BASIC CONCEPTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS--CAUSES AND PROBLEMS

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We all know we are living in a time of turmoil, and living in organizations is a very confusing business. But I think one of the best ways of identifying the source of that confusion is to think about what happens in Chinese baseball. I don't know if any of you have played Chinese baseball, but it is played just like American baseball with one change in the rules: after the ball leaves the pitcher's hand, and until it hits the ground, you can move the bases. Now that one small change makes a big difference! Because if you are the batter, you not only have to keep your eye on the ball, but you have to watch what is happening at the bases. That seems to be a fairly accurate picture of what living in a world like ours, and particularly being a manager in a world like ours, is like these days. The bases are always being moved, creating a certain amount of tension and stress.

On the other side is our critical reaction to people's stress. Harry Truman's famous statement, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!" is probably one of the most potent statements about stress. The only problem is that there are some people who have to work in the kitchen, whether they like the heat or not. They must begin to think about how they can cope or fix things so that the kitchen isn't so hot. And I think that those who are concerned with occupational stress need to look at both sides of the coin--how we cope with stress and how we change the conditions so that stress may be reduced.

Following this paper is an excellent article by Cary Cooper and Judi Marshall, "Occupational sources of stress: a review of the literature relating to coronary heart disease and mental ill health." The authors have summarized all the key literature, and have put it together in an elegant model. What I would like to do is share with you some basic concepts that have occurred to me about stress. I shall try to indicate what the world of the manager looks like in dealing with stress, reporting on a very recent study that just came out on managers in the public sector.

Finally, I shall tell you about how some people prepare themselves to enter a very stressful situation. Recently I spent time with the National Football League officiating team at the '49'ers game--the six men who wear those black-and white stripes at the ball game and go into that very stressful decision-making arena. I learned some very interesting things about how they prepare themselves for that situation.

Let us now look at the positive and negative possibilities of stress. It is important to recognize that stress in itself is not necessarily undesirable.

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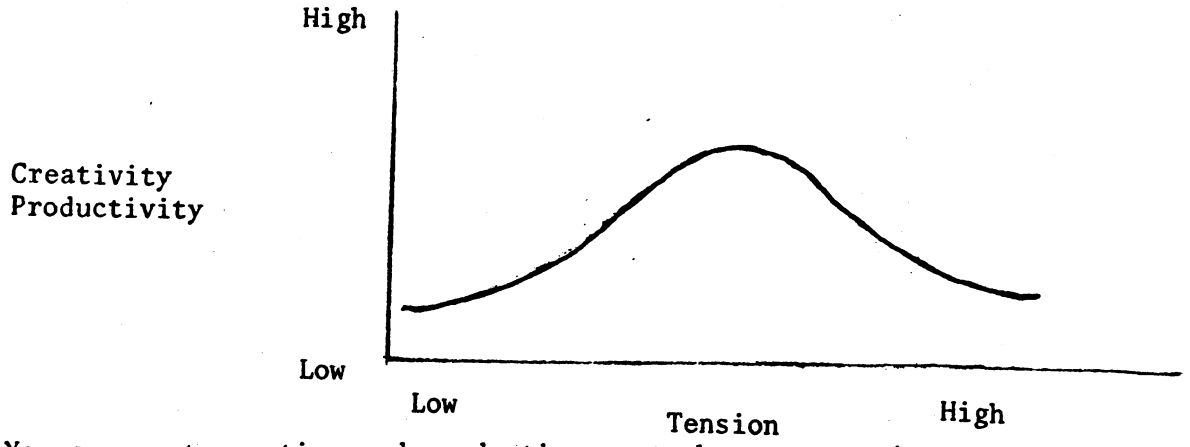
If we measure the degree of tension and plot it against creativity and productivity, we come up with the following sort of curve:



You are most creative and productive, not when you are in a completely relaxed condition, nor when you are in a highly tense position, but when you are somewhere in between. On the low stress side you get more apathy and there isn't the energy available to push for new solutions and new approaches to problems. On the other hand, if stress becomes too great, what tends to happen is that we begin to limit our vision psychologically, we're able to see fewer alternatives, and we tend to be more defensive and more rigid in our approach to things. So what we want to do is *manage* our level of tension so that it stays within an area where it is useful. Some very important things happen when people are under tension or stress. Physiologically, athletes break records during games when the stress is great. But when excess stress brings us to the down side of the performance curve, we have to rexamine what is happening.

I'm going to look at stress just from a psychological point of view. (The physiological side will be dealt with by others in the seminar.) It seems to me that we are moving toward the down side of the curve when our feelings of security and adequacy are threatened. To me, *security* and *adequacy* are two key words in all of our behavior. Most of us behave most appropriately and most effectively when we have relatively high feelings of security and adequacy.

The feeling of security depends on our reaction to our environment--its predictability and friendliness. How sure are we of what's going to happen? We feel more secure if we can predict more accurately, if we can anticipate what's going to happen.

