

# Beyond the Horizons Consulting

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## The Stressed-Out Employee

Despite 1001 labor-saving devices most of us in the Western world are stressed out nowadays. We readily assent when someone describes how pressured for time they are, because we experience the mental stress of having too much to do in too short a time as well. But what exactly is stress?

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., describes stress as follows:

A mentally or emotionally disruptive or upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences and capable of affecting physical health, usually characterized by increased heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, muscular tension, irritability, and depression.



Whether these “adverse external influences” are real or are in the person’s perception, they do give rise to physiological responses such as those listed above. Psychologists generally call these external factors “stressors.” To come to any measure of inner peace, one has to separate oneself from the stressors in one’s life and recognize them for just that — external influences. In fact, **they are not part of your essential being.**

## Stressors in the Workplace

Let’s take a look at some of the stressors an employee may face in the workplace. Here is a partial list:

- 1 Conflict with a coworker
- 2 Rumors and rumor-mongers
- 3 Lack of clarity or direction from the boss
- 4 Inability to delegate to subordinates
- 5 Negativity (from within or from others at work)
- 6 Inability to prioritize
- 7 Rigid rules
- 8 Boss’ subjectivity
- 9 Not having a sounding board — no one to listen
- 10 Experiencing a lack of harmony and teamwork
- 11 Multitasking taken to the max
- 12 Unrealistic deadlines
- 13 Unrealistic expectations
- 14 Unrealistic budgets
- 15 Stifled creativity

We’re not saying that employees don’t have other stressors. Certainly there are stressors in the home environment and in the extended family and community. We shall address these at a later time, however. What we want to do in this issue is help you, as manager, sort out what may be your responsibility in helping your employee work through some of the stressors specifically at the workplace. In this way, you not only help create an environment that’s

conducive to good work, but one that motivates your employee to do his/her best for you.

## **Fuzzy Thinking**

First, let's look at the category of stressors I call "fuzzy thinking," Nos. 3, 4, and 6. Lack of clarity, whether it's in goals, in terms of who does what, or in terms of order of completion of tasks is simply fuzzy thinking. Since leadership begins at the top, you, as manager, need first to be clear about your company's and your department's mission statement. Once that is in place, you can begin to list and prioritize objectives.

For example, if your company's mission is "ABC Company will produce the best quality widget with the best technical customer support and will tailor customers' widgets to their unique applications," now you can begin to list the objectives for production and for customer service. Department heads need to buy into the company's mission statement and to develop objectives for their own groups. Writing down objectives and creating job descriptions with input from the employee helps dispel any lack of clarity on the leader's part. A leader who has done this and has determined what tasks belong to which employees is on the way to delegating. This person now needs to coach his/her employees in the process, requiring them to write down tasks, logical order of completion, and so on.

## **In-the-Box Thinking**

Next let's look at the category of stressor I call "In-the-Box-Thinking. These stressors are Nos. 7, 12, 14, and 15. We begin with rigid rules. Whether these rules pertain to how things have always been done in the past or whether they require that everyone think alike, leadership in this type of organization is going to exclude most innovative approaches to problem solving. Rigid rules may extend to the area of unrealistic deadlines, which often triggers the "hurry-up" mechanism in a worker. That kind of extreme pressure may do one of two things — it may precipitate a "fright reaction" in the employee, which may actually block his working on the project. Or it may precipitate a "fight reaction," in which she may become so angry that she may sabotage the project.

If a customer puts pressure on a supplier to complete an assignment at a significantly earlier deadline, the contract must be renegotiated. It might require that the supplier hire extra temporary employees and thus drive up the price significantly.

We have already touched on the fact that in-the-box thinking stifles creativity. What we have not said is how this stresses the employee who may have some very valuable insights to offer. *This kind of discouragement is worse than taking a pay cut for many people.* They are robbed of the reward of contributing something unique to the running of their department or organization and feel disrespected and undervalued for who they are. This has to be one of the chief reasons for high turnover in many organizations.

Unrealistic budgets (No. 15) also contribute, of course, to stifled creativity. Budgets that allow for continuing education expenses, on the other hand, encourage learning, offsite networking, and employee growth. Budgets that can be amended when a project is midstream, based on a new understanding of the full scope of the undertaking, reflect flexibility. Leadership is able to allot more to production costs and temporarily cut down on perks for senior members of the firm, for example.

