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MANAGING STRESS IN ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

Lawrence B. Carroll, Elmhurst College

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on stress management workshops that have been conducted for executives and administrators of several organizations and educational institutions. The workshops are experiential in nature and vary depending upon the assessed needs of individual participants and their organization. The workshops are designed so that each participant will be given an opportunity to look at themselves and how they manage their own stress. One person's positive stress may be another person's distress. The main focus of the workshop is to look at the management of stress and not the elimination of stress. Participants become more aware of their own stress management by completing self-assessment tools throughout the workshop. This workshop is an organizational development intervention which, hopefully will have an impact upon the quality of life in the organization.

INTRODUCTION

Stress is life. It is the total energy flow which, when managed well, stimulates creativity, rational problem solving, progress, changes, satisfaction and enhances the quality of life. Stress management is an individual process involving the body/mind as a total system. This system consists of physical, cognitive, and emotional components. A change in one component influences all others. In dealing with managing one's own stress, the individual needs to be aware of the interrelationships of the three components and the right to make choices around them.

In recent years organizations have become aware of how the stress of their employees, especially top executives, has resulted in a loss of productive capacity. Stress, which has had a negative connotation for many people, needs to be better understood. Individuals need to work with their own capacity to manage stress which can be better for them than trying to change the organizational climate.

People have different stress levels and need to assess how much stress they can effectively handle.

FIGURE 1
LEVELS OF STRESS

| Understimulation (Low Stress) | Optimum Stimulation (Adequate Stress) | Overstimulation (High Stress) |
|----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| boredom | creativity | irrational problem |
| fatigue | rational problem solving | exhaustion |
| frustration | solving | illness |
| dissatisfaction | process change | low self esteem |
| | satisfaction | |

Figure one illustrates what can happen to people at different stress

levels. The workshop gives each participant an opportunity to have several experiences in becoming aware of his/her stress. All experiences are processed and tied together with conceptual material. The sequence of events in the workshop depends upon the needs of the group and develops a balance between stimulation/excitement and rest/relaxation along with a balance between cognitive and experiential learning.

Organizational Assessment

The diagnosis of an organization is the most critical phase of organizational development. Diagnosis should be treated as a general category of activity relevant to all organizational development. Effective diagnosis asks and answers two important questions: "Where are we?" and "Where do we want to be?". These two questions are answered through data collection and analysis. Data collection is an extremely significant activity because it plays a dual role in organizational development. First it provides the organization with a basis for a better understanding of its own processes and how these affect its performance. When members of the organization begin to share their perceptions, feelings, and other information about the way the organization functions a self-assessing process begins which often leads to effective problem solving within the organization. The second role is to be seen in the method used to collect and share data. It must be remembered that all activities taken on by an outside consultant are organizational interventions, therefore the method used to collect the data inside the organization is of considerable importance. The type of data collected and the methods used to collect data must be carefully planned and implemented.

The three data collection methods used in assessing the needs of organizations are: a) written questionnaires, b) the interview; and c) direct observation. Each method varies in form from simple to highly sophisticated. Because assessment approaches are relatively flexible a diagnostic method that best suits the organization can be used. Alternative data collection methods and their impact on the people response must be considered.

To be a really effective planned intervention the diagnostic phase in organizational development must be based upon sound analysis of relevant data. The diagnosis involves the careful analysis of information and data concerning the culture, processes structure, and other essential elements of the organization. Sound diagnosis provides the basis for identifying and assessing priorities to problems, issues, and opportunities. Its ultimate goal is to predict the impact of particular events on the productivity of the organization and the satisfaction of its members.

In all cases entry into the organization was obtained by completing a diagnosis of that particular organizations needs. Different diagnosis techniques and instruments developed to fit the uniqueness of the client were used as assessment tools. Ideally the uniqueness of an organization can be diagnosed while instruments that have been validated in other situations are used. This provides both a validity check and a comparison with other organizations. In all cases the stress management workshop followed other intervention com

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pleted in the organization.

