

Stress management for optimization of organizational activity

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Abstract: *Stress is a constant presence in our lives, whether we analyze it in professional, social or family terms. This daily reality creates a state of tension, strain and discomfort, causing significant changes in physical and mental health. Stress at work can affect anyone, at any level, in any sector and in organizations of any size. Stress affects health and safety of individuals and also organizations' welfare and national economies. There is a definite correlation between the level of stress at work and the changes in organization's productivity.*

Keywords: *stress management, organizational optimization, occupational stress, organizational culture, psychological contract*

STRESS: DEFINITION, TYPES AND CAUSES OF ITS OCCURRENCE

We meet every day people who are overworked, overwhelmed or underpaid. We wonder what to do to cope with the stress in our life. Often we forget to put on paper all the endless tasks we have to do during the day, and paradoxically we receive other new tasks to fulfill.

According to Peter Drucker, we have to make a clear distinction regarding those who are accomplishing an intellectual work today, the situation being more complicated for them than for production line workers of the past, who knew what they have to do. Instead, those involved in intellectual work should not only execute the plan, but also to conceive it. This puts an important pressure on the human brain so in case you see a doctor, one of the question is: "How stressed are you?" Certainly, stress at work can affect anyone at any level. It is produced in no matter what domain and in organizations of any size. Stress affects the health and safety of individuals and also welfare

of organizations and national economies.

Stress was introduced by Hans Hugo Bruno Selye, professor of histology, who sets up the foundation of International Institute of Stress with Alvin Tofler in 1977. He believes that stress is related to adaptation syndrome as a reaction of individual against environmental aggressions. Hans Selye defines stress as "the set of reactions of the body to the external action of the causative agents (physical, chemical, biological and psychological) consisting in morphofunctional changes, most often endocrine".

According to the Romanian Language Explanatory Dictionary (1998), stress is "the name given to any environmental factor (or set of factors) causing an abnormal reaction to human body; adverse effect on the human body produced by an environmental factor."

According to Terry Looker, Olga Gregson (2009, p.31),

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“Stress is seen as a reaction of the organism against changes occurred in our environment.”

All mentioned authors consider that “stress can be defined as the condition that we feel when we perceive a discrepancy between perceived demands and ability to cope with them.”

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define stress as “a cognitive and behavioral effort (with obvious emotional expression) to reduce, control or tolerate external or internal demands that exceed personal resources.”

Ioan Bratu Iamandescu (2002) believes that mental stress is a syndrome consisting of exacerbation beyond the level of simple homeostatic adjustments, certain psychic reactions and their somatic connections (affecting almost all body components), in connection with external and internal excitement exerted by triggering factors (stressor factors) acting intense, surprisingly, sudden and/or persistent and having a symbolic nature, “threatening”, or, other time, extremely favorable to the subject (perceived or anticipated by the subject). In other cases, stressor factors could be psychical excitants with major affective resonance (positive – eustress or negative – distress) or overloading factors of cognitive (attention, thinking, etc) and volitional process, mentioning that mental stress is mainly based on a major emotional involvement.”

The definition given by Golu M. (1981) should also be taken into consideration: “state of tension, tightness, discomfort, caused by affective agents with negative significance (or positive, in case of eustress), frustration or repression of some motivations (needs, desires, aspirations – including unloading), the difficulty or impossibility of solving problems”.

However, Paul Popescu Neveanu, in the “Dictionary of Psychology” (1978), defines stress in terms of two meanings: “a) a situation, stimulus which puts the body into a state of tension; b) the special tension state, itself, of the body as an activation of all its resources to cope with physical or psychical aggression (strong emotion)”.

“Stress is an individual reaction and the result of interaction between environmental demands on one hand and the resources, capabilities and opportunities of the individual on the other hand.”

It is certain that stress is characterized by intense hormonal changes, massive secretion of adrenaline. There are also morbid changes (hypertension, gastric ulcer etc). Psychological stress is caused by prolonged emotions primarily mainly due to frustration, conflict and anxiety. There is stress of overload and also stress of underload. A moderate stress boosts and stimulates the body vitality. The harmful feature of stress occurs when the damage is too large, exceeding the individual adaptive capacity.”

