

# UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

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Newsletter

## Four Paths to Less Business Stress

**W**e typically spend one-third to one-half of our adult lives at work. But work is a common source of unhappiness and stress. Studies have concluded that the number of burned-out, stressed-out or chronically stressed individuals is between one-fourth and one-third of the work force.

If companies are to survive the challenges of uncertainty, leaders and workers must be fully present and engaged at work, in a state of health and well-being.

A study by the Conference Board reveals only half of Americans today say they are satisfied with their jobs, down 10 percent from 1995. Among those who say they're content, only 14 percent say they are very satisfied.

Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than any other factor in people's lives, even financial or family troubles. While they may fail to realize the health implications, people at work are acutely aware of stress. A Northwestern National Life survey shows 40 percent of workers report their jobs are very or extremely stressful, and 25 percent of employees view their jobs as the top stressor in their lives.

More than 50 percent of employees feel overwhelmed by their workloads, and 62 percent perceive their workloads to have increased in the last six months.

## Causes of Stress

**W**e are hardwired to respond to threats with a stress reaction that can save our lives. In a nanosecond, we are ready for fight or flight. But the biological systems that saved us in a primordial world can actually turn against us in highly stressed business offices. We are no longer threatened by tigers, but our mental and physical reactions are exactly the same.

A common form of mental stress occurs when reality differs from expectations. Falling below a certain sales quota for a quarter creates stress for everyone in sales. The stress is linear: minimal if sales are off



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**H**erdlinger Associates provides the vehicle to help people expand and develop skills and attitudes necessary to achieve a higher degree of success both personally and professionally.

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by 2 percent and greater when quotas are off by 40 percent or more.

Stress happens when:

- We fail to meet deadlines, budgets or other goals
- We have ambiguous job responsibilities
- We perceive a lack of control over tasks
- We have a sudden upsurge in tasks
- We have conflicts with others

## Hierarchy and Control

Stress is also related to social hierarchy within an organization, which signifies how much control you feel over your life. This sense is directly related to disease; studies show lower levels of control at work consistently led to increased illness.

Factory workers are more likely than university professors to have heart disease and a shorter life expectancy because of stress related to social position. Companies that go out of their way to reduce hierarchy have noticeable reductions in stress.

Many common work problems create gaps between expectation and reality.

## The Costs of Stress

Stress can be defined as the cognitive, emotional, biophysical and behavioral reaction to a threat, real or perceived.

Stress reactions are costly. Stressed executives can exhibit the same heart-rate increase, elevated blood pressure and hormonal release when running late for a meeting or confronting an armed thug. Stress depletes our physical, emotional and mental resources, which ultimately reduces companies' productivity and profits.

The Canadian consulting firm Chrysalis contends stress is responsible for 19 percent of absenteeism, 40 percent of turnover, 30 percent of disability costs and 60 percent of workplace accidents.

Healthcare costs for stressed workers are 46 percent higher. Total stress-related business costs (disability, death, insurance, medical expenses, accidents, loss of employees, sick leave and reduced/lost productivity) total between \$250 billion and \$300 billion annually in the United States. Starbucks, which prides itself on its employee programs, now spends more on healthcare than on coffee procurement.

Americans' working hours increased 3 percent from 1979 to 1999. We are sleeping approximately two hours less a night than people living 50 years ago. Far too many people whose jobs should help sustain life find them to be a source of stress and fear, killing them spiritually,

## “You Can Do It” Attitude

Whether out of fear of losing their jobs or a desire to turn the company around, people often display amazing abilities to work under pressure.

When we are asked to sustain too great a load for too long a time, there's an undeniable detrimental outcome. Athletes and soldiers understand the impact of physical and mental strain, and they pace themselves to avoid burnout and injury. The rest of us continually expect more from the people we employ, not to mention ourselves.

Have you ever wondered why salmon die after spawning? When they swim upstream from the ocean to their spawning grounds, fighting currents and obstacles, their adrenal glands become hyperactive. The constant “on” cycle causes control mechanisms to fail, and the adrenals keep pumping. After spawning, salmon do not die from exhaustion; the cause is excessive stimulation when the adrenal glands fail to shut off.

Executives and leaders are particularly at risk for putting themselves in highly charged environments, where expectations of surviving successfully are high and there are few timeouts for recuperation. The greater their responsibilities, the more stress CEOs have. They harbor tremendous expectations for achieving goals over which they may actually have little control.

## Saving Ourselves from Stress

There are four paths to counteracting stress and disease at work: two personal and two organizational, according to research in the book *What Happy Companies Know*, by Baker, Greenberg and Hemingway.

An individual's or organization's failure to take responsibility can quickly destroy a team. The organization must refrain from imposing unreasonable productivity requirements, and individuals must recognize their limits – a difficult prospect for high achievers.

