

Stress Management

❖ PAUL MARINESCU ❖

In the post-modern management organizational leaders have the obligation of protecting their employees against factors that could cause damages to their potentially wealthy lives. Stress is such a factor. We shall attempt by means of the present article to draw attention on certain general aspects that should be taken into account in drafting plans for fighting against and diminishing the stress faced by the employees.

Key-words: stress, pressure factors, harassment, stress indicators, measures for stress prevention, measures for stress reduction, work-place well being.

I. Stress Definition

The golden rule of western contemporary time – “Time is money” – puts pressure on today’s man, determining him to permanently pursuit success, consequent to fulfilling as many objectives in as short time as possible. Being a limited resource, it has been viewed as any other limited resource discovered by man along history, namely

its maximum exploiting has begun. Such permanent pressure put on the working individuals, as well as any factors which will be further discussed herein generate the generalized stress phenomena.

That is why more and more employers are beginning to pay more attention then they used to in the past to the effects of stress over their human resources. What is stress? The most

appropriate definition seems to be the following: *adverse reactions, on a psychical and physiological level of an individual when not capable to cope with the forces it faces.* Stress is generated not necessarily by the external problems we confront, but by the way in which we cope (or fail to cope) with these problems. Thus, most people face a great diversity of pressure factors throughout their entire life, and there can

be said about some people that they are stimulated or are at their maxim performances when facing “pressure”, especially at work. However, as soon as we stop coping adequately to pressure, the stress symptoms begin to appear.

II. Stress Symptoms

Stress can lead both to physical and emotional negative reactions.

Box 1 – Reacting to stress

„Difficulties or very low stress levels can lead to low difficulties (boring cases), whilst too much stress can be damaging (over-demand or tearing). Between such there is an area in which the stress improves performances and life. Stress cannot be avoided, but it must be kept on a comfortable level. Managers due to the nature of their work are exposed to risks arising from excessive stress. Thus, it is important to know how excessive stress can be damaging – and which are the signals that can be detected in order to observe its damaging potential.

The natural emotional reaction to stress or to difficulties is a powerful stimulation caused by adrenalin. The focusing is intense, the reflexes are rapid. The attitude is severe. Sleep and relaxation are impossible. Facing a crisis, such stimulation is benefic; a difficult task can be solved much quickly and more efficient. For the moment the loss of relaxation and sleep is not important. As well as in the case of physical reaction, problem occurs only if the reaction to stress lasts for too long.

Many managers can cope to such life style and are even happy. However there are certain disadvantages. One of them refers to the fact that the capacity of working long hours and the inability of relaxing at the end of the day frequently generate family problems. The second is that such addiction for work satisfaction determines the manager to find himself in a risking position when he is no longer able to work” (Melhuish, 2001: 800).

The **immediate** stress symptoms can manifest as: indigestion, dizziness, headaches, backaches, inability to eat, insomnias and increased irritability. **Over time**, among the symptoms there

are: diseases of the heart and circulatory system, ulcer, nervous breakdowns and other severe illnesses. In order to enhance a relatively wide synthesis of the symptoms, see the table bellow.

Table 1 – Effects of stress over the body functions (Melhuish, 2001: 802)

What is damaged	How is it damaged
Brain	Headaches and migraines, tremble and nervous tics
Mood	Anxiety, loss of sense of humor
Salivary glands	Dry mouth, lump
Muscles	Muscular tension and pain
Heart	High blood pressure and chest pain
Lungs	Coughing and asthma
Stomach	Abdominal pain and diarrhea
Intestines	Abdominal pain and diarrhea
Bladder	Frequent urination, prostate symptoms
Sexual organs	For men: impotence For women: menstrual disorders
Skin	Drying and eruptions
Bio-chemistry	Quick tiredness

III. Stress Factors

In a complex research on stress carried out during the 1960s (Holmes and Rahe), most life events connected to the potential occurrence of stress (for instance: death of spouse, divorce, death of a close relative, accidents or diseases of such, loss of the working place, retirement, change of the financial situation etc.) refer to the **house related and social life**, and not to the working place. The professional performance is highly probably negatively influenced by

the particular or social life. Stress represents a personal and subjective reaction to pressure; hence it depends on each individual's perception over both the size of the problem he/she confronts and his/her own ability of coping to such.

