Managing employees’ workplace stress

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ABSTRACT
Managing employees stress has globally become one of the major problems among organizations and employees in the 21st century. Stress, if not managed properly affects the very existence of the organization as well as the well being of the employees. This research aims at providing great insight into the symptoms of employee workplace stress, its causes and types, its effects on both the organization and the individual and suggesting measures by which this canker can be reduced if not prevented by both employees and organizations.

INTRODUCTION
The growing concern for organizations today is employees’ stress. Stress, according to “Dr. Richard Lazarus, a stress expert is “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well being” (Smith, 2000). Chang et al, 2007 state stress is a prevailing problem in modern life. Fevre et al., 2003 stated that the first person to use the word “stress” was Selye, in 1964, to define a set of physical and psychological reactions to adverse situations or influences. According to Topper 2007, stress is one’s physiological and psychological reaction to the perception of demand and challenge. It is people’s response to excessive pressure placed on them by family members, friends and or nature of their jobs.

Stress is both positive and negative. It, at times, brings out the best in individuals and induces them to find smarter and innovative ways of doing things. The positive aspect of stress is called eustress. More often than not, stress is understood in the negative sense and this negative aspect of it is known as distress. Stress in some cases is a double edged sword. It can cause people to break and can as well cause people to break records.

Stresses are relative based on the individual concerned. We are able to manage our stresses and reduce them to appreciable levels if we are able to know whether they are caused in the workplace, in the school, at home, or wherever sources that are causing them.

Symptoms of Employees’ Workplace Stress:
Symptoms of employees’ workplace stress include the following:
- Habitual absence from work, fleeing from responsibilities at work, lateness to work, closing early from work, etc.
- Reduction in the quality of work performance, high risk of making errors at work, loss of memory, etc.
- Showing an exaggerated response at work, disagreement with colleagues on issues, getting peeved, being worried and nervous, etc.
- Reduction in quality of health, high rate of accidents, etc.
- Smoking and drinking at its apex, improper eating habits, that is either over-eating or under-eating, wakefulness, etc.
- Inadequate and or lack of sex drive.

Factors That Cause Employees Stress:
Stressors are the factors that lead to stress among individuals. Notable factors/stressors that act on employees are
Organizational factors:
According to a research by (Savery, L.K., J.A. Luks, 2001) organizational changes such as implementation of new equipment or plan, restructuring and downsizing often leads to stress and increases in injury/illness. With organizational stress on the rise and its complications, there is a rise in factors that cause stress among employees in an organizational. Among these factors include-
(1). Favoritism in the structure of the pay/salary
(2). Rules and regulations that are stringently enforced
(3). Inefficient and ineffective communication
(4). Pressure from friends
(5). Ambiguous nature of organizations’ goals
(6). More of formal and centralized structure of the organization
(7). Inadequate or lack of promotional opportunities for employees
(8). Not including employees in decision-making
(9). Managers having excessive control over the employees

Individual Factors:
High expectations from family members, peers, superiors and subordinates put a lot of pressure on the employee. Failure on the part of an employee to realize such expectations or to carry out such expectations leads to ambiguity and conflicts in roles which in turn cause employee stress. Other stress causing factors that are individual based among employees are personality traits that are inherent such as impatience aggressiveness, rigidness, feeling time pressure always, etc. Undeniably, personal financial problems, sudden career changes and family issues all lead to stress.

Types of Employees Stress:
Basically there are two main types of stress according to its effect namely: Positive (Eustress) and Negative (Distress)

Positive Stress:
Positive stress, also called Eustress is the type of stress that is good and desirable. It enhances our health and helps us to feel content and also maintains our optimism in life. This kind of stress is short-termed and it increases our immediate strength. It inspires and motivates an individual to complete a task and also offers creative thinking when completing a project. Positive stress is almost available everywhere that inspiration and or motivation are required. For an athlete, positive stress arises even before the competition, for some it may come when watching a suspense thriller and exciting movie and for others it comes during a jolly ride on a rollercoaster (Badri, et al., 2006).

Instances where a person is likely to experience positive stress include when a person wins a sport, lottery or a game. Additional examples of eustress are going on a first date, getting a better paying job, getting promotion at work, getting married, giving birth to a baby, reuniting with lost relatives as well as buying a new home or vehicle (Johnson et al., 2005). These instances of eustress give a person a tinge of nervousness and stress in a good kind of way. All in all, positive stress makes life worthwhile.

Notable signs associated with eustress are increased productivity not only in developing new ways of solving problems but also better ways of doing things, increased productivity on a personal level and at work not forgetting a general feeling of happiness, joy and well-being.

