

COPING WITH STRESS IN AN ORGANIZATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of mankind there has always been some kind of stress affecting how people feel, act and cope with situations. In this paper we will look at the definition of stress and what causes people to have stress. Then we will see how different people handle stress and show how not all individuals have the same tolerance for stress. The next thing that will be discussed is how managers in organizations can recognize and reduce the negative effects that stress has on the worker and the organization. Finally we will consider what kind of stresses there are in military organizations and how they can be controlled.

II. DEFINING STRESS

Robert C. Dailey, in his book *Understanding People In Organizations*, defines stress as "any demand made on the body that requires psychological or physical adjustment." Many people think of stress as always being something bad. However, stress sometimes can be good. Stress is part of our every day life. It can have a motivating effect or a demotivating effect. Each of us have our own level of how much stimulation or stress we need in our lives to keep us from getting bored.¹ Others however, have a much lower tolerance for stress stimuli. So managers must be able to look at each individual and decide if the individual has a high or low tolerance for stress. Managers can do this only if they have a good understanding of what causes stress.

III. TYPES OF STRESS

Stress can come from a multitude of different reasons, but for simplicity lets break it down into two forms: individual induced stress and physical environment stress. Individual stress includes things such as role conflict, role ambiguity, work overload, and responsibility for others. Role conflict occurs when

accomplishing one job inhibits or greatly reduces the chance at completing another assigned task. In this case the person who is tasked to do the jobs will incur some type of stress while trying to figure out how to get both tasks accomplished in the given amount of time. How much stress and if it will impact the individual positively or negatively will depend on the experience level of the individual. Role ambiguity is when an individual is not sure of what their job entails. It makes it hard for a person to decide on what their priorities are and how to manage their time. Ambiguity can come from a number of different things. A transfer, promotion, new boss, or new co-workers can all cause an individual to experience some type of role ambiguity and added stress. Both role conflict and role ambiguity relate to job dissatisfaction, lower level of self-confidence, and sometimes elevated blood pressures.² When these occur an individual's motivation decreases, family problems surface, and depression sets in.

Another form of individual induced stress is work overload. There are two forms of work overload: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative occurs when a person has too many things to accomplish and not enough time to do them in. Qualitative overload on the other hand is when the individual doesn't have enough experience or expertise to accomplish the task(s) at hand. Both of these type of stressors are very detrimental to an individual's health. In fact because employees feel as if they are doing two or more jobs at once and have no time to themselves they experience elevated cholesterol, blood pressure, and pulse rate.³ Another factor which affects employees is when they have or feel they have the responsibility for other co-workers. This can happen not only to managers but also to other employees who may be group leaders or even union leader. When you start adding up all of these individual responsibilities the potential for employees having some sort of job related stress is very high. Now lets move on to physical work environment stressors.

When people think of physical work environment they usually think of some type of hard labor. But its not confined only to physical labor, it also encompasses other factors such as noise, temperature, lighting, and pollution.⁴ So that means even people in business and people in construction both have some kind of physical work environment stressors. Stress from noise doesn't have to be caused from loud sounds. It could be the sound of the air conditioner or maybe even the silence of some one who is sitting next to you and you know they are watching what you do. Temperature also adds to frustration and therefore causes stress. Whether its from working out in the blazing sun or from sitting beside the air conditioner, they both can lead to stressful situations. Light can cause stress because of being to high, to low, or the wrong type. Any of these can make a person strain their eyes thus make them more susceptible to stress. When you put all the individual and physical stressors together you can see why job stress is drawing more and more attention.

IV. HOW TO HANDLE STRESS

Although every person handles stress in their own particular way they all basically go through the same stages. Professor Hans Selye called these stages the 'general adaptation syndrome'.⁵ He says that the body adjust to stress in three stages; (1) alarm reaction, (2) adaptation, and (3) exhaustion. Alarm reaction is where a person first becomes aware of whatever the stressor is. In this stage the body activates its defensives. Some of the notable traits are higher blood pressure, rapid breathing, faster heart rate, and muscle tension. In the adaptation stage the body tries to identify which system it needs to use to deal with the long term effect of what ever is causing stress. Then the body moves into the exhaustion stage. This is where the body is totally depleted of its adaptive energy. The body also can revert back to the symptoms of the alarm reaction stage.⁶ From having a basic understanding of how a person's body reacts to stress, managers have a better insight on what to look for when trying to figure out what the limits are of their personnel.

