

JOB STRESS AND WORK PERFORMANCE

The Stress of Relocation - Recognition and Prevention

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My discussion will deal with the stress of company-initiated relocation. Within these confines we must agree to some basic assumptions regarding stress, i.e., emotional stress. Stress is a threat, a pressure, or a force acting on the individual. It can come from outside or within the organism. We all live with stress, and we all perceive it differently and adapt to it in different ways.

We live in a stress-producing society. Entertainment is frequently violent; our transportation is violent and stressful; our instant news accents violence, particularly on television. The carnage of the highway and battlefield is projected into our living rooms and bedrooms in color and grisly detail. So who can deny the reality of these sources of stress?

Society needs stresses to keep its institutions operational. Without the stresses of needs, desires, and ambitions, we would not enjoy the social progress, the educational challenges, and the standard of living that we have attained. A simple rule for interpreting stress is that stress is a positive or constructive force if you are handling "it," rather than "it" handling you. When stress is excessive or the individual is unable to adapt, it may cause anxiety and fear. It may cause symptoms and physical disease.

Stress is also present in our places of work. Employees arrive at work fatigued by their over-programmed social lives and the demands of late-night TV. They are over-stimulated by expectations from the "Play..." magazines for super-sexual performance, leading to stress and fatigue. They are stressed by the rigors of travel to and from work and are further stressed by the work environment itself. It is an additive situation.

When assessing stress in a business setting, it is necessary to understand and accept the need in some employees to succeed. This self-induced stress may be excessive; and although it may be a valuable asset to the corporation that views such employees as "stars" or high achievers, this self-stressed employee may be very destructive at home or in his or her role as spouse and parent.

One of the occupational stresses that the Northwestern Bell Telephone Company has been studying is the stress associated with company initiated moving. Moving families from one city to another, or even within the same city, can be an excessively stressful experience for all members of the family. Relocations in our company and in other large corporations usually are tied directly to a promotion or are aimed at providing a different management experience that can later lead to a promotion. Because of this implied coercion, many ambitious and aggressive managers are reluctant to consider any alternatives to the move. So driving are their ambitions that they are frequently reluctant to discuss the move with the spouse and children. They fail to involve the members of the family in the decision. They fail to consider the options or alternatives.

Over the last four years we have researched what is being done around the country to help families with problems of relocation. Most large corporations go to great trouble and expense to provide assistance in the selling of the home and compensation for all moving expenses. Some even finance exploratory trips for the employee and spouse to aid in the selection of the new home at the new location. These mechanics of moving are all well covered. However, our research has found few examples that aid in the emotional sphere--where most of the problems focus. There is one large moving corporation that has sponsored symposia on the effects of relocation on members of the family (1,2,3). Some corporations that have extensive international relocations, have programs to help the families adjust to the marked shock of cultural change. But it is safe to conclude that the large share of corporations do little or nothing to prepare all family members for the emotional assault and stressful consequences of the move.

From the corporate point of view, the usual but illogical attitude is that the employee's family will enthusiastically cooperate and

support the move because it means an enhanced career and greater rewards for the breadwinner. If the personnel department (which is usually in charge of the relocation details) and the employee's immediate boss use good management practices, they will share with the employee their plans for his or her future and will explain how the new job assignment will, by providing needed experience, aid in his managerial development. This is sometimes known as "career pathing." If the employee shares this "career pathing" with his spouse and family, then the surprise element is eliminated, and understanding and acceptance are made somewhat easier. If family members accept and adjust to the move, the stress is controlled. To be effective, the philosophy of "career pathing" and the commitment to its effective use must begin at the top of the organization and extend throughout the middle levels of management.

In Northwestern Bell Telephone Company-- which covers both Dakotas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota--corporate-induced moves are necessary. Management development through a wide variety of experiences is achieved by transferring high potential employees to locations in the Bell system. During the early 1970's, Northwestern Bell moved approximately 650 employees and their families each year. In 1976, we moved 485 families. On the other hand, it is almost impossible to record how many employees turned down the opportunity to relocate. Many times the supervisor is informally aware that the employee will not move and the offer is, therefore, never tendered. We must accept the fact that we are going to continue to initiate employee family moves; thus, we must help these employees and their families deal with the associated emotional stress.

For a corporate family going into an established neighborhood, the chances are good that the neighbors will reach out and try to make the new family feel part of the neighborhood. If there are children of school age, the parents can bridge social barriers through the children and get to know people at various levels in the community. However, if this "new" family moves again in another two or three years, the pain of leaving is also borne by the neighbors who are left behind. After several experiences such as this, the fixed neighbors will be less warm and open to other corporate families who move in. The neighbors may sense that this "tour of duty" will be as short as it was for the previous family. Thus, a mechanism of adaptation, in this instance the making of new friends, is lost.

