Managing Employee Stress: Ways to Minimize Distress

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Abstract

Workplace stress has become a major issue for the employers, employees and the organizations. Cut throat competition and grueling pace of change have made employers realize that employees are the only source of competitive advantage. Given the pressure to perform and compete stress will be a natural concomitant. It is therefore important that executive stress is kept at bay to ensure health, performance, morale and well being of the executives. In today’s scenario, to develop stress management strategies for the employees is not only an option but also a necessity for an employer. This paper attempts to understand the nature of stress in the present day scenario and suggest simple yet effective ways of coping as often times the prescriptions we get for stress management prove to be more problematic than the problem itself.

Keywords: Employee Stress, Organizational effectiveness, Stress Tolerance Limit, Coping.

Introduction

Globalization and competition in the business world has forced organizations to look forward to seek new means to sustain fierce competition in order to succeed in their operations [1, 2]. In an ever-changing market environment companies have to adapt to the changes in the business to maintain and reinforce their competitive advantages [3, 4]. There is a tough competition in the market and the company that can win the war is the one that provides better services and products to the customer. Cut throat competition has made employers realize that employees are the only source of competitive advantage. Given the pressure to perform and compete stress will be a natural concomitant. Therefore, it is important to keep employee stress at bay to
The word ‘stress’ originated from the Latin word, *stringere*, meaning to draw tight. In 1936, Hans Selye, “The father of modern stress”, borrowed the term from physics and used it in medical literature [5]. He suggested that stress is a non-specific response of the body to any demand. In this modern hyper competitive world, stress can come from anywhere and everywhere. The question, however, is how to deal with it? But before finding an answer to this we need to understand the nature of stress.

Stress is a condition in which an individual is confronted with constraints, demands or opportunities related to him/her, but for which the outcomes are perceived to be important and uncertain [6,7,8,9]. It has devastating effects on human behavior and organizational functioning [7,9, 10].

**Organizational Stress**

A misfit between person-environment often leads to Organizational Stress [11, 12]. The basic premise of P-E fit is that stress arises when there is a lack of person and environment fit. There are two basic assumptions, first, that stress arises from the misfit between person and environment, and second, that subjective perceptions of work environments primarily determine stress [13]. Therefore, there should be integration between characteristics of a person and his environment so that individual and the organization both get along well resulting in positive outcomes. The work environment should provide opportunities for meeting individual’s needs and aspirations failing which stress may result affecting the health, morale, performance and well being of the individual. Stress has both psychological and physiological dimensions [14]. Psychologically, people perceive situations to be threatening and challenging and this cognitive appraisal may cause physiological disturbances such as cardiovascular problems, blood pressure, diabetes, ulcers, high cholesterol, etc. Such events may lead to Distress. According to Greenberg [7], health related effects of stress is extremely serious and play a significant role in determining the physical and/or psychological health of an individual, as well as the success of an organization. Studies have proved that there is a relationship between stress and employee health [15, 16, 17].

However stress is not always negative. An optimum amount of stress can arouse a person towards action. It can result in a new awareness and provide exciting new perspectives [18]. Stress can increase alertness among employees and mobilize their adaptive capabilities. Such stress is referred to as Eustress which leads to constructive planning and corrective actions; it is essential for success in any endeavor.

The earlier approach to stress was focused on identifying the stressors and cordonning them off. However, the strategy did not work because stress cannot be eliminated. If one source of stress is cordoned off, stress will arise from some other source. This led to a paradigm shift in stress and focus shifted to the role of cognitive appraisal in stress causation. This approach explains that factors generating stress can vary from...
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individual to individual depending on their belief, attitude and perception about the situation [19]. The same stimulus can elicit different responses from different people, that is, a stressor to one person may be insignificant to another. So stress is more individual based rather than stimulus based [15].

Either very low level of stress or very high level of stress, both have a negative effect on individuals. A very low level of stress undermines people’s alertness. This lack of alertness or resource activation may cause loss of motivation, withdrawal, or complacence in effort; a very high level of stress may lead to anxiety, depression and various mental and physical illnesses. Sometimes, however, the pressures and demands that may cause stress can be positive in their effect. As explained in Yerkes – Dodson Model (1908) [20], performance increases with physiological or mental arousal, but only up to a point. When levels of arousal become too high, performance decreases. This explains that moderate level of stress is associated with superior performance. Maintained at moderate levels, stress can be stimulating.

![Yerkes–Dodson Model](image)

**Figure 1:** Yerkes – Dodson Model (1908)

Coping strategies

Stress affects both, a company's bottom line and the morale of the employees [21]. Company sponsored programs for managing stress of employees increase the stress tolerance level among them. However, the prescriptions from highly institutionalized agencies or professional Yoga Gurus offering services to reduce stress in people may not always be helpful because it demands rigor and continuous commitment. Since, people working in organizations do not get time enough to follow the regimented nature of such agencies it is prudent to think of some simple user friendly stress management techniques that do not ask for much time and are easy to practice. Employees need to be trained to adopt these techniques. The following techniques have been found to be useful in helping organizations cope with employee stress.
1. **Becoming aware of the problem**—The first step in handling stress is to figure out what is causing it. Individuals have the tendency to deny the existence of stress in their life without realizing that stress is severely impacting their own well-being. Often people end up overusing denial and thus taxing one’s defense mechanism to exhaustion. (Kubler-Ross Model) because it is easier, psychologically, to cast out the probability and deny its existence completely. This avoidance strategy develops into a vicious cycle where the failure to cope with one stressor give rise to another stressor thus adding to the woes of already existing stress. Therefore, appraisal of stress among employees is an important step. It is necessary to face the unpleasant notion of being under constant stress. Employees need to develop insight into what causes them stress. This would help them develop a strategy for managing stress more effectively.

