A Three-Step Approach to Managing
Workplace Stress

Cutting stress can yield great benefits.

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Although stress in the workplace is inevitable, it becomes harmful when it starts to impair productivity. Unmanaged, workplace stress leads to occupational injuries and illnesses, absenteeism, inefficiency, poor morale, and high health-care costs. Here's a practical, three-step way to manage workplace stress:

Step 1 Check for stressful factors.

Begin by reviewing your records. Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Have you received any customer complaints** describing an employee as irritable or stressed?
- **Has there been an unusual amount** of absenteeism?
- **Has there been any verbal or physical conflict** among employees?
- **Is there a high employee-turnover rate** that might be caused by workplace stress?
- **Has there been an increase** in stress-related workers' compensation claims?
- **Have workers made any complaints** in which stress could be a contributing factor?

A "yes" to any of these questions doesn't necessarily prove undue stress. It does, however, mean that you need to assess the situation in more detail. Ask these questions:

Do *job characteristics* encourage stress?

- Is there insufficient time allotted to perform the job?
- Does the job require more or less skill than the employee has to offer?
- Is there a lack of task variety?
- Does the job call for high performance but little decision-making control?
- Must the employee serve demanding or difficult customers, clients, or other employees?
- Does the job involve nontraditional hours, rotating shift work, or substantial overtime?

Does the *work environment* contribute to harmful stress?

- Is the workplace unsafe?
- Does the environment make workers uncomfortable in any way?
- Is there a high risk of violence?

Do *organizational practices* result in stress?

- Is there a lack of communication and guidance about how to resolve problems?
- Do managers fail to recognize employees for jobs well done?
- Are there limited opportunities for skill development and advancement?
- Has morale been affected by downsizing or job insecurity?
- Are job descriptions and expectations unclear?
- Has there been any verbal, sexual, or other harassment?
- Are assignments made unfairly rather than based on merit?
- Do workers have little chance to participate in decisions or give input on matters that affect them?

After pinpointing potential causes of stress, ask employees how they view these factors and encourage them to suggest solutions. You can gather such information informally, in small groups or individually. An anonymous questionnaire is also a good way to gain feedback.

However you glean workers' input, the important thing is that everyone share responsibility as a team to address workplace stress. Just making an effort to assess the problem signals employees that you care about their well-being. That action alone can improve morale and reduce stress, even before you take formal anti-stress measures.

Step 2 Activate measures to reduce stress.

If jobs involve *high demand, low control, repetition of simple tasks, or hurried pace,* try these ideas:

- **Retrain** employees, and rotate them through different jobs.
- **Encourage** employees to delegate responsibility.
- **Supply** a greater variety of tasks.
- **Experiment** with giving employees more authority to make decisions.
- **Reorganize** the job to include other skills.
- **Offer** education and skill development for employees.

If jobs require *interaction with demanding people,* lessen stress with these strategies:

- **Provide** training in communication skills that includes ways to handle difficult people and defuse hostile situations.
- **Ensure** that employees can refer a troublesome person to their supervisor if they're unable to handle an unpleasant situation.

- **Hold group meetings** at which employees can discuss their mutual problems with one another.

For jobs involving *high vigilance,* consider the following stress-management methods:

- **Support and recognize** employees for good work.
- **Urge** workers to help plan and implement job changes to reduce the level of vigilance required for certain jobs.
- **Require** people to take regular breaks if they have a habit of working straight through.

For jobs with *nontraditional work schedules,* consider the following:

- **Involve** employees in the planning when switching them from traditional to nontraditional work hours.
- **Rethink** the idea of overtime. Substantial overtime may intensify workplace stress to the point that it isn't worthwhile. If voluntary overtime isn't possible, try flexible overtime hours to accommodate employees' needs.

