

Coping Manager: Stress & Survival

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WORK is necessary for mental health because it presents a consistent means of keeping in touch with the world and of mastering some part of it. Work also provides a means for satisfying oneself. Adults must struggle with the task of handling, blending and redirecting their drives for competence, consistency, clarity and competitiveness.

Work also helps individuals to master self and life in another way. Many people become terribly restless and agitated about not being productive and useful. The unemployed tend to dwell upon things that have no meaning or as "things should be." The statement that people often make regarding that they would become crazy if they didn't work is literally true.

People use their job life as a source for social activities. Many belong to bowling leagues from their company, attend the firm's physical fitness classes, and enjoy the social milieu on the job.

According to Dr. Harry Levinson, a well-known psychologist who has written several books regarding management and mental health, there is overwhelming evidence that work is important in maintaining a man's psychological balance under stress. Work is one of the means whereby the individual re-channels both destructive and constructive drives. The secretary who pounds the typewriter not only gets her work completed but also releases the anger she may feel toward her boss or her human condition off the job. The druggist not only makes a living from filling prescriptions, but also gets intrinsic satisfaction from helping others stay healthy.

Work is also a place in which a person can project individualism yet benefit both company and society

Over the years there has been an increasing degree of dehumanization in daily work. With the industrial revolution came a sense of isolation and lack of reliance upon self as a craftsman. While it is true that people are needed to run machines, the comparative flexibility and competency of an individual to a machine can never be matched. It is an understatement that employees in our complex society are feeling the pinch of technology more today than ever before... and at a human cost.

Many people believe that stress is harmful to our health and performance and we should strive to eliminate it from our lives. On the contrary, without stress one would have little growth or see the relevance of change. Though too much stress will immobilize, too little stress also can.

Could it be that in industry those more prone to ulcers are the supervisors and foremen rather than the top executives? Most problems causing stress are directly felt by the lower and middle management people so that stress from operating pressure is diffused prior to getting to the top.

There are many causes of stress. The middle manager is involved in decision making processes and the need to exercise authority "with politic." In relationships to superiors and subordinates, a high degree of stress is present. Another cause of stress can result in the subordinate's ability to "take orders"... the perception of criticism or

Coping Manager: Stress & Survival

attack. It can be said that the prevailing climate in society tends to be democratic, whereas, decision making in industry is authoritarian.

Other factors which contribute to stress are fear of disabling illness, loss of performance because of health or aging and pressure for high achievement...an achievement level which keeps escalating.

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Here's a profile of the healthy manager:

- He is able to realize and accept that he has both strengths and weaknesses. He either attempts to strengthen his weaknesses or depends upon others to perform the job he can not. He knows he must constantly learn in order to fulfill potential and that it is not shameful to ask others for help.
- He can take recommendations from others and give them credit. "Strength in others is only a threat to the immature and insecure," says Dr. M. R. Feinberg.
- He accepts responsibility for failures; he can admit, "I goofed".
- He has developed a degree of patience, weighing numerous alternatives before selecting the solution to the existing problem.
- He is not crushed by failure but instead grows through the

experience.

- He can think in the anxiety of being alone; or simply put, he can make tangible solutions from intangible input without always calling a staff meeting.
- He *really* enjoys work! The key is organization, a step by step system that works. If one is in control of the many important requests coming into one's world, we are able to put our thumb right on that material that is needed.
- He becomes involved! It is said that the coping executive is able to look beyond his myopic world, is able to find a cause for its generic value.
- He develops physical, psychological, spiritual and intellectual capacities in his total life style to maintain a well-rounded balance.
- He realizes that growth takes time, and to that end *invests* his time.

If one is to be able to cope, managers must feel that the environment in which they work is supportive and free from threat. In such a climate, the employee can be free to communicate appropriately, exercise openness and be concerned for the total system rather than self-protection. If a manager is to cope, he must trust himself so that others can respect and trust him, and he must face the unknown situation and unknown people with eager curiosity rather than guardedness.

