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Building resilience in the workforce



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The impacts of workforce stress are well known. Yet, while stress can be harmful, our ability to persist in the pursuit of meaningful goals despite anxiety, worry and stress is part of what makes us human. How then, can organizations challenge employees to meet meaningful goals, while buffering them against the negative impacts of stress? By studying resilient individuals, the field of positive psychology has found some answers.

As a female executive entering a consumer electronics corporation traditionally led by men, Liz Shaw (named changed to protect anonymity) faced challenges. Female colleagues warned that women just did not fit in and male

executives would ignore her while shaking hands with the men who reported to her. When she tried to create a leadership forum for women within the company, she was taunted, excluded from company social events, and had her car keyed. Research suggests that minorities in the workforce (e.g. women) can experience additional stress. However, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and survivor syndrome, among other stress-related challenges impact a variety of workers across a range of industries. In the face of significant stressors, some workers lose motivation, become cynical and demonstrate decreases in performance, while others, like Liz Shaw, persevere, adapt and recover.

In the case of Shaw, her organization's CEO helped make resilience possible. When Shaw approached him about developing a leadership forum for women, he surprised her by providing the social support and decision latitude she needed to get the forum running, and importantly, ignore the hectoring from coworkers. This act had consequences on employees' resilience across the organization. Her program reduced female employees' voluntary-turnover rates and increased job-satisfaction scores. This saved the organization 5 million dollars in training and recruitment costs. Shaw eventually led initiatives that increased the company's share of the 90 billion dollar purchasing power of women in the consumer electronics market.

In 2013, the Canadian Standards Association, in association with its Quebecois sister organization the BNC (Bureau de normalization du Quebec), released the 'Psychological health and safety in the workplace standard'. The first of its kind, this standard provides a comprehensive strategy for building mentally healthy and resilient workforces.

After describing and defining resilience, this article will tie in selected recommendations from the standard with current research to describe the foundations of workforce stress and resilience, as well as practical ways to build a workforce capable of recovering from and adapting to the demands of this new millennium.

As evident in measures of social-health and wellbeing, the current workforce faces greater challenges than those experienced by their parents. The American Institute for Innovation in Social Policy tracks 15 indicators (e.g., homicides, food insecurity, high-school dropouts) and reports them as a composite measure. It has tracked a 20% decline in wellbeing since the 1970s. This decrease in wellbeing has paralleled social changes. Research has associated growing inequality and the de-industrialization of developed economies, to stagnating inflation-adjusted wages for the middle class, and lower wages for both the working class and new college graduates. Moreover, companies have been forced to downsize and 'rightsize', causing employees to report more worries about being laid off despite objectively lower unemployment rates. This distress impacts employers' bottom line. Fears around layoffs are linked with higher levels of employee illness and injuries. Studies have shown that large layoffs are often followed by increased levels of employee absenteeism. Importantly, factors that can buffer workers against the impacts of stress, such as work-life balance, physical fitness and a rainy-day savings account, are harder to find. 'Work extensification', the blurring lines between the office and home, has accompanied technological advances. North Americans are now more than twice as likely to be obese and in addition experience higher levels of debt and lower levels of private savings than in the 1970s. These personal challenges add to workplace stressors. Polls from the Pew Research Center and Statistics Canada have shown that 40% of American workers, and 27% of Canadians have reported that their job is either very or extremely stressful.

DEFINING STRESS

Stress and discussions about stress are common in organizations, but what is stress? As Hans Selye once told a reporter,

"Everyone knows what stress is, but nobody really knows". Here, we provide a brief refresher on the antecedents and nature of stress, as outlined by the Theory of Cognitive Appraisal, the Yerkes-Dodson Law, and the General Adaptation Syndrome.

According to Richard Lazarus' Theory of Cognitive Appraisal, an event causes varying levels of stress depending on the experimenter's appraisal of both how threatening the event is, and his or her perceived ability to deal with that threat. Applied to the workplace, a worker who is given a new assignment may either feel focused by the challenge or overwhelmed with stress depending on (1) whether the individual sees the assignment as routine, or as a last chance to demonstrate competence (threat appraisal) and (2) the employee's perception of having enough time and training to manage the assignment successfully (resource appraisal). The outcome of this appraisal is then experienced physiologically and psychologically.

Physiologically, an individual under stress experiences autonomic arousal of the sympathetic nervous system. At high levels, this leads to dilated pupils, dry mouth, and racing heart that we associate with fear. Over long periods of time, this suppresses the immune system. Psychologically, depending on their level of stress, individuals can experience either anxiety, or a satisfying mid-level state of arousal sometimes called 'flow'. This relationship between stress or arousal level and performance creates an inverted U-shaped curve first identified by Yerkes and Dodson in 1908, and now known as the Yerkes-Dodson Law. Shown in Fig. 1, this relationship holds that stressors can be positive when they fall within a person's ability to cope with them. It is important to note, however, that a person's resources and ability to cope change with time. As described by Hans Selye's 'General Adaptation Syndrome', and Theo Meijman and Gijsbertus Mulder's Effort-Recovery model, chronic stressors and nonstop work depletes resources, eventually leading to exhaustion and negative affect if the stress is not relieved.

Based on these models, and an overview of the literature's definitions of stress (summarized in Table 1), we define the process of stress as follows:

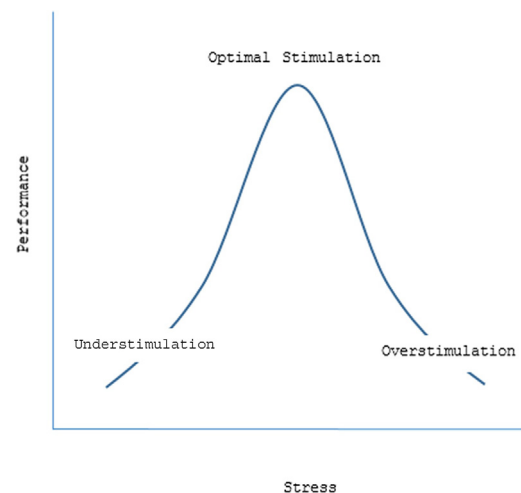


Figure 1 Yerkes-Dodson Inverted U-shaped Relationship Between Stress and Performance (Yerkes and Dodson, 1908)

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