Negative Stress:
This type of stress is harmful to our bodies. When our routine is constantly altered and adjusted while we try to adapt and adapt to new situations, we are faced with “distress” which is another name for negative stress. Distress normally brings about feelings of anxiety, discomfort and unfamiliarity. When we are in a new workplace that we are not able to cope and adjust to the situations on the ground yet, we are faced with distress.

Negative stress in itself is in two folds: Acute stress and chronic stress. Acute stress is short termed. It disappears and intensifies rapidly. Acute stress occurs as a result of moments of sharp sudden stress. An example is when an employee is about to fall asleep and suddenly jerks awake. Incidents of acute stress are the easiest to overcome. The more severe type of distress is chronic stress. It is long termed and can exist for days, weeks, months or even in years. Instead of being an occasional occurrence, it tends to be a normal state of being (Chang, K. and L. Lu, 2007). This level of stress makes employees feel there is nothing they can do to better it or to come out of such a situation. When an individual persistently changes job, he or she is faced with chronic stress which comes about as a result of the constant change in job.

Negative stress affects an employee both psychologically and physically. An example of workplace distress can easily be found in a manufacturing plant when a foreman is pushed by his superiors to meet many short deadlines and also maintain a high level of production quality (Ogundele, O.J.K., 2005). This same foreman
deals with employees who are not concerned about the quality of goods they are producing and also not willing to give their maximum best. This foreman is no doubt going to be under stress which can affect his health. Additional example of distress which is related to family and can be a little harmful is that of an employee who is a single parent (Bridger, R.S., 2007). He or she tries to raise three children, makes ends meet and also does two different jobs. The consequences are that he or she is faced with a great deal of distress as he or she tries to make sure his/her children have good parental care. Signs of employees negative stress includes reduced productivity and creativity, reduced feeling of well being, avoiding social contacts, mal-functioning of the immune system as a result of influenza, allergies, anxiety and chronic fatigue.

At times, it looks like we should examine the root cause of the stress before labeling it a certain type of stress. Stresses are relative based on the individual. By knowing whether the stress comes from the workplace, school, in the home, or whatever that is causing it, then we will better know how to minimize that stress to an appreciable level and change it from a distress into a eustress.

Effects of Employees Stress:
On an Enterprise:

It is an undeniable fact that employees stress has both positive and negative effect on an enterprise. Among these negative effects include the ones outlined below:

Smith, 2000 stated that stress is connected with lessened functioning of the individual in the workplace and a main obstacle to the success of an organization (Noblet, Andrew, 2003). It has been estimated recently that, in a year, about 91.5 billion working days are lost due to illnesses that stress-related (Andrew Smith, 2001). Negative effects include low capacity to perform, reduced efficiency, decreased concern for organization and co-workers, dampened initiative and low level of interest in working, loss of responsibility and increased rigidity of thought, (Fairbrother, K., J. Warn, 2003).

Stress is associated with decrease in product quality, work output, service or morale, high wages/overtime payments and organizational sabotage. All these bring additional costs to the organization (Brown, Z.A., D.L. Uehara, 2008).

Additionally, occupational stress brings about increased risks of diseases that are work-related and mishaps in countries that are both developed and developing and where rapid industrialization is been experienced (Mark Le Fevre, 2003).

Furthermore, occupational stress, more often than not results in job mobility, high dissatisfaction among employees, poor work performance, ineffective social relations at work and burnout.

The occupational stress according to (Christo, B. and J. Pienaar, 2006), if not properly managed, may bring about high rate of absenteeism, low morale of employees and internal conflicts.

Not only these but also, occupational stress leads to reduction in performance, low-level morale and motivation, higher turnover, accidents, leave of absence from work due to illness, reduced job satisfaction, ineffective internal communication, low quality of services and products and conflicts.

We can confidently conclude that the negative effects of occupational stress on an enterprise are myriad and if not properly handled can threaten the existence of such an enterprise.

On the Individual:

In a broad sense, stress can have both positive and negative effects on an individual. (Stevenson, A., S. Harper, 2006) pointed out that excessive amount of stress can lead to reduced performance with its acceptable level helping to improve the performance of the individual.

(Sapountzi-Krepi, 2003) states that a prominent health hazard of the modern world is stress. It brings different conditions such as psychosomatic diseases, behavioral changes and also contributes immensely to emotional, social and family life disturbances.

In addition, an individual’s physical and psychological being is affected by occupational stress. This leads to hypertension, heart diseases, alcoholism, peptic ulcers, depression, suicidal tendencies, mental disorders as well as anxiety (Christo, B. and J. Pienaar, 2006).