Workshop Design

The workshop design puts emphasis on identifying and dealing with the individual stressors of each participant. After each individual has become aware of their own stressors the design calls for working on common individual and organizational stressors. Dealing with organizational stress only becomes possible after people learn how to handle their own stress and develop a trust relationship with other people involved in the workshop. A follow-up one day session is conducted five to six months after the initial stress management workshop. The purpose of the follow-up session is to assess how successful the participants have been in managing their own stress and to work with stress management as an ongoing intervention in the organization.

The general objectives of the stress management workshops are that:

- 1) Participants will complete a series of self-assessment instruments which indicate their own individual stress level.
- 2) Participants will distinguish between stress and distress.
- 3) Participants understand the biological and emotional effects of stress and their interrelationship.
- 4) Participants experience awareness of personal responsibility of/for stress management.
- 5) Participants evaluate stressors in their own life.
- 6) Participants assess present method of managing stress.
- 7) Participants will build on their capacity to cope with and manage stress.

With these objectives in mind the workshop is structured to give all participants an opportunity to experience their own stress. Stress is looked at from within a person instead of outside a person. Participants begin the workshop by defining stress as they see it and assess their own stress which is the first step to managing stress. A self diagnosis in which a person looks at his/her own lifestyle and the stress that is in that lifestyle is completed. As Han Selye points out you can protect yourself against stress if you 'earn about it' (3). The participants are next shown the relationship between stress and disease. Participants are taught some sensory biofeedback techniques. Without the use of sophisticated and expensive biofeedback equipment the participants learn some sensory signals they can use as biofeedback sources:

a) heartbeat, b) respiration, c) stomach sensations (butterflies, heat, cold), skin temperature, and e) muscle tension. People are individually different with regard to their stress load and this must always be taken into consideration.

Participants are next exposed to Aerobic exercising and Ken Cooper's exercise program (1) Cooper's research indicates that if people attempt aerobics and do not follow the proper program they are putting themselves in a great deal of risk. Participants are made aware of Type A behavior people who are characterized by always jumping head first into things. The research of Friedman and Rosenman discovered Type A behavior people can live to old age with no cardiovascular problems (2). Participants are given the characteristics of Type A behavior and Type B behavior and are told to describe to a partner those situations where they themselves were Type A and Type B people. The participants are then requested to share both the internal and external characteristics of each with their partner. This is one of the many self-diagnosis experiences that are performed throughout the workshop.

Participants next look at their present method of handling stress. When people experience stress and other emotions that are viewed as unpleasant they usually see these reactions as being directly triggered by disturbing situations. However, a careful analysis of what occurs would disclose that when the upsetting event occurs, we tell ourselves something about it and it is this self-statement which triggers the emotion (4). This sequence of events may be represented as: Situation (A)--Self-statement (B)--Emotion (C).

FIGURE 2
Self Statements

| | |
|--|--|
| (A) <u>Situation</u> A chaotic problem-solving meeting | (A) <u>Situation</u> A chaotic problem-solving meeting |
| (B) <u>Self-Statement</u> "Why don't these guys see all the stupid moves they're making. I can't stand it". | (B) <u>Self-Statement</u> "That's not my problem. I don't need to take on every issue". |
| (C) <u>Emotion</u> Frustration, resentment | (C) <u>Emotion</u> Relief, relaxation |

One goal of a stress management program is to help people learn and practice effective means of coping with stress, their task is to learn to analyze specifically what they are saying internally that makes them upset and to develop a set of specific self-statement (figure 2) that they can use to cope with disturbing situations (4). This self-statement stage is a good point for an intervention which request the participants to pair up and recall unpleasant debilitating kinds of situations and describe the situation to their partner as accurately as possible. Participants are then asked to try and recall their self-statement and look for alternatives they could use to change their emotions. Participants are made aware of catastrophizing (allowing relatively minor frustrations, inconveniences, and concerns to mentally blow up so they become, for the moment, catastrophes which are emotionally reacted to as such) situations (4).

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Example: "My boss ignored me this morning"!
Response: "I must be in trouble"!

Catastrophizing is circular, it increases stress and makes you less able to deal with whatever it is and makes it seem more and more like a catastrophe. Participants are shown how catastrophe reducing can be programmed into the body/mind.

We next deal with building a participants own capacity to manage stress. To prepare for this participants are requested to record what they have eaten in the last seven days. A film on nutrition is shown after which participants get into triads and evaluate the list of food they have consumed against the categories of food used in the film. This gives people an idea of what category and quality of food they put into their bodies. Participants are then shown how they can effectively improve their own diet. Participants are also made aware of the three options to managing stress: a) isolate the stress or example use of self-statement, b) alter relationships with the stressor for example, change response pattern, and c) re-tune body/mind - example assume total responsibility for body/mind.

During the last day of the workshop the participants assess common stressors and develop individual action plans. Participants identify common stressors, spend time assessing how they presently manage stress, and develop a support system to work together back on the job. The major portion of the final day is spent developing a personal action plan. The participants complete the Willness Inventory and a life expectancy table which provides data for the action plan. After the instruments are completed the participants are given an exercise which requires them to look at themselves and assess how they presently function under stress and how they would like to handle it differently. The participants use the data generated to develop an action plan that answers the questions. Where are you now? Where do you want to be? How will you get there? This data will help the individual assess new ways to manage stress and begin data collection for the follow-up session which will be held in five to six months.

PARTICIPANT AND ORGANIZATION REACTION

The participants have viewed the workshop as a way of obtaining helpful tools to successfully manage their own stress. The following are some comments made by participants immediately after the workshop and/or the follow-up session:

I thought this was an excellent workshop. I can apply theories and practices to my everyday life.

Most unique workshop, and one which required the highest individual responsibility I have ever been involved in. I appreciated participant center focus, very beneficial for me.

I enjoyed the workshop and feel good about taking a look at the way I function in stress situations.

Method of presentation is excellent, participant involvement is fantastic.

The workshop gave me a whole new perception of stress.

This workshop allowed me to experiment with people and their reaction to the way I handle stress. A very rewarding experience for me.

Organizational reaction to the workshop has been very favorable. In all cases, especially where a continuous stress program has been developed, organizations have reported that workshop participants performance on the job has increased.

RECOMMENDATION FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT WORKSHOPS

Based on the experiences we have had in conducting stress management workshops I would like to make the following recommendations.

1) Do not use a stress management program as the first intervention in an organization. It is very important to build a trusting environment in which to work. Trust must be earned and this can be a slow process.

2) Do not force the question of organizational stress until the organization and its employees are ready for such an undertaking. It is important for participants to first deal with their intra personal stress and not diffuse it by trying to deal with other issues

3) Never do a program of this nature alone. It is important that you team up with other people who have the necessary training and skills to help make the program successful. It would be helpful to have a staff that includes a medical doctor, physical therapist, nutritionist, psychologist, and other backup personnel.

4) Get a commitment from the organization that it will support participants new behavior. It is very important that the organization be willing to let the workshop participant return to the job and experiment with new ways of handling their own stress in the organization.

5) Attendance at the stress workshop should be on a voluntary basis. A person who does not want to attend will not be helped by the workshop.

6) The workshop should always have a follow- up session as part of its design. It is very important that a persons learning be continuous and supported.

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SUMMARY

The stress management workshops are proving to be effective organizational development interventions. People live under a great deal of self inflicted stress which affects the way they interact with others. Anyone who wishes to improve his/her interaction with others needs to be aware of his own behavior. This awareness can be helpful in determining a point for introducing change into a situation. The workshop participants have exhibited greater degrees of self aware-ness and indicate greater overall personal need satisfaction. The behavior and satisfaction changes which have been indicated would seem to contribute to an organizations viability. This further suggests that additional improvements in output criteria may be expected as the changes are fully implemented and the system reaches a steady state.

The major advantages we have seen in the use of stress management workshops are twofold: First, the workshop makes people aware of their own stress level and how they handle stress, secondly, when this intervention is based on appropriate diagnosis, strategy, and timing it can assist the client organization in making significant internal improvements.

The present diagnosis and data collection is less than complete in treating the range of issues involved in managing stress. Under what conditions is stress management a useful intervention? When should an intervention be specific to a certain stressor? When should it treat the inter group and inter organizational relationships? When should it focus on the stress potential in the organizational context? These and other questions are important enough to warrant must additional data collection and research.

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