

## Plantline Editorial

Submitted by Keith Ayers

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# Is Unnecessary Stress Costing You Productivity?

Stress is not bad for people... without stress people would not get out of bed in the morning. Stress provides the motivation to do things, and can be both positive and negative. Dr Hans Selye, a Canadian pioneer into the effects of stress created the word *eustress* to describe the positive stress you experience when you are excited about something.

If you have ever played competitive sport, you would know that just prior to a competition your body exhibits signs of stress. Your heart rate increases, your stomach starts to churn, your palms get sweaty and the hair on your neck stands up... the same symptoms that you would experience if you were in danger. The difference is in *your attitude* towards each situation... your attitude determines whether you experience it as *eustress* or *distress*.

For example, some people are excited at the opportunity to take on more responsibility... others are terrified. It is all in the attitude.

You have to create some stress in the workplace to keep employees challenged, and motivated to perform at their best... but you do that by creating *eustress*, which increases energy, performance and creativity. Threats, intimidation and fear-motivation only create *distress*, which consumes energy, kills creativity and reduces productivity.

One of the primary causes of stress in the workplace is change, and you don't need me to tell you that change will continue at an accelerating rate.

So since you can't avoid inflicting change on your organisation, you can't avoid inflicting stress on your employees. And, if you are increasing change-induced stress without increasing their ability to cope with it, you are heading down the track of reducing productivity and wiping out any efficiency gains you hoped to make from the change in the first place.

So although we may not be able to do a lot about the continuous changes we have to implement, we can help our employees' attitude towards the change by the way in which we implement it.

Dr David Olsen, a leading expert on stress, has identified six areas that contribute most to workplace stress:

- **Job Characteristics:** Do employees see the work as too demanding, to the extent that it is creating tension? Are people's talents being utilised? Is anything being done to make work interesting and enjoyable?
- **Compensation and Benefits:** Are people being paid fairly? Fairness is a matter of perception, so being on the award does not guarantee happiness. Are employees rewarded for increasing productivity? People always want more money, but they very rarely leave a place where they are happy and feel valued.

- **Scheduling:** Who determines the work schedules in your organisation? Do employees have any say over what hours they work, or how work is scheduled? Feeling that you have no control over your situation is far more stressful than if you feel like you have some input.
- **Work Relationships:** Is there tension or even outright conflict between coworkers and how is it handled? Is communication between coworkers encouraged to the extent that time is provided for it? Conflict resolution skills and time to communicate can not only reduce stress, it creates an environment for discussing ideas for continuous improvement.
- **Supervisors or Managers:** Do your managers and supervisors have the skills to implement change in a way that gets support from employees, or is it a constant battle to get changes accepted? Do they listen to ideas put forward by their employees on how things could be improved? Managers or team leaders who are seen as rigid in their thinking, are difficult to communicate with and who do not support their employees are creating unnecessary stress.
- **Being Productive:** Believe it or not... most employees want to be productive. They want to feel like they are contributing to the team or organisation's success. That can change of course if they feel resentment towards their manager or the organisation as a whole, but they did not start out that way. Most people are delighted when they get a new job. There is a high level of commitment and a high level of receptivity to change. Taking on a new job is quite stressful and yet that new employee copes with that stress well... because of their positive attitude.

The difference between the attitude of the new employee and the present attitude of each of your employees is to a large extent determined by whether their expectations have been met. Have they been able to make a difference? Do they feel valued by management and their coworkers? Have there been opportunities to advance, if not through promotion, through the development of new skills and knowledge?

These things are in the hands of management to control.

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