



The Coaching Manager

The Challenge of Stress

In every organization employees are at risk from stress. Change of role, working conditions, downsizing, right-sizing, threat of redundancy, bad management, collapse of relationships and mergers are just a few of the factors that can cause stress levels to rise in individuals. Almost any kind of change – good or bad – can lead to varying levels of stress in individuals. The role of the coaching manager concerning stress is two fold: 1) to recognize when their employees are under stress and, 2) to support them through these periods. It is imperative for a coaching manager to be sure that the stress is not caused by them. There are some instances where stress cannot be avoided but in many cases it is actually the behavior of the manager that is the root cause in the first place. At the same time, management is a stressful role and managers have to be on the lookout for signs of stress within themselves and others.

Stress becomes apparent through both physical and psychological symptoms. It can manifest itself as high blood pressure, peptic ulcers, weight gain or loss, sleep deprivation, irritability, depression, migraines, asthma, drug and alcohol dependence, mental exhaustion, and the list goes on. I sadly have seen all of these symptoms during my time in management. I have also suffered at the hand of stress myself, so I know what it feels like.

Stress is probably the biggest cause of work absenteeism and causes billions of dollars of lost revenue to business every year.

The effects (of stress) on British Industry are huge. Low performance, self-esteem and reduced productivity have helped to lose Britain £10.2bn in lost productivity in 1998 alone (as reported by the CBI).

A report by MORI November 1999 showed 60% of the working population are affected by stress at work.

Job stress has been estimated to cost American industry \$150 billion per year in absenteeism, diminished productivity, compensation claims, health insurance and direct medical expenses To get some perspective, these costs are more than 15 times that of all strikes combined.

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Presented at the Work Stress and Health '95 Conference. September 1995,
Washington D.C.)

What can the coaching manager do to lessen the incidence and impact of stress within the workforce? The coaching manager should remember some important points about stress:

- Stress can kill.
- Suffering from stress should not be considered a weakness.
- Stress is infectious. It is stressful to live and work with people who are suffering from stress.
- Stress is produced by high demands and lack of support.
- There are numerous techniques that can minimize stress.

The following tips should help managers not only relieve stress for employees but in many cases prevent it or its debilitating effects.

- Watch for signs of stress in employees. Notice their behavior, mannerisms, changes in appearance, time keeping, and absenteeism record.
- If you suspect any of your employees are suffering the effects of stress take time to talk with them.
- Get feedback from them about what they think needs to change in order for them to "get back to normal." Use coaching and counselling techniques to assess and help them through tough times, but set boundaries. If the situation starts to border on "therapy" then do not hesitate to refer them to someone fully qualified. Do not, under any circumstances, attempt to become a "part time or amateur therapist."
- Let them know you are emphatic to their situation and if they need time-off from work, they should be allowed to have it.

As far as prevention of stress a manager should consider these questions:

- What is the exact cause of the stress? Is it organisational, for example, a threat of merger, role change, redundancy, working conditions, or management style? Or is it strictly personal?
- If its personal then consider referring them to a professional counselor depending on the nature of the issue. I have supported people through challenges with their marriages that were causing a negative impact on their working lives. I only achieved this through a high degree of trust. If you do not have this trust with the employee then you will struggle to support people through home life challenges. Again watch the boundaries!

If it is organizationally based, what can you do about it?

- Some aspects of organizational change will not go away and the manager has to be able to support employees through the change. This can be done by keeping communication as open and frequent as possible ensuring that people are kept up to date with all developments.
- If the stress is due to working conditions or management style then the manager can certainly try to do something. Listen to what the employee thinks is causing the stress and attempt to be as empathetic as possible. Do not agree with the complaints but certainly empathise. There will be certain things you cannot change and if you agree with the employee's complaint then you will not move that person forward because they will feel that you are supporting them regarding that complaint. Help them to look at their options. How can they deal with the situation and then coach them to action. If the stress is caused by you as a manager, then seek to

understand exactly what the behaviours are that are causing the stress. Change them if appropriate. Most competent managers will be aware of the impact they are having on employees and will change behaviours where appropriate.

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