The other aspect of security is the degree of acceptance and understanding that we experience in our environment. When we are with people who make us feel secure (we know that we can trust them, they care about us, they will not hurt us or try to embarrass us) we can use our full energy to focus on a problem. When we are insecure--when we are worried about people's reactions to us--then we have to use some energy to protect ourselves and we experience stress.

The other feeling that is important is the feeling of adequacy--the feeling that I can make a difference, that I can *influence* my environment, that I can do what is expected of me and handle things effectively. I am in control.

Stress (the *negative* kind of stress) occurs when we feel threats that lead to feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. That is when energy begins to be used nonproductively.

Let me describe briefly how this works in the world of the manager. The most important part of your environment, of course, is people, and it is from them you get your major feelings of security and some cues as to your adequacy.

Now let's look at some of the people in the world you live in who make a difference in how you feel about yourself. If I am a manager working in an organization I probably have at least one boss. He's an important person in my environment. How he feels about me is important. I also have some other people who make up my environment. There are subordinates--I am responsible for them. There are my peers and colleagues who expect certain things from me. I may have a wife or husband who is important to me. I have friends, neighbors, customers, clients, and so forth. (Every once in a while it is useful to plot the world you live in, i.e., the people who make a difference in how you feel about yourself.)

Now, every one of these people who deals with me develops an image of the kind of person I am. You talk to my subordinate, Mary, and ask her what kind of a boss she has, and she can tell you. Ask my colleagues about me, and they can tell you about me from their experience. And of course I carry within myself my own self-concept. My image of myself, the way I think about myself, how I define myself, is probably the most important ingredient of my whole personality in considering stress.

Each of these people I have mentioned develops his or her own image of me--the person they *think* is there--and they react to that person. As you know, one of the interesting things about human beings is that our perceptions are always partial. Some of our misbehavior toward one another occurs because we don't really know with whom we are dealing. Mary is relating to the boss she *thinks* is there, not to the boss as I see myself. Some of the tension in my environment comes from that kind of misunderstanding. Programs have been developed to help us sense better how other people see us. Knowing how others see us tends to reduce some kinds of stress in our lives, and increase other kinds of stress.

But the major kind of stress comes, not from the fact that we misperceive one another, but from the fact that all of the people in our environment have a notion of not only who we are, but also of *how we ought to be*. My wife could tell you how I could be improved or what a good spouse is. My boss has an idea of how a person in my position really ought to behave. All of the other people who live in my world have not only their image of me, but their expectations of how I ought to be--"I wish he would make decisions," "I wish he would delegate more," etc.

Part of the problem occurs because these ideal images of me are very often incongruent. How my boss would like me to be is very different from how my wife wants me to be. My boss wants somebody in my position to be fully committed and dedicated to the organization and not to let personal feelings get in the way of the job. My wife doesn't see it exactly that way. And all of these people try to influence me. In one way or another, by subtle and overt means, they try to move me to behave more in line with what they think I ought to be. Meanwhile, inside of me there is also the quest to become a different person, a growing person.

So there are pressures. We all get caught in this swirl of influence. We are surrounded by people who only partially understand us, who develop their notions

of how we ought to change, and sometimes try to move us in conflicting directions. One of the most common sources of occupational stress on the job is conflict within the role itself. Different people who deal with us expect us to behave in conflicting ways.

How do managers perceive all of this? In a recent study by Robert Pearse some 5,000 managers in the private sector identified some of the major causes of stress as they perceived them.* These have been divided into individually-oriented factors, interpersonally-oriented factors, and organizational factors.

As far as individually-oriented factors are concerned, the most common source of stress that managers report is the *fear of failing* on some specific assignment--the worry that "I won't be able to do what they expect me to do," "I'll be late," "The solution won't be as elegant as it ought to be," and so on. And I suspect that every one of us has experienced that kind of stress.

The second most important individually-oriented source was the *physical* and *emotional impact* of long hours, travel and deadlines, the things that, in effect, tear away at one's freedom and push one physically.

When you look at the interpersonally-oriented factors, you find that *inadequate support by superiors* is an important factor. If I don't feel that my boss--a key person in my life--supports me, understands me and appreciates me, I am more susceptible to a stressful experience. *Ineffective performance by my superiors* turns out to be another important factor in stress. If I don't think I have a competent boss, it is going to create problems for me. And if these two factors --incompetence and inadequate support--occur in the same person, then I've really got trouble. The chances are that he probably will pass on the blame for his ineffectiveness to me.

Inadequate performance from subordinates is the third key factor that managers report as contributing to their feelings of stress on the job.

Then there are a couple of organizationally-oriented factors that seem to be important. One is described as the *political climate* of the organization. There are organizations where there is a dog-eat-dog environment--one division is out to get another, the personal problems of one person begin to impact upon a whole set of relationships and there is a spillage of family problems into the organization.

