

Effective Ways to Reduce Stress in the Workplace

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Rising expectations. Looming deadlines. Tighter budgets. Being forced to “do more with less.”

Let's face it – we all experience some type of stress on the job. Increased fear and uncertainty, due to recent economic events, only heighten employees' susceptibility to the negative impact of stress. Given that workplace stress is unavoidable, how do you keep it from eating you and your employees alive? This article outlines 10 strategies to reduce workplace stress levels and keep everyone operating at peak efficiency:

Conduct an informal assessment. How big a problem is stress in your workplace? Look for these key warning signs and symptoms of excessive stress (in both yourself and your employees):

- Anxiousness, irritability and/or depression
- Apathy toward work and/or social withdrawal
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical symptoms, including muscle tension, headaches, stomach problems and difficulty sleeping

Start at the source. Job stress can come from any number of sources – ranging from job security to office politics. To eradicate negative stress, start by identifying the root causes – within departments and across the company as a whole. Identify prime stressors by soliciting feedback from employees (via interviews, surveys, etc.). Once you understand the causes, you can begin creating an effective game plan to combat them.

Improve communication. Not knowing – about potential changes, supervisors' expectations, or perceived work performance – is one of the greatest sources of employee stress. Eliminate it by being candid with employees, even when the news is bad. Honest conversation reduces fear of the unknown and involves everyone in developing solutions.

Clearly define work roles. Examine tasks within work teams and see if you can re-assign some of them according to members' competence and enjoyment levels. Assess training that may be needed to help employees feel confident and competent in managing their work loads. Finally, ask team members for input on the group's processes and outcomes, to ensure everyone understands his or her role.

Explain the reasons for decisions that affect your workers. While your decisions may not make everyone happy, reviewing the reasoning behind those decisions, including alternatives

considered, will help minimize negative repercussions.

Help employees improve the work/life balance. A 2005 study by the Society for Human Resource Management found that women and workers under 35 say that work/life balance is the most important component to their overall job satisfaction. But with companies forced to run leaner, so many people are feeling the pressure to work longer and harder. Prevent burnout and keep your staff working at peak efficiency by helping them create a better work/life balance:

- Offer flex time, job sharing and/or telecommuting. Consider implementing a formal program that allows employees to design their schedules to fit their personal lives.
- Consult employees about scheduling. Be sure that workloads are suitable to employees' abilities and resources. Avoid unrealistic deadlines.
- Use temporaries. In addition to helping you meet critical deadlines and stay focused on top priorities, temporary staff can also alleviate the burn out overtime causes.
- Be human. Simple things, like giving someone time off to attend a parent/teacher conference, can greatly reduce the stress working parents feel.

Offer rewards and incentives. Praise your employees' work performance both formally and informally. Offer them opportunities for additional training and/or career development as a reward for their hard work. Provide incentives for achieving improved productivity or cost savings. Share some of the gains their hard work creates, and you create a stake for the employees so that work stress becomes more bearable.

Have some fun. "All work and no play" creates a stressful, negative work environment. Left unaddressed, this negativity can erode your corporate culture – killing morale, motivation, productivity and quality. So have some fun at work! Lighten the mood with a lunch-time get-together. Find a way to get through a tough situation by injecting a little humor. Anything you can do cultivate a more friendly, relaxed atmosphere at work will pay off over the long-term.

Take a look in the mirror. Like it or not, your emotions and attitude are contagious. The stress you feel has an impact on the quality of your interactions with others. So take a look in the mirror and take charge of your physical and emotional well-being. Identify potential negative knee-jerk reactions or attitudes you show while working and strive to improve your communication skills. The more positive your work relationships, the more effectively you can manage your employees' stress.

Keep things in perspective. Realize that as a manager, it is not your job to eliminate stress in the workplace. In fact, moderate levels of stress can actually help *drive* performance. For example, the desire to outdo competitors can be a positive stressor that fuels extraordinary accomplishment. The key is to keep stressors at a healthy level, striking that delicate balance between motivation and burnout.