Stress in Organizations: Management Strategies

Nasir Karim[*]

Abstract

Stress management is set to become a primary strategic and operational concern for all organizations because of the direct relationship between decency and humanity, good employment practice, and successful business. Stress places a cost burden on organizations in all locations and sectors, and there is also a human price among those who work in stressful situations or suffer from stress-related injuries and illnesses. Forgoing in view, the nature of the research study is kept descriptive and exploratory, to help in identifying causes for potential stress and how it creates a significant effect on workforce performance. Finally conclusions are drawn from the discussion and strategies are recommended based on organizational needs

Keywords: Management, Stress Management, Strategic Management

Introduction

An organization is a social arrangement for the controlled performance of collective goals (Buchanan, Huczynski, 2005). The organizations operate through division of labor and allocation of functions, and well defined hierarchy of authority and responsibility. However, each organization is faced with internal and external pressures which may cause psychological stress. Stress "an adoptive response, mediated by individual characteristic and psychological processes, that is consequence of any external action, situation or event that places special physical, psychological demands upon a person" (J M Ivancevich and M T Matteson, 1980) may result into high labor turnover and absenteeism

---

[*] Dr. Nasir Karim, Associate Professor, Dept. of Management Sciences, CECOS University, Peshawar

rate, low productivity, reduced performance, ineffectiveness, and inefficiency levels will also affect the psychological, social and physical health of the employees. On the contrary, stress may generate positive outcome as a consequence. Receiving a PhD degree at the end of successful public defense, or completing a difficult work assignment will result into "Eustress" (Selye). In this regard Selye described stress as the spice of life and said that the absence of stress may lead to dullness, decay and death. He differentiated between positive stress, which he called "Eustress" and negative, harmful stress which he called "distress" (in most cases, a wedding would be Eustress and a funeral distress). Stress is a part of life, it is inevitable but when someone continuously lives in a stressful environment, such stresses convert in distresses and distresses convert into disease and disorder. Furthermore, Stress is 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. Research study has indicated that stress is caused by many factors, two basic reactions can be expected i.e. Fight-or-flight response. Environmental factors which may cause stress can be categorized into:

1- Individual level
2- Group level
3- Organization level
4- Extra-organizational level

The potential stressors in the individual context are job demand, work over load, role conflict, role ambiguity, work/family conflict (T. A. Judge and J. A. Colquitt, 2004), and fear of losing job. Job loss can turn into a very stressful event causing decreased psychological and physical well being.

Interestingly sleeplessness or insomnia may also cause stress and strain. Various studies indicate that seven to eight hours of sleep significantly contributes towards alertness, restoration of energy, performance, creativity and critical thinking (M. Greer, 2004). Job pay differentials, inequities, ambiguous procedure, unrealistic job description, too much of centralization, high degree of specialization, line –staff conflict, over crowding, safety hazards, poor communication system, unfair control system, inadequate information, inappropriate system of promotion, posting and transferring of their employees, poor intra-and-interpersonal relation of the employees, lack of coordination and cooperation among the employees, favoritism, nepotism, lack of accountability, absence of justice, authority used for personal benefit and vested interest and violation of merit. In such environments majority of the people become sycophant, no reward and incentive system for good work and no accountability on corruption and avoidance of work and untrained man power in the offices. Absence of proper arrangement of training of the employees also leads to stress.

If the above cited malevolencies and prejudices are prevalent in the man power of any organization, surely they will fall prey to tensions, frustrations and pressures, which are the major causes of stress. Common signs of stress include increased heart rate, high blood pressure, muscle tension, mental depression and an inability to concentrate. Typical reaction includes social withdrawals, increased use of tobacco, alcohol, or drugs and feelings of helplessness and depression about the situation. This study aims at the organizational stress: consequences, prevention and management strategies.

The problem of occupational stress has been of great concern to many industrial/ organizational psychologists because researches indicate

that if undue stress is imposed on employees, it will affect the job performance and their psycho-somatic, that is, physical and mental, health as well. The industrial/organizational psychologists focused their attention on the causes and effects of stress in the work place for two reasons. First, there is a general awareness that stress-related diseases are wide-spread, and that more people are disabled today as a result of stress than at any other time in history. Secondly, stress on the job is costly and is reflected in a form of lower productivity and poor performance in the organization.

