

Leadership in a Time of Crisis

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Understanding Stress and Fear

To understand how current events are causing employee stress, it is important to take a moment to focus on the nature of stress itself. What is stress? What causes it? What can we do about it?

The fact is that stress is quickly becoming not only one of the greatest health concerns for American employees, but also one of the top production and performance concerns for American employers.

To understand stress, we must first consider life itself. We are all under stress. There is no such thing as a stress-free life. There is obviously no such thing as a stress-free job. Everyone is exposed to daily pressures. Most people cope with, even flourish on, modest amounts of stress without suffering any ill effects. Another name for this kind of stress could be *challenge*. Challenges can come from our work as well as from our private lives. Challenges may confront us, but the main point is that if we feel that we are in control, stress can be experienced as a positive thing. It can drive us to perform at the top of our game.

While there are many theories of stress, experts agree that the principal difference between healthy “challenge” and unhealthy “stress” is the reality or the perception of the person being able to **control** or positively affect the outcome. When the sense of control over the situation is lost and coping mechanisms break down, a potentially healthy challenge can become dangerous stress. This loss of control often comes when an employee feels that, no matter what the stressful situation is, he/she can no longer do anything to resolve it. Untreated and unrecognized stress can affect employee productivity, attendance, attitude, and often physical and mental health.

There are many kinds of emergency situations that can occur in any workplace—weather, flood, earthquake, fire, employee or ex-employee violence—to name a few. Now we are faced with the challenge of adding terrorism to that list. What makes terrorism so terrifying is not just the threat of loss of life, injury, or illness, but also the common belief with many employees that there is nothing we can do to alleviate or reduce these risks. We face calculated risks to our life and health every day that we have accepted as part of the price we pay for our lifestyle. Automobile accidents, random violence, smoking, and eating unhealthy foods are all risks that most of us accept as a part of everyday life. The risk of terrorism poses great difficulties for us all because its very nature seems to exclude our ability to make it a “calculated risk.”

We can accept and feel better about risks by controlling them or having the perception that we control them. We tolerate the risk of the highway because we are driving the car. We control the risk of random violence by choosing where we go. We eat dangerously but we can always diet. We smoke but we feel we can always quit. The perception of control in these calculated risks makes them more acceptable and therefore not so stressful.

Stress and the Workplace

The stress that we feel from terrorism and crisis extends beyond the workplace. We fear for our children and our parents. We have a general feeling that no place is safe. We feel we cannot let down our guard for fear of being caught by another surprise attack. In fact, the point has not been lost on anyone that the vast majority of terrorist attacks have killed and harmed persons when they were at work. Therefore, it is up to employers to calm the fears of employees by taking strong action to provide leadership to control the risks and instill employee confidence in the judgment of the management team. The bottom line is that, in order to deal effectively with stress in the workplace, all employee fears must be taken seriously and addressed.

This is what we know about work-related stress.

No one works in a vacuum. Only the most extreme cases of stress are explained solely by factors related to work. A death or illness in the family, a divorce, buying a house, marital problems or other personal difficulties, frequently influence the ability of employees to cope with the day-to-day pressures of work. However, some situations are more likely to cause work-related stress than others. These situations include:

1. **Organizational change**
2. **Conflicting demands or assignments**
3. **Work pressures that go on for long periods of time**
4. **Threats of violence or aggressive behavior**
5. **A sense of loss of control or inability to impact a situation**

Employer Note:

The current strategy many employers are using to try to calm employee fears is to educate them about the risks of terrorism and, by using comparisons, to minimize these risks in the minds of employees.

Example:

"You have a greater chance of being killed driving to the airport in a car accident than from being hijacked."

***This strategy does not work!
Remember it is not about the risk; it is about the control of the risk.***

Leaders need to focus on training and tools that can be given to employees to help them gain power over these risks, not trivialize them.

Leadership Styles

Management and organizational styles can play a significant role in creating a context that may negatively (or positively) affect the employee's ability to deal with stress. The styles that are usually most harmful are:

- I. Leadership styles that emphasize intimidation, conflict or bullying**
While never a good management style, this approach is especially inappropriate and ineffective during these times. Leaders need to be aware of employee fears. They need to help the employees resolve their fears, not criticize or chastise them for having them.

- II. Indifference or disregard for employee needs or concerns**
Listen to the employees' needs and concerns. Be flexible about meeting them. This could include everything from a change of schedule to help them deal with a family issue to a concern they have with work. Solutions that organizations develop to react to a terrorist scenario should, whenever possible, involve something that the employee can do to be part of the solution, rather than simply announcing that you have it under control so there is no need to worry.