In Battle Creek, Michigan, at the Lakeview High School, there is a two-year program, "The Host Program" (4), which was started by a teacher in the department of sociology. Volunteer students are trained to be school and community hosts to new students coming into the community and the high school. These hosts acquaint new students with dress styles and other peer behavior patterns--where the kids "hang out," what they usually wear and how they talk. This helps the new student understand and adapt to peer group functions. With conformity as important as it is at the adolescent level, this program is solving some of the stresses of moving in Battle Creek, Michigan. As one of the new students said, "My host was somebody I could call when I didn't know anyone to call."

Older children who have a sport or talent in which they excel can bridge without difficulty the move from one city to another or one school to another. Athletic credentials, experience as a cheer leader, or participation in some other student activity that can be carried over to the new institution provide an excellent opportunity for meeting new people. Unfortunately, scholarship and intellectual interests in the sciences or classics do not provide an effective bridge for social interaction and new school friends.

Many employees have said that the move must come as soon as possible once the announcement about the transfer has been made. For the employee may be left in a disrupted organizational unit that is waiting for his replacement. The announcement has been heralded and he is anxious to meet his new challenge. The family, meanwhile, watches their community foundations crumble and is perturbed with the idea of losing close friends. There is usually no stimulating challenge for them in the new community. There are no tangible rewards--they begin again at the space marked "Go."

As families get older, the children leave home; the parents do not have the entree into a neighborhood that children living at home provide. Some gynecologists have referred to the depression at this stage of life as the "empty nest" syndrome. The mother who has built her life around the children has also reached middle age with its menopausal upheaval. If another corporate relocation is added to this stressful state, it will not be unusual for clinical symptoms and negative behavior patterns, including drug dependence, hostility, and divorce to appear.

Figure 1 diagrams the forces at work in a typical family relocation. Above the balance beam are the positive and negative factors which influence the decision. One may assume that a positive decision will lead to a satisfactory move; whereas, a decision based on negative factors will lead to an unsatisfactory move either for the employee, the family, or the corporation. The fulcrum represents the "decision threshold," and factors are shown which influence its position under the beam. Obviously, the family who is willing to take the risk and desires a change in environment will push the threshold in a positive direction. A family with negative attitudes will force the decision threshold in a negative direction. Negative counsel by the boss or friends might also move the threshold in a negative direction. The family with positive strengths and relationships will likewise influence the decision threshold in a positive direction.

PERSONAL COUNSELING SERVICE

Northwestern Bell has developed several programs to help our employees deal with their emotional stresses and anxieties. There is an active personal counseling service in the Iowa and Nebraska facilities. Each year five to six percent of our employee families voluntarily contact the Personal Counselor for help (5); some of them have stress from the relocation per se, while others have family problems that can prevent a successful adjustment to a company-induced move.

FAMILY SYNERGY

About 2½ years ago, we started a series of workshops using faculty members of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (6). These workshops were begun on an exploratory basis to determine the nature and extent of the stress of relocation, and if this experience could help families. Some of the workshops included husband and wife, while others included both parents and children above age 10. After involving sixty families, it was decided to modify the format to include more than the stress of relocation. The workshops are now called "Family Synergy."

The Family Synergy Workshops help participants understand techniques that they can use to solve problems and relieve stress. When the group has become comfortable and has acquired group integrity,