Doctor Ioan Bratu Iamandescu, in his book “Psychical stress and internal diseases” (1993), believes that stress can be positive (eustress) or negative (distress).

Eustress (“positive stress”) has beneficial effects on the human body, occurring when the stress agents have positive significance for the individual.

These triggers positive emotions (intense joy, ecstasy, triumph, laugh out loud), and positively affect the body’s organs and apparatus. Eustress appears in the course of positive emotional states or coupled with moderate exercise (eg sex or jogging). Eustress is essentially acute. Frequent repetition of eustress contributes to increase anti-infection and anti-tumor immunity, becoming a longevity premise.

Distress (“negative mental stress”) is widely recognized as pathological. It usually produces pain and inadaptation as a result of contact with a stressor agent.

Situations generating mental stress:

- the existence of unusual circumstances for the individual, which find him unprepared to deal with them
- the significance of an event
- engaging the individual into an exaggerated action or relation
- peculiarities of the social context
- lack of internal conditions
- subjective way of perceiving environmental demands

- underload / overload
- existing conflictual situations in the family, profession or intellectually related
- lack of time
- isolation
- the emergence of a physical or mental obstacle in the way of a goal that leads to frustration
- disturbing circumstances arising from physical agents (noise, vibration, temperature fluctuations).

STRESS AND HEALTH AT WORKPLACE

MANIFESTATIONS OF STRESS AT WORKPLACE

Stress at work can affect anyone, at any level.

It is produced in every sector and in organizations of any size. Stress affects the health and safety of individuals and also welfare of organizations and national economies.

Workplace stress occurs when job demands exceed the available resources of human beings. Stress is not only the result of major adverse events, but also is the result of stress and daily pressures. The latter, by their frequency, have an important role in the professional environment and affect more individuals than major adverse events, which are rare.

Andreescu Anghel, Liță Ștefan (2006), states that "sometimes, professional stress is considered as a positive, beneficial factor on performance.

This refers to eustress which means activation, mobilization of individual resources. It is important to distinguish between eustress and distress, one as a state of stress with beneficial effects, the other with adverse health effects."

Today's world, more dynamic in work field perspective, brings in the foreground workers, personnel reductions and services externalization, increased flexibility in terms of position and competencies, the growth in number of determined time job contracts, growing uncertainty of jobs and intensity of work (overload and higher pressure), and unstable balance of life and work.

That is why stress can bring disease and pain to individuals, both at work and at home.

Stress can compromise safety at work too, thus contributing to other health issues related to work, such as musculoskeletal disorders.

Stress greatly affects the image of an organization.

Reducing stress associated with work and psychosocial risks is not only a moral imperative but also a legal one. It is also an important problem of economic efficiency. The good news is that stress associated with work can be approached in the same logical and systematic way as other health and safety issues.

There is an abundance of practical examples to cope with this problem in the area of European Union countries. Using the appropriate method, workers may be stress protected.

Considering the example of a person who feels great pressure meaning job demands (work time, liability) larger than individual capabilities and corroborated by conflicts with colleagues/leaders, frequent changes or threats on job security – such as the possible personnel downsizing; all these could be perceived as a stressful situation by someone or challenging by another. What makes the difference in perception depends on job nature, the psychological profile of individuals, as well as physical health or health, in general.

Manifestations of stress at workplace can lead to: depression, anxiety, feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to cope with them, a decrease in professional performance, an increase in the number of days for sickness treatment, absenteeism, insomnia, cognitive difficulties (reduced ability to concentrate or make decisions), fatigue, headache, palpitations, gastrointestinal problems, increased aggressivity, etc.

All these lead to the following consequences:

- a decrease in productivity
- an increased risk of having an accident at work
- damage in personal relationships
- an increased risk of health problems (cardiovascular disease, digestive problems, cervical pain, etc.)