V. RECOGNIZING STRESS

The best way to learn how to notice signs of stress in other people is to become aware of your own types of symptoms. There are many warning signs available

to us. A few of them include dryness of the mouth, insomnia, chest pain with no known cause, rapid breathing, stomach pain, and changes in appetite. When you feel these type of symptoms pay attention to how you react to them. More than likely what you do will probably be the same way others cope with stress. Here are some of the things you might not see in your self that you might notice in your co-workers; drug use, excessive drinking, absenteeism, and emotional outbursts. One of the more serious stress-related sickness is depression. This happens when a person loses their self-esteem and they feel that they have no control over their job. Two signs associated with depression are the inability to meet deadlines and having trouble making decisions while at the same time worrying about both of them excessively.⁷ Managers need to be able to recognize these signs of stress in the work place so productivity won't be hurt and the quality of life for the employees remain high.

What exactly can be done about stress? The most important thing that organizations can do is try to keep stress at a minimum on the job. Employers need to make sure that they educate their employees about how to handle stress. This can be in done at a formal meeting, at informal group meetings, or by newsletter. The main thing is to get the word out about stress and heighten individuals awareness of it. There are many avenues to take that help relieve stress. Physical fitness, nutrition, weight loss, and smoking programs are some of the more popular ways to help ward off stress. One way that employers are responding to employees' emotional, physical, and personal problems are employee assistance programs(EAP).⁸ These programs are set up by the employer with a local medical organization that has the capability of helping employees that have some type of problem whether it be drug dependency, alcoholism or smoking. The employer in these programs pay for part or all the expenses of the program.

Another way organizations are helping their employees to deal with stress are wellness programs. Many organizations are using these programs and are reporting great results from them. Companies are beginning to realize that programs dealing with stress-related problems before they become chronic can be a major contributor to the quality of work life for employees thus enhancing their job performance.⁹ Some companies spend millions of dollars each year on wellness programs. One company even paid their employees bonus' for any weight they lost. Although these programs sound like they cost a lot they actually save companies money in the long run. This is because of several factors some of which are less hospital stays, less health insurance claims, reduced accidents rates, and increased employee satisfaction. All of these lead to a more productive individual and better work force.

One other aspect of reducing stress deals with specific behavioral techniques for mental relaxation. These are brought out in stress management courses that some companies let their employees attend. They focus their attention on the concept that the central nervous system can't differentiate between a real experience and an imagined experience. These classes teach things like deep breathing, muscle relaxation, biofeedback, and how stress can affect them personally and what they can do about it.¹⁰ In today's society where pressures are becoming more and more extreme organizations, leaders, and managers need to be aware of the stress that their work force encounters and set up some type of program to help them deal with them.

In the military there are the same type of stressors as in the private sector and also a few that wouldn't be found in corporate industries. Military leaders must look at their personnel and see what kind of pressure they are experiencing to be effective leaders. In fact they need to be even more vigilant for signs of stress because they must be sure that an individual is ready to go to combat, both in a physical and mental state, at a moments notice.

VI. THE MILITARY AND STRESS

There are many things that can cause undo stress in the military. They range from worrying about getting promoted to getting a college education and to trials and tribulations of being separated from ones' family for long periods of time. Some of the things already mentioned before such as responsibility for others, role

conflict, and role ambiguity are all present in the military work force. Stress affects enlisted personnel as well as officers. Lets explore some of the ways the military and military leaders can help the organization and its members to cope with stress and its effects.

One way the armed forces has dealt with stress in its organization is with EAPs.¹¹ Almost all bases have some type of program to help members who have some type of dependency. The first step however is usually the hardest, is to identify the people who need the help. Most of the programs allow the member to volunteer for help without retribution. Individual commanders also can play a big part in helping members find help. By making sure their troops know about what programs are available and by having stress awareness training so other members know what to look for in their co-workers, the commander is able to stop chronic stress before it occurs. Another way the services deal with preventing stress are their physical fitness programs. Each unit should support these programs by assuring the individuals have time allotted to participate in them. Still another way that has picked up steam in the last couple of years is the quality of life working teams. These teams look for ways to improve the quality of living both during work hours and after. So as you can see the military is concerned about stress and are taking great steps in trying to reduce its affects.

VII. SUMMARY

We have taken a look at what the definition of stress and some of the causes of stress in the work place. It is important to try and reduce these causes as much as possible so that employees won't get any stress related symptoms. Also it was stated how a persons' body reacts when it encounters stress. Then the signs of stress that managers need to look for were discussed. After that some of the ways organizations can help it employees manage stress were looked at. Finally, it was shown how the military is handling stress among its members. As the world gets more diverse stress in the work force will continue to grow. It is imperative for managers and leaders to be able to recognize stress, understand its causes, and know how to alleviate it in their organizations so that it can continue to grow and be productive.