Discussion

The word stress, like success, failure or happiness, signifies different things to different people. Beehr and Newman, for instance, define job stress as "a condition arising from the interaction of people and their jobs and characterized by changes within people that force them to deviate from their normal functioning." In fact, stress in the work place has become the black plague and intensified when bad and illegal practices are happening which are causes of tension, frustration and pressure on the employees. The important stressors are: inappropriate leadership, weak monitoring, lack of resources, unfair rules & regulations, some bosses have ego-centric attitude, misuse of resources, lack of trust, role ambiguity, encroachment or erosion of authority and responsibility , power hungry culture,   lack of facility of internet and computer, improper system of lighting and heating , public pressure, noise in the offices, hazardous jobs and toxic substances, busy highways and bad driving conditions,   crude and negative thinking of people, over ambitious attitude,   social pressure of family, pressure of personal interest of the friends, Lack of financial resources, unhealthy competition, target oriented , political policy influence, lengthy legal

procedure , Low tolerance for ambiguity, unnecessary dictation, Lack of empowerment of employees , lack of Job satisfaction, Under worked officers , over worked officers , Under qualified and Over qualified employees, lack of participative environment,   myopic mind, time pressure and deadlines, red tapism, autocratic management system, delay in decision making, career and promotion, lack of horizontal and vertical mobility, no vision statement, stagnation in organization, lack of transparency, excessive perks and privilege, Poor interest of the stakeholders, procedural complication, unfair polices and inequitable practices, office politics, role conflict, lack of contentment , adjustment problem of wife and husband, educational problems of children, death of a spouse or serious illness etc. If the above mentioned stressors are present in the organization they will create tension, frustration and pressure for employees. Further the 21st century has also thrown innumerable challenges, such as, rapid change is coming in the technology, electronic media, aviation, space travel, computers and cultural invasion. Some unethical activities are happening at international, national and organizational level. All these factors are enhancing the tension, frustration and pressure. Finding of researches indicate that task demands and work load   are so often the causes of stress (Karasek, 1979), physical and psychological environment affects the relationships of the employees.The potent stressors are role conflict, role ambiguity (Kahn, Wolfe Quinn, Snoek Rosenthal, 1964, scott; scott Landlow, 1990); and physical conditions such as excessive noise, inadequate lighting, etc (Caplan, Cobb, French, Pinneau and Van Harrison, 1975; Corper and Marshall, 1976).   Extra organizational or occupational factors   such as social, familial and financial stressors

affect the health of the employees. (Bhagat Mc Quaid, Lindholm, and Sergovis, 1985).

Work load is another potent source of stress at work, having too much work to do in available time e.g., (Margolis, Kroes and Quinn, 1975). Lack of job security, fear of demotion, not receiving an anticipated promotion, are causes of stress (Hurrell & Murphy 1995). Whereas, non participation at work has been found to be a significant indicator or predictor of job-related stress and strain, leading to poor general health, escapist drinking, low self-esteem, absenteeism and plans to leave work (Ostroff, 1993). In general, clerical and blue collar workers suffer from more stress than managerial and professional workers, partly because they have little control over their work and working conditions (Cooper & Smith 1986). If stress is excessive, and prolonged over an extensive period of time, it can threaten one's ability to cope with the environment and chronic stress has been linked to degeneration of overall health, and tends to play havoc with human organism and leads to an increase in psychosomatic disorders.   Doctors contend that several kinds of illnesses may be caused by prolonged or frequent spells of stress. Diseases of   stomach and intestines, such as duodenal ulcers and colitis are often linked to stress, Arrhythmias (abnormal heart rhythms) and even heart attacks some times occur because of stressful events. Stress also suppresses the body's ability to fight off diseases such   as flue, mononucleosis, herpes simplex, and some kinds of cancer have been shown to be affected by stress.