Another stress factor at work is the way in which individuals perceive the potential outcome of their professional activities, moreover regarding the aspects of relative success or failure. In case the outcomes are viewed both

uncertain and important (for instance, signing an important contract, drafting a crucial report, or pure and simple the ability of "pleasing the direct supervisor"), more chances of stress occurrence exist.

IV. Harassment at Work

Harassment influences the right of each of us of having our personal dignity respected at work. When our colleagues or superiors subject us to exaggerated pressures which obviously cause us a state of psychical discomfort, then on a first sight it might seem that we are facing a harassment case. Here is the definition of the European Commission in the Recommendation regarding women and men dignity protection in professional environment (November 1991):

„... Member states must take actual measures in order to implement the rule according to which any sexual behavior grounded on the sense of belonging to a certain gender, affecting women and men dignity in the working place, including behavior of superiors and colleagues, is unacceptable if:

- The person under discussion deems that behavior as unwanted, offending or outside reasonable limits;
- The individual's rejecting the said behavior or accepting such... is used explicitly as grounds for a decision affecting that person's access to professional training... working position... promotion, or as reason for any other sort of job related decision;

- It creates an inhibiting, hostile or humiliating professional environment for the person subjected to such behavior".

A particular focus has been placed on sexual harassment, which women mostly, however not exclusively, face. Harassment can also be triggered by race or religious beliefs, by the capacity of member in a certain union, as well as by attitudes manifested in respect with young people, disabled, or minority groups members.

For the employers who take not measures against harassment cases, two types of consequences exist:

- They can be held liable before a labor court of law (for instance, grounded on laws regarding sexual discrimination and inter-racial relations) or before a civil court of law (for instance, for breach of contractual obligations), given the fact that the costs implied by such proceedings can be quite large; secondly,
- Chances exist for the organizational professional performance to be damaged due to internal pressures, increased human resources fluctuation, absences rate and a general low morale state.

The employer can take the following measures:

- It can design and publish a clear policy statement regarding this matter, comprising defining examples in respect with the term of harassment and its

effects, clarifying the behavior norms to be complied with by the employees, as well as sanctions for infringement of such;

- It can ensure an appropriate and functional communication system, by means of which the employees can make confidential complaints against any harassment case;

- To ensure a functional system of adequate disciplinary sanctions, by means of which the employees at fault to be treated with firmness, yet correct;

- To ensure conditions so that harassment accusations to be investigated and settled without delay;

- To ensure appropriate counseling services, both for those making the complaints and for those accused of harassment;

- To make public to the greatest extent the organizational aims in respect with the harassment cases between employees.

V. Organizational Stress Indicators

Stress can lead to:

- High levels of sickness and absences;

- Low performances and inability of achieving established objectives;

- Increase in the accidents and errors rate;

- Increased number of internal conflicts between the employees;

- Extremely high fluctuation rate.

The costs in charge of the organization could be very high, thus the top management is interested in imple-

menting measures aiming to reduce the stress level, so that the entire organization to function appropriately.

The measures that can be taken by the management in order to reduce stress of the human resources can be divided in two major categories:

A. Measures aiming to prevent stress;

B. Measures aiming to reduce stress.

The purpose of the first mentioned ones is to eliminate the potentially stressing situations, whilst the last mentioned ones attempt to maintain stress within reasonable limits, when its occurrence is noticed. Both measures categories are implemented merely on an organizational than on an individual level.

A) Organizational Stress Prevention

Stress prevention is an objective difficult to accomplish by any healthy and active organization. However, a number of measures can be taken in order to provide the employees with the needed stimulants, without causing a chronic stress level. Here are some examples:

- Jobs can be designed in such a manner as to allow for a maximum degree of freedom in using the individual competencies and decision making ability by the job holder, by including tasks diverse and difficult enough as to keep the interest up;

- Activities can be designed in such a manner as to allow the position

holder to be as responsible as possible, enhancing him/her with increased authority and allowing him/her to be a part in the making the decisions influencing the job;

- The superiors can be encouraged to adopt participative management styles;

- The team spirit can be encouraged;

- The inter departmental/unit communication should be encouraged, as well as vertical communication along the hierarchical managerial path, and constructive feedback should be ensured for each individual (in respect with work results, human resources appraisal and so on);

- Delegation should be used in respect with decision making so that on each organizational level people can take part in the decisions affecting their work and promotion possibilities;

- An organizational culture should be developed promoting a positive attitude towards the employees.