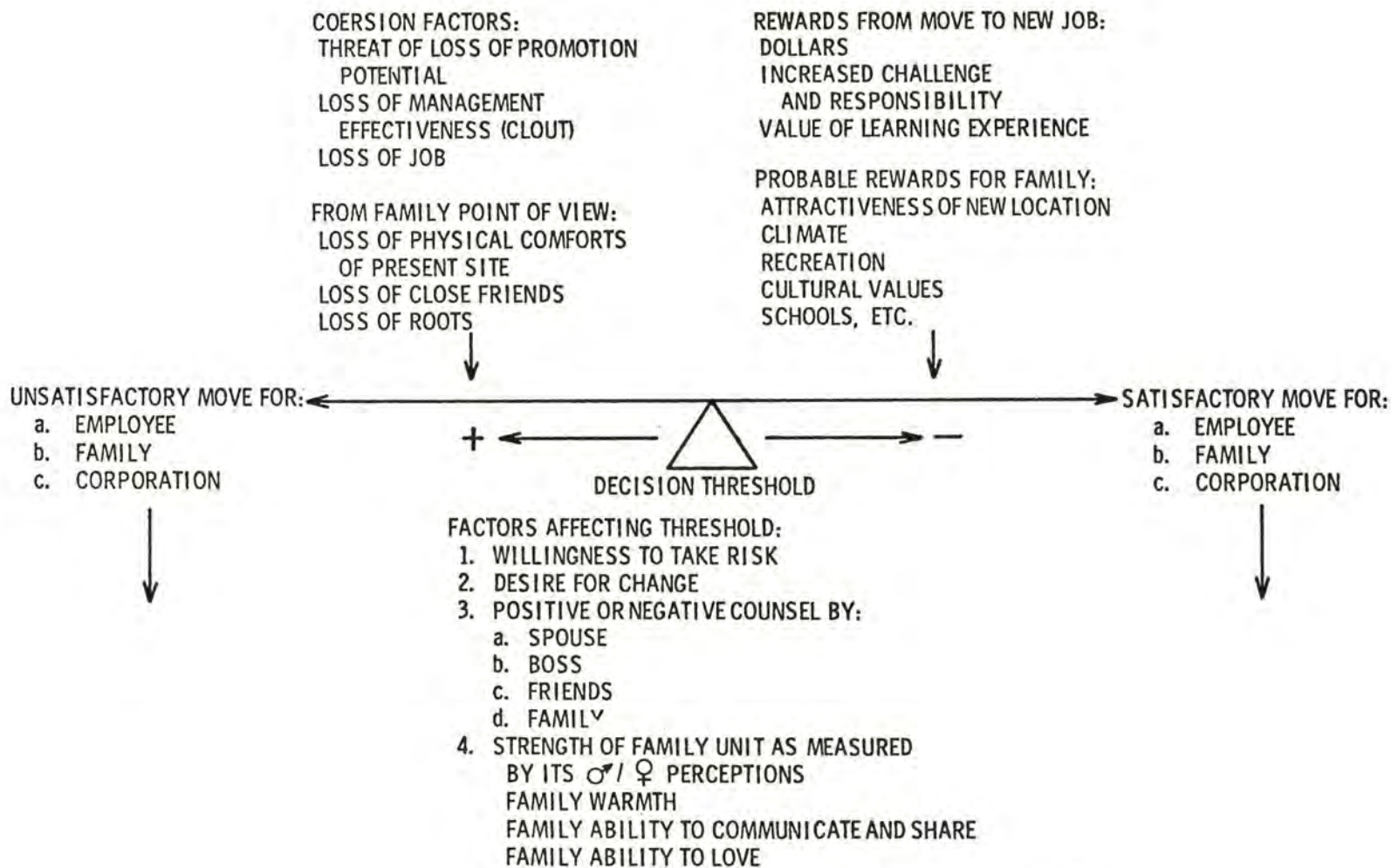


Figure 1. Shows forces affecting the decision making in a corporate relocation. The balance beam moving in a counter clock-wise rotation would be evidence of an unsatisfactory move; moving in a clockwise rotation would be a satisfactory move.

its members learn by sharing experiences of how others solve problems.

One measurement that has come out of this experience is the "stress scale" using the Osgood technique(7) for semantic differential. Participants are asked to rate a series of sixteen keywords and phrases from one to seven. In almost every instance, words and phrases associated with relocation are given a high rating.

One of the challenges associated with the Family Synergy Workshops has been to keep these educational experiences from being threatening to the lower and middle level management families. Since the workshops are held during off-work hours on a voluntary basis, how do we keep them from being viewed as an imposition? How do you prevent supervisors from forcing families to attend? We have overcome these hurdles by having the invitations originate with the Medical Department, thus assuring the employee that the experience is voluntary.

MALE/FEMALE AWARENESS WORKSHOP

Northwestern Bell's two other programs, though not aimed directly at improving and supporting families of multiple inter-city moves, will strengthen family relationships and help families adjust to relocation.

One is titled the Male/Female Awareness Workshop. This is a very effective voluntary program that examines the various forms that sexism takes in a large corporation or community (8). It is a 3½ day experience for 24 males and 24 females, and does not include spouses or other family members. Its goal is to help our employees understand the nature of institutional sexism. Participants also learn a great deal about their personal feelings and attitudes toward the opposite sex. For the first time in their lives, some participants understand what their sexist attitudes are. For many, this is quite a revelation! A husband who does not understand the socialization process his wife must stumble through in trying to understand her own needs for achievement and personal growth often will not be able to help her in a new community setting. A husband who understands our community institutions may see a move as a way for his wife to break away from a certain life-style which she may

not want, deserve, or need. Relocation would thus be a positive move with less personal stress for her and less for the rest of the family.