Most people spend about one third of their lives at work, if stressors are present at work place, they become the causes of emotional, behavioral, mental, physical disorders. The research studies indicate that job stress-related illnesses are hypertension, coronary heart disease,

alcoholism, and mental disorders (Hurrell Murphy, 1995). Stress is the cause of poor mental health and high risk for coronary heart disease (Hurrel, 1985; ostroff, 1993). Long working hours have been found to be linked with coronary heart disease (Breslow & Buell, 1960) Role ambiguity has been linked with job dissatisfaction, tension, depression, increased blood pressure and pulse rate (Kumari and Shrama 1990) Now there is some evidence which suggests that stress may be one of the cause of tuberculosis, Arthritis, diabetes, leukerria, and also problems such as colds, stomachaches and backaches (Holmes and Masuda, 1974; Rahe and Arthur, 1978) Robinson and Inkson, 1994) evidence suggests that stress often contributes to precipitate peptic ulcers (Christodolov, Alzevizos and Konstantakanis, 1983). (Engel 1971) sees stress as contributing to sudden death i.e sudden cardiac failure a moderately common effect of stress is impairment of one's cognitive or mental functioning, thereby leading to a narrowed focus of attention, reduced flexibility in thinking, poor concentration and less effective memory storage, which in turn leads to impairment of one's problem solving skills (Mandler 1979, Orpen 1991) Continuous pressures at workplace, the employees can develop various symptoms of stress that can adversely affect their performance. (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoeck and Rosenthal, 1964) described work stress as an individual's reaction to the characteristics of work environment which appear threatening and can not be handled effectively by the individual. Jasmine,(1987) found that the public sector organizations experience significantly more stress than of private sector organizations because management in the public sector has given less freedom, frequent changes in polices, and centralization of control. (Pestonjee ,1987), and (singh, 1987) finding indicate that lack of firm, clear and formal code of job expectations, conflicting and

frequently changing polices, numbers and more ambiguous objectives lead to higher stress. (Singh, 1987) also reveals that perception of achievement, expert influence, and extension climate are negatively associated with role stress, and positively associated with job satisfaction.

All the three dimensions physiological, psychological and behavioural are important to the understanding of job stress and coping strategies in modern organization. Stress cannot be eliminated from daily life, nor should it be. The solution is to manage it effectively. But people need meager amount of stress to perform at their best. But unbearable stress produces many negative effects. Therefore many people try to manage the stress in better ways in their lives. Unfortunately however majority of employees do not know how to manage and cope with the stresses. They adopt maladapted techniques for stress management that are alcohol, smoking, drugs, overeating, escapism, spending sprees, physical and verbal abuse, blaming others, overworking, denial, magnification, and martyrdom. Adverse effects will be shown on physical and mental health, by adopting maladaptive techniques for stress management. Few people adopt positive ways that are , medications, solitude, music, play, prayer, intimacy, Massage, professional assistance, hobbies, humor , exercise, deep relaxation , social support system and physical exercises.

Conclusion and Recommended Strategies

In conclusion, it may be emphasized that human mind is not a "windowless monad" as Leibniz wants us to believe. On the contrary, we do enter into inter-personal or social relations and are constantly engaged in self-constructive or self-destructive activities/relations. Our actions, so to say, are not just pleasant or unpleasant, hedonic or non hedonic, but

are, in fact, constantly defining and determining our beings. In a controlled organizational context, where we run into the same physical and mental environment, day in and day out, the chances of developing favorable or unfavorable psycho-moral and mental attitude towards others are quite strong,. In business organizations, we have relentless demands on our time and talent and that too, at times, in inimical and unfriendly surroundings. The hostile circumstances so often cause emotional and psychological stresses and strains which, in turn, push us to psycho somatic disorder. Our mental and physical health begins to deteriorate. Our professional performance so often declines and we tend to lose respect of our juniors and seniors. An aggravated situation of this kind, eventually leads us to all sorts of fatal consequences such as, incurable diseases and deformities caused by long lingering stresses and strains. This, in brief, is the summary of our preceding analysis.

Now the question is: can we find out some effective strategies for overcoming (or at least minimizing) the gravity of these psychological stresses and strains which are fraught with dangerous implications? Our stray reflections on this important question are:

Wear A Human and Humane Face. There is an urgent need to introduce a psycho-moral change in our business organizations. Our capitalists/employers should wear a human and humane face. They should understand that their employees are not their slaves. Instead they are distinct self respecting, sensitive and responsive fellow-beings. Our employers should never invade their self esteem, their dignity, and their individuality. They should realize that in all probability they need the workers as much as the workers need their jobs and their salaries for survival. For if the workers/employees leave their jobs en-bloc, the capitalist would suffer more loss than his former employees. His former

employees may find jobs compatible to their skills while the capitalist may find it difficult to find an early replacement for his former employees. The point that we wish to emphasize is that a basic attitudinal change of the employer can create a congenial atmosphere and reduce the possibility of stresses and strains. This single act alone can introduce a humane touch to the organization. Instead of having a master-slave relationship, he should cultivate an atmosphere of mutual respect and fellow feelings. If both sides (i.e. the employer and employees) follow a basic moral maxim: "recommend for others what you would like to recommend for yourself", we can introduce a real change in our work-place. Besides, the employer should try to follow a consultative or participative   format   of   governance   rather   than   an authoritative/totalitarian or dictatorial format of governance. This change in format of administration can help us to eliminate the chances of heart burning and unnecessary stresses and strains.

Proper job Description. So often bickering and tensions get started because there were no clear and specific job descriptions. Usually the employer prefers to keep these terms and conditions rather vague so that he can get the maximum work from his employees. In the absence of clear job description, the employees on the other hand, tend to feel that they were being exploited and asked to render more services than what was humanly possible. Now if the employer is keen to avoid frequent frictions, he should try to hire right man for he right job. Give him the proper job description along with the salary package. The employer should also tell the employee that he would be subjected to a transparent accountability. His reward and recognitions will be based on his performance rather than his nearness or distance from the establishment. In the intervening period he will be given adequate professional freedom

so that he should put his heart and mind into his work and do it as best as is humanly possible. Of course, the employer should see to it that the employee has the requisite integrity. Intelligence and honesty, it may be underscored, are qualities that rarely go together. Wherever these two qualities are found together, that man can be most suitable functionary of the state or an organization. It may be observed that it is the prime responsibility of the employer to pick the right man for the right job and then give adequate freedom and the right kind of working conditions for his innovative and creative work. This strategy can also help us in improving the working conditions and reduce the possibility of stresses and strains.

Usually the capitalist tends to pay the minimum to their employees and maintain the high percentage of their profit margin. A disgruntled worker obviously cannot identify himself with the organization and put in the best of his time and talent into the work. In our view, a decent salary package can promote the interest of the employer more than the employee. Employees can feel a sense of belonging to their organization and do of their best to improve its quality production. This consideration can also help us in reducing the unnecessary stresses and strains.

As a rule, every man has a tendency to sip at flattery. Industrialists and capitalists may be no exception. Our recommendation is that a capitalist should discourage such employees who wish to carve out their place by indulging in character-assassination and back-biting. A class of psychophants so often spoils the working conditions in an organization and makes life difficult for those who tend to thrive sheerly on the basis of their hard work.

A public appreciation of a good-worker can inspire others to do their best in their respective jobs. While the employer should observe this much decency that any adverse comments against an employee should be passed on to the concerned employee in privacy. Personal dignity and self-esteem of an employee should never be damaged.

We assume that minor precautions of this nature can bring in a marked improvements in our working conditions and minimize (if not totally eliminate) the main causes of stresses and strains in our organizational setup. The fundamental approach has to be based on openness, honesty, and integrity. It is essential that a mutual respect and trust between staff and managers is created and developed. This is vital, and indispensable, regardless of whether the organization is hierarchical, bureaucratic, authoritarian, participative or democratic. If this is not introduced and given due consideration, we are afraid, organizations and their managers must be prepared to face problems of absenteeism, illness, injury, and burnout as a result.

Bibliography:

Beehr, T.A., and Newman, J.E. 1978. Job stress, employee health an Organizational effectiveness: A facet analysis, model and literature review. *Personnel Psychology*, 31, 665-699.

Bhagat, R.S., McQuaid, S.J., Lindholm, H., and Sergovis, J. 1985. Total life stress: A multimethod   validation of the construct and its effects on organizationally valued outcomes and withdrawal behaviours. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 70, 202-214.

Bhatnager, D., and Bose, B. 1985. Organizational role stress and branch managers. *Journal of Social and management Sciences*.14,349-357.]

Breslow, L., and Buell, P. 1960. Mortality of coronary heart disease and physical activity of work in California. *Journal of Chronic disorders*, 11, 615-626.

Caplan, R.D., Cobb, S., French, J.R.P., Harrison, R.V., & Pinneau, S.R. 1975. *Job demands and worker health: Main effects and ccupational differences*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.

