



Workplace stress and an organisation's role in mitigating it.

Spend a reasonable amount of time in the lunchroom of many workplaces and chances are that you will hear staff talking about feeling 'stressed out'. This is manageable.

By Jonathan Clegg

WE'RE PUTTING IN longer hours than ever before in today's fast-paced workplaces, and stress is taking its toll – on our people and our efficiency. And the impact is huge. Lost productivity, claims paid, impact on customer experience: all are costing organisations significant amounts of money. Yet, many factors lie within the control of an organisation. This article explores the relationship between workplace stress, the role that cognitive fatigue has on this, and how you may work to mitigate it – providing a healthier, more relaxed and thereby more productive workplace for your people.

What causes workplace stress?

While there is a range of factors (eg, smoking, lack of exercise), in this article we look at those that are directly within the control of frontline management. Here, the issue is that many workers feel they have very little control over their work lives. Workplace stress, like other forms of stress, occurs when people feel they are not able to meet the demands placed on them. A report into workplace stress published by private health insurer Medibank Private¹ found people are more likely to experience high levels

of stress at work when they are placed under pressure, in terms of workload and responsibility, **but** feel they are unable to meet their deadlines or control their output.

In a more recent working paper from Harvard and Stanford Business Schools², amongst the issues cited, they include low control over job decisions combined with high performance demands, erratic or overlong work schedules and inequitable decision making. The cost in the US is estimated at \$145billion annually (although this rolls up all factors).

At the end of the day, much of this boils down to how well frontline managers support and guide their people.

What does it look like?

Some obvious signs of workplace stress are emotional or physical – short tempers, weight gain, disengagement from team activities. Rises in absenteeism may also be signs of this. But other signs are not as obvious.

Forgetting things is an early warning – too much is going on and someone may forget what has been requested or how to do simple things. Related to this is

an inability to concentrate – someone keeps getting distracted with seemingly insignificant things. An increase in errors, particularly with simple things, is often a symptom or even poor decision making – someone does something that just doesn't make any sense.

Ultimately, a lot of these symptoms or reactions are primal, related to our 'fight or flight' coding. We become antagonistic or hide in avoidance. This is where someone is feeling unsafe, insecure or just simply overwhelmed.

How can frontline leaders reduce workplace stress?

Ultimately, management 'owns' any work problems such as high volumes of overdue work, system delays or issues, poor quality of inputs, or low skill levels. To 'hand' the problem to employees will drive stress up. So, frontline leaders have to be able to manage their area effectively to reduce stress. This involves:

- > Ensuring that people are clear on their accountabilities. What is their role and what is not.
- > Having clear standards of performance that everyone understands – *what*

does good look like? Using these standards to plan workload supports equitability in a team.

- > Only ask people to do what is a 'fair day's work'. Overloading them will not achieve your aims.
- > Setting clear expectations up front with the team – and engaging in a conversation with them about how to achieve this – drives engagement with the work and ownership of outcomes up. It also helps to understand what pressures others are under.
- > Follow up to provide support – be on the spot when they need help or guidance. Make it part of 'how we do things around here', so that people aren't unnecessarily isolated or feel that they cannot ask for help. But this needs a structure; it has to be a work-focussed conversation where both sides understand what they talk about and how they talk about it.
- > Manage your processes in a consistent and calm manner: firefighting in emergencies can be exhilarating for some, but mentally draining for most.
- > Being on top of what work needs to be done and how well a team is progressing in its completion allows managers to determine early – when it is easy to fix – if problems start to emerge.

Specific tips that may help your people cope:

1. *Do the most important things first*

Complete your most important work first thing in the morning, before your brain has been depleted by hundreds of small decisions. Think about the most creative and interesting task on your plate right now, or the one with the biggest long-term upside, and spend one to two hours first thing in the morning on it. First thing—that is, before checking your email or looking at any media, such as TV, newspapers, smartphones, or computers.

2. *Categorise your tasks*

Consider the tasks on your to-do list for the day, and label each of them as 'Important Decisions', 'Creative', or 'Other'. Carve out time late in the day (perhaps after your lunch, during your food coma?) to complete the tasks in the 'Other' category. Knowing you've scheduled time for these makes it less



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Mental or Cognitive Fatigue

Mental fatigue is that feeling you may experience when you've been working on a thinking (cognitive) task for an extended period of time. Distinct from physical tiredness, mental fatigue leaves you unable to focus on anything, sleepy and unmotivated, and with little ability to complete the task at hand. It's a common experience in modern working life and is exacerbated by longer hours, shift work, and the emergence of digital technology, where we may be pummelled with frequent updates and multiple sources.

According to Safe Work Australia³, your performance deteriorates significantly when fatigue sets in, as does your ability to assess risk. You'll show impaired decision-making and judgment, become easily distractible, and your attitude and mood deteriorate (making you not only less

efficient, but less than popular in the workplace!).

Your health suffers too. The longer-term health effects of fatigue can include heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal disorders, lower fertility, anxiety and depression.

What causes mental fatigue?

Common sense would dictate that mental fatigue is the direct result of concentrating for extended periods of time. But this isn't always the case. You can become mentally weary in minutes if you're doing something particularly monotonous or repetitive. Conversely, if you're working on a venture you find exceptionally rewarding or exciting (driven perhaps by money, status or passion) you may rarely tire.

Knowing the work and how it impacts your people is critical.

likely that you will try tackling them earlier in the day, when your mental reserves are highest.

3. *Be more intentional about email*

Try reading and responding to your email messages for only one hour in the afternoon and reflect on whether doing so improved your ability to focus more clearly on tasks that require problem solving or creativity during the rest of the day. Sometimes the view that each task has to be done immediately drives inefficiency and stress.

4. *Plan ahead*

Make a few decisions the night before you have a big day, so you won't have to make them on the big day. They can be small (like what to wear or have for breakfast and lunch) or they can be large (like deciding what tasks actually matter to you to accomplish on the big day). Organise your to-do list based on those large decisions.

Role Clarity

Recent research by Gallup has shown that “clarity of expectations is a foundation for building an engaged workplace that performs at high levels.” McKinsey research has shown that “improving role clarity improves accountability” which has a direct impact on what McKinsey calls “organizational health”⁴. The importance of this measure is that it correlates with the ability to deliver “superior financial and operating performance”⁵.



Priorities for Matrixed Managers

Given the importance of role clarity and accountability to organizational health and, ultimately, performance, addressing the role ambiguity that pervades matrixed companies is a critical priority for their leaders, who should help employees by continually setting clear expectations aligned with the direction of the business. This clarity should cascade into frequent conversations between managers and their direct reports about the specific role each person plays in advancing the company’s objectives. Consultative (as opposed to authoritarian) leadership practices can contribute meaningfully to accountability, according to McKinsey’s OHI research.

It is also imperative to maintain day-to-day lines of communication to root out and dispel ambiguity and ensure that everyone is consistently

on the same page. This is true at the organizational as well as the team level: Gallup research shows that managers should not save critical conversations for once-a-year performance reviews—engagement flourishes when employees receive regular, actionable feedback on their progress.

Last, the matrix structure is notorious for frequently obscuring lines of accountability, so leaders and managers should ensure that all employees understand whom they answer to and the duties for which they are responsible. The importance of regular discussions to reclarify expectations as work demands change is compounded in matrix organizations. And highly engaged employees thrive in a system where everyone is accountable for his or her work.⁶



Sources

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