To be stressed or not to be stressed

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By Aleika Walker

Everyone fantasizes about a nonchalant and unruffled life, especially after COVID-19, when there was the rediscovery of the importance of work-life balance. However, most of us battle everyday with the pressures and stress this world has to offer.

These strains range from individual factors in our personal lives to constraints and uncomfortable environments in the workplace. An interconnectivity is also established when stress is created when trying to manifest the balance of work and family responsibilities.

Take Susan, for instance, who has a full-time 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. job, four children and university classes on evenings. Stress is woven into her daily routine when trying to give 100 per cent to each area of her life.

Stress management is an important segment in a company's commitment to occupational health and safety. Ensuring that a depressurised environment is established and sustained is not only important to employee health but has a direct link to overall productivity.

Stephen P. Robbins, professor emeritus of management at San Diego State University and author, defines stress "as a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important".

This definition identifies that stress can be deemed a motivator for some individuals, presenting them with opportunities to attain goals, and as a constraint for others. Stress is often highlighted in a negative context, but many employees thrive and excel under stressful circumstances such as deadlines and targets. What is deemed a stressful situation by someone may be deemed a walk in the park to another. Following are examples of workplace stressors.

Job uncertainty

Even though some consider this a post-pandemic time, job uncertainty is still a great concern. There has not been full economic recovery, and some companies have downsized, laid off and merged, to wade the waters of survival during these years. Internationally, many technological companies are still laying off thousands of people. This factor has become the major stressor for employees in today's society. The battle of sanity rages in their minds with the reality that their position within a company can become redundant in a split second. The overextension of financial resources for personal enhancement such as loans and houses can be added pressure and stress when the means of income is being diminished or extinguished.

Using Susan as the resident example, the loss of her job would incur many consequences for her way of life. Her everyday expenses including her university fees and children's maintenance would be in jeopardy and added burden to her already hectic life. Job uncertainty produces anxiety, depression, and irritability in employees because they are consumed with helplessness and the feeling of being a prey in a potential trap waiting to be devoured.

Job description

With this downsizing, remaining employees are expected to complete additional tasks and carry the workload of their former colleagues. This role expansion broadens the meaning of multi-tasking, causing employees to feel overworked and abused. Instances of job dissatisfaction and frustration occur when no incentives or benefits are given for the increased workload. Additional deadlines and targets cause employees to feel stressed and pressured because of the added responsibility and no compensation or consideration for their well-being.

Unattainable goals

The object and main priority of any organisation is productivity and profitability. Employers expect maximum productivity and returns on their investments which requires employees to commit and excel in their delegated areas. However, overly ambitious employers sometimes establish unattainable goals for employees, thereby creating a stressful and hostile environment. Deadlines and targets are created on short notice and expected to be completed in a fleeting time span. Employees often feel the obligation to complete these tasks without objections or queries due to the fear of victimisation or reprimand.

Disparities

A hostile environment can also be created when there is miscommunication or a lack of communication in the chain of command. This is an environment for disaster, where employees are receiving multiple directions to achieve the same goal. These disparities can also be seen in department rivalries where individuals deem their input more valuable than others'.

Individuals coping with stress in these situations experience physiological, psychological, and behavioural symptoms. Elevated levels of stress can result in ulcers, irritability, high blood pressure, weight lost and in some extreme cases suicide.

According to the American Heart Association, when faced with stressful situations, our body releases stress hormones which causes our hearts to race and blood vessels to constrict. The association suggests clearing mental clutter to lower high blood pressure to overcome stressful situations.

The health of employees is a great concern to organisations because this translates into absenteeism and, more recently, frequent resignations. Stressed employees require extensive leaves of absence due to the inability to cope in the work environment or some resort to resigning in the effort to regain mental stability.

It is in the organisation's best interest to ensure that management creates an environment conducive to productivity with low stress levels. In this economic climate, it is impractical to guarantee human resource sustainability, but it is also important to reassure employees of their value and their importance to the company's success.

Here are some recommendations to aid in this process:
- Team building exercises.
- Incentives (performance or attendance incentives, outstanding achievements).
- On site amenities (gym, day care, exercise classes).
- Wellness programmes.

Employees operate at their full capacity when they feel comfortable in their environment. Stress poses adverse effects to an employee's health and the company's productivity level. Remember, a healthy and happy employee fosters a successful and profitable business.

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Stress is a threat to employee health and a company's productivity.
(Internet image)