Christodoulou, G.N., Alzevios, B.H., & Konstantakakis, E. 1983. Peptic ulcer in adults. Psycho-pathological, environmental, characterological and hereditary factors. *Psychotherapy and Psycho-somatic*, 39, 55-62.

Cooper, C.L., & Marshall, J. 1976. Occupational sources of stress: A review of literature relating to coronary heart disease and mental ill health. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 49, 11-28.

Cooper, C.L., & Smith, M.J. 1986. (Eds), Job stress and blue collar work. New York: Wiley.

Engel, G.L. 1971. Sudden and rapid death during psychological stress. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 74, 771-782.

Holmes, T.H., & Masuda, M. 1974.   'Life changes and illness susceptibility'. In B.S. Dohrenwen & B.P. Dohrenwend (Eds.), *Stressful life events: Their nature and effects*. New York John Wiley.

Huczynski B. 2005 *Organizational Behavior: An Introductory Text*, London: Prentice Hall.

Hurell, J.J., & Murphy, L.R. 1995. Psychosocial Job Stress. *Journal of Human Stress*, 58, 112-130.

Hurell, J.J., Jr. 1985. Machine-paced work and the Type A Behavior pattern. *Journal of Occupational Psychology* 1985;58:15-25. 7

Ivancevich J. M. and Matteson M. T. 1980. *stress and work: A Managerial Perspective* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman,), pp. 8-9.

Jasmine, R. 1987. *A comparative study of private and public sector blue-collar employees on job related stress*. Unpublished M.Phil dissertation, Calicut University, Calicut.

Judge T. A. and Colquitt J. A. 2004. 'organizational justice and stress: the mediating role of work-family conflict'. *Journal of applied psychology*. pp 395-404

Karasek, R., Jr. 1979. Job demands, job decision latitude and mental strain: Implications for job redesign. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24, 2, 285-308.

Kumari, K., & Sharma, S. 1990. Global versus health-specific social support and match preferred and perceived social support levels in relationship to compliance and blood pressure of hyper-tensives. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 20, 13, 1103-1111

Kahn, R.L.,Wolfe, D.M., Quinn, R.R., Snoeck, J.D., &Rosenthal , R.A. 1964. Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity. New York: Wiley.

Khanna, B.B. 1985. *Relationship between organizational climate and organizational role stress and their impact upon organizational effectiveness: A case study*, Doctor Dissertation, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.

Kahn, R.L., Wolfe, D.M., Quinn, R.P., Snock, J.D., & Rosenthal, R.A. 1964. *Organizational Stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. New York: Wiley.

Lazanis, R.S. 1966. *Psychological stress and the Coping process*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Mandler, G. 1979. 'Thought processes, consciousness, and stress'. In V. Hmilton & D.M. Warburton (Eds). *Human stress and cognition: An information processing approach.* New York: Wiley.

Margolis, B.L., Kroes, W.M., & Quinn, R.P. 1975. Job Stress: An unlisted occupational hazard. *Journal of Occupational Medicine*, 16, 659-661.

Orpen, C. 1991. Cognitive failure as a moderator of the effect of work stress on   personal strain: An empirical study. *Studia Psychologica*, 33, 2, 179-81

Ostroff, C. 1993.The effects of climate and personal influences on individual behavior and attitudes in organizations. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*. 56, 1, 56-90.

Pestonjee, D.M. 1987. *A study of role stress in relation to Type-A and anger*. Working paper No 670. Indian Institute of Management: Ahmedabad.

Rahe, R.H., & Arthur, R.J. 1967.   A longitudinal study of life change and illness patterns. *Journal of Psychological Research*, 70, 355.

Robinson, P., & Inkson, K. 1994. Stress effects on the health of chief executives of business organizations. *Stress Medicine*, 10, 1, 27-34.

Scott, A.J., & Landlow, J.L. 1990. 'Shift work: Effects on sleep and health with recommendations for medical surveillance and screening'. In Scott A.J. (Ed.), *Occupational Medicine: State of the art reviews*. Philadephia: Hanley & Belfus.

Selye,H. 1956. *The stress of life*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Singh, G.P. 1987. *Organizational climate as a moderator of role stress-job satisfaction relationship in case of different job categories of computer professionals*. Doctoral Dissertation, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad.