

How to stop stress from wreaking havoc in your workplace

Published in the Birmingham Business Journal on May 29, 2009

The term stress was coined by Hans Selye, a Canadian endocrinologist, in the 1930s. He defined stress as the physical or emotional reaction to a perceived or real threat. Today, the threat that worries most workers is uncertainty regarding organizational changes with relation to the economy.

While fears of layoffs, job losses, hiring freezes, pay and benefit cuts, and reduced hours have a negative effect on employees, the company as a whole suffers as a result. According to experts at the American Stress Institute, stress costs businesses in the United States \$300 billion annually. This averages out to approximately \$7,500 per employee for expenditures such as hiring temps or paying overtime to cover absenteeism, increased medical costs and incurred expenses from turnover.

Stress causes physical, mental and emotional wear and tear on the body. It manifests in a variety of symptoms, such as anxiety, aggression, irritability, withdrawal or depression. Studies have shown that stress contributes to ailments such as migraines, insomnia, heart disease, increased drug and alcohol use, elevated anger, change in eating habits and unsatisfactory work performance. Regardless of the form it takes, stress results in reduced productivity, absenteeism, burnout and increased medical expenses. According to the American Stress Institute, 60 to 80 percent of workplace accidents are stress related.

Stress is a fact of life, but it does not have to be a way of life. As Selye defined it, stress is often the result of perceived stressors. Likewise, a study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reports that 40 percent of workers viewed their job as highly stressful. Therefore, an individual's outlook can determine the level of stress he or she experiences. Situations that are stressful for some, such as tight deadlines, may give certain people a rush, whereas others face it as a tumultuous situation.

What can companies do to help employees deal with stress? Employers who offer an effective employee assistance program (EAP) have an excellent resource for employees and families. An EAP provides employees with a confidential access to mental health professionals who can help them better deal with stress.

Additionally, managers and supervisors are the frontline defense against stress. There are several effective techniques that managers and supervisors can utilize to help their employees deal with stress.

Show appreciation – Taking the time to praise positive work performance illustrates to employees that their efforts are recognized, and, in turn, they feel that their work is valuable. Relaying verbal praise, sending a thank you note, and giving a positive annual work appraisal are some ways that managers can express their gratitude. Showing appreciation can have a positive effect on your company's performance as well by motivating employees to do their best.

Treat employees fairly – While each employee is unique and has different needs, all employees want to be treated fairly. While some employees like to be praised, others are fine without it. Managers should take the time to understand what makes each employee tick. Doing so requires managers to get acquainted with their employees, and in turn they are better in tune to their state of mind and recognize when they are feeling stressed. If managers know their employees, then they will recognize that certain employees are feeling stressed and will take the appropriate steps to help them get more of their needs met.

Encourage employees to take better care of themselves – Employees that maintain a healthy lifestyle are better able to handle stress. In doing so, they will feel better physically and are better able to cope with stress and even reduce it. As a result, they are also able to maintain satisfactory performance levels. Similarly, employees who build solid support systems – family, friends, church – have a personal outlet to express their fears and frustrations and help find relief.

Communicate, communicate, communicate – Much of the stress related to the economy is rooted in uncertainty. Transparency can help alleviate that uncertainty. Companies that establish open lines of communication with their workforce build a greater level of trust with their employees, and allow them to better prepare for any changes that may come.

Provide training and resources – People are most often stressed when they feel a situation is out of their control. By encouraging employees to direct their activities in a positive direction and learn to let go of the things out of their control, they are often able to achieve a sense of empowerment. Allowing employees to improve their job skills by taking a class and learning a new skill during difficult financial times improves their value and self-esteem as employees and help build towards their career goals.

Change is happening all around us, not just in the workplace. Some people cope with change better than others. Others try to avoid it because they don't have the skills to navigate through it and are content to stay in their comfort zone. This group will have less and less control over the outcome of change, and are more likely to feel stress.

Lita A. Clark, Ph.D., is Vice President of Employee Assistance Programs for American Behavioral, a Birmingham-based company specializing in employee assistance programs and managed behavioral health care. Reach her at (205) 871-7814 or lclark@americanbehavioral.com.