Stress has a wide range of effects on employee’s behavior, mood and emotions. Equally essential but not often appreciated are its effects on the human body including various organs, tissues and systems. Physical illnesses as well as mental or emotional problems are caused by physical or mental stress. Some parts of the body that are affected by stress are listed below:

**Hair:** High levels of stress may lead to some forms of baldness and excessive hair loss.

**Muscles:** Spasmodic pains in the shoulders and neck, lower back pain, musculoskeletal aches, and various minor muscular nervous tics and twitches are often evident when under stress.

**Digestive tract:** Stress aggravates diseases of the digestive tract such as stomach and duodenal ulcers, gastritis, irritable colon and ulcerative colitis.

**Skin:** Certain skin diseases such as eczema and psoriasis, in some instances are some of the individual’s body reaction to stress.
Reproductive organs: The reproductive systems are not left out when talking about the effects of stress on the body causing premature ejaculation and impotence in men and recurrent vaginal infections and menstrual disorders in women.

Lungs: Individuals with asthmatic conditions are affected immensely by high levels of mental or emotional stress.

Heart: Accumulated stress brings about cardiovascular disease and hypertension.

Brain: Problems related to the mind and that of emotions like insomnia, headaches, anxiety, irritability and personality changes are triggered by stress.

Mouth: Excessive dryness of the mouth and mouth ulcers are often signs of stress.

In order to manage stress in organizations, there is the need for management to develop appropriate interventions.

Organisational Strategies for Reducing Workplace Stress:
Organizational changes that managers and employers can make to minimize workplace stress. Includes the following:

Improve in communication:
1. In order to reduce uncertainty about employees’ jobs and futures, information must be shared.
2. Employees’ roles and responsibilities must be defined clearly.
3. Communication should not be mean-spirited or petty but friendly and efficient.

Consulting employees:
1. Workers should be given opportunities to participate fully in decision making.
2. Employees’ should be consulted about work rules and scheduling.
3. Workloads should be employees’ friendly and must suit their abilities and resources devoid of unrealistic deadlines.
4. Value individual workers
5. Give workers rewards and incentives.
6. Organizations must officially and verbally, praise good work performance through measures such as Employee of the Month.
7. Offer them avenues to develop their career.
8. Provide an “organizational” friendly environment that will give employees’ more command over their work.

Promoting a social and neighborly climate:
1. Provide employees opportunities for social interaction.
2. Insist on a harassment free policy.
3. Organizational values must be consistent with management actions.

Individual Strategies for Reducing Workplace Stress:
1. Employees should have a daily list of things “to-do” list, must have priorities in the list and plan them accordingly. They must relax regularly during breaks at work. Workers can attain sets targets timely, meet work pressures and do away with stress when they are able to manage their time effectively.
2. Work hard, try to attain your goals but not to the detriment of your health, family, or peers.
3. Engage yourself in physical exercises as it helps in circulating blood effectively, diverts mind from work pressures and also makes you fit.
4. Lead a healthy and worthy lifestyle by sleeping regularly, drinking plenty of water and adhering to good and healthy eating habits. Plan several ways of relaxation such as yoga, listening to music, meditation and reading interesting story books.
5. Employees must be full of optimism with regards to their work. They should avoid links with employees that have negative minds and approaches.
6. Workers must be emotionally intelligent at their workplace. They should be self confident as well as having self-awareness and self-control at workplace.
7. Social support systems and programs must be built by employees. They should be inter-related with peers who can listen to their problems, boost their confidence level and are also trustworthy. This social network will contribute immensely to overcome some level of stress.
8. Another important way to reduce stress among employees is through counseling. Employees will know of their strengths and how to improve them when they are counseled. Through counseling they will also know about their weaknesses and how to do away with them. Strategies to change their behavior can also be employed. Career counseling also helps employees to minimize certain ambiguities regarding their career.
9. Devise ways of releasing stress like playing tennis, golf, cracking jokes, etc.
10. Employees should not always be egoistic but must also turn their focus outwards and help others. This will help them release some amount of stress

**Conclusion:**

In today’s fast paced society, one major challenge for everyone is coping with workplace and social stress. In an aggressive business or organization, people see workplace stress as a necessary lifestyle to stay competitive. Burn out becomes unavoidable when an individual is faced with a lot of stressors. When employees are exposed to stressors either at workplace or at home, they stand the risk of becoming psychologically and physically ill. Stress of this kind forms barriers to the well being of the organization and can cause absenteeism, high turnover and low morale among employees. It is an undeniable fact that stress is unavoidable in life. If we monitor and check it very well through stress reduction methods and a worthy and health lifestyle, we can reduce it if not eliminating it totally from our lives. Though stress affects the lives of employees, there are many methods to relieve it. One fact that we must know is what works for one person may not work for another.

**REFERENCES**


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