Not knowing what is expected of me on the job emerges as one of the key factors. These factors of ambiguity and uncertainty are found in the literature, too. Not knowing what is really expected of me, if I am doing a good job, or even if I am doing the right job, along with uncertainty about what I am going to be held accountable for are the kinds of feelings that confront us, particularly when we move into a new job situation.

Not receiving the credit and recognition that is due me, along with inadequate information about career advancement requirements, tends to increase stress. "What do I need to do in order to move forward in this organization?" is an important question. And as you know, studies show that there is a high percentage of persons working at all levels of the organization who do not really know

* Robert Pearse, *What Managers Think About Their Managerial Careers* (New York: ANACOM, 1977)

how to move ahead because they have not been given that kind of information.

These, then tend to be the factors of stress that managers report in the recent study by Pearse. This study of 5,000 managers is just being released by the American Management Association. I find the key factors of security and adequacy threaded throughout the reported results of this study.

Let's now look at some of the causes of stress in public officials. A year ago I met with the League of California Cities, which includes both elected and non-elected officials from the cities of California. I asked the officials to define the things that cause them the greatest stress on the job. Out of some 500 responses, this is the picture that emerged. In order of frequency, the items reported were:

Time pressures. Having to get things done quickly and having to get numbers of things done almost simultaneously.

Competing demands. Having a conflict or being challenged in public. One of the costs of being in the public sector is being exposed. You are put on a spot and lots of people can see how you respond or how well you are doing.

Insufficient information to make a decision. More and more, I think, all of us are finding ourselves in situations where there is no clear answer, where we feel that what we do is partly based on guesswork.

No one best solution. Although someone has said that there is no problem so confused and complicated that there isn't available, if you look for it, an answer that is clear, simple, attractive, and wrong! But for conscientious people, there are always lingering doubts as we make decisions. There is no one best solution available. We are always dealing with tradeoffs. Stress comes from that recognition, that awareness.

Competing loyalties. We want to help different people, we can identify with different groups and different people. However, at the decision point we have to opt for one and not the others.

Irrational and emotionally charged issues. Public officials frequently deal with irrational emotionally charged issues, and that intensifies the original problem.

Inability to get a point across. This is the kind of frustration that creates stress. This is particularly so when someone feels that this is a very important point for him to get across and doesn't feel really understood.

Inadequate staff performance preparation. Most of us are dependent upon other people to supply us with the accurate and full information we need.

When others try to manipulate, pressure, or deceive.

I'd like to come back to the notion that stress has either a positive or negative effect, depending on how it is understood and handled. There is a lot of energy

available in a stressful situation. It can be used either constructively or destructively. Let me give you an example. Stress is related to expectation. If *more is expected of me than I feel I can deliver,* then some negative things can happen. I may feel anxious and become defensive and resent those who will not accept my limitations. *But* it is also possible that I might stretch myself and really exceed my own predictions.

If others expect less of me than I feel I can deliver, there would be some negative possibilities. I can lower my own aspirations. I may become resentful toward those who demean me. *Or* I may set out to demonstrate their error--their expectations were too low.

If expectations are not clear, I may feel helpless and confused and become irresponsible. I may feel inadequate and insecure. *Or* I may use the freedom to define my own goals and my own rules to become more proactive. *If expectations are in conflict,* I may side with one set of expectations and reject the other. I may seek help and get some perspective. I may be immobilized. *Or,* I may confront the conflict and get parties together to resolve the issue.

So, in situations of stress, it is useful to consider the possibility of using the available energy positively or negatively.

I shall conclude by relating to you an interesting experience I recently had. I met with Jim Tunney and his crew of National Football League officials who do not always make popular decisions and who experience a great deal of stress in making those decisions very quickly on the job. In fact, they have thousands of people who are ready to comment on their decisions right after they make them. I was curious about how they prepare themselves for this event. They do it in the following way. Saturday night before the game, they meet in a hotel room. They go over the film from the last game at which they officiated. They have a record of every play along with comments from their supervisor, Art McNally. They go back and forth over those plays.

During that process, I noticed that they do a lot of supporting of each other. "That was a great call!" "Good placement of the ball!" "You were in the right spot!" and so on. Then they can handle the misplays that the supervisor has noted. It is a rigorous self-training as professionals. On Sunday morning they meet and intensively go over some set of rules. They have a three-page test which they all have had to fill out the week before--true-false and situational problems. They systematically go through all the applicable rules. They reinforce themselves and they discuss the underlying principles and strategies that they are following.

As I listened to them I thought to myself, "What a wonderful way of clarifying their role and to whom they are really responsible." They were able to use one another on the job to gain a sense of companionship and support on that field. With that they are able to move into that arena and handle a very stressful situation.

In summary we are looking at a very important area. Stress will grow as our lives become more complex. What we are dealing with is the unleashing of energy which we really need to understand better, so we can keep it within bounds. We must understand when we move from stress to distress. The research that will be reported to us will help us to understand better, and handle better, the stressful situations in our lives.

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