Organizations consist of many kinds of people, from the line assembly operator to the president. The coping manager knows his likes and dislikes and cultivates his preferences. If certain jobs do not have to

Coping Manager: Stress & Survival

be performed by him, he delegates them to be free to do more difficult and involving tasks. He confides in and trusts his subordinates. He chooses them with care and lets them stand on their talents so they will build strength and confidence in themselves.

No matter how clever, perceptive and alert a manager is, some things happen that were not foreseen. It is almost inevitable that there are up periods and slumps, no matter how hard one tries to avoid them. One must deal with problems not as though they were created to hurt personally, but rather as experiences to strengthen the managerial foundation.

Stress can wear down a person, both physically and mentally. In its role as friend, stress can be an ingredient for personal progress and development. Some stress is the result of change in one's routine or the perception of requests for change. Robert C. Page, in his book, *How to Lick Executive Stress*, states that loyalty to the customary ways of doing things creates a stable atmosphere. But if traditional solutions and routine prove ineffective, the manager must decide to implement change even though some resistance on the part of the employees might appear. Change is sometimes difficult to cope with, but if the company is to grow and be responsive both in the marketplace and internally, then the stress associated with change must be met and dealt with appropriately.

The coping manager puts stress on his side. To master stress, he first finds out where it is coming from, plans a *modus operandi* to deal with the problem at hand, and realizes that he can be the victor, not the victim. He cultivates a firm composure and institutes a positive attack on tasks; he channels aggression on tasks,

not on people.

The coping manager seeks opportunities to perform jobs at which he excels and that are of interest to him. He gives himself positive strokes for a job well done. He also increases the chances of success by putting the right person in the right place. However, both people and jobs change. Evaluations must be made periodically for mutual well being. When a subordinate has been groomed to take over a particular position with more responsibility but decides he is happy where he is, the result is frustrating for the manager. But if the manager is alert, he accepts and respects the subordinate's decision or tries to find out what frightened him.

The manager can benefit if he has some knowledge of the dynamics of anxiety. Anxiety is not to be confused with stress. Stress gives its victim some sort of warning, while anxiety is often a silent invader. The following are some anxieties which may help the executive identify and confront these invaders.

- Fear of Loss of Position. This may be a realistic fear or one based on irrational preoccupation. The job is to identify the causes and realities of this fear. If the fears are justified, one should analyze and try to change the cause for the possible loss of position or else voluntarily leave the company and search for another career position.
- Fear of Personal Financial Loss. To avoid a financial debacle, one should have a planned financial life, confront unnecessary spending and manage credit by spending wisely. The balanced medium between living the way one wants and the way one can afford must

Coping Manager: Stress & Survival

be achieved.

- **Worry Over Health.** Most executives have so many things to think about that they often disregard body discomforts. Many times, these aches and pains can be symptomatic of serious diseases which, if ignored, can be the cause of personal and career debilitation.
- **Fear of Estrangement from Spouse and Children.** Marriage is a relationship that takes effort to be successful. Many executives spend so much time working that they separate themselves from their families. If one weighs life values wisely, the manager can protect against this loss.
- **Undue Worry Over Mistakes.** Obsessions can affect one's ongoing effectiveness and coping ability. If subordinates are delegated responsibilities, there is little need for the manager to feel personally overwhelmed. Delegate the urgent.

Because man spends a major portion of his life working, it would seem imperative that continued corporate attention be given regarding the needs that work fulfills and the emotional conflicts people feel.

The nature of work helps to satisfy human aspirations as well as to influence either positively or negatively, status in the social and family structure. Work itself is not merely a means for earning money. Its psychological influences go too far beyond.

Stress in today's managerial world is greatly influenced by constant requests for change as well as the emphasis on "more...faster...bigger...better." Stress, if dealt with properly, can become a constructive force in one's climb up the

organization ladder, or, if not handled in proper perspective, can be the destructive force in the fall to a bottomless career pit. When a manager feels that his position is in jeopardy; where age is a factor in our youth-oriented corporate society; when illness threatens vertical career ascent, he feels anxious and may become reactive. He must recognize stress as a positive factor, and learn to deal with anxiety whenever it rears its menacing challenge.

Such practical solutions presented here are not new, but we hope that we have provided some insight into stress, strain and your impetus for self-responsibility. ♦

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