

when  
**WORKPLACE  
STRESS**  
stifles productivity

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**M**ore than ever before, business leaders agree that new approaches are needed to reduce the employee stress they see as a major drain on corporate productivity. The big question is how to accomplish this effectively and efficiently.

Employee assistance programs, stress management seminars, exercise programs, smoking cessation, nutrition programs and other health-related activities have helped hundreds of thousands of employees to manage their stress levels. However, programs that focus only on changing employee behaviours, or placing responsibility for stress management solely with employees are not enough. Solid research increasingly and clearly indicates that characteristics of the workplace are also critical. Some corporations produce employee stress just as surely as they produce products and services.

By neglecting causes of workplace stress, employers may be nullifying their investment in employee-focused health-promotion programs. The evidence linking certain workplace characteristics to employee stress and health is as strong as the evidence linking smoking to lung cancer.

Serious attempts to manage employee stress require a dual focus. First, they need to help employees develop coping skills and positive lifestyles. Second, they should focus on the characteristics of each local workplace situation. Two sets of workplace factors are particularly worthy of attention.

One involves work settings characterised by “high demand and low control”. Employees have too much to do for too long, with constant imposed deadlines (high demand), and too little influence over the day-to-day organisation of their own work (low control).

At the extreme, high demand, low control conditions are associated with significantly high rates of:

- Heart and cardiovascular problems
- Anxiety, depression and demoralisation
- Alcohol and prescription/over-the-counter drug use
- Susceptibility to a wide range of infectious diseases

The second set of factors involves “high effort and low reward”. Employees must consistently expend high amounts of mental and/or physical energy (high effort), and feel they receive inadequate compensation or

acknowledgement of their efforts in terms of status, financial gain or career advancement (low reward).

At the extremes, the high-effort, low-reward condition is associated with:

- High rates of cardiovascular problems
- High incidence of anxiety, depression and conflict-related problems

Where both conditions are present, which occurs often, you find:

- High incidence of back pain
- High incidence of repetitive strain injuries (RSI).



### Home and family factors

Home and family stress has a cumulative effect with work-produced stress; both feed off and reinforce each other. Workplace programs that help employees deal with home and family stress will also reduce the impact of work-produced stress.

It is important to note that the impact of workplace factors on employee health is independent of employee lifestyle factors and of home and family stress. These workplace-produced effects occur regardless of employees' coping skills and lifestyles.

### Early warning signs

According to research, stress from any source causes changes in brain chemistry that imperil the immune system's ability to defend against bacterial and viral attacks. The effect of excessive stress and strain on brain chemistry is experienced as mood—usually as depression, anxiety or anger. These moods, or mental states, are early warning signs.

The immediate impact is poor morale, absenteeism, and lower productivity. If these changes in brain chemistry and mood persist, immune system deficiencies will worsen, and more serious illnesses will occur.

It is possible to obtain useful information simply by asking employees how they feel about demands, controls, efforts and rewards. If a large proportion score at the extreme ends of these factors, action is called for.

### Effective action

What actions are effective? Many organisations are reluctant to ask, fearing that major, if not insurmountable,

efforts are needed. The evidence suggests otherwise.

In most workplaces, market competitiveness dictates the demands and efforts. Redesign or reengineering to reduce demand and effort may indeed be major, but are worthy of consideration in terms of increased productivity and reduced employee stress.

More easily and quickly changeable are control and reward. Increasing employees' control over the means of production gives them a say in how they meet the demands, and can go a long way in reducing employee stress.

Similarly, the effort required of employees may not be easily changed, but the associated rewards can be. Rewards are not restricted to money. Recognition, status and appreciation are also significant.

Control, or influence, and reward are closely connected. For many employees control is the reward they seek above almost all others. The satisfaction of having appropriate influence over the way work is done can weigh heavily against the stresses of high demand and high effort.

### Better than experts

Soliciting and using employee input on decisions affecting space, design of workstations, lighting, heating, cooling and general efficiency and safety can provide a sense of control. Also highly appropriate is involvement of employees affected by decisions on how and when to introduce new technology. At the core of this approach to workplace stress is the "no harm" principle. As the scientific evidence relating workplace characteristics to employee health becomes more widely known, the obligation on employers to ensure they are not producing health-related stress problems will grow.

There is already abundant justification for ensuring that your workplace