If workers say that *organizational practices* are causing stress, put the following ideas into place:

- **Let** people participate in evaluating and reorganizing the ways they do their jobs.
- **Teach** managers and supervisors to be effective communicators, coaches, and facilitators.
- **Help** employees understand their limits, and encourage them to alert their supervisor if they feel they are approaching those limits.
- **Tell** employees before making job changes, and give them time to prepare.
- **Train** supervisors to recognize and reward employee achievement.
- **Hold** employee recognition events.
- **Grant** special benefits, such as employee-of-the-month awards, for outstanding performance.
- **Encourage** anonymous feedback with a suggestion box or toll-free phone number.

If employees feel that the *work environment* is stressful, here are some approaches that have proved successful in other organizations:

- **Provide training** to help employees perform a wider range of job assignments.
- **Support employees' efforts** to educate themselves and improve their skills.

- **Create job descriptions** that define responsibilities and lines of authority.

- **Give special attention** to employees who report to more than one supervisor. Consider simplifying the supervisory relationship. Train supervisors to be sensitive to the problems faced by employees with more than one supervisor.

- **Furnish benefits and privileges equally** to all employees.

- **Generate clear policies** regarding hiring, promotions, discrimination, harassment, and disciplinary actions. Be sure everyone understands these policies and follows them consistently. Inform employees of their legal rights and what steps the organization will take to address harassment or discrimination.

- **Institute a stress-management workshop** for employees during uncertain economic times.

- **Develop violence-prevention plans** if security risks exist.

Step 3 Track progress.

After you've created a stress-reduction plan, monitor it to assure that progress is made. Written records are useful tools to see if employees feel less stressed and approve of your changes.

Stress management is a trial-and-error process. If your changes don't improve the situation, revise the plan. Keep a record of what's working, and make adjustments as needed. Success will follow. ■

Resources

Angelica, Marion Peters, "Eight Steps to Managing Conflict," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 20, No. 4.

Levesque, Joseph, "To Write or Not to Write: Do You Need a Personnel Handbook?", *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 11, No. 3.

McKay, Shona, "Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 13, No. 3.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Personnel & Human Resources Management, Leadership Series.*

Sroypetch, Nion & Brian H. Kleiner, "How to Conduct Discipline Interviews," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 20, No. 4.

Van Vlaenderen, Heidi & Brian Kleiner, "Your Duty to Investigate Workplace Complaints," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 19, No. 3.

These publications are available from the Society's Resource Center, 734-451-3582, www.snpo.org.

Visit these Web sites for more on workplace stress:

- **OSHA,** www.dir.ca.gov
- **Tampa Medical Group,** www.tampamedicalgroup.com
- **Helpdesk-Online,** www.helpdesk-online.com
- **Society for Nonprofit Organizations Resource Center,** www.snpo.org

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Important Things to Remember about Stress

- **Just because there's stress** in your organization doesn't mean it's a problem. What's critical is whether employees feel that stress disrupts their performance.

- **You can't eliminate** all stress. Focus on factors that have the greatest impact and are easiest to improve. A few "quick fixes" can make a big difference.

- **The best way** to approach stress is to get feedback from employees.

- **Personal problems** can magnify workplace stress. There's little you can do about your workers' personal lives. But concentrating on factors you can control will reduce the effect of those you can't.

- **Harmful stress** most often results from three things: (1) jobs that demand a great deal while allowing employees little control, (2) work environments that are unsafe or uncomfortable, and (3) organizational practices that exclude employee participation and input.

- **Managers are most likely to be successful in cutting stress** if they value employees' well-being, remain flexible when addressing workplace-stress problems, and keep open lines of communication with employees.

- **Reducing workplace stress** should be a team effort involving everyone in the organization.

- **Some stressful situations,** such as downsizing, budget cuts, or the loss of funders, are unavoidable. Even in those situations, however, respectful management of employees can help everyone get through the difficult time with a workable level of stress.

- **Don't set** unachievable goals for relieving stress. Aim for one-step-at-a-time improvement.