

# Burnout Prevention, Resilience, And Well-Being

An Interview with Paula Davis JD, MAPP, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Stress and Resilience Institute

**EDITORS' NOTE** Paula Davis is the Founder and CEO of the Stress & Resilience Institute. For 15 years, she has been a trusted advisor to leaders in organizations of all sizes helping them to make work better. Davis is a globally recognized expert on the effects of workplace stress, burnout prevention, workplace well-being, and building resilience for individuals and teams. She left her law practice after seven years and earned a master's degree in applied positive psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. As part of her post-graduate training, Davis was selected to be part of the University of Pennsylvania faculty teaching and training resilience skills to soldiers as part of the Army's Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program. The Penn team trained resilience skills to more than 40,000 soldiers and their family members. Davis is the author of *Beating Burnout at Work: Why Teams Hold the Secret to Well-Being & Resilience*, which is about burnout prevention using a teams-based approach. *Beating Burnout at Work* was nominated for best new book by the Next Big Idea Club, which is curated by Adam Grant, Susan Cain, Malcolm Gladwell, and Daniel Pink. Davis has shared her expertise at educational institutions such as Harvard Law School, Wharton School Executive Education, and Princeton. She is a two-time recipient of the distinguished teaching award from the Medical College of Wisconsin.



Paula Davis

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *The Stress and Resilience Institute (stressandresilience.com) was founded in 2010 to help organizations make work better. It is known for its ability to translate complex research into practical, easy-to-implement strategies for individuals, leaders, and teams. The Institute's work typically focuses in the areas of burnout prevention, stress management, resilience, and well-being. It takes a "me and a we" approach to its teaching, consulting, and research, which is about seeing the entire workplace system – understanding how leadership behaviors, team dynamics, and individual experiences interconnect to create the conditions for high performance. The Stress and Resilience Institute has conducted hundreds of programs for tens of thousands of people across industries and around the globe.*

## Will you discuss your career journey?

I am a lawyer by training, and I practiced commercial real estate law for seven years. I burned out during what became the last year of my law practice. It was a scary experience as I didn't really understand or know what burnout was at the time. It took me about a year of stops and starts to realize that I wanted to leave my law practice to pursue a master's degree in applied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. After graduating in 2010, I had the opportunity to join the UPenn faculty teaching a version of the Penn Resilience Program to U.S. Army officers, non-commissioned officers, and their families. I

was part of the training team for about three and a half years, all while working in my business and trying to figure out how to talk about well-being way before it was a hot topic in the workplace. I've been running my business ever since.

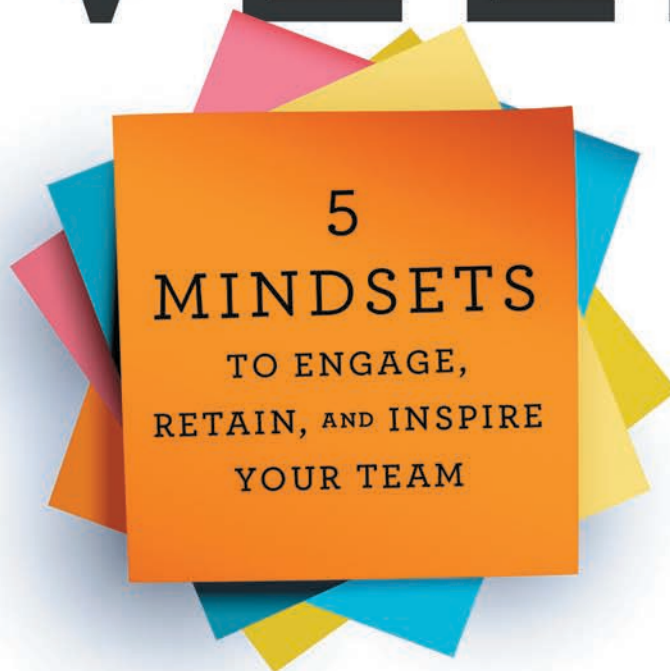
## What was your vision for founding the Stress and Resilience Institute and how do you define its mission?

In the beginning, I went to the UPenn MAPP program looking for something that I felt I could teach to other busy professionals to help them manage their stress better and not burn out. I formed my company in 2009, but I arrived at UPenn not really having much direction. Some of my professors in the MAPP program are the world's leading experts in the science of resilience, and as soon as we started to dig into that research, I knew I had found something significant. Initially, my work revolved around teaching a version of the skills in the Penn Resilience Program with soldiers, but that expanded to lawyers, providers in health-care, and beyond. The more I taught, the more I realized that we needed to start talking about these concepts – and well-being in general – in a more systemic way. Leaders, teams, and individuals are interconnected and influence each other, yet most of the focus has been just on making individuals stress less or function better. There's much more to the conversation than that. Now I like to think that I help people make work better, and I help leaders create strong teams. My work has always focused at the intersection of burnout prevention, resilience, and well-being, and in the past six years or so has added the dimensions of teams and leadership.

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PAULA DAVIS, JD, MAPP

# LEAD WELL



## Will you provide an overview of the Stress & Resilience Institute's services?

I wear a lot of different hats at the Institute. I absolutely love teaching and teach a wide variety of training programs and workshops on the topics of resilience, burnout prevention, well-being, and the leadership and teams intersections of all of those topics. My new book, *Lead Well*, focuses on leadership mindsets that help leaders create thriving

cultures against the backdrop of the significant change we're seeing in the workplace. As such, I also talk about recognition and mattering, workplace engagement, self-determination theory (the science underpinning what drives intrinsic motivation), the leadership practices that promote meaningful work, and much more. In addition to the trainings and workshops, I deliver keynotes to larger audiences. I also offer strategic guidance to leaders and

teams about these topics. True burnout prevention requires a systemic approach, and many organizations don't know where to start. Many organizations also get stuck with how to evolve their well-being initiatives, and I help them think in a more strategic way about how to expand that conversation. I also teach/co-teach two certificate courses, one focused solely in the legal profession, and the other focused solely on burnout prevention to a general audience. I was involved in a new research study with ALM (American Law Media) to examine the effects of stress, burnout prevention, and psychological safety in the legal profession. I plan to conduct more research in the upcoming year.

## What interested you in writing the book, *Lead Well*, and what are the key messages you want to convey in the book?

In my work with leaders and their teams, I realized that legacy mindsets ("this is the way it's always been done"), short-term thinking in this space (no long-term people strategy), too much emphasis on "fix the individual," and lack of education on these topics for leaders were all holding back the acceleration of next level strategies to help meaningfully address well-being as a whole at work, and I wanted to fill the gap. Some of the key messages are:

- We need to take a "me and a we" approach to solving well-being issues. While the pandemic opened the door to a much-needed and more robust conversation about mental health and well-being, most organizations approached the ensuing stress as exclusively an individual problem which led to an over-emphasis on individual-focused, one-size-fits-all tactics that didn't solve for the root causes of chronic stress and burnout in the first place. Individuals, teams, and leaders are interconnected.

- You don't have to rewire your entire team or organizational culture to see improvements. You can deploy effective strategies, which I call TNTs (tiny noticeable things) to help. But they take work. Leaders need to start focusing on the root causes of issues.

- The increase in AI will require a more human-centered approach to leadership.

## What do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

A blend of good teaming practices and good human practices, captured by the five mindsets in the book:

- Mindset #1: Prioritize "Sticky" Recognition and Mattering
- Mindset #2: Amplify ABC Needs (Autonomy, Belonging, and Challenge)
- Mindset #3: Create Workload Sustainability
- Mindset #4: Build Systemic Stress Resilience
- Mindset #5: Promote Values Alignment and Meaning

## What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Be a problem solver – look for ways to solve problems that make your boss and team's life easier. Also, get to know people, particularly beyond your own team. Who is doing work in the organization that excites you? Be kind and help others. Introduce yourself to those people. Curiosity can be a superpower – ask great questions. ●