- III. Unclear objectives and goals for tasks (or the job itself)**
In the broad landscape of this assault on America, it is easy to perceive the work that we do as being trivial. It is not. The work that we do is the battle of the home front. All risk is related to the concept of reward. Why do we need our employees to "hang in there?" What are they accomplishing by doing so? Good management cannot remind them of their role too much and it is impossible to thank them enough for their role.

- IV. A crisis atmosphere**
The assault on America came from the outside, but the crisis is our own. We choose whether to act or to react to these events. Management must act. Management must have a sense of controlled urgency about the safety of its employees, but never demonstrate an uncontrolled reaction to it.

- V. Lack of clear management planning, direction, and prioritization (one of the primary causes of a crisis atmosphere)**
Letting your employees know what you are doing is important, but letting them know why you are doing it is just as important. Involve employee teams in your planning.

Is Stress All In The Employee's Mind?

It is hard to separate the body from the mind. Rather than trying to judge whether an employee's reaction to stress is appropriate or an overreaction, it is valuable to understand what is happening to a human being who is undergoing stress.

When experiencing stress, human beings experience what is known as the "fight or flight" response. In the first alarm stage, the adrenal glands release hormones that prepare and stimulate the body for action. The heartbeat accelerates, glucose is supplied to provide energy, and blood flow is redirected to the working muscles.

A little controlled stress is experienced by many employees as stimulating, much like the exhilarating feeling we get when we ride a roller coaster. However, we all know that the roller coaster ride will end in a few minutes. Imagine now being on a roller coaster ride that may last indefinitely, depending on factors totally out of your control. This "stimulated" condition may well prepare the average employee to flee or fight an attacker, but what happens when there is a constant threat of an attack that may never come? What happens when the potential of the risk heightens with every CNN update?

As long as stress is short-lived, these reactions can be considered a natural part of life and key to survival. However, when the stress does not resolve and the employee feels that there is no solution in sight, serious problems can occur. Heightened and prolonged levels of the hormones and other biochemical changes associated with stress can lead to:

- Exhaustion,
- Insomnia,
- Depression,
- Anxiety,
- Headaches,
- High blood pressure,
- Weakened immune systems,
- Back pain, and
- Increased risk of heart attack.

As you can see, stress is more than an attitude. The results of prolonged stress are just as physically real as a broken leg. And employees can't leave their physical or attitudinal responses to stress at the workplace door. These reactions from employees under the stress of terrorism today are becoming commonplace for all employers. Do you have employees feeling stress in your organization? Then you are likely to have employees who are having these health problems.

Taking Control

Helping your Employees to Take Control

Four Steps:

I. Instill employee confidence in the management team.

Every American must admire the way that Mayor Rudolph Giuliani handled himself in the days that followed September 11th. He both informed and calmed the population of New York. He avoided panic and exhibited a communication style that will be a model for our leaders for years to come.

How did he do it? By understanding that his people needed four things:

- Up-to-date and accurate information on what was happening, using a two-way communication model that invited questions.
- A calm and considered demeanor, presenting a role model for the people of New York to emulate.
- Information about what the city was going to do, along with the reasoning behind all decisions.
- Honesty about what he and his staff did not know, with a promise to keep everyone in the loop.

This is a role model not only for government leaders but for you as a leader as well.

II. Share clear and accurate information about the nature of the risks for employees.

This is a chance for you to explain the nature of the risks accurately and without emotion. This is also the opportunity to explain the actions that will be taken to handle and control the risks. Provide information and details about what the organization will do, what effect those actions or policies will have on the risks and, most importantly, how they will affect the employees.

III. Provide hands-on training for the employees to reduce risks.

By either using existing internal or outside experts, review tangible things that each employee can do to minimize the risks of a crisis in their day-to-day activities. Also determine in advance what to do in worst-case scenarios. Whether it is air travel, opening letters, direct attack, fire, earthquake or preparations for worst-case scenarios at home, employees need tools, instruction and training for living and making a living to help reduce stress, develop confidence, and gain the feeling of control.

IV. Risk Versus Reward.

Every risk we choose to take is done within the context of a real or perceived reward. We take the risk of driving for the reward of convenience and getting to where we are going. We take the risk of eating raw seafood because we like the taste. We take the risk of swimming because we enjoy it. On balance, we have determined that the rewards of our actions justify the risks.

What are the risks of coming to work? What are the rewards? Once the ability, training and the tools to control the risk are in place, organizations must help employees to see the rewards in taking that risk.

What are the rewards? On a personal scale, the ability to support our family is no small issue. One of the most important qualities of leadership is the ability to help persons see the larger picture and embrace the greater goal. By helping employees to keep healthy, safe and focused in these times of crisis, you demonstrate leadership at its highest level.