

Super-Stressed Superheroes

By Tora Estep

To order "Performance Intervention Maps: 36 Strategies for Solving Your Organization's Problems," edited by Ethan S. Sanders and Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan, visit store.astd.org.

AFTER ANOTHER NIGHT of bad dreams, Magnetic Mike found himself staring at his bleary-eyed image in the mirror, brushing his teeth. As he brooded gloomily on the long and uninspiring workday ahead, his chest tightened. Suddenly he heard a shout from the kitchen and what sounded like the cacophony of pots, pans, knives, forks, and spoons hurling their way up the stairs. Magnetic Mike opened the bathroom door, to be bombarded by the loose metal objects in his house. With the metal sticking out from him like spines, he looked like some strange porcupine raising its protective armor. Sighing heavily, he carried his load down the stairs, apologized to his wife Stella Strange who had collapsed into a puddle of strange matter on the floor, and sent the pots, pans, cutlery, and other things back to where they belonged. After a dismal breakfast during which the spoon kept sticking to his teeth, he put on his cloak and mask and went to work at Superhero Services Corporation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to saving the world.

Magnetic Mike had always enjoyed his job at SSC. He worked in the street crimes division, preventing burglaries, muggings, drive-by shootings, and so forth by manipulating magnetic forces with his superpowers and stopping criminals in their tracks. But recently work had become difficult for Mike. SSC had unexpectedly laid off several superhero employees in the disasters division (floods, droughts, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, plane crashes, war, and so forth) and eliminated the department of defense against evil geniuses trying to take over the world. These events had caused widespread anxiety among the remaining superhero employees and created a work environment plagued by rumors, uncertainty, and fear (as well as a variety of odd occurrences as stressed employees found themselves unable to control their powers).

Furthermore, a large portion of the

workload from disasters had been delegated to Mike's division. Coupled with higher crime statistics, that left Mike unable to keep up with his work and regularly working increasingly long hours. As a result of the pressure, he was having trouble sleeping, and when he did sleep, he had nightmares. After the layoff of his friend Stinkbomb Stan—loss of control over his superpowers had made him unbearable to be around and quite disruptive in the office—Magnetic Mike had an increasingly hard time concentrating and his performance began to suffer.

Late one night, Magnetic Mike was called out to help the disasters division apprehend the diva Sirene Acosta, an enormous opera singer who was plotting to dominate the world with a weapon that amplified her voice and its mysterious powers. With it, she would be able to direct her voice to any part of the globe and reduce governments to slavishly adoring fans who would do anything for her. Sirene Acosta was bringing in her weapon on a container ship that would dock at a remote pier on an island off the coast. The disaster team and Magnetic Mike were in place to stop the diva from succeeding with her fiendish plot.

Mike had had little sleep, having spent most of the night taking care of a backlog of paperwork that threatened to spill out his office door. Sleepy and worrying about his wife—who had not yet fully recovered from the pots and pans incident—Mike was not prepared when the disaster division went into action. Startled, Mike accidentally hurled Metal Man, one of his colleagues, straight into the side of the ship. Metal Man rolled back onto the pier, only slightly dented, but an enormous gash had opened up in the side of the ship through which Sirene Acosta's henchmen now fired various weapons at the disaster team, and Sirene herself blasted a high note that blew the disaster team back with the force of a hurricane. Overreacting, Magnetic Mike lifted the entire ship out

of the water with his powers and flung it far out to sea, where it landed with a great wave, but in an upright position, so that the ship could soon be seen heading toward the open ocean. The disaster team took off after the escaping ship, using various methods of flight, running over the surface of the water, and so forth. As Magnetic Mike prepared to follow them, the disaster team leader ordered him to stay behind.

Dumfounded with disbelief at his mistake, which could cost the team its chance to stop the diva and cost the world its freedom, Mike staggered to a curb where he sat down and held his head in his hands. Metal Man, who still remained on the pier, walked over and sat down next to him. "I'm sorry I tossed you into the side of that ship," Mike mumbled. "Don't worry about it," said Metal Man. Silent for a moment, Metal Man then continued, "Have you thought about trying that stress management program that SSC is offering?" "What stress management program?" "Well, I guess the head honchos at SSC figured out that everything that has been going on lately has really rattled a lot of nerves, so they are trying to figure out how to help the employees manage their stress better. I guess one of them read this book called *Performance Intervention Maps*; one of the chapters is about stress-management programs. You should try it!"

Magnetic Mike shrugged, thinking to himself that that kind of program was only for people who couldn't handle the job of superhero, and he didn't like to complain. Correctly interpreting Mike's noncommittal silence, Metal Man said, "No really, you should try it. I went through it, and it has really helped." "You went through it?" asked Mike. "But you are one of the toughest superheroes out there." "Yeah, well, it's been hard for me too," replied Metal Man. "I was starting to rust." Shocked, Mike looked at Metal Man and slowly started nodding his head. "All right, Metal Man, maybe I'll try it out." "Great! You should. By the way, could you do me a favor and straighten out my dent?"

Despite Mike's mistake, the disaster team managed to catch Sirene Acousta's

ship, imprison the diva in a soundproof cell, and destroy her amplification weapon. But it had been a close call, so Mike decided to follow up on Metal Man's advice and sign up for SSC's stress management program. As part of the program, he attended stress management courses and received access to counseling, support groups, and stress management literature. He learned to identify physical signs of stress, recognize changes in speech that indicate stress, be aware of emotional indicators and symptoms, and understand the cognitive effects of stress, which include lack of concentration, reduction in creativity, disorganized thinking, and low self-esteem. He learned that the cognitive effects of stress were the culprits behind the loss of control of his superpowers, and that the loss of control produced more stress, creating a vicious cycle.

In addition to learning about stress, Magnetic Mike learned several stress management techniques and read about some ways to eliminate stress in the article "Everyday Stress Busters," by Linda Cruse and Joe Hoare. He discovered how to have a positive mental attitude and take responsibility for how he lived each day, thus gaining a sense of control over his life; plan to set aside time for himself to use as a buffer zone; prioritize responsibilities; identify where his time went and delegate some responsibilities; and slow his breathing.

Using his newfound awareness of stress and stress management techniques, Magnetic Mike began to get back to his normal, everyday superhero self. Soon, he was once again happily saving the world from petty criminals, super villains, and evil geniuses.

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GOTO/"Everyday Stress Busters,"
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