In my mind, **multitasking and unrealistic expectations** go hand in hand. If we are too hard on ourselves, we may have a tendency to be too hard on others. Some personality types, particularly the Myers-Briggs ST types, are goal-driven, detailed, and prefer to stick to one task at a time. They are usually excellent workers and very loyal, but may find it difficult to multitask, preferring to proceed one step at a time. Managers who have a wider, more global outlook may need to scale down their scope of expectations for these types of workers. Instead they should use the STs for in-depth work where thoroughness and concentration are of utmost importance.

**Negativity (No. 5) and not having a sounding board (No. 9)** often have a reciprocal relationship. Managers need to circulate among their employees, taking time to talk briefly with each one on a rotating schedule. Surveys of worker satisfaction are also important tools to identify situations that have gone terribly wrong. These stressors have to do with a person's general attitude toward life. Certainly having a sounding board can help — when it results in a person's feeling that they have been heard. But a sounding board must be used in a helpful and ethical way. Rules of confidentiality must be put in place, whether it is a one-on-one conversation with the boss or whether it's a group discussion on how to improve morale in the workplace. The flip side of a sounding board is that unless everyone is clear about his/her responsibilities to make any changes that are agreed upon, the sound-

ing board becomes a hollow complaining session.

## Half-Truths

Nos. 2 and 8 are related in that **both rumors and a boss' subjectivity are slanted away from the objective "truth."** Now *truth* is a hard word to define, precisely because there are so many individual perceptions of a situation. I am reminded of the ten blind men who each tried to divine what an elephant was while making contact with the animal at ten different points — one saying, upon touching its tail, that it was a rope; another, upon touching its side, that it was a wall; another, upon touching its leg, a tree trunk, and so on. Yet rumors invariably begin with a minute, single observation, which then gets blown out of all proportion as the "whisper goes down the alley." Rumors can be extremely detrimental to an employee and cause stress not only for that individual but for everyone in the department, as coworkers realize that such a rumor could be circulated *about them*. Company policy must strongly discourage any rumors, whether they be about an individual or about some company events, such as downsizing. Bosses must learn to communicate openly and clearly and to follow up with action that demonstrates the potency of their words.

On the matter of a manager's subjectivity, we can note two things:

1. Certain people are by nature more subjective in their decision making; and
2. These persons should make every effort not to blatantly play favorites in the workplace.

This warning goes out especially to those who prefer the Feeling function over the Thinking function on the Myers-Briggs. Fortunately, Feeling persons can learn to bring into their consciousness a certain amount of objective Thinking that will allow them to show fairness and impartiality toward all involved.

## Conflict in the Workplace

Now we come to the last two items on our list of stressors: **No. 1 (conflict with a coworker) and No. 10 (experiencing a lack of harmony and teamwork)**. I have placed these stressors together because, again, they seem to have a greater impact on the Feeling versus the Thinking person. Those who prefer an objectively logical approach to problem solving are often less stressed by conflict in the workplace.

Steps to consider in resolving conflict include first having a meeting with the two employees involved in the conflict. Try to understand what each of the individuals wants and lift up the area(s) that both value and want to maintain. This common ground will be one of the key tools you can use to mediate their dispute. For example, if both are motivated to do an excellent job, this common ground can be used to brainstorm solutions. If their dispute has spread to the whole team, creating a polarizing effect, then a larger action is called for. Meeting with the whole team to clarify facts and to hear each person's feelings in a re-

spectful atmosphere will go a long way toward resolving the issues creating this kind of stress.

## Conclusion

Every person's stressors are unique to that individual at that time. Since as human beings most of us find it difficult to compartmentalize our lives into professional, personal, community service, leisure categories, we tend to lump all our stressors together. ***Naming our stressors and distinguishing our subjective response (our experience of stress) from the stressors themselves goes a long way toward establishing the basis for inner peace.***

As managers we can be more aware of the kinds of stressors our employees face. We can also be clearer about our goals and intents, and about what is of prime importance to us in achieving a particular objective. This clarity will surely filter down to our employees, who must make their own decisions regarding priorities.

We can also be cognizant that certain personality types are more vulnerable to certain kinds of stressors, for example, conflict with a coworker or lack of harmony in team functioning. We can then take steps to resolve these conflicts early on.

We should also be aware that there are resources of us as managers to help resolve stresses in the workplace. Not only honest and strong leadership, which is also open to new ideas, but a receptivity to learning more about employees are key factors. And business coaches and consultants can help managers at all levels do just that.

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