Follow these steps to create a motivated, productive staff.

Easing
Stress
in the Workplace

By Robert Raitano & Brian Kleiner

Stress can erode employees' physical, mental, and emotional health, lowering their productivity. To reduce job turnover and boost morale, you need to know what causes stress, how to diagnosis it, and how to prevent it. Here are the steps to take:

Learn the Root Causes

The first step is to understand the factors that contribute to excess stress. These stressors are a function of the environment *and* workers' perception of the environment. The most common workplace stressors are:

Role uncertainty: When responsibilities aren't clearly defined, employees lack focus and lose motivation.

Excessive demands: When employees have too much work, they can't prioritize tasks or perform core duties properly. They become confused and demoralized.

> Encourage social support groups for employees.

Extremes of authority: If control is lopsided toward upper management, employees have little influence over their work and become highly stressed. There does, however, need to be some locus of authority. Otherwise, if a problem beyond workers' expertise arises, there's no clear leader to recommend action.

Too much formality or informality: Extreme formality removes employees' ability to be creative and take the risks that lead to real breakthroughs. Extensive rules can increase a project's time requirements, promoting stress. On the other hand, extreme informality removes helpful guidelines. Employees lack a template of how to conduct the task, what form it should take, and what result is expected.

Diagnose the Stress in Your Organization

The function of this step is to pinpoint stressors and ferret out their causes. Here are some ways to make a stress diagnosis:

• **Review** organizational records, and note instances of absenteeism, tardiness, turnover rates, and fluctuations in productivity.

• **Hold** interviews or discussions to gain feedback from employees.

• **Circulate** questionnaires throughout the office to uncover problems.

• **Observe** employees' behavior, and talk with those who appear frustrated, tired, or stressed.

• **Study** the results of exit interviews.

• **Help** workers set up their own discussion groups to periodically determine trouble areas. Give them latitude to brainstorm solutions.

Take Action to Prevent Stress

Working with employees, use your diagnosis results to choose the best ways to prevent stress in your organization. Prevention methods take three forms:

1. Primary Prevention

Primary-prevention tactics aim to eliminate or reduce factors that promote stress. Put most of your resources into this type of prevention, since it's the most effective way to purge stress. Try these primary-prevention tips:

• **Give** people detailed job descriptions and clear goals so they understand what you expect of them.

• **Offer** plenty of feedback so staff members always know how they're doing. Hold frequent performance evaluations, based on objective criteria.

• **Devise** an organizational culture that contains a healthy medium of authority and formality — not too much or too little of either.

• **Assign** interrelated tasks to one person or team. Let the person or team perform the activity from beginning to end, while reporting to management periodically. Having control over the entire

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project from start to finish, rather than just a piece of it, gives people an important sense of control. It also invests them in the outcome so they'll give more of themselves to the job.

• **Maintain** lines of communication among key personnel to minimize uncertainty. Create an open dialogue between managers and staff.

• **Redistribute** the decision-making process to employees. Give them authority over decisions affecting the outcome of their work.

• **Implement** flexible work schedules, which let employees coordinate their work and personal schedules, reducing the time pressures from both.

• **Lavish** people with all the training and resources they need to do their jobs.

• **Promote** the use of organizational teams, which give people a forum to discuss problems, a chance to release emotional pressure, and the catharsis that sharing brings.

• **Be sure** employees have the freedom to be effective and the sense that they're contributing to a larger purpose.

2. Secondary Prevention

Secondary prevention methods involve moderating the stress response. Here are some ways to apply these techniques:

• **Offer** physical fitness or sports opportunities. Both aerobic exercise and weight training help moderate the body's reaction to stress.

• **Provide** access to relaxation training. Exercises such as deep breathing and mental imagery of a relaxing environment improve people's moods and allow clear mental focus.

• **Encourage** social support groups for employees. Such groups create an emotional buffer and new perspectives on how to deal with stressful situations.

• **Inject** humor and fun into the workplace. Laughter is a wonderful stress reducer.

3. Tertiary Prevention

At this stage, primary and secondary methods have been neglected or poorly applied. As a result, employees can no longer function well, and you may need to refer them to a crisis intervention program.

Intervention programs take time, cost money, and don't guarantee a return to full productivity. For these reasons, proper diagnosis and use of primary and secondary methods are crucial.

> Remember that you don't have to do it alone.

Be Ever-Vigilant

Stress management is a continuous approach of monitoring, diagnosing, and preventing stressors. If lapses occur anywhere in this process, you and your employees risk a decline of productivity, morale, and physical and mental health.

Remember that you don't have to do it alone. Stress management is the responsibility of everyone in the organization. Work together to create an environment that makes you all eager to come to work every day. ∎

Put an End to Dis-Stress

Use these *Nonprofit World* articles (www.snpo.org/members) to de-stress your organization:

• **Build a Powerful Staff Team** (Vol. 18, No. 4)

• **Employee Assistance Programs: Tackling Dysfunction in the Workplace** (Vol. 4, No. 5)

• **A Three-Step Approach to Managing Workplace Stress** (Vol. 22, No. 2)

• **Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change** (Vol. 13, No. 2)

• **How to Reduce Employee Stress** (Vol. 24, No. 3)

• **The Key to Building Productive Teams** (Vol. 21, No. 4)

• **Don't Let "Sick" Workers Undermine Your Organization** (Vol. 23, No. 1)

Robert Raitano is a financial analyst employed in southern California. Brian Kleiner, Ph.D., is professor of human resource management at California State University, Fullerton, California.