

But I think that's one thing we can comfortably say that it levels, that these stressors get to a point where you're not who you wanted to be to begin with. We heard that an awful lot, and that was probably the most troubling thing to me is these highly, highly successful people would describe stretches in their lives of three, five, eight years, where they were just rising to the demands of the system. Then woke up one day and go, "How did I get here?" That's not a good thing.

The other thing we know in the solution side of our book, is that lack of connections is just as bad. We show that mortality rates are higher for people that don't have close confidants—26% greater likelihood of dying in a certain interval of time. It's worse than obesity, alcohol, lack of exercise. Really, the trick is, in our world, is to say, how do you fine tune these interactions happening in a way that reduce the negative and then lean you into positive interactions that have an effect of pulling you above the microstresses?

Martin Reeves:

Great. Well, let's indeed go on to solutions then. As far as I can tell, you have three categories: building resilience, finding resilience, leading a healthy life, and purposefulness. Could you maybe just walk us through some of the different types of solutions that exist to excessive microstress?

Rob Cross:

Yeah. I'll grab one path and then, Karen, hand it over to you as well. But one of the things we find that really is impactful with this is there's a grid in chapter five in the book. We use this an awful lot with the different audiences right now. We're getting people to reflect on the 14 microstresses down one column, and then in rows across the top are where these sources of stress are coming from. It's a boss, it's colleagues, it's your teammates, it's loved ones. And really what we do is we ask people to go through three passes. This one is, "Where are you experiencing systemic microstresses that you should be doing something about?" Just three or four, not a bunch of cells, because if it's everything, it's nothing. But just three or four that you can change the nature of the interaction.

Then we'll surprise people, and we'll say, "Okay, take a second pass through and say where are you causing this stuff?" That always shocks people. But we find when we do really big webinars or audiences and we're polling on what are people experiencing, and then we poll on what are you causing others, the profiles are almost identical. The stresses we experience in modern organizations, we have a tendency to pass on. What we know is, the stress we create for others tends to boomerang back on us in a different form. You lean on an employee too hard, and they suddenly start to disengage. Or you push a child too hard, and they become a little bit more recalcitrant in different ways. That second pass around is, what are you causing? Then the third for us is really around where are you allowing minutiae to creep into your life?

You're making a mountain out of a mole hill, and most of us have three, four, five points in these grids that we start to say, "You know what? In the context of life, that just doesn't matter. I've allowed myself to get down into the weeds too much." That was really, I think, one of the most profound tricks of our 10 percenters—those people that are really thriving from both a performance and wellbeing standpoint, is they live more multidimensional lives. They tended to

have at least two and usually three groups outside of their profession that they were an authentic part of, and it had the effect of pulling them out of the minutiae. The stories that ended horribly in these interviews were people that just slowly became smaller versions of themselves, until it was purely work and direct family, and then everything is significant. That work has become life in that context in a way that's not healthy.

Martin Reeves:

Karen, did you have any observations you wanted to add on strategies for dealing with microstressors?

Karen Dillon:

Sure. I'll just build on what Rob was talking about with what we call our 10 percenters, the 10% of people who just were living on a different plane, and we just wanted to learn what they did differently. One of the things I'll talk about, resilience, for example, they were basically better at navigating obstacles in their lives and setbacks in their lives than other people. It wasn't because they had some superhuman internal grit that the rest of us don't have, they're just cut from a different cloth. It was because they instinctively understood that resilience is something that can be built by connecting with other people. You don't have to become the steeliest version of yourself to get through something hard. You have to have and nurture and tap into a diverse network of people who can help you get through that difficult time. If we ask anyone, ask you, has there ever been a particularly difficult time in your life, challenging time in your life, what helped you get through it?

You're probably not first going to think about how steely you were. You're going to think about the people you could turn to, the people that gave you perspective on it or provided solutions for you, or just made you laugh in the difficult circumstances. We learned from these folks that being connected to other people was really important to their ability to navigate the challenges in their life. You'll hear this theme as we talk about the solutions throughout.