When both husband and wife are employed in stimulating careers, it is necessary that they understand the mutual respect and honesty which healthy male/female relationships require. If so, their moves will be far less destructive than the usual cases of this type--the man demands his wife place her role second to his and give up her career.

MANAGEMENT COUPLES PROGRAM

The Management Couples Program is a unique workshop in our experience because it involves upper-level managers and their spouses in a controlled setting for four days and nights (9). At present, only one in five wives of upper-level managers is employed. This ratio may ultimately change, but at present the husband is at work and the wife is at home in most of these families. Each workshop has 12 to 15 couples who attend on a voluntary basis. The program develops group integrity and couple solidarity; couples are then placed in a situation where they cannot ignore issues--they must examine and understand the assumptions upon which they base their marriage and careers. The spouse at this time is expected to develop a self-awareness by asking the questions, "What do I want of my life? How do I get there without manipulating others?" The spouse as wife and mother is supported with the philosophy "It's O.K. to be what is O.K. with you." The group learns that there is more than one male and female role model. They learn about the relationships between the employee and the spouse to the business. By questioning their basic assumptions, which may have changed over the years to where they are now false, the partners see each other in a new and more honest light. They are able to develop understanding, empathy, and more realistic common goals. There is an effective measure of feedback, both at the end of the workshop and after several months. The company has been asked repeatedly not to take spouses for granted.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Business organizations, large and small, impose excessive stresses, real or imagined, on their employees at all levels. The manager who is able to understand these stresses and their effect on the family unit, and who is willing to take action to relieve the stresses, will have a stronger and better adjusted work force than the manager who does not.

To understand the effect of business-related stress on employee families requires management, at all levels, to thoroughly understand the fundamental techniques of communication. Good communication can make the difference between authority that is stress-producing and authority that generates respect and allegiance. For these reasons, communication courses should be required for all levels of management.

2. For alleviating stress at the workplace, particularly the stress of a company-initiated relocation, there should be a clear understanding between the boss, employee, and spouse early in the career of a high potential employee, that a series of moves may be offered by the company. The spouse must understand the reasons for the moves, the rewards associated with the moves, and the timing.

Work and family conditions change. The basic marriage assumptions are also modified and changed by children, financial problems, and the health of the family members. People remember selectively. Frequently, they forget, unless there is reinforcement, some of the unpleasant information they have been told. It is in this framework that "career pathing" is of value. "Career pathing" requires that the personnel department and the employee's supervisor analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the individual under consideration; and then, employee and supervisor together plan the route by which goals will be attained. "Career pathing" falls down when middle management fails to make careful application of this modality. Such a program requires time and study on the

part of the supervisor, guidance from the personnel department and repeated discussions with the employee. Top management must reflect their commitment to the career plan philosophy and its execution.

3. The future will have increasing numbers of husband/wife teams in the labor market. Middle and upper management executive wives may not be willing to assume the role of the passive homemaker. The corporate entity cannot be responsible for resolving marital disputes about whose career is the more important. But the company can provide educational experiences that enable corporate families to listen and understand each other and resolve their differences. By way of encouragement, the company should recognize and reward both husband and wife at the time of the company transfer.
4. A single-purpose family is one with a single career goal and pathway. But it is becoming increasingly recognized that women make excellent professionals and managers, and are high achievers with high energy levels; therefore, in the future there will be fewer single-purpose families in management. Corporate officers and managers at all levels must recognize this and plan in advance.

It is suggested that:

- a. The corporation develop new and receptive attitudes toward nepotism. With both husband and wife working for the same company, a corporate move should be easier to facilitate. The husband and wife could be employed and managed as separate individuals, but moved as part of a family unit.
- b. For those dual-purpose families (where both husband and wife have individual career roles and do not work for the same corporation), there could be a series of inter-industry agreements that would effect relocation of both career people to the same geographic area.

- c. Where a satisfactory transfer arrangement cannot be worked out for the spouse, a system of incentive rewards could be provided. These incentives could be in a form of a direct financial payment, underwriting of educational opportunities in the new city, or even an employment service to enable re-employment of the spouse.
- d. Corporations should recognize the need for and give support to an employee organization that has a "welcome aboard" service. Volunteer groups would be trained to act as hosts to the new families. A teenage organization, coordinated with the high schools and junior high schools, would recruit peers to assist the relocated students.
- e. A new corporate attitude and policy should be instituted to enhance management development without a transfer of the family. For example,
 - 1. brief tours of duty at distant sites,
 - 2. management development within the same work location to the greatest extent possible,
 - 3. remove all stigma from any refusal to transfer and move only those families who genuinely desire to do so.

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