



Topic: Workplace Stress
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Beating the Costs and Causes of Stress

The economy is tight, and as a result, workplace tension is on the rise. Increased employee stress is to be expected whenever uncertainty and belt-tightening occur. However, failing to deal with the strain can cause even larger ripple-effects that spiral into expensive and unintended consequences. Knowing an underlying truth about stress can make a huge difference in your future success.

Many managers are capable of handling whatever problem comes before them. Unfortunately, many managers are not adept at recognizing the costs and causes of stress.

Call it what you want; stress, fatigue, tension, it doesn't matter. Yes, we see it in tough economic times and when circumstances loom large. But external conditions are only a part of the stress equation. Much of what we experience as “stress” is really the result of our mental choices. Cutting to the chase, a more appropriate way to define stress is *a feeling of losing control*.



The underlying truth about stress

Think about it. When someone’s computer doesn't do what he or she wants it to do, that person may claim to be stressed, but in reality, the person is sensing a loss of control. Of course, people don’t want to declare that publicly. It implies weakness—an inability to handle a problem. Instead, it’s much more acceptable for people to say they’re *stressed*.

This perspective may seem harsh, but additional examples reinforce the concept:

- If the number, pace, or size of the projects before us gets to where we can't keep track of everything, we sense a loss of control, but we call it stress.
- When we realize we don't have the answers everyone wants us to have, we may sense a loss of control, but we'll often call it stress.
- When we are working extra hours to make sure nothing slips through the cracks, it's because we're trying to stay in control, but publicly we say we're stressed.

This is not to suggest the challenges we face are not real. Managers deal with very real problems every day. But managers can minimize stress by remaining focused on how they can get a handle on their problems. Successful managers don't succumb to the size of the problem; they remain focused on answering the question "what can I do to keep moving forward?"

**The difference is not the size of the problem,
but rather where one chooses to focus.**

Still, the word "stress" is part of our vocabulary. According to the magazine *Business IQ*, a recent survey of 2,000 senior managers found that their most stressful challenges are:

- Getting employees to embrace and initiate change
- Filling the organization with "A Players," not "good enough" employees
- Growing and selecting managers that can execute and achieve results
- Getting employees to act like "owners" instead of "renters"
- Getting people to understand & execute the strategy without resistance or excuses

Each of these challenges can slow down the flow of business. But at the core of each item is a question that must be answered: *What is the best way to bring this to reality?* Focusing on finding an answer is the key. One becomes “stressed” when one’s focus turns to the size of the problem instead of remaining on-task to find a solution.

Keep in mind that a certain amount of pressure or stress in life is almost always necessary. If a butterfly does not experience the strain of working its way through the small opening in its cocoon, fluid in the butterfly’s wings is not disbursed and the wings will never function properly.

But at work, choosing to focus mainly on the size (or number) of problems instead of finding solutions has a price. Research posted on *StressCosts.com* indicates that the financial cost of stress to industry in the United States alone is more than \$300 billion annually. We also have non-workplace costs: Alienated children, damaged friendships, and failed marriages.

What to do?

Some companies provide childcare or exercise rooms, which do help provide a sense of control. However, more is needed for dealing directly with workplace issues. People need ways to manage their ever-changing work so that they can stay in control of it. They must learn how to stay focused on solutions.

“Focusing on solutions” doesn’t mean solving the entire problem right away. In most cases, it simply means identifying the next step—and taking it.



To help people stay focused on finding solutions, I strongly recommend people attend workshops on decision-making and problems solving. These skills are vital for managers and leaders to keep work moving forward, but they're also valuable for minimizing stress levels.



Problem-solving and decision-making are closely linked, because each requires creativity in (a) identifying the issues on the table and (b) brainstorming the potential solutions for them.

Different tools and methods can be used, but a key for forward progress is learning to ask effective questions. Here are some fundamental questions to help maintain focus on moving forward:

1. What is the REAL issue at hand?
2. What obstacles are in the way of forward progress?
3. What are some benefits of moving forward to get things resolved?
4. What needs to change?
5. What needs to remain the same?
6. Who else should be involved in making the decisions?
7. Who will be responsible for implementing actions to resolve the issues?
8. How will progress be monitored?
9. How will you define success?
10. How will you follow-up to ensure ongoing success?

CAUTION: Some personality styles prefer to jump in and “start a solution” before thinking things through. This practice can be expensive—and also cause more stress! If action is taken and the above questions remain unanswered, it's easy to make bad decisions that compound the problems at hand.

NOTE: The Center for Workplace Excellence provides problem-solving and decision-making workshops for managers and teams. Contact 208-375-7606 for more info.

In addition to learning problem-solving and decision-making skills, getting a coach to serve as a sounding board is also helpful. Good coaching helps people stay focused on what they want.

Some people believe they'll be perceived as weak if they hire a coach. I don't think Pete Sampras, Tiger Woods, or Meryl Streep are seen as weak, yet they hired personal coaches. They aspired to be better—to excel beyond where they were. They knew a coach could help them do that.

A good coach will do the following:

- Listen to you
- Help you clarify your goals
- Ask key questions to help you stay focused
- Help you formulate a plan
- Keep you aware and on-track
- Provide accountability



Bottom line, people feel stressed when they feel like they're losing control of a situation. This doesn't mean we need to become control-freaks, but rather develop a system for staying focused and making effective decisions for moving forward.

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About the Author:

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