How to Reduce Employee Stress

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Don't risk losing your best workers.

Stress is high in nonprofit organizations — and the price of stress is high, too. An organization with significant levels of employee stress can't consistently deliver quality services.

It's important to take a proactive role in reducing employee stress. Here are the most effective ways to do so.

Attack Uncertainty.

Employees are often unsure about their responsibilities, the criteria used to evaluate their performance, and the exact way to do a job. Such situations create stress. Here are some powerful ways to decrease uncertainty:

Use job analysis, the process of gathering and analyzing information about jobs to clarify responsibilities and qualifications. For each job, create a job description, including (1) a job identification, which specifies the title and location of the job, the title of the immediate supervisor, and the pay grade or range; (2) a job summary that outlines the most common function, the primary output, and the objective of the job; (3) a listing of job duties and responsibilities; and (4) a working condition summary that identifies physical demands, equipment used, and associated risk factors. Also create a job specification, summarizing the minimum qualifications for the job, such as education, training, experience, skills, and certification. Both the manager and employee should periodically participate in reviewing the job description for changes and agree on it.

Develop a performance appraisal system. The following steps provide the basis for such a process:

1. Establish performance standards for each position.

2. Create policies on when and how to rate performance. Feedback should be given frequently and as close to the actual performance as possible. The appraisal process should include day-to-day instruction, in which a manager provides employees with constant, immediate, and specific feedback on performance. Formal evaluations should be made annually or semi-annually.

3. Gather data on employee performance during the evaluation process. Keep records of employee performance, noting outstanding accomplishments and deficiencies.

4. Evaluate employee performance, using a behaviorally based measure tied to the important dimensions of the job.

5. Discuss the evaluation with the employee. The interview is the most important part of the performance appraisal. There should be a review of overall progress, a discussion of how current performance fits with the employee's goals, and development of specific action plans for the coming year.

Be sure that policies are well communicated, well understood, and consistently applied. As guidelines for decision-making, they are designed to reduce uncertainty. You should have policies in the areas of:

• working conditions (work hours, vacations, compensation, and benefits)

> ## Responsibility without authority is a recipe for burnout.

• performance appraisal (who is evaluated, who evaluates, criteria for evaluation, timing of evaluations, and use of appraisal information)

• recruitment and selection (processes, sources of applicants, and fair labor practices)

• honesty and ethics (expected behaviors that are deemed moral and legal, employer and employee responsibilities)

• orientation, training, and development (purpose of training and development, who participates, timing of participation, and role of employer and employees)

• safety (descriptions of behaviors that are considered safe, employer and employee responsibilities, layout, standards, equipment, and other physical conditions)

• organization (chain of command, reporting relationships, and handling of complaints and grievances).

Involve employees in planning. Planning involves agreeing on a vision and developing a mission, goals, and strategies for goal achievement. By its nature, planning reduces uncertainty and provides a sense of direction for employees.

Promote Employee Success.

Past success tends to reduce stress. Therefore, you should define your role in terms of helping employees succeed. Here are a few suggestions:

Instead of penalizing employees for low performance, identify and remove performance obstacles.

Recognize and reward accomplishments. Nothing assures success more than regular feedback.

Don't overload employees by asking them to assume multiple tasks and roles at the same time.

Such employees are likely to experience unusually high levels of demand. To avoid this problem – common in busy nonprofit organizations – make creative use of volunteers and interns rather than load one person with too many tasks.

Select employees who meet the qualifications in the job descriptions. The goal is to match the employee's needs and abilities with the demands of the job. A mismatch leads to overload or underload conditions, both of which create stress.

Provide orientation to new employees. Too often this initial phase of employment is handled poorly. The result is that the demands of the task may appear greater than the employees' abilities. Orientation should give new employees knowledge of what superiors and coworkers are like, tell them how long it will take to reach standards of effective work, and encourage them to seek help when needed.

Offer training. Well designed training programs reduce stress, create realistic job expectations, and hone skills. Follow these steps to create an effective training program: (1) Determine training needs and objectives. (2) Develop training criteria. (3) Choose a trainer, and develop training material consistent with the objectives. (4) Plan, implement, and evaluate the training program.

When you ask employees to take responsibility, be sure they also have the authority to make decisions. Responsibility without authority is a recipe for burnout.

Create a Supportive Environment.

Be sure your workplace fosters honest, open communication and encourages employees to find and solve problems as they occur. Here are some ideas:

Give employees input into scheduling, planning, making decisions, and implementing change. But be sure employees have adequate training, access to information, and the appropriate amount of authority. Failure to provide such supports will increase, rather than decrease, stress.

Balance authority. If authority is lopsided toward upper management, employees have little influence over tasks. This lack of control is highly stressful. However, lack of any locus of authority can be just as stressful for employees. If a problem beyond their expertise arises, they need to know who to ask for advice.

Avoid extremes of formality. Extreme formality removes the opportunity for creativity and discretion. Extensive rules and procedures add to a project's time requirements, increasing stress. On the other hand, there must be enough structure so that employees have guidelines to follow as they perform their work.

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Practice participant management, which involves an open dialogue between managers and employees about management decisions. The crucial element is opening lines of communication among key personnel, which is extremely effective in reducing turnover and absenteeism and increasing morale.

Offer work options, such as flexible hours, telecommuting, work teams, and job sharing.

Encourage physical exercise and relaxation training. Studies show that regular aerobic exercise and weight training reduce stress. Relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing, mental imagery of a relaxing environment, and self-induced hypnosis, also moderate stress and allow a clear mental focus. Forward-thinking organizations provide such activities or offer incentives for employees to seek out such training on their own. Coupons for meditation classes, spas, or fitness centers

Policies are designed to reduce uncertainty.

make great recognition gifts for employees.

Recognize the personal stress that employees bring to the job. An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is an effective way to support employees through difficult times. EAPs provide short-term therapy and intervention for drug abuse, depression, marital and family issues, grief, and loss. Work with a local counseling agency to administer such a program. The EAP, with its emphasis on support and confidentiality, brings problems into the open and provides a proper forum to help employees through difficult times. ■

Selected References

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*Starred articles are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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