

## Stress Management

Anyone reading this article will identify with the following situation. You go to a doctor with a backache. The doctor examines you and asks a few questions. These questions usually start with whether you've lifted something heavy or have suffered an injury. If you are a woman of a certain age, you are asked if you have aches and pains all over your body. If the answer is yes, you are told it is probably osteoporosis. But whatever be the diagnosis, the one question that is definitely asked is whether you have stress. I myself have been asked this question several times by doctors and I find it odd. How can you be a living being and not have stress? Even birds have stress. If you've ever seen them fight over food, you will know what I mean! So, my answer to every doctor who has ever asked me if I have stress is, do they know of anyone who doesn't? Stress is real and it is a debilitator and when it accompanies you to your workplace, it manifests itself in many dangerous ways in your career and for your organization.

The workplace is a mirror of our social structure. It is full of characters who we love, hate, admire or are indifferent to. It is a place where we have a task to accomplish because we have a job to do. It is also a place where we bring our 'whole' selves five days a week. By 'whole' self I mean our personality, our behavior, our skills, our knowledge and our stress. Managers can often be heard saying that when you walk through the door of the office, you must leave your problems and stress outside the door. This is easier said than done. Let us take a look at some statistics.

- As per a study conducted by the International Labor Organization, approximately 50% of lost workdays across the world can be attributed to stress.
- FTSE 100 companies taking action and reporting on employee health issues **outperformed their competitors financially by 10 per cent on average** in 2009.
- European Network for Workplace Health Promotion found that for every 80p spent on health promotion in the UK, £4 can be saved through:
  1. Reduced absenteeism
  2. Improved turnover
  3. Presenteeism
  4. Increased motivation
  5. Reduced need to take on temporary staff
- Stress is the single biggest cause of sickness in the UK. Employees who remain in work without the support they need cost UK businesses up to £15.1 billion a year. While those leaving work due to mental ill-health costs a staggering £2.4 billion annually.
- According to the World Health Organization, depression is the No 1 occupational disease of the 21st century and an overwhelming number of people under stress feel that they are not productive.

Clearly, stress is a great challenge for organizations. Unfortunately, in the case of stress, people at work are more open-minded about its symptoms rather than accepting it as a cause per se. A back ache or acid reflux or any similar illness will be discussed, opinions given, suggestions offered but very rarely can colleagues be heard discussing stress front and center. If the figures above are taken into account, employers must understand that when they are dismissive about poor performances or employees not being up to speed, they must train managers and supervisors to go deeper in their leadership roles. There must be a system of discussing things in an open, non critical and confidential manner that makes employees secure in the knowledge that they are not alone, they will not be looked down upon and they will find a helping hand when they most need it.

Let us take a case that occurs commonly at workplaces. A business team or a functional team has a member who has been advised several times about making a client presentation in a particular manner. This person listens diligently and it is assumed that he or she has understood the instructions. However, subsequent presentations continue to display the same errors or shortcomings. The big quandary is that this employee is highly qualified and knowledgeable but in this case is continuing to make mistakes despite warnings. An alarm bell should start ringing loudly in the mind of the supervising manager who should try and have an interactive fact finding discussion with said employee. Chances are, the block in execution is being caused by personal stress. It could be a sick child, marital discord, an ailing parent or even post traumatic stress behavior after an accident or a death of a dear one. Supervising managers should be trained to investigate the problem through common tools such as sympathy, empathy or leading questions. However, supervising managers unless otherwise trained, should bring such cases to the HR departments which must have a mental health counselor or therapist either in house or available on retainer basis. Stress and work – life balance run in a circle which is self propelling. Stress at home may cause problems at work which in turn raise stress which may cause new problems at home or aggravate old ones. This begs the question – can this cycle be stopped? Unfortunately, it cannot. However, this cycle can be acknowledged, understood, accepted and managed so that the risks associated with it are mitigated as much as possible.

Let us also look at our social understanding of stress. We are trained to look down on people who cannot seem to overcome stress or stressful situations. Our muscle memory is built to tell us that buckling under pressure is a mark of weakness. That being said, everyone undergoes stressful situations and challenges. It is how they deal with it that becomes the differentiator. Some people seem to manage stress better than others. They could be born that way with a biological predisposition or may have been nurtured in an environment which taught them how to deal with and overcome stress. That does not make them better people than those who have neither the disposition nor the nurture. But something can be learnt from them. We may be surprised to find answers that are both extremely simple and self generated as well as complex and dependant on extraneous sources. Maybe these people have broken down their stress into its smaller parts and have understood the cause and effect pattern easily. It may be that they have resorted to therapy or meditation or exercise as a tool for clearing their head so that that they can think through their stress and manage it. It may even be that they have a great support system in the form of family and friends who act as a shock absorber to their

stress. Most likely, it's a combination of all of these factors. An employer needs to learn from all examples and replicate these solutions in the workplace.

- Find out what the cause of stress induced behavior is.
- Try and find out how the problem can be solved and work with the affected person to solve the problem.
- Put in a temporary plan to support your colleagues as he or she works their way through the problem. Activate team members to play a supporting role and share task completion responsibilities
- Set a timeline for problem solving so that issues do not remain open ended endlessly.
- Create a support group that can watch out for their colleagues.
- Conduct training programs across the organization to equip people with tools for managing stress, including lifestyle management tools like yoga and meditation

The cost of hiring the right talent and retaining it is big enough without having to bear losses due to stress induced performance issues. Employers increasingly want to measure their return on investment on employees. This investment is an incomplete investment unless it includes an effort to understand and manage employee stress which is critical for employee engagement.