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# REDUCING STRESS IN ORGANIZATIONS: AN APPROACH FOR MANAGERS

BY

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## ABSTRACT

The importance of stress as an element of wellness has become an important issue to organizations and individuals to the improvement of productivity. It (stress) is a condition that causes changes, both positive and negative. Stress is part of a technical society and learning to cope is essential to future growth of organizations.

## REDUCING STRESS IN ORGANIZATIONS: AN APPROACH FOR MANAGERS

Stress is the pressure that is put upon us which in turn we put upon our body, either knowingly or unknowingly. Adaptability is the way we handle or cope with stress. Stress is to humans what stretched elastic is to rubber. The rubber band has less life and stress takes the life out of people. But there are ways to cope.

Stress usually is external pressure or disruption that cause nonspecific chain reactions within us. The response is basically the same regardless of the stress. Hans Selyre (7) believes that each of us has a finite and non-replenishable amount of adaptation energy available to us in restoring equilibrium after a stressful event.

## The Physiology of Stress

The stress response involves the autonomic nervous system, which ordinarily serves to keep our body in equilibrium by controlling our metabolic and growth rates. The autonomic nervous system functions in two ways: first, it can act directly upon the heart, liver, stomach, spleen, and large and small intestines, causing each to speed up or slow down. Basically, in stressful situations, cardiovascular functions are sped up and gastronomical functions are slowed down. Secondly, the autonomic nervous system can circulate certain endocrine glands (especially the pituitary, thyroid, and adrenal), causing them to release their hormones. There is a complicated sequence of internal events that

happens in response to stress and triggers the body to fight or take flight. The autonomic response occurs quickly and lasts only a short while; the endocrine response initiates more slowly and lasts longer. Setting off these responses many times over a long period has a wear-and-tear effect on the body; eventually they lower resistance to diseases. The hormones flowing through the system, along with the accompanying tension, also have a psychological effect. Over a period of time the chain reaction of the stress response can cause depression, irritability, nervousness, apathy, sleep difficulties, and significant changes in smoking, eating, and drinking habits.

This whole chain reaction originally evolved to help human beings escape from dangers. Once safe, escapees were able to proceed with their normal routines when the physical effects wore off. Today, we still trigger the same psychological response in the face of stress. The kinds of stresses we encounter are different and can seldom be escaped. Thus, the energy originally devoted to the protection of humans is now turned inward and may eventually become a factor in illness.

### Causes of Stress

Every occupation produces particular kinds of stress that can hurt the individual and the organization. Stress can affect personal health, create conflict with co-workers, dampen creativity, productivity and interfere with good management.

A simple equation used by stress management consultants is  $\text{Stress} = \text{Pressure} - \text{Adaptability}$ . We define stress as what you feel, and pressure as what is causing you to feel that way. The prescription for decreasing stress becomes obvious: either reduce or eliminate the pressure, or increase your adaptability.

Managers and "bosses" need to recognize that not only can they be under stress personally, but they can be "stress carriers". Managers can intimidate, demoralize and exert pressure just by the way they act, causing stress all around them.

How can you tell if you're a "stress carrier"? The best way is to ask your subordinates. But if that's too threatening, look for this important clue: are all your people "yes" men and women? If nobody in your organization ever challenges a policy or action you propose--if everybody does exactly what you say without asking questions, then there's a problem. The more lines of communication that are open and the more sharing among the people in groups, the less likely it is that the boss is creating stress.

Role ambiguity is another quality that needs to be looked at. Do people know exactly what it is they are supposed to be doing? Do they get regular feedback on how well they are doing? Do they have the authority that goes with the responsibility? Do they understand the group's overall mission within the large organization? If the answer to these questions are negative, then you are faced with a primary cause of

stress.

## Preventing and Reducing Stress

A leader who makes sure that people are in a position to communicate easily and are clear about procedures, practices and missions, can do a lot to reduce stress. There's much to be said in favor of structure. One seeks structure in which the leader allows room for negotiation on some issues, while recognizing that it's proper for him to exert veto power on other issues. The fostering of teamwork and cross-training can also open up communications.

We are not equally blessed with talents and expertise. As we learn to share our individual strengths, we open the door for greater communication and understanding about our value systems and how or why we are approaching a problem in the way we do.

Every day brings our ability to cope with the changing day's events to the fore. Helping to reduce anger and anxiety in the workplace takes time and cooperation from all those involved. When changes are necessary, incorporate all those who are involved to whatever extent possible. This reduces the fear of the unknown. Individuals are less hostile and rebellious toward someone who has kept them informed and has openly kept them involved.

Keeping the collective goal or objective in the fore is helpful. The refocusing and clarification of the team's goals makes the goal the target for everyone's energies and participation. Competition within the group working together needs to be kept at a minimum. Each individual within the group or team needs to be recognized for his individual contribution toward the goal's achievement.

When someone within your domain or team is to be promoted or transferred, talk with that person quietly about their feelings of rivalry with the understanding that most people would feel a sense of competition under such circumstances.