STRATEGIES TO ELIMINATE AND

PREVENT STRESS AT WORK

Recent studies of the so-called “healthy organizations” suggest that policies for employee health lead to benefits for organizations.

A healthy organization is defined as an organization with a low rate of illness or disability in working personnel.

That means an increased competitiveness. Researchers have identified that a minimum stress at work leads to a higher level of productivity as definition for a healthy organization.

These relate to:

- Recognizing employee’s performance
- Opportunities for career development
- Organizational culture that values employee
- Managerial actions in concordance with the values of the organization.

Strategies to reduce stress at work include:

- a) psychological assistance for employees is an occupational health service; that is provided by organization in order to reduce or eliminate the decreasing performance at workplace;
- b) training services for employees: performance management, time management, stress management, career management, etc. ;
- c) educational workshops: parenting, work life balance, time management, stress management, emotional control, anger management, decision making and problem solving, alertness, communication in couple, smoking quittance, weight control, etc.;
- d) online educational resources: newsletter, access to educational information for the employee and his family (web resources, brochures);
- e) career management services;
- f) services for managers and professionals in human resources departments are:
 - management of critical incidents ;
 - assistance for enhancing skills in control of inadequate behaviors of employees;
 - assistance and training in management of employees capabilities;
 - development and implementation of employee assistance programs in the company.

STRESS PREVENTION AT WORKPLACE

There is no standardized approach or a manual for developing stress prevention programs. Design programs and solutions will be influenced by many factors: the size and complexity of the organization, available resources, and in particular the type of problems the organization faces.

For example, in some companies the main problem is overloading employees and others, an inflexible program or lack of communication with the public. In other words, it is not possible to find a universal prescription for stress prevention in the workplace, but it is possible to provide some guide lines for the prevention of stress in organizations.

In all cases, the process of stress prevention programs involves three distinct approaches: problem identification, intervention and evaluation. Organizations must be prepared properly to lead this process successfully.

A minimum level in preparing a stress prevention program should include the following:

- workplace stress awareness (causes, costs, control);
- ensuring a quality management and support for the program;
- employee involvement in all phases of the program;
- establishing the technical capability of program management (specific training for members or consultants involvement).

Assembling employees or employers and managers in the same committee or “solving problem group” can be a very useful approach for developing a stress prevention program.

Researches show that these participatory efforts were successfully achieved on ergonomic issues in the workplace, partially due to the capitalization of direct knowledge of employees about the problems encountered in their workplace.

The “psychological contract” as a mean of preventing and combating stress is today a frequent approach. In the literature the term “psychological contract” is commonly used in the sense of mutually shared set of expectations between the employee and the organization.

The author Denise Rousseau defines the psychological contract as “individual beliefs shaped by an organization, in terms of exchange between the individual and the organization”.

Psychological contract can be accepted as a mental model that employees use to frame and interpret organizational phenomena. Its terms shall constitute a reference system to which employees report their work and the attitude of employers towards employees is also very important.

Characteristics of the psychological contract:

- represents, essentially, a subjective perception that differs from one individual to another;
- psychological contract is dynamic, that means it is changing over time, during the relationship between employer and employee;
- refers to the mutual obligations based on investment in promises made by both parties, with the hope of a positive outcome for each party;
- is closely linked to the context of labor relationship,

the psychological contract cannot be created by individual or organization only.

The main functions of the psychological contract:

- reduces uncertainty, because not all possible aspects of the employment relationship may be covered by a formal written contract between the two parts: employer and employee;
- dictates employee behaviors - like a system, the employee weighs their commitment to the organization and the organization's obligations to themselves and change their behavior in relation with critical company outcomes;
- the third function of psychological contract, gives to employee a sense of influence on what happens to him, in the organization.

To conclude, stress is a “disease” of our time, affecting people no matter of their lifestyle.

Stress is found everywhere, more obvious and more frequent in advanced countries. To find the way to manage stressful situations is up to each of us.

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