

Employee Stress and Performance

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Creating a high performance organization is a popular theme in the training and development field. To survive in these competitive times, companies can't afford anything less. Creating a high performance organization requires understanding what factors influence performance. One of the most significant factors is stress.

Historically, stress has been viewed as an inevitable consequence of work life; or at most, a health care issue. Neither view begins to capture just how costly this problem is to employers. Research shows that stress interferes with human intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal functioning. In fact, nearly every popular training and organizational development initiative is directly compromised by the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal consequences of stress.

Initiatives like The Learning Organization, Process Re-engineering, Diversity Training, Collaborative Team Work, and The High Performance Organization are all impacted by the way people are affected by stress. In this article, we will highlight some of the research findings and discuss their implications for today's organization.

Stress, Threat, and "Numbing Out"

When animals, including human beings, are exposed to potentially life threatening situations; their bodies release endorphins, which are nature's pain-killer. This makes sense from a survival perspective. If you are being attacked by a predator and are injured, you don't want to be focusing your attention on how much you hurt.

This response doesn't just happen in response to tangible, visible threat; it is also triggered by potential threat. Thus, if we feel threatened or fearful, our body releases endorphins. This sets the stage for serious intellectual and interpersonal consequences; because endorphins dull both our ability to think and our ability to feel. Effective decision-making and interpersonal skills require both.

Implications for the Workplace

In workplaces where people are constantly afraid and insecure, employees are at risk of "numbing out" to protect themselves. We see it in the blank faces of clerks, the lack of enthusiasm by front line workers, and in the remarkably insensitive ways managers and employees treat each other. The very mechanism which allows a person to survive an emotionally painful environment also makes it difficult for them to respond sensitively and empathetically to others. The organizational conflict and customer service consequences of this are obviously very costly.

This numbing process affects far more than the interpersonal realm of organizational performance. It affects all aspects of decision-making, innovation, and safety. With their thinking impaired, people are at greater risk of causing serious mistakes and accidents. They are also obviously less likely to make wise decisions and create process improvements.

Stress and the Loss of Creativity

Creative and innovative thought are at the heart of the learning organization. An organization's ability to innovate is perhaps the most important source of competitive advantage. Organizations who know how to stimulate and leverage innovative thought are able to respond more rapidly and resourcefully to market changes and customer requirements than their slower, less innovative competitors. Despite the tremendous contribution innovative thought makes to organizational survival, most organizations don't realize how they prevent such thought from being exercised in their organization. The typical high stress workplace the physiological and psychological affects of stress on the human brain and mind compromises such creativity and innovation.

Studies show that when people are under stress, their thought processes narrow. This narrowing of attention, by definition, prevents divergent thinking, which is the foundation of creativity. Divergent thinking is the ability to see connections between very distantly related ideas and context. It is an important component of "thinking outside the box." When people are stressed, they are able to perceive obvious connections and associations between ideas. When people are in a positive emotional state, their ability to make more distant, novel connections and associations increases. Thus, stress compromises, at the most fundamental neurological level, one of the foundational skills of creativity and innovation.

Uncontrollable Stress and the Dumbing Down Process

Research by Dr. James Pennebaker of Southern Methodist University has demonstrated a very serious consequence of uncontrollable stress on thought processes. In an experiment performed by Dr. Pennebaker, subjects wrote about whatever was going on in their mind - their "stream of consciousness." One group was subjected to a loud noise in the middle of the exercise and told there was nothing they could do about it; they had to "grin and bear it." The other group was subjected to the same loud noise in the middle of the exercise, but they were told they could have the noise stopped if they chose. The results were both fascinating and disturbing in their implications for organizational performance.

The group that had no control demonstrated a significant deterioration in their thought process during and after the noise. Their thinking became unemotional, unimaginative, and dull. It was as if they became temporarily dumb in order to endure the stressful situation. Even more interesting was the other group's response. "although they were told they could stop the noise if they needed to, not one person chose to do so. Therefore, they experienced the same amount of unpleasant noise as the group which wasn't given that option.

Despite being subjected to the same amount of noxious noise, their thought process remained unaffected. They engaged in deep, reflective, creative thought. Thus, it wasn't the negative external situation, but the perceived lack of control, which resulted in a diminished thinking capacity. The operative term here is perceived. This study and others like it show that even if a person's perception is wrong - if in fact they really don't have control, the effect is the same as if they truly had control. It's the perception, the belief, that matters.

Closely linked to this sense of perceived control is predictability. "s long as a person (or lab rat for that matter) knows when the next painful situation will occur, they do not suffer the same kind of psychological and physiological harm as those who don't know "when the other shoe will drop." Simply knowing creates a feeling, even if ill-founded, of control.

Implications For The Workplace

One obvious implication of this research is that employee intellectual functioning can be very powerfully influenced by their environment. In workplaces where employees feel helpless and disempowered, they are less likely to think in intelligent, creative ways. Another important implication, and this is born out by other research, is that perceived control plays a major role in whether a person is affected by a potentially stressful workplace. Workers in jobs with similar demands, but different levels of control, exhibit very different psychological and physiological responses. With the same demand level, workers in low control workplaces are significantly more affected by their work.

Thus, when workers have little control over their work and feel powerless in general, they are more likely to suffer from the kind of "dumbing down" that Pennebaker's work demonstrated; and which we see in organizations throughout America.

In thinking about organizational implications, we need to realize that the word "perceived" in the term "perceived control" is important. It is important because in reality, there is no way we can create a workplace in which a person has total control over their work and over their destiny. No organization can guarantee lifelong employment, no one can foresee market changes or economic downturns. But, as long as people have open lines of communication and know that they can get the information they need—even if it's "we don't know yet," they experience a sense of control. Thus, organizations which enable open, honest communication create a context in which people are less likely to be stressed out, and because of that, more likely to utilize their capabilities.

Summary

To create a high performance organization, an organization which brings out the best in its people, we need to understand how stress affects people's intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal functioning. By drawing on the wealth of research available, we can make recommendations which increase the probability that people will not be compromised by stress, but instead, perform at optimal levels.

About the Author: David Lee is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance. He is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, as well as dozens of articles on employee and organizational performance that have been published in trade journals and books in North America, Asia, Europe, and Australia.