Changes are always occurring such as when older employees are asked to take younger employees "under their wing." Let the objectives of the company and the goals of your division be the focus so that superiors and subordinates have a sense of agreement and participation between them. Personal pressures will often increase rivalry. Rivalry within a team structure is stress-producing.

Every executive wishes for each of his staff to be independent and totally problem-free. But there is a need to incorporate all individuals and keep the lines of communication open so that each one knows what aspect of a project the other is involved with. When you're dealing with a team operation, it is necessary for each individual to function together as with an orchestra. There can only be one conductor, but each individual makes his contribution to the harmony of the final product.

Opportunity to let individuals ventilate their feelings of rivalry, disappointment, helplessness or hostility are really to everyone's betterment. When individuals are allowed the opportunity to appropriately discuss their feelings, they are better apt to deal with their frustrations rather than have their frustrations and anger thwart the goal or make themselves ill.

Coping with change is a daily process and it comes in little steps as well as monumental big moves. When changes can be anticipated there is less stress. That helps ameliorate a great deal of anguish and smooths the waters so that no one feels a sense of being drowned in their own feelings of uncertainty.

## DEALING WITH STRESS

Although some stress is inevitable in life, managers have a responsibility to hire people who can handle the day's stress level inherent in a particular job or group.

All stress is not negative or harmful. There can be positive stress, as when a joyous event occurs. If it's within your domain, try not to add to your stress level at a time when you already have many new or demanding experiences to juggle.

Whenever possible, stressful events should be anticipated or planned. Time management needs to be incorporated into one's lifestyle. When the manager sits on an item that is due at the end of the month and doesn't act upon it until just days before the key item is due, this only brings anxiety and stress into one's life. When appropriate and within one's domain, we need to plan properly so that we do not have a stressful event.

Be wary of many published stress tests which assign universal value to life events for everyone. Individuals are unique. Stress tests are useful only in helping people identify what stress it is they are feeling, not the quality or quantity.

There is no one way to reduce stress. The important thing is to figure out what is pressuring you now and how you are adapting to it. Avoid fads, but recognize that physical health is critical in preventing and coping with stress over the long term.

Strong support systems at home and at work are extremely important. Research shows that it is vital to know people with like values and with whom you can share experiences with varying degrees of intimacy. There is a popular myth that stress in your personal life and your work life can be kept separate. Each will affect and act upon the other. Your health, performance and attitude on the job or at home are interactive.

When stressful events cannot be prevented or anticipated, recognize that you have no control and decide how you're going to increase your adaptability. This could mean anything from making a conscious effort to

live with a situation to looking for another job. But don't waste time feeling stressed about the unchangeable.

Where possible, don't over-adapt--sometimes it's good to try to change the stressful environment if that's at all within the realm of possibility.

Once you've identified the stress in your life that you wish to ameliorate, it's necessary to change your attitude, your behavior or both. Technical people in particular can make the mistake of assuming that this kind of change can be made quickly and involves only the intellect.

Personal change is tough, takes time and involves some emotional reaction. It's not enough, for instance, to decide you "will delegate more." Instead, set a goal such as, "In 6 months I want 50% of my department's projects to be done by somebody on my staff besides me." Change in any aspect of your life takes time and thought, but it can be done.

For good health and mental well-being, activity is a biological necessity. Unused muscles, brains or any other part of the body lose not only their elasticity but their efficiency. Inactive individuals have deprived themselves of every outlet of their innate abilities to create, to build and to be.

Whether the activity is work that enthralls us, or play that demands a state of total relaxation, depends on our need and our attitude toward the activity. We need to find play that will excite us, be pleasant, useful and/or constructive. Play is the best outlet or safety valve for re-evaluation and self-realization. Play and a healthy body are what is needed to help cope and prevent irritation, violent outbreaks or fights with depression.

Individuals who are highly motivated to seek release from stress and frustration usually put their energies into worthwhile goals and allow themselves the opportunity to totally discharge their stress or anxiety in a worthwhile and safe environment such as play allows us.

Diversion is the spice of life. Changing the activities that give us strain and tightness to activities that are relaxing or will allow us complete rest affords us the opportunity of diversion in its most pleasant form.

A healthy body that is allowed the highest nutrition and exercise on a regular basis and a mind that is exercised in challenges, relaxation and meditation are a combination of mind and body that will deal with stress almost effortlessly. The coping mechanism of the human is a marvel and, like any tool, the body and mind need to be brought into harmony through the understanding that stress can either work for us or against us. The choice is totally ours. Coping with change can be a challenge that we have the ability to reach for with enthusiasm.

Do not be afraid to seek professional help in any of the areas that

appear to be stressful, whether it be a psychotherapist, short-term career counseling, or the other professional services that are available. There are specialists in many areas to help eliminate any sense of tension or discord we are feeling. Your job is to reach out of yourself to use the myriad avenues available for help in coping with stress.

No insight, however virtuous or profound, is worth much of anything until it is acted upon. Remember that stress is nature's way of telling you to slow down.

Note: Additional bibliographical information is available from the author upon request.

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