Businesspeople and athletes share a common desire to achieve a personal best. “Good stress” strengthens our mental and physical abilities, but we need reasonable mental conditioning.

Just as individuals have a responsibility to be physically and psychologically fit for duty, an organization must provide a healthy environment, with specific policies to bolster workers' health and well-being.

More importantly, a company can reduce stress by

changing its corporate culture, including increased awareness of the value of appreciation and positive emotions.

## Step One: Personal Mastery

**P**ersonal mastery of stress begins by recognizing that it's a palpable force in the workplace – one for which we must proactively prepare. Of course, a certain amount of stress is the norm in business, but recognizing its signs and symptoms is essential for diminishing and controlling detrimental reactions.

Accepting a degree of chaos becomes part of the challenge. Instead of looking at change and uncertainty as a series of calamities, we can reframe these situations as exhilarating experiences that provide opportunities.

As with river rafting, one's environment cannot be controlled. But with the right skills, we can navigate and enjoy the turbulence instead of fearing it. Negative stress can be reduced through reframing our perceptions.

## Step Two: Health and Well-Being

**T**oo many companies purchase the health plans they can afford and then hope to maintain costs, without realizing that corporate culture and individual responsibility have a dramatic impact on overall employee health and healthcare costs. Some CEOs take the attitude that employee health is none of their business, whereas others see health as something intrinsic to corporate values.

Achieving reductions in healthcare costs without employees' buy-in is difficult, as many health issues are related to lifestyle. Obesity, smoking, lack of exercise, poor nutrition and an inability to manage stress are associated with 50 to 70 percent of all illness and medical problems.

Wellness programs provide structured efforts to improve employee lifestyles, and screenings before the onset of disease enhance health and reduce costs. But less than 5 percent of the \$1.8 trillion that Americans spend on healthcare goes toward prevention, and even progressive companies spend 80 times more on cure than prevention.

Some wellness programs consist of little more than posters and reminders in company newsletters. And since they are voluntary, wellness programs attract those who tend to be healthy – not the individuals who need the most help.

Corporations have a responsibility to reduce stress, which leads to risky behaviors like smoking, alcohol abuse and poor eating habits. But health packages are affordable and effective only when employees take responsibility for managing their own lives and bodies.

## Step Three: Resilience

**W**e can also reduce stress by inducing a positive mental state before or during stressful situations.

Studies show appreciation-generating techniques can reduce the production of cortisol (the stress hormone), lower blood pressure, improve hormonal balance and increase the body's production of antibodies that fight pathogens.

Recognizing employee strengths and expressing appreciation are key stress management components. Coaching and mentoring programs can help companies develop corporate cultures that foster creativity, productivity and optimal performance.

Expressing appreciation in the workplace has been studied extensively, and researchers have found it reduces stress and improves performance.

## Step Four: Corporate Culture

**A**n overwhelming number of companies are lackluster because they culturally replicate fear-based behaviors, reacting to events rather than driving toward a vision. An atmosphere of judgment and criticism prevails. These companies stifle human potential and behave in ways that lead to mediocre outcomes.

Successful companies are most often led by leaders concerned with the well-being of everyone who works in the organization. Research shows such companies have leaders who are humble, inclusive, inspirational and willing to demonstrate innovative/visionary leadership.

### Leaders First

**H**uman behaviors are notoriously difficult to change, but attitude and cultural adjustments are the only ways to differentiate yourself long term. To have a meaningful effect, leaders' attitudinal changes must precede actual organizational changes, which ultimately herald social and employee shifts from stress behaviors to positive performance.

It takes focus and tenacity to improve corporate culture, instill attitudinal changes in positive thinking and routinely express appreciation. You must find a few actionable principles that truly make a difference and revolutionize workplace culture. You must take specific steps to drive these principles deep into the company, at every level and into every behavior.

This is a tall order, and it begins at the top.

## **The Healthy Road Ahead**

**C**ompanies and employees must develop well-thought-out strategies to identify, defuse and overcome stress. Taking personal responsibility is a start, but health-optimizing programs are needed to develop physical and psychological resilience.

The proper tools and techniques – relaxation therapies, cognitive therapies to teach optimism, strategies to find positive meaning in fundamental aspects of work – can help individuals reshape internal functioning mechanisms and achieve optimal emotional and psychological states.

Such programs cultivate a positive corporate culture that can save hundreds of thousands of dollars a year through stress reduction.

No one can be innovative, creative and high performing if burdened by fear and stress. Eliminating stress enables us to be our most creative and cooperative in business.

When we make a conscious choice to practice and express appreciation, even in difficult times, everyone benefits. When we decide to focus on what's right, lead from strengths and look for possibilities that can be transformed into realities, we enjoy optimal performance and creativity.

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