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Why companies need to stop causing so much stress

HARVEY SCHACHTER

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David Posen is a stress doctor. The Oakville, Ont.-based physician, after many years as a general practitioner, became involved in stress counselling and stress management in the early 1980s. He now specializes in it, carrying out counselling and psychotherapy with patients two mornings a week, as well as consulting to organizations and advocating for action in his lectures and books.

He believes the discussion on stress in the workplace begins with four basic premises:

- 1) Workplaces are making people sick.
- 2) Not enough people are talking about it, and when they do, nobody's listening.
- 3) Much of the time and effort put in by stressed-out workers is actually unproductive, so it makes more

sense to focus them on important matters and cut back their hours, so their health and productivity will improve.

4) Many of the solutions aren't complicated.

He works with individuals to help them cope better with stress. But he believes the focus has to switch from personal responsibility to the organizational level: Companies need to stop causing so much stress.

"It's like having 50 employees in a hot room, expecting each one to endure the heat or somehow cool off. Wouldn't it make more sense for their employer to turn down the heat, open the windows, turn on a fan, or crank up the air conditioning? The problems are systemic. The solutions need to be systemic as well," he writes in his new book, *Is Work Killing You? A Doctor's Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress*.

Organizations that are smart will act. Levels of engagement, and hence productivity, are down. Something called "presenteeism" – when employees are present but not fully working – is now being discussed in executive suites. Absenteeism grows. Costs for employee assistance programs and long-term disability swell. "It is costing a staggering amount of money for this," he says.

People generally have a long list of stressful elements of work. But he feels they can all be lumped into one of three categories: volume of work; velocity of work; and abuse at work by superiors or colleagues.

Even if you have been in the same job for 10 or 20 years, he explains in an interview, the stress created by the work has no doubt increased. There are fewer people to share the work, after nearly two decades in which downsizing has been a watchword. The speed of everything has increased, with impatience on the rise: Deadlines are tighter and everything seems expected immediately. And as volume and speed has increased, more and more people are behaving badly.

"It perplexes me more and more what people are expected to do and the grief they get when they can't do it," he says. "Work-life balance has become a joke for many people. I see very conscientious people trying to do what is expected of them but they can't."

Ironically, while the volume of work keeps increasing, studies show that much of it is not vital. Individuals in surveys indicate that less than 50 per cent of their work seems of great value, consistent with organizational strategic goals. People are being asked to handle a lot of tasks that are not of real value to organizations.

The issue of velocity of work breaks down into two parts. One is capability: With technology, everything can happen quicker. The other issue is expectations: People are assumed to be available at any time and expected to respond immediately – with perfect solutions to whatever has arisen. "In today's world, nobody wants to wait," he says.

When he goes into companies, managers tend to stickhandle around the issue of abuse. Maybe conflict and tension is mentioned. But the reality, he says, is that abuse occurs and is increasing – harassment of others, playing mind games, cheating colleagues out of commissions or credit for their deeds, and bullying. "Bad behaviour and harassing and bullying aren't new. I don't like it, but it may be inevitable with human beings. What I can't accept is that it's tolerated," he says.

Solutions start, he believes, by acknowledging we have a problem of workplace stress. Companies need to understand the costs – to the organization, and the individual – and then must address the mismatch between the work that needs to be done and the number of people to do it.

If you're overloading your employees, prioritize. Cut out some of the unnecessary tasks. "If you're taking on new clients and people are already overloaded, that's not a smart thing to do. It's not realistic," he warns.

Review the number of people you have. Downsizing has been taken too far, and it is time to readjust. In league with this review, reconsider the number of hours your employees are working. At some point, too much is too much – and productivity suffers.

He says there's evidence that anything above 40 hours may be excessive, and the extra hours are highly unproductive. Certainly after 50 hours, that would seem true. He routinely advises his clients to work fewer hours, and in 25 years says he has not had one individual who hasn't cut back hours and seen productivity increase to the point where they can keep up with their workload and use the time saved to care for themselves.

Review the pace of work as well. Could your organization set deadlines differently? Can you change the culture so there is less compulsion to respond immediately? Can you reduce the reliance on technology to bring down the velocity of the work pace?

As for abuse, he suggests executives must identify the problem individuals and deal with them – not the individual who everybody finds different, but the bad actors who cause everyone grief. Tell them it's no longer acceptable. Put them on notice that their behaviour won't be allowed any more. At the same time, remember that a lot of people behaving badly are themselves stressed and traumatized. Give them the help they need.

With such powerful forces creating the stress, can we truly change? "Yes. I'm an eternal optimist. When there is a will, there is a way. The solutions can be small and incremental. We don't have to right the ship in a month. It can be gradual," he concludes.

Harvey Schachter is a Batterssea, Ont.-based writer specializing in management issues. He writes Monday Morning Manager and management book reviews for the print edition of Report on Business and an online work-life column Balance. E-mail Harvey.Schachter