

Organizational Stress Management: Survival Strategies for Turbulent Times

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"Stress!" Even the word can send shivers down your spine. Most of us live in a world where stressors of all sorts come at us daily - stress at work, stress at home, and stress all around us. We constantly are bombarded when we walk through the door at work, when we go on-line, when we drive through traffic, or when we turn on the TV or radio.

Organizational stress management programs abound, and a growing body of research has given us insight into the causes and potential antidotes for stress. Yet, stress has not gone away. Far from it! Most indicators of mental health in the United States show that symptoms of stress have been on the rise. The decline in the economy has taken its toll over the past few years. On September 11, 2001, the mental health of the United States experienced a sudden jolt. And, since then, there has been war, heightened awareness of terror, and an on-going diffuse sense of unease and nervousness. Even for those not directly affected by economic or world events, there remain reverberating aftershocks that affect us all.

And then, at a more local level, there is work-related stress. Plain, ordinary workday stress. The problem is stress can be cumulative. What goes on at work can add to the "volume" of stress a person perceives and experiences. Consider "Joe Worker." On a typical work day, he may wake up worrying about money. After fighting commuter traffic, he has a hard day at work (perhaps harder than usual due to a recent reorganization or cost-cutting program). He listens to some disturbing news on the radio on the way home, unwinds with a few drinks, and then goes to bed having just watched more bad news on TV. Not a pretty picture!

What to do? An organization only can do so much. Work stress is only part of the problem. But, in many cases, a significant part -- and a part that potentially is changeable through workplace interventions.

Some stress clearly can be traced to individual factors (e.g., personality, social support, coping skills), and not some organizational culprit. People vary quite a bit in terms of how much stress they can withstand, how much they let it get to them, and how much they may transmit it to those around them. Research has shown a number of factors to be important in our capacity to tolerate stress. The same individual factors discussed in a 1986 Training and Development article (Nowack, K. "Who are the hardy?") still ring true today. People who are

committed to meaningful goals, who see problems as challenges, and who experience a sense of control (the 3 “C’s”) are buffered against the effects of stress. A fourth “C,” connection to others also has been shown to mitigate the effects of stress. For the most part, an organization can do little to modify or change these individual factors (except perhaps more rigorous recruitment and selection practices that screen those especially susceptible to stress, or those who are known carriers of stress).

Besides an individual's personality, emotional predisposition or coping skills, there are many organizational sources of stress. In fact, recent research by Organizational Performance Dimensions suggests that without addressing organizational sources of stress, individual stress management programs usually are ineffective with respect to productivity and quality of worklife outcomes. Furthermore, a recent study by Marketdata, a Tampa, FL research firm, reported that nearly 75 percent of people seeking stress reduction were being treated for work-induced stress.

TOXIC ORGANIZATIONAL STRESSORS

So, what are the biggest contributors to workplace stress? Of all the potential workplace stressors, our research points to nine that are especially relevant.

1. Bad Bosses

Recent studies suggest that one of the biggest sources of stress at work is having a bad boss. Toxic bosses wreak havoc in organizations. Sometimes bad bosses may be among the most experienced, hard working and results-oriented folks in an organization.

People can put up with many types of adversity, but often the hardest is to work for an “interpersonally challenged” boss. Ask anyone who has endured a number of difficult bosses in their career, and they'll tell you bosses come in many varieties and there are all sorts of boss-induced stress. Generally, where there are toxic bosses, there is increased turnover, more stress disability claims, less productivity and lower team morale.

The evidence mounts:

- After 20 years of research and 60,000 exit interviews, the Saratoga Institute reports that 80% of turnover is directly related to unsatisfactory relationships with one's boss.
- According to a recent Gallup Organization study of approximately 2 million workers at 700 companies, the number one reason people leave their jobs is because of “bad bosses.”

- Another recent Gallup study found poorly managed workgroups are an average of 50 percent less productive and 44 percent less profitable than well-managed groups.
- A conclusion reached by Roger Herman is that 3/4 of people voluntarily leaving jobs don't quit their jobs; they quit their bosses. (Herman, Roger. Winning the War for Talent. The ASTD Trends Watch: The Forces That Shape Workplace Performance and Improvement. American Society for Training And Development, pp. 23-32, 1999, p. 28)
- Workplace bullying is more prevalent than most of us suspect. The most notorious and illegal varieties - sexual harassment and racial discrimination - get the most press, but bullying can take many forms. Bullies can be accidental, chronic, opportunistic, or substance-abuse related. The U.S. Hostile Workplace Survey 2000 of 1335 (Campaign Against Workplace Bullying) provided prevalence estimates of bullying in the U.S. to be approximately 1 in 6 (16.8%) workers who has experienced severe disruptive mistreatment in the past 12 months.
- Being the victim of a brutal boss leads to clinical depression in 41 percent of victims, according to a survey by Bullybusters.org, an online nonprofit in Benicia, CA, that advises victims of workplace abuse. Bullying eats away at self-confidence and leaves victims feeling inadequate and isolated. The victimization also can lead to sleep disorders, ulcers, high blood pressure, loss of creativity and even posttraumatic stress disorder.

To the extent organizations tolerate poor management; employees are subjected to much unnecessary stress. Getting rid of bad bosses (or managing them) can alleviate much of it. The best organizations hire bosses, in part, based on their social and interpersonal skills (their emotional intelligence). They also provide training, mentoring, and incentives to help bosses learn how to treat people humanely and at the same time get productive work from them. Unlike primitive concepts where productivity and employee satisfaction were seen as trade-offs, there are some management styles that aim to maximize both objectives. Enlightened organizations actively encourage and reward that. They view their investment in management talent as a means of protecting their investment in their employees.

2. Overload, Frequent Reorganization and the Pace of Change

While bad bosses have been around since the dawn of time (or at least the dawn of organized work), the current pace of change has been a relatively new phenomenon. And, it is leaving employees reeling. In our research, many organizations report stress is up, confusion is up, org charts are changing more quickly, and people have less of a clue about what's going on. Consequently,

trust and confidence in management is down, and when people look outside the organization, they have see fewer options. It is no surprise people feel more confused, angry, depressed, and worried about their job security.

According to one executive in a Fortune 500 company, “We find the constant reorganizations are creating a lot of uncertainty and stress. In addition to work overload (since people now may have to do work that displaced workers used to do), it is the lack of information itself that leads to panic. Often our managers are well-intentioned. They don't want to raise people's fears by telling them about impending restructuring. However, the lack of information actually creates more panic.”

The way mergers are handled can be especially demoralizing: “In the old days, we used to know everything and share information before it hit the street. Now we know it at the same time, or even later than everyone else.” It is unsettling for employees to hear on the news about their own company, or to get a call from a friend outside the company who may have heard about it first.

Human beings desire a certain amount of stability and certainty. When major changes occur, people's sense of predictability and control is disturbed. To the extent it is practical and legally permissible, it is good practice to share as much information as possible. And when you can't, say you can't and that you will share it as soon as you can.

3. Job Designs That Do Not Make Sense

Napping at work may be as hazardous to your health as it is to your security. According to a new University of Texas study, people who struggle to stay awake in passive jobs are 34% more likely to die prematurely than employees who have more active jobs (includes all causes of death). Additionally, a very heavy workload coupled with little decision making opportunity—air traffic controllers, for example—makes a premature demise 45% to 50% more likely. Why? Heavy workloads can lead to continuously high stress hormones and often are associated with poor overall health habits. In turn, poor habits are strongly correlated with adverse health, increased absenteeism and decreased productivity.

Also, some job requirements simply do not make sense. Research on job satisfaction shows people want to do meaningful work that fits in to a larger framework. A sure way to kill motivation is to assign jobs where that connection is not clear. When people do not see the purpose of their work, there is little for them to get excited about. Work becomes a chore - a place to drag yourself to every day.

A growing body of research suggests two major factors leading to stress in this area. Jobs that are designed with little decision latitude and those with

tremendous pressure and overload are linked consistently with lower productivity and adverse psychological and physical health outcomes such as hypertension and cardiovascular disease. Today, many employees feel an extra dose of pressure to produce more with fewer resources - adding to a psychological sense of overload. Employees who can actively participate in solving problems, planning their work, and making decisions are not only more satisfied, but more productive and healthier.

4. Lousy Feedback

Most of us require a certain diet of feedback. When that diet is deficient, there can be a number of problems. Sometimes we don't get enough positive feedback. Sometimes, we don't get any feedback. And sometimes it is the manner the feedback is given.

In the first case, people who get plenty of negative feedback, but little positive (related to the problem of bad bosses) live in a very demotivating work climate. It is stressful to be told only when you screw up. Getting consistently skewed feedback can erode self-confidence and make work a whole lot less fun.

Getting no feedback at all can be extremely stressful too. (Or the variant of getting feedback that is so vague and watered down, you might as well get none.) The most engaging jobs are those where people perform a task --whether a complicated management process or a simple physical task -- and get immediate feedback. They know right away what worked and what did not. They know they have an impact on their environment. They see the connection between what they do and achieving some result. When deprived of that connection, people are left to swim through the mush of their work not knowing if their actions had any impact on anything or anyone.

Current research suggests as leaders move up in organizations, they actually receive less direct feedback about their interpersonal and leadership style. Others are less inclined to be honest with them. One of the reasons for the rising popularity of 360 degree feedback processes is that they provide targeted information to leaders about what they are doing effectively and what their "blind spots" are. Feedback, properly delivered, actually increases motivation and reduces stress for most high performing employees.

All feedback is not created equal! In fact, the way feedback is delivered sometime can be more important than the feedback itself. A recent meta-analysis review of over 600 feedback interventions in diverse organizations revealed that one-third of those interventions actually resulted in decreased performance! It is clear that little, no, or poorly delivered feedback can have tremendous impact on the psychological health and productivity of employees.

5. Money (but it may not be what you think!)

Ask most employees, and they'll tell you they do not make enough money. When questioned about what can be done to make them happier, a common response is "just pay me more." However, that knee-jerk reaction may mask other more basic drivers of dissatisfaction.

Below a certain threshold, to be sure, low pay does cause stress. (A large body of epidemiological research links low socioeconomic status to poorer overall health.) However, attitudes related to money often are complex and can have a bigger impact than actual dollars. Feelings about fairness, violated expectations, and lack of control can affect people more than their absolute level of pay. (An axiom in stress management is that it usually is the perception of stress that is so stressful, not the stressor itself.)

"Equity theory" says that what your neighbor makes can change how you feel about what you make. Mary earns \$75,000 a year and considers herself well paid. However, she finds out her colleague Pat is making \$90,000 and doing less work. Now, her sense of justice may be offended. Simmering resentment can result.

Also, if expectations are violated (the "psychological contract" as behavioral scientists like to say), that too can lead to money stress. When people are led to believe they will get a certain raise or that their pay will be contingent on performance, they expect follow-through. Violations of such expectations can lead to pent-up resentment, depression and a lower level of commitment to the organization.

Paradoxically, being overpaid can be stressful too. Of all the dysfunctional workgroups we have known - and we have known many - some of the absolutely worst ones contained people who were substantially overpaid. And they knew it! Trapped in "golden handcuffs," they would not leave even the most deplorable or abusive work conditions. Instead, they simply hunkered down, grinned, bared it, and did whatever it took to hang on to their jobs. Below the surface, however, they were seething. Sometimes they would act out in ways just short of getting themselves fired. Unable to attain satisfaction themselves, their closest substitute was to stir things up and try to make others miserable too.

6. Unpleasant Co-Workers

We catch colds and bad moods from infected co-workers. Like bad bosses, unpleasant co-workers rank right up there as a major source of occupational stress. A common chorus among many workgroups is "we spend more time with each other than we do with our families." Often that is true. The people we hang out with can have a big effect on how we feel about ourselves. What goes on

from 9 to 5 (or 9 to whenever!) may have a big impact compared to what we do at night and on weekends away from work.

Team work, collaboration, political culture and interpersonal style play a big role in the type and amount of work stress that employees experience day-to-day. A substantial body of literature in social psychology has found that positive moods foster prosocial behavior in a variety of settings (i.e., collaborative team work). These studies strongly suggest that positive mood at work is related to both health and productivity. For example, in a recent study of 210 sales people, positive mood at work was significantly associated with less absenteeism and greater prosocial behavior towards other team members. Unpleasant coworkers, on the other hand, can make work a real drag, driving down both the well-being and productivity of those around them.

7. The Work Itself

Sometimes, it is the actual work itself that leads to stress – not the conditions surrounding the work. In blue-collar jobs especially, exposure to chemicals, noise or an unpleasant physical working environment are common sources of stress. Among pink- and white-collar employees, environmental sources of stress are less common, but stress emanating from the social and political environment can be just as toxic.

It is highly stressful when people believe their job requires them to do things that go against their values or beliefs. Managers or human resource folks sometimes feel compelled to take management's side and toe the company line even though their true sympathies lie elsewhere. Or potential whistle-blowers may anguish over whether they are willing to pay the price for acting on their principles.

At its worst, people believe they need to lie in order to survive. Putting a lot of energy into posturing and presenting a false self can be insidious to physical and mental health. People often incur great costs when they feel they must pretend to be different from who they really are, or to cover for the mistakes and misdeeds of others.

8. Technostress

Technostress is not new. It has been around for a long time -- even before "multi-tasking" was a word. For quite a while, many of us suffered from information overload, and felt we were expected to do too many things at once. "Give yourself permission not to multi-task" is a more modern version of the mantra "one thing at a time."

And yes, it is getting worse. By the time this goes to press, there probably will be a few more time-saving or data-transmitting technologies available to us. In

many cases, rather than using them as tools to make our lives simpler, we feel compelled to use them and also suffer their effects. We become more available and have the capacity to do even more things in even less time. Rather than being the master of technology, it is easy to become the victim of it.

Have you checked your email lately? Just logging on at the beginning or end of a day (or not being able to log on at all) can increase your blood pressure substantially. Technology can be a double-edged sword. It potentially increases productivity. However, it also can increase expectations and the resulting work load. The bar is raised. Our level of customer focus is higher. Now, we may feel we need to be responsive to others all around us 24/7.

A recent AT&T corporate study found that half of those taking vacation either call in to work or check email while away (and that's assuming they do so with a healthy discount on their long distance telephone bill). We know many stories of executives who spend practically their entire vacation responding to their e-mails, voice-mails and pagers. This can contribute to the "let down effect" where people actually get sick just when they planned to actually unwind and relax. Current research from UCLA suggests that some individuals actually get sick as soon as they slow down and get away from technostress and the demands from work ("reactors"). Others wait to get sick until they get back to work when they have to work doubly hard to catch up after a relaxing vacation ("delayers").

9. Work/Life/Family Balance

Results of a new study from the University of Maryland confirm what working parents already know -- the expanded work week is undermining family life. In a study of over 500 employees in a Fortune 500 company, researchers concluded that long hours at work increase work-family conflict and that this conflict is associated with stress related health problems and depression. This was true regardless of how flexible an employee's schedule was or how much help they had at home for child care.

In case anyone hasn't noticed, some major career paradigm shifts continue to influence the value struggle between employers' needs and employees' wants. Job security has been replaced by employability security, organizational loyalty has been replaced by job/task loyalty, linear career paths have been replaced by alternative career paths, and career success has been replaced by work/family balance.

It is no coincidence that when reviewing characteristics of the "Best Companies" in America, we find a shift to those that are indeed "family friendly." In the past, it simply was accepted that many of us had to put in long hours (particularly if we wanted to be promoted and climb the corporate ladder). In recent years, some folks are reprioritizing. Despite economic conditions, they feel life should not center entirely on work. Today, an increasing number of employees are willing to

put family, community, religion, hobbies, or volunteering first even if they pay the price.

Career research from Organizational Performance Dimensions suggests there is a greater proportion of working adults who endorse work/family balance as a top priority for them—despite anxieties over the slow economic recovery and continuing threats of downsizing. Despite these trends and despite the existence of family-friendly work policies in many organizations, there are plenty of cultures that actively discourage employees from leading balanced lives. Rewards and promotions go to those who put in the requisite amount of “face time,” staying at the office long enough to show they are good dedicated corporate citizens.

- In a recent poll by Reston, Virginia based online jobline TrueCareers, more than 70% of workers do not think there is a healthy balance between work and their personal lives. More than 50% of the 1,626 respondents reported they are exploring new career opportunities because of the inability to manage both work and family stressors.
- In a comparative survey by Atlanta-based staffing firm Randstad North America, in the year 2000, 54% rated family the most important priority compared to almost 70% in 2002. No doubt that companies considering cutting work/family friendly programs and services to cut costs (e.g., flexible scheduling, child care, job sharing, telecommuting) could have trouble keeping employees when jobs become more plentiful. The work/family balance struggle can leave us literally physically and mentally exhausted.

At the same time that work is becoming more homelike in some ways, the home is becoming invaded by work. According to a Family and Work Institute study conducted in 2000, over 16% of employees bring work home at least once a week—up from 6% in 1977.

What makes these work/family issues more striking is that working hours in other countries are flat or even declining. For example, France recently enacted a 35-hour work week and mandatory vacations for all employees. According to the International Labor Organization, as of 2000, Americans are working more hours than the Japanese: 1,966 hours per year compared to 1,889.

In addition to the number of hours on the job, work schedules themselves can have positive or negative health consequences. A number of studies have associated poorer physical and psychological functioning with rotating shifts and schedule demands of workers on the job. Fatigue, as a result of inadequate sleep is a major occupational stressor and one that can have serious consequences with respect to accidents and poor performance. For example, the National Transportation Safety Board has cited fatigue as a probable cause in the *Exxon Valdez* and *World Prodigy* marine accidents and in the crash of a DC-8 aircraft in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Fatigue also has been associated with

the nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island and Bhopal and in the decision-making process of the Space Shuttle Challenger accident (for additional information see <http://www.alertness-solutions.com>).

The Future of Stress

To many observers, the future of stress on the job may not seem promising. On the other hand, it may not be as bleak as some of us fear. Work tends to go in cycles. Neither bad times nor good times are permanent. (although to an individual in the midst of a bad period, it may seem as if it will never end!) One may be tempted to look back at the “good old days” and bemoan things will never be the same. In fact, that is true -- things will never be the same - but not necessarily in a bad way. Many struggled to make ends meet back then, and had to endure discrimination and physical demands not nearly as commonplace now. Yet, we sometimes tend to remember the past in distorted and glowing ways.

In any event, neither waxing nostalgic nor longing for better days is likely to help. We need to face up to the changing nature of work and learn to adapt as best we can. Stress is here to stay. Its form and nature may change. Coping strategies may need to be altered somewhat to keep up with modern stressors. And, what works in one environment may be different from what works in another.

For individuals seeking to manage their own stress and for those in positions of authority who can influence the lives of others, it is important to understand the sources of work stress and what can be done about them. The best organizations really do believe people are their most important asset. And they manage them as if preserving that asset matters.

Relieving stress...what employers can do

Employers can do quite a bit to help alleviate employee stress. Of course, there are constraints based on culture, economics, the industry one is in, and a host of other factors. Nevertheless, here are some general recommendations for helping reduce employee stress:

- Invest in talent management. Send the message to managers throughout the organization that bad behavior is unacceptable. Encourage and reward healthy management practices.
- Share information generously. Even under adverse circumstances, employees want to know what's going on. Yes, people will grumble and complain when they hear bad news. However, that is nothing compared to the resentment they will feel if they have been kept in the dark. Overcommunicate!

- Manage the pace of change. To the extent possible, allow people a breather after a major change hits. Give them a chance to recuperate before the next one comes along.
- Establish a climate of openness and honesty. Make it safe for people to express themselves. Tell it like it is. Make sure people don't fear retaliation if they speak out.
- Get the right person - job fit. Steer employees into jobs they can succeed at and have a passion for. Productive employees usually are the happiest (however, the opposite - that happy employees are productive - is an outdated myth). Give people jobs that challenge them but where success is attainable.
- Provide services employees can use for themselves and their families. Wellness programs, gyms, childcare centers, EAPs, and other services mean a lot, especially when employees are encouraged to use them and there is no stigma attached.
- Have "family friendly" policies. Balance short term productivity costs with a longer term investment in people. Having generous flex time and maternity/paternity policies can help employees manage the stresses of work and home. Make it OK to use these services. Don't just have them on the books, but informally discourage their use.
- Employ "fatigue countermeasures" to ensure that employee fatigue does not result in accidents and injuries. Review and control working hours, rotating shifts and policies surrounding work and travel schedules.
- Make sure employees know the organization cares about their well being. Provide appropriate avenues for people when they feel wronged. Let them know there is recourse beyond their immediate boss if their legitimate rights have been violated.

Relieving stress...what employees can do

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for how individuals manage stress. Different strokes work for different folks. Experiment. Pick and choose what is right for you:

- Identify what truly gives you satisfaction. What do you find absolutely engaging and absorbing? Make a conscious effort to carve out time and put that in your schedule.

- Try to maintain balance in your life. Put work in perspective. If circumstances force your life to be temporarily out of balance, accept it, but commit to reprioritizing and rebalancing at a defined later point.
- Practice positive lifestyle and health habits on an ongoing basis: regular exercise, eating well, meditation, relaxation, restful sleep, and social support.
- Find humor even in difficult circumstances. Seek out people with positive attitudes who make you laugh. Treasure those relationships.
- Know when you had enough of a bad situation. Realize you have options. Try to maintain a sense of hope and perspective. Without being a “Pollyanna” or denying the reality of a negative situation, try to find the challenge or “gift” in it.
- Intersperse mini-stress reducers throughout your day. (Stretch, focus on your breathing, yawn deeply, take a short walk, strike a Yoga pose, call a friend at an appointed a time for a non-work conversation). Take time to relax when you eat lunch.
- Deal with unpleasant relationships in ways that are best for you. Accept that some interpersonal stress is inevitable. Know when to walk, when to ask for help or advice, and when to give it your assertive best.
- Space out your stressors. Most of us can deal with a certain amount of stress and do just fine. The problem is not having a chance to recover from one before the next one hits. If possible, give yourself a chance to recuperate before jumping into the next likely stressful situation.
- Try a vacation without bringing along work -- physically or mentally. Also, schedule frequent mini-vacations. Make it a point to use your vacation as a restorative time and minimize the “let down effect” by practicing mental and physical relaxation exercises before and after your break.