



## **Employee Stress – Eroding Half your Profits!**

The World Health Organization has deemed stress as a “worldwide epidemic” and a major cost to companies in the US with estimates of more than \$300 billion a year in absenteeism, poor performance and health care costs. In fact, Lee (2005) states “stress is implicated in 60 to 90 percent of medical problems that can cost the average company up to 45 percent of its after-tax profits” ... “40 Percent of employee turnover relates to stress!” Yet most managers have no idea what stress is costing them in bottom-line dollars and that it is eating away at their profits.

Underlying much of the stress in the workplace is the perceptions employees have of the environment, difficult coworker relationships and poor communication practices. When workers are stressed they overreact, thus alienating coworkers. This hostility undermines the teamwork needed to create world-class customer service and generates a negative workplace atmosphere. These behaviors affect workers’ in terms of decreases in work effort, time on the job, performance and productivity. Think of what happens to the goals of an organization when workers are stressed and perform at minimal standards.

### **Understanding the Implications of Stress:**

The ability of humans to think and project is a main component of a stress-filled life. This is a very different reaction than an animal has when faced with a danger. When an impending attack occurs, animals physically respond to the dangerous situation which allows them to either flee the circumstances or stay and fight. The hypothalamus in the brain triggers a bodily reaction which initiates a sequence of chemical reactions which allows the animal to respond to the threat. When the fight or flight response is activated, adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released into the blood stream and immediately cause dramatic changes in the body. Breathing increases, and blood is directed to muscles and limbs to supply the energy for running or fighting. Pupils dilate, awareness increases and the perception of pain diminishes. All this is to prepare the animal physically and psychologically for the challenge ahead. After an animal is faced with such challenges, their body returns to the normal state it was prior to the event.

Humans, however, may respond differently. Although the physical reaction is the same, our ability to project can place us in fight or flight reactions to threats whether perceived or actual. How often have we gotten in our heads and thought ... What if? ... What if?... What if?. How often do you worry or ruminate over issues that never become reality. We are faced with a stressful time and instead of focusing on all the things we can influence, we become victims and worry about things we have no control over. This places our bodies into constant fight of flight mode. When our actual survival is threatened, there is not better response to have, yet what happens to our bodies when they are constantly placed in fight or flight with chemical reactions continually occurring? And what are the modern day saber tooth tigers that we face?



In the turbulent environment of today's workforce, external events threaten our very existence. Modern day threats that people face may be downsizing, mergers or unforeseen environmental events. In addition everyday hassles may accumulate and have the same affect as a catastrophic event. A fight with a boss or coworker, a traffic jam or technology failure can also leave you feeling helpless. How can you respond to these issues in the workplace? Can you flee? Can you fight? Often you have to sit and try to control yourself while your mind churns out endless talk which constantly ignites the fight or flight response. We begin to imagine threats that do not exist and exaggerate the consequences of an event.

### **The Impact of Stress on Coworker Relationships**

When you consider stress in the workplace, it is important to think of what happens to a person when stressed. It is imperative to realize that stress causes physical, emotional and behavioral problems which affect your personal and professional relationships in many ways. Let's look at a scenario to see how it may play out in the workplace. You, an employee, have a disagreement with a spouse or child before leaving home for work. As you drive, traffic begins to back up and you fear you will miss an important meeting. Irritation is exacerbated by the traffic situation which gives you the time to think and project about what will happen if the meeting is missed. You mentally project that your job may be in jeopardy because of this event and feel scared. Upon arriving at work, your usual parking spot has been taken and you need to find another place to park. By the time you get inside, you are physically and emotionally in chaos. A coworker reminds you that you are late for a meeting which results in a verbal tirade at the coworker, and you enter the meeting agitated, disheveled and unorganized. You have a headache and trouble focusing. You leave the meeting convinced that this is the end of your career, and spend the rest of the day mentally playing out the future. The boss does not say too much, so you mentally fill in the blanks. Unable to complete any of the items on your "To Do" list, you spend the rest of the day updating your resume. In the hall, you pass the coworker that met you when you arrived that day and finds the employee upset. "Overly sensitive" is the label you put on this individual.

Stress in the workplace is not new, but due to environmental issues facing organizations, it is a greater threat to employee health and well-being than ever before. When stress becomes excessive it triggers physical and emotional reactions in the body that are harmful to both the employee and the business. Early warning signs of stress according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health include:

- Headache
- Sleep disturbance
- Stomach upset
- Difficulty concentrating



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- Low morale
- Relationship problems

When early warning signs occur, it is imperative to deal with them immediately since chronic conditions develop over time and may be life threatening such as cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal conditions, and psychological disorders. Offering resources at a Health Fair in a Fortune 500 company hooked employees up with resources such as massage, reiki and yoga that they had not experienced before and reported that it helped their stress levels remarkably.

### **Managing during stressful times:**

How you manage your organization during stressful situations has a dramatic effect on the people you oversee. Are you resilient? Do you panic? Is your glass half full or half empty? The actions of a leader can determine how others see the stressful situation. Do you model good stress management techniques? Do you take care of yourself so you are able to help your workers with their stress? Assess how you communicate to workers as the emotions of the managers are transmitted to the employees, as it is imperative that you exude confidence. Your behaviors must be consistent with the beliefs and values of the organization no matter what the source of the stress. An awareness of the issues that cause anxiety for you, can help you manage your behavior instead of communicating insecurity to your people.

As a manager you must also find the sources of stress within the workplace, which negatively impact your bottom line, and can be corrected. Do team members communicate with each other? Are there gaps in organizational communication which elevate the stress levels? Is your communication honest so it increases the level of trust employees have in you and the organization? Reina and Reina (2006) have found that “trust is both the adhesive that holds organizational relationships together and the oil that lubricates its performance. Although of course trust building and healing are important during stable times, they are critical during times of change.”

As a leader you can also offer services and help employees become aware of stress management techniques. If your organization has an Employee Assistance Program, this can be a good time to offer their services. In addition, if your organization has a newsletter or message board, this is a good avenue to communicate stress management techniques, such as:

1. Avoid unnecessary stress: Not all stress can be avoided, but you will be surprised at the number of stressors you can eliminate.
2. When possible, avoid situations that stress you out. Learn to say, “No.”



3. Express your feelings instead of stuffing them. This only leads to a nuclear reaction down the road to firecracker events. Use friends and trusted coworkers for support.
4. Don't try to control the uncontrollable. There are certain things in our life that we can control and certain things we cannot. Empower yourself by focusing on what is in your control. You have the power to choose how you react to situations.
5. Look for the silver lining in circumstances. During difficult times are there any positives? Focus on these instead of the downside of challenges.
6. Look at the big picture. How important is this situation in the long run? Will it matter a month, year or five years from now?
7. Adopt a healthy life style: Exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, and avoid caffeine and sugar as well as dealing with stress with alcohol, drugs or cigarettes. Instead of using substances to run from difficult situations, deal with circumstances with a clear mind.
8. Do something you enjoy every day.

People deal with stress differently, so encourage your employees to experiment with different techniques and strategies until they find what works for them.

Managers are the key to organizational culture. When a business encourages employee participation from the bottom up, institutes policies that take into account the needs of employees, and empowers them to do their best even in challenging times, the organization minimizes the influence of stress. By modeling confidence, communicating clearly and offering stress management techniques to your employees, you, as a manager, can become the foundation for a resilient organization.