B) Stress Reduction Measures

- The number of changes imposed to each individual or team should be reduced;

- The procedural complexity and other sort of complexity in performing the tasks should be limited;

- The employees should be provided with the possibility of expressing their opinions before someone – bosses, colleagues, qualified counselors;

- Social and sport related facilities should be provided;

- Material facilities should be provided, such as access to lunch cafeteria and adequate toilets.

VI. Counseling Services on Stress

Job related counseling is the situation in which a person uses a set of methods or competencies in order to help another person to think his/her decisions in an organized manner and to undertake liability for such, regardless if such decisions regard the professional or the private life of the individual.

Most cases, although they are sincerely well intended and understanding, co-workers can make without even knowing inappropriate remarks or suggestions to a stressed individual. Given the fact that most managers have no talent or special training on counseling, all they can do in this respect is to have the capacity of telling if an employee needs counseling or not.

Each individual has the potential of overcoming his/her own problems, and counseling provides us with the ability of discovering our inner resources and of identifying external opportunities and to use them both in order to successfully overcome potentially stressful situations.

Counseling represents a process in which the counselor helps his client:

- **To identify the problem;**
- **To admit the ideal or preferable settlement;**
- **To take into account modalities in which intended outcome could be obtained.**

Organizations providing counseling services for their employees can decide upon internal level counseling, by using qualified internal counselors, or upon using external consultancy services company. One of the methods based on external counseling is the Employee Assistance Program, in which the employer contacts a counseling services specialized company which provides this sort of service for the employees.

The confidential nature of the discussions with the clients is guaranteed in any circumstances – the organization contracting the counseling services is only provided with the number of received calls, the type of raised problems and other general information, which cannot lead in any way to identifying the individuals.

The employers provide such service because:

- If the employees are unhappy, restless or stressed, they cannot perform at their best on the job, they can take more medical leave periods or even change their working place;
- It is in the organization's direct interest to prevent such un-economical use of the human resources it has;
- Ensuring qualified counseling services can represent one of the modalities of supporting the employees performances, of achieving the economical objectives.

VII. Job Related Welfare

Welfare protection is usually covered by the legislation on labor and health protection. Thus, matters such as

ensuring personal hygiene facilities (toilets, showers etc.), rest, lunch area, first aid and so on are regulated by law. In respect with financial insurance, welfare is covered by remuneration and salaries system. Hence, pensions, sick leave indemnities, health insurances and others like are granted as part of the employees' total remuneration.

Employees' welfare protection is manifested in the following cases:

- **Deaths;**
- **Elderly employees and retired persons;**
- **Working problems;**
- **Family problems.**

There are also benefits which are granted with no purpose and voluntarily, such as free insurance covering usual dental care control, periodical controls or hair dressing services.

Group welfare protection services usually refer to access to the cafeteria, to sport or social clubs, as well as organizing ad-hoc events such as Christmas parties (for retired persons or for employees' children etc.).

In respect with labor protection, employees health and welfare protection in the professional environment, most elementary rules are stipulated in one way or the other under legal provisions. It is important to admit that the obligations arising from law do not usually impose more than observing minimal standards. Organizations interested in their own employees' welfare will accept to apply more than the law in respect with labor protection and health protection.

Box 2 – Working environment and family environment

„No matter how preoccupied a manager is of his/her physical appearance, his/her health is determined after all by the satisfaction on the job and at home. On the job, satisfaction arises from how good is the balance between the individual's personality and his/her activity. The happiness at home is first of all influenced on selecting the spouse and on the ability of discussing family matters. The more successful a manager is in his/her work, the more time he/she will have to spend at work. After all, his/her happiness and his/her family's happiness depends on being aware of such conflicts and on the ability of settling them – when they can be solved” (Melhuish, 2001: 807-808).

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