2. **Relaxation**—People who feel relaxed are better at dealing with stress. The idea is to deviate mind off the stress and substitute it with a more tranquil and peaceful scenario. Though relaxation is an individual specific response one has to understand that genuine relaxation must result in peace of mind. The techniques can range from watching television to listening to music or visiting some close friends or a power nap. Relaxation not only lowers blood pressure and heart rate but also improves concentration, boost up confidence and reduces anger and frustrations.

3. **Healthy diet**—The link between mood and food is established. A well nourished body is well equipped to cope with stress. It is said that our swabhava(nature) is determined by the food we eat. Certain food increases the proclivity towards aggression whereas certain food catalyzes calmness and help in release of serotonin which is also known as “happy hormone”. During stress body releases cortisol into bloodstream which sends appetite-stimulating neurotransmitters into drive. This lowers the level of serotonin and programs brain accordingly. According to a survey conducted by American Psychological Association (APA) women turn to comfort food such as ice cream and cookies to ease stress. Under stress, women urge for their favorite food which they would have otherwise denied deny because they’re trying to lose weight.

4. **Create Balance**—Professionals have an issue of work-life balance and find it a major source of stress. Unbalanced work-life often escalates stress level. Individuals often deprive themselves from passion for their work or their life; they may become physically or emotionally ill. Time should be taken out for socializing, relaxation or exercise. To create balance one should include activities that are relaxing and creative like watching movies, yoga, reading, sports, etc.

5. **Exercise**—Exercise can be a key method to compensate long-term effects of stress. According to Cooper, “To deal with stress effectively, you need to feel robust and you need to feel strong mentally. Exercise does that”. People who are physically fit helps manage emotional stress and tension well. Exercise can also aid in relaxation and improve sleep. Regular exercise decreases stress hormone cortisol and increases endorphin giving mood a natural boost. Moreover, during exercise the stray thoughts do not disturb an individual and hence body and mind gets time to recover.

6. **Think positive**—The constant passive feeling of ‘I can’t do anything’ is one of the main causes of stress, anxiety and lack of wellbeing. Positive thoughts not only boost up confidence and rejuvenate mood but also Increases life span, lower rates of
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depression and levels of distress. Individuals who are optimistic do more physical activity, follow a healthier diet, and don't smoke or drink alcohol in excess and cope better with stressful situations.

7. **Have ‘ME’ for some time** - It may sound obvious, but individuals often forget to take out time for themselves. The extra hours in the workplace mean that people aren’t spending enough time doing things that they really enjoy. It is important to take some time for pampering oneself. When one begins to feel overwhelmed or burnt out, it is best to call for a break and take a moment for yourself. This would prevent from getting stressed. Making space for oneself in life gives mind and body a break and time to re-energize.

8. **Good night sleep** - Adequate sleep fuels mind and body. Feeling tired will increase stress because people are less patient and think irrationally. Lack of sleep can be an uncomfortably large source of stress. Irregular and disturbed sleep often hampers concentration and decreases energy levels. This in turn affects the effectiveness of work and increases stress. During sleep, the body rests, repairs, rebuilds, grows, and heals itself and stresses and tensions accumulated throughout the day are ideally released. Regular exercise, light reading or music, even humorous movies induce sleep.

9. **Prayer and Meditation** – Both prayer and meditation work wonders in reducing stress. Spending a few minutes in meditation can restore calm and inner peace and balance emotional well-being and the overall health. However, effective praying or meditation has to be learned through training. Both prayer and meditation require full concentration of an individual who has to focus all his attention and remove the accumulation of petty things that trouble him in his daily life. This helps in looking at the bigger picture. Religion and spirituality can also offer comfort and strength that is important when dealing with stressful situations. The peaceful time spent during meditation and prayer gives body and mind important time to relax and renew. It helps lower heart rate, breathing rate and blood pressure. It helps in moving away from the distress of life to a more peaceful and tranquil state of mind. This in turn rejuvenates an individual increasing his/her stress tolerance.

10. **Manage your time** - Time-management skills are critical for effective stress control. Individuals should learn to prioritize tasks, avoid over-commitment and identify time-wasting tasks. You can also learn to tasks by keeping a diary for a few days and noticing where you may be losing time.

**Conclusion**

That executive forms the backbone of an organization is an old story. The present day reality is that it is the HEALTHY executive. A sick executive may make the whole organization sick. To take the organization towards progress it is important that executive stress is kept at bay. Stress has emerged as a leading health risk of the 21st century and as a serious hazard in the workplace. Stress has always been perceived as negative and unpleasant. When people hear the word “stress” it is actually distress. Distress leads to negative implications and people generally try to avoid. But there is also a good stress called eustress which is positively correlated to good performance and well being.
A very high or a very low level of stress affects the mental and physical health of an employee. It can manifest as anxiety, aggression, irritability, dependency, withdrawal or depression leading to poor health, lower productivity and reduced morale. However stress is not always entirely negative. Moderate level of stress motivates and improves performance. Maintained at this level, stress is stimulating.

The techniques mentioned above have been time tested and are based on years of research. The principal strategy in fighting stress is neither to deny the existence of stress nor to be bogged down by it. The trick is to know stress is a part of life and it can be conquered. Rather it has to be conquered. By investing little time and little effort on these small stress bursting techniques as mentioned above the toll that stress takes on employees can be highly reduced.

Reference

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