But the people who were better at this didn't just have a nice to have set of extra friends or ride-or-die friends, but they were able to develop and maintain a diverse set of connections. They don't have to all be best friends who were helpful to them in different ways—key being different ways—during a difficult time. Seeing resilience as a team sport, for lack of a better word, is something that these guys did instinctively, which we thought was really fascinating, different than the rest of us.

Rob Cross:

If I could just add on to that to make it actionable in a sense. Because there's a lot of evidence out there, as I mentioned, that's saying, "Gosh, we need best friends. We need quality connections, those have fallen off, civic associations have fallen off." You can't come back to people and say you have to go find friends, because what happens is typically late thirties, early forties, life and work is taking off. We see people slowly dropping out of these groups that were keeping them healthy to begin with. That's one of the reasons we're all as burned out as we are right now. There has been a rise in work and, in particular, the collaborative aspects of work through COVID—more fracturing of the work days. All sorts of things that are increasing stress that we're experiencing. But at the same time, the social distancing has pulled us out of these groups that were keeping us whole to begin with. The book clubs; the running groups; the music associations; the spiritual, aesthetic organizations that had an effect of creating perspective in our lives. When we look at that, we see three strategies that are really easy for people to leverage. One is to reach back to a passion you had in the past and use that to slingshot you into a new group. We have wonderful stories of neurosurgeons picking up guitars and joining bands as a way to get into groups that weren't their best friends, but that created perspective in their lives in really powerful ways.

Again, this stuff doesn't all have to come from just one or two close confidants. Second is what Karen did really, really well in her life is reach back to dormant ties from college days, and find an activity that rejuvenates that and starts to pull again those friendships and perspectives back into your life. Then, third is to really look at what you're already doing and seeing. How can just slight shifts in what I'm already doing pull me into more meaningful interactions?

We would hear examples, for example, of really successful runners in their mid-forties, waking up one day and saying, “I don’t care about personal best times. That’s society’s definition of success, and I’m not going to continue to get one for the rest of my life. What I want to be doing is using this activity of running to get closer to my child, her best friend, and a parent in the community.” You’re taking that same activity, and you’re just pivoting it slightly to say, “How is that going to pull me into groups that I find meaningful, whether that be at work or outside of work?”

Those are all super easy things to do. We’re not adding on massive efforts like go hike the Himalayas or write a concerto to find purpose in your life. It’s more about, how do you live the small moments more authentically with others?

Martin Reeves:

Let’s explore maybe some broader aspects, try to relate this to maybe the executive lives, the working lives of our listeners. I guess a lot of what you talk about is at an individual level. In a sense, you’re talking about resilience, personal resilience. I guess, from an executive’s perspective, you might want to think about resilient enterprise or organization. Can we deal with microstresses at that collective level, or is it so individual that it can only be dealt with at an individual level?

Rob Cross:

Yeah, I think it’s a great question. One of the things we know in the tools we’ve built—we put an app on the store recently called the Microstress Effect App. It’s free for everybody to download. It’s designed for people to use a digital card sort to work through those 14 microstresses and say, “Where are two or three that I need to be paying attention to right now, and what are strategies from all these successful people that we explored?”

The reason we do it that way is we find that everybody’s profile of what they need to take care of is different. Of course, anytime—and I’m sure you’ve had authors on constantly—everybody pushes you to have the one big idea that everybody can remember. That just isn’t this game. It’s not like one microstress we could come back and say, “This is the one that’s killing everybody.

That's what you need to take care of." It's really a process of creating tools that help people get down contextually to the things that they need to address. Then focusing on that based on the context.

Martin Reeves:

I accept that it's very individual. For instance, personally, I'm an introvert, but I find I have to give a lot of presentations. I find the stress of being in front of a public audience actually quite helpful. It flips me into an enjoyable performance mode and makes me very aware of the audience and so on. I can imagine that being so individual, you know, one person's nightmare is another person's fuel. On the other hand, I can imagine, perhaps, some common denominator behaviors. For instance, what are the social protocols in this organization? Is there a common denominator of organizational behaviors which are a great source of microstressors, which are sometimes avoidable, perhaps?

Karen Dillon:

I think we see it in a lot of well-intended managers and teams. Everybody's overwhelmed, everyone's trying to get a lot of things done. The reality of how people work together now is that we used to work with colleagues for years. We'd build real trust in their skills and how we work together, and they'd build real trust in ours. But in reality now, teams are formed, reformed. You're working with people who are, again, all well-intentioned, but we're trying to get different things done at the same time.

That's baked into the high performance expectations of most organizations now. So I think that managers and leaders can actually really just make a concerted effort to recognize where they are triggering microstress unintentionally in the patterns of how they ask people to collaborate, in their own exchanges with employees, in what they're holding employees accountable to. We were talking to a manager the other day, who has decided to put in his employees' performance reviews at the end of the year, how much they're able to hold their own ground in not letting microstresses derail them from getting good work done. He jokingly did a trick with his team

where he asked them something outrageous. I think it was to have something back to him by Saturday at noon, knowing that was a violation of what he had just told them was going to be important to be able to push back on. And not as many people pushed back as he thought. Most people, they either went to, “I’m going to be Herculean, get it done,” or they ignored it. But then they were feeling overwhelmed by the rest of it, or one or two came back and asked questions. As leaders and managers, you can think about where you’ve baked into your system the triggers for microstress that are going to hurt your whole performance as organizations. Because, as we talked about, microstress has ripple effects that go beyond your immediate moment. If you have simply, just say, an email that comes in late in the day asking a team to prepare something and that you’re not clear about it. The team scrambles. You’re going to have multiple emails back and forth among the team; they’re probably going to put their other work aside for a while. They might be coming home late, maybe not having the interactions with their family that they want. There are little things that people do without thinking that send off ripple effects of microstress. I think we can think about that consciously to start to pull it back within the organization.

Rob Cross:

I think the other thing that we’re seeing, too, is two other threads that can really be pulled organizationally. One is, some of the really neat examples I’ve been hearing about is where people have been going through and making audits of where all their decision processes, resource allocation processes, work process, staffing practices are creating unnecessary work.

Organizations are replete with this, where somebody made a mistake 15 years ago, and everybody’s going to make sure that mistake never happens again. But they’re not really factoring in the idea that today, we’re actually doing more to avoid the mistake costing more than the actual mistake itself. It’s ratcheting up work and stress in a way that’s driving burnout and disengagement. We’ve seen some really neat examples of people creating audits and saying, “How could we remove 5%, 10%, 15% of what have just become expectations of people that’s driving everybody crazy?” Different touchpoints that’s creating stress unnecessarily.

I think the second thing that’s a very easy thing to do at a team level or an organizational level is just to step back and say, “How are these microstresses coming at us through the relationships in

our organizations?” And do a simple audit. This can be as simple as with your team, you sit down, you take a blank piece of paper, two lines down to create three columns. The first column you say, “Here’s all the ways we’re collaborating to get this work done.” It’s an obscene number in most cases today.

Usually, it’s six to nine modalities from IM, text, instant messaging applications, those sorts of things, but email, video calls, team collaborative spaces, usually there’s six to nine. Then, in the second column say, “What are the positive norms we want to be using this tool with, rather than it using us?” We’re going to start using, for example, email, it’s bullet points, it’s just standard hygiene stuff. And in the last column it’s, “What are the norms we’re going to stop?” It’s the unnecessary cc’ing behavior, not sending the email after 10 o’clock at night. If you have to write it, then send it on a delay so you’re not starting the “always on” culture. But I find over and over again, just, you know, a leader takes 30 minutes, knock that grid out, then take it into the team discussion. People are laughing at the absurdity of what they do to each other with these things. You just get common agreement on here’s how we’re going to work in a way that’s going to take the collaborative footprint of the work down, and decrease the microstresses that are happening through just the ways that we’ve learned to work together. There’s a lot of examples like that, that start to really elevate these ideas to organizational or team level outcomes.

Martin Reeves:

There might be a little paradox here. I’m sure we can resolve it, but my field is strategy, and strategy is all about gaps. It’s about a desired state and something that doesn’t meet the goal and some plan to plug the gap. I think there are more and more gaps and more dynamic gaps nowadays. There’s so much change that we’re always in a constant state of misalignment. One of the things I’ve observed from a strategy perspective is that awareness of and facing those gaps, which are often a source of stress, I mean, a gap is a failure to perform perfectly, is part of the learning process. I’m wondering about how to reconcile facing, in this case, I’m thinking about strategic stressors, problems, the things in the business that are not as they should be. Facing stressors being a productive learning path forward, versus the microstressors that you are talking about, which are an impediment to work in health and happiness. How did we reconcile those two

things? I'm thinking about strategy. For example, we have things called an engineered environment where, essentially, we isolate ourselves from the turbulence of the world. And that's great for as long as it lasts. That's very hard to do though. In more dynamic environments, we have learning environments, where actually we're facing the stresses and constantly adapting. How do we reconcile these two ideas, do you think?

Rob Cross:

I think it's a great question and I'll answer at a philosophical level as well as you're posing the question philosophically. I think it sounds great when you're at this very executive C-suite level to say, "We need tension, and we need misalignment and creative conflict." That is great stuff. Nobody argues with it. Innovations come from resolving disagreements in different ways or integrating different perspectives.

The problem is when you ignore the fact that people are on so many team-based efforts today that they're drowning. We may be on one team, but most people we talk to are on five, six, seven collaborative efforts, because executives just tend to throw teams at solutions—workforces, committees, just naturally. But they're not also looking at the cost or the tax of those efforts. It's actually not the work that's gone up so much that's creating stress. It's the collaborative footprint around the work that's driving it. As we've gone to one firm approaches agile, adopted all these technologies, it's increased the collaborative footprint of the work in ways that's really taxing individuals, but invisibly. The challenge for me is to really think carefully about what is good philosophically? Then move that down a level and put yourself in the context of your star employee that's on eight different efforts and isn't getting home to see their families, because we're not seeing the degree of stress and tension that's getting created there.

Martin Reeves:

Yes. Yeah. I can see that one could reconcile facing necessary challenges, but in more collaboratively effective ways. Is that the essence of what you're saying?

Rob Cross:

At the heart of it and understanding again where the excess burden is being placed. That's what we're missing right now. I think it's a transition. When we moved to process-oriented ways of work with Deming and Juran and others, it was ten, 15 years before they figured out what to measure and how. We're doing the same thing right now. We're moving to these more agile enterprises, more collaborative enterprises, but we have not evolved the analytics to see and understand where we're putting pressures on in different ways, and where that's productive and where it isn't. At one level, philosophically these things can make a tremendous amount of sense. But you move down especially to that mid-level where they're getting crushed from so many different perspectives, and you have a very different lived experience of what's appealing philosophically in our experience.

Martin Reeves:

I wish we had more time because it's a fascinating topic, but unfortunately time is limited. Let me begin to wrap up by asking—so, supposing I'm a CEO listening to this and I buy it. I buy that there's probably an epidemic of microstress, so we should become aware of that. We should do something about it. We should become aware of the footprint and shape it proactively, as you're suggesting. Where would you begin? Because that's a whole world. You've got your 14 stresses and your different types, and five processes, and seven divisions. How would you as a CEO bring some sense and focus? Where would you begin?

Karen Dillon:

I would just begin with the simple audit and conversation audit, being checking in with people and yourself. How are you feeling about these? You can start by understanding the toll of them on yourself, to recognize the potential toll of it on your entire organization. We know that you're talking about the strategy effects that people who are feeling really burdened by microstress are just not their best selves. They're not their best co-creators. They don't bring their best ideas to it. They're not resilient when they have setbacks. You can relate to it from a personal perspective.

Then, I think you can begin a conversation in your organization about what Rob talked about. Where are you systemically layering in microstress unnecessarily? Again, the big emphasis being that removing a negative can have up to five times the impact of adding a positive.

We're a culture of "and," right? We often ask people to do this and, and, and we add things on, we seldom take things away. Maybe even doing an audit of what negatives can we remove, even just a few that will have a material impact on the quality of our work, the quality of our engagement? I think that would be a really good first step.

Martin Reeves:

To end on the personal, you're both in the business of teaching people and on writing books and so on. I'm sure you're not immune to stress. How have you leveraged some of the ideas in your own working or personal lives?

Rob Cross:

I can start with that. For me, it goes back to what Karen was saying earlier on about really targeting the interactions, and understanding where those interactions are in your life that are having an impact on you. For example, my daughter is simultaneously a source of purpose, humor, and inspiration for me in my life, and one of my biggest microstresses. I absorb her workload at different points. She carries secondhand stress that's just a knee-jerk reaction when something goes wrong. She'll fire a text off to me because we have a close relationship. Even just figuring that out over a glass of wine one night, that she's just saying something in ten seconds, it means nothing to her. It's just a knee-jerk reaction. But I worry about it for three or four hours, had us laughing, and I was, like, "Stop it, you're killing me."

But we shifted in that interaction, and she doesn't do that anymore. When it's serious, she comes to me and I'm there in a heartbeat, but just that simple thing has had a positive impact. That's what you're looking for are these small moments that if you can adapt the interaction and what's happening there can remove the negative. Then for me, the thing that I've taken very, very seriously is, I think, the volume of these microstresses coming at us, they're not going to go away.

They're only going to accelerate with every trend that you see out there. That ability to add dimensionality to your life and find ways to rise above has been something that I take super seriously. I'm part of a cycling group, a tennis group; there's something I'm doing spiritually with other people. There's a set of things like that I have, to maintain dimensionality in my life, that I view as critical. Now, I don't view it as a "nice to have," I view it as something that we as humans really need to hold on to.

Martin Reeves:

Thank you, and you, Karen?

Karen Dillon:

I'll just add something Rob and I both have done as an experiment, and it's been really great. We both really have tried to practice what we're preaching in the book, because we are not immune for microstress, and we have the benefit of seeing what other people do better than us. We're trying to learn. But one exercise we've both been doing, which has been really interesting and fun. And it would work even for an introvert, is this exercise of reaching out to people that you maybe have not been in contact with for a while, who are important or were important in your life.

Setting up, it sounds funny, but an eight-minute phone call, the idea being you say in advance, "I just want to check in with you. Let's do eight minutes. We can both spare eight minutes. Let's just see what we can do in the eight-minute phone call." It sounds funny, and I've actually even set a timer, so that if you don't want it to go on longer, because eight minutes is about your bandwidth for being connected with someone in that moment, I joke and say the experiment's over. But it's been a really great exercise.

I've been in touch with coming up to 30 different people who I just put a thing on Facebook saying, "If we've been out of touch, I'd love to connect with you." I've learned about things that are important in their lives, and I've reminded myself of why that friendship was there in the first place. It's been a really good step into reinvigorating some dormant ties, without it being a big, huge life overhaul or having to go back and be besties again. Just a really nice reminder.

Martin Reeves:

Well, thank you very much for a fascinating book, and I'm sure it'll do very well. Congratulations, and thanks for joining me today.

Karen Dillon:

Thank you, Martin.

Rob Cross:

Thank you for having us.

Martin Reeves:

I've been discussing *The Microstress Effect: How Little Things Pile Up and Create Big Problems*, which is coming out from Harvard Business Press shortly, by Rob Cross and Karen Dillon. I really enjoyed the book in a way I didn't expect. I found the audit in chapter five to be quite a good way of taking stock of one's life, not just with respect to microstressors, but also with respect to things like complexity and purpose. I guess I began reading the book a little skeptically, thinking, "Is this another thing to worry about? Another box to check?"

Actually, I came in on reading the book thinking, "Well, this is a way of simplifying and focusing my life in the way that I want to be focused." I found it ultimately very empowering, and I imagine that this could have the same effect for many others [to whom] I'd strongly recommend the book. If you like the conversation, make sure you're subscribed on your favorite podcasting platform. As always, we welcome your feedback to the BCG Henderson Institute.

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