

## Under Pressure

"The past and future are both things I don't like to stress about because the past can't be changed. And the future is too random to predict."

- Chae Richardson

It is difficult to argue the inherent wisdom of the above quote and certainly we would be well served to incorporate its philosophy into our daily lives. Unfortunately, stress is an unavoidable fact of life for most, if not all human beings, one that cannot be held at bay simply with clever prose or even the adoption of a worthy philosophy. Physicians, scientists and psychologists agree that stress is an integral part of our existence and, in fact, essential to our evolutionary progress and ultimate survival. "Stressors" in our environment and the need or desire to alleviate them are perhaps the primary cause or our species great adaptability and inventiveness throughout the ages.

However lofty discussions on the survival of the species are understandably of little comfort to the person experiencing stress, particularly high amounts of prolonged stress. This is especially true of pressures encountered in workplace, as it is an area for most of us that is often not simply a "choice" but a necessity. While we may (to varying degrees) have some freedom in the type of work we choose, the need to be employed is not something most can cast aside for a little R&R when faced with tension. Regardless of the type of work one does, the idea of a stress-free job is by and large a fantasy.

So if we accept that stress is simply a fact of life, then how can we best cope with it? As stress accumulates, how do we resist recoiling into the fetal position and "giving up"? Fortunately, there are methods of reducing or coping with workplace stress that both companies and individuals can adopt. While stress itself is inevitable, how we deal with it is something that remains largely in our power.

First we must determine which stressors are in fact inevitable and which stressors can realistically be eliminated or at least alleviated. Before we go into that, though, it is worth mentioning that not all stress is bad. A certain level of stress, referred to as "eustress", is indeed healthy, fulfilling and motivating. For example, getting a promotion, solving a challenging problem, competing in a contest, getting married or buying a new home are sources of eustress. Most people would want to hold on to *that* kind of stress!

Eustress aside, there are work-related stressors that can be addressed by both the company as a whole and/or the individuals involved. Why should you, as an employer, care about the stress levels in your company? Shouldn't your employees be responsible for their own well-being? And, PR issues notwithstanding, doesn't pressure and killer



deadlines deliver the desired results? The answers to these questions are complex and depend to a large degree on the personality of people involved. Some folks thrive on stress – it gives them a buzz and having the proverbial Damocles' sword hanging over their heads actually motivates them. Other will perform adequately under intense pressure, but the stress can take a toll on their health, resulting in more sick days, increased risk of burnout, errors and sloppy work. The worst scenario is when the pressure hits those who freeze in times of stress – it is quite obvious that an emotionally paralyzed employee will not perform up to par, if at all.

With these arguments in mind, it makes good business sense to ensure that the level of stress in your company doesn't paralyze your employees. Unpredictable deadlines or even less predictable clients may simply be a reality in your company or position; stress resulting from miscommunication, lack of preparedness, or uncertainty with regards to role expectations or even job security are matters that can be dealt with effectively. By eliminating non-essential stressors we can not only focus our attention on essential stressors but also reduce the cumulative stress factor, which often becomes overwhelming to the individual and costly to the company.

Still, varying degrees of stress will undoubtedly remain. Even in best possible scenario, business is unpredictable; conflicts will spontaneously arise and must be coped with. Therefore it is incumbent upon employees at every level to develop techniques and strategies for dealing with stress. The ability to cope with stress, commonly referred to as "hardiness" of course varies among individuals.

Why do some people thrive under stress (or at least rebound easily) while others crumble? The answers are complex and a matter of ongoing scientific discourse and investigation. As with most matters of personality, hereditary and environmental factors play a role, as do diet and overall physical health. To further complicate matters; even one's resilience to stress is often situation-specific and unpredictable in itself. For example, one person may be a rock, the go-to guy of the company, always called upon in the most volatile situations. Yet when required to speak at a conference, he or she is overwhelmed with trepidation and unable to perform. Conversely, another employee may have severely underdeveloped coping skills and fold like a deck of discount cards at the slightest tension, yet miraculously (seemingly) rises to the challenge like a master thespian whenever the opportunity to engage in public-speaking presents itself.

As complex and unfathomable as the whole issue of stress may at first appear, there are learnable techniques for dealing with stress that are commonly effective. Here are some of these strategies:

**Exercise** – Regular exercise helps to burn off and use up stress hormones and neurochemicals and can thereby help avoid the damage to our health that prolonged stress can cause. Exercise also increases our resilience and boosts our immune system.

**Meditation** – No longer the province of merely the spiritually inclined, meditation has proven medical benefits that include relief from hypertension, insomnia, arthritis, stress and stress related illness, to mention only a few.

**Decompress** – Whether it be having a massage, watching a movie or even a quiet stroll by yourself, taking an occasional break from one's responsibilities, both physically and mentally, is imperative. By doing so, we can approach challenging days with a renewed energy and enthusiasm.

**Change perspective** – Whenever possible, view a problem as a challenge, rather than a cause for worry or distress. Psychologists speak of transformational vs. regressive coping techniques. Simply put, transformational coping is a means of dealing with stressful events by transforming them into subjectively less stressful ones. Regressive coping can be thought of as the time-honored practice we've all engaged in - that of avoidance (if I ignore the problem, maybe it will go away). Try viewing a current concern as though you were an objective third party or simply see it as a perplexing puzzle. By removing our overwhelmed emotions from the equation, solutions will often present themselves more readily.

**Eat healthily** – Diet can be a significant contributor to how well or poorly we deal with stress, not only for the obvious health reasons but also because of the self-esteem boost that result from a healthy body image.

**Express yourself** - Don't brood! Excessive worry generally causes more problems than it solves. Actively seek solutions to your problems, rather than merely despond over them hopelessly.

**Create an ergonomic workspace** – Poor workplace ergonomics are known to result in a multitude of physical ailments such as tired or irritated eyes, headaches, sore muscles and a stiff neck to name but a few. Fortunately an ergonomic workspace can be achieved for little or no cost. A quick search online will yield a wealth of information and tips on this topic that include simple practices such as recommended table and chair heights, lighting, proper sitting and typing technique and even simple yoga exercises that can be done while seated at your workstation.

**Reduce role ambiguity** - Stress occurs when role expectations are confusing or conflicting. To avoid this, a person's skills & abilities should match a clearly defined, consistent set of role expectations. Provide your employees with task descriptions for their position, and make sure they understand and buy into your expectations and performance metrics.

**Improve planning and organization of projects** - As with role ambiguity, poorly defined and haphazardly planned projects will take an unnecessary toll on all those involved. Taking the time to clearly define and communicate the desired goals of a project, the timeline and task tendencies will ultimately save time, and a few gray hairs.



**Invest in your future** - Some of the following techniques may be expensive or impossible to implement for smaller companies (gym memberships, healthy cafeteria menu, seminars on coping with stress). However, any company can take steps to educate employees or encourage them to learn coping techniques. Any company, regardless of size, can improve planning, organization and communication. Just a few steps can make a big difference.

And above all, **retain your sense of humor**. To quote novelist and author Kurt Vonnegut, "Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh since there is less cleaning up to do afterward."