

How to Avoid Burnout on the Job

Four Lessons from Property Managers

BY DARCEY GERSTEIN 2020 JUNE

MANAGEMENT



The duties of a property manager are multiple and multifaceted. Starting the day before dawn, and remaining on-call throughout the night and even on weekends, managers have to deal with a dizzying array of challenges and tasks—everything from the physical upkeep of the property, to staff management and vendor procurement, to dealing with interpersonal conflicts and communication—not just with boards and residents, but with vendors, service providers, and municipal personnel, too. Managers are responsible for protecting and maintaining the integrity of properties that in many cases represent owners' single biggest investment, as well as their quality of life. That's a lot of pressure.

Given these high stakes, one might reasonably assume that burnout is rampant among property managers. But the managers we consulted for this article conveyed something quite different; according to them, the stress and variability in their daily tasks are what make the job interesting.

The rewards of seeing the effect their work has on people keeps them going—over lifelong careers in the industry, in many cases. And while each has their unique personal approach to the different types of communities they manage, they have all learned lessons on the job that allow them to provide essential services for their clients, in both normal times and in crises.

Lesson 1: Be Prepared

Jeremy DiFlaminies is the general manager of Pier4, a full-service, 106-unit condominium in Boston. The building is not even a year old, so DiFlaminies and his staff—along with the newly moved-in residents of the building—are still getting acquainted with one other, and coping with the operational challenges that come with brand-new construction. Add to that an unprecedented global health crisis, and you have a potential recipe for rapid burnout.

Luckily, DiFlaminies has a secret weapon: a hospitality background, including 10 years managing the residential portion of the Four Seasons Hotel Boston. He has taken this experience to his new role, and infused it in his staff as well. It's proven essential to maintaining and even ramping up the full-service offerings at Pier4, while simultaneously adjusting staff roles to accommodate enhanced cleaning schedules and other shifting priorities brought about by the pandemic.

But how does he accomplish all of this without getting completely overwhelmed? "Having a plan is essential," DiFlaminies says. "The unknown is stressful, but that stress can be mitigated by policy and preparation." Knowing this, DiFlaminies took a proactive approach to the impending COVID-19 crisis and acquired plenty of personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitizing products early on. Having those in place, in addition to a plan for package deliveries, amenities, and—perhaps most importantly—communication about all of it to residents, made the challenges easier to face. Keeping himself and his staff educated and prepared allows the building to function smoothly while avoiding the kind of compounded stress that can lead to burnout.

Lesson 2: Maintain Balance

Property managers tend to have a thin separation between their jobs and their personal lives. These men and women are often generous with their time even after spending so many hours each day officially on the clock. But for many, it's just part of their nature; DiFlaminies says that for him, working hard is "a force of habit," and attending classes, events, and trainings offered by his company, FirstService Residential, and then bringing the knowledge back to his staff and residents is actually a form of stress relief for him.

Another FirstService Residential associate, Dan LeBlanc, has a similar work ethic. He manages a portfolio of eight properties in the Boston area, which means working with 40 different board members and hundreds of units. He's been in the business since the age of 18, when he started as a maintenance technician at a company that was later bought by FirstService Residential. After years as an assistant manager for nearly 20 different properties, and now four years as a portfolio manager, LeBlanc has set parameters for himself so that he doesn't burn out.

"A lot of our business is complaint-driven," says LeBlanc, "and a lot has to do with personalities, which can be mentally exhausting." Managing his time and communication has proven effective in avoiding burnout from the daily onslaught of calls, emails, and conversations that his job entails. One of his first rules? No email on weekends—though his clients know that he's available by cell phone if there's a true emergency.

Keeping to a schedule helps, too. During the week, LeBlanc starts his day at 5 a.m., spending the early hours doing administrative tasks and answering emails. He then meets with vendors and performs site visits to make sure that his properties have what they need. In the mid-afternoon, he generally takes some form of mental break—whether that's a power nap, a walk, or just a quiet 20 minutes. After that, he's recharged to deal with whatever challenges may remain in the day.

Lesson 3: Don't Take It Personally

Often those challenges have something to do with managing personalities. Dealing with multiple boards as LeBlanc does means that conflicts are inevitable—and part of being an effective manager is knowing how to handle them when they arise. LeBlanc makes it clear that 90% of boards and residents are fantastic; it's the other 10% that can be tougher to work with. After an experience with a board president who could just not be made happy no matter what LeBlanc did, he says that he learned a valuable lesson: You can't make all the people happy all the time. "What I took away from that experience is that it's more important to be respected than liked," LeBlanc says. "When you genuinely care about communities like we do, it's hard to not take everything personally. So that is something I work on to keep balanced."

DiFlaminies agrees, and adds that it's important to mentally separate caring about communities from caring about their personal feelings towards you. That's why he advises his staff "to try not to bring the outside in, and vice versa." Although the lines can be blurred—LeBlanc says that he regularly socializes with client board members, and DiFlaminies enlisted his wife to sew masks for

his staff—at the end of the day, the goal is to improve the lives of community residents. As long as they are accomplishing that, say the managers, they do not get overwhelmed by their jobs.

Lesson 4: Have Perspective

The same is true for Claudine Gruen, vice president of Garthchester Realty, a management firm based in Westchester and Queens, New York. She says that while her job is certainly stressful—especially under the conditions of a global pandemic—the rewards outweigh all the long hours and hard work. “When I see that I can make a change on a property and that the residents are happy,” says Gruen, “that’s fabulous for me.” Counting herself lucky that all of her properties are faring well in the crisis and that she can keep her staff employed and remain busy with work herself, Gruen maintains the perspective that “it could be a lot worse.”

Lately, she has been working from home, going into the office on weekends when no one is there, and fielding emails and conference calls constantly, from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. some nights. While she “[doesn’t] like being on the computer all day,” Gruen views this new reality “not as being stuck at home, but being safe at home.” Living and working in the area hit hardest by coronavirus in the entire world, Gruen is just thankful that she and her family are healthy, that her business is functioning, that she is able to pay her employees and keep them working, and that she can provide her clients and staff with protocols and equipment to keep them safe.

Offering another reason for her grateful perspective, Gruen mentions that her grandparents were Holocaust survivors. Whenever she finds herself bemoaning a task or getting overwhelmed, she is reminded of their struggle and that of the millions of others around the world who deal with adversities much greater and more catastrophic. Gruen speculates that she may be in the minority in this perspective, but there is a case to be made that gratitude really is one of the most powerful relievers of stress we have. Anyone can access it, from any place, at any time. And in our current world full of invisible threats and so much uncertainty, it is a valuable reminder for all of us—in any circumstance—to focus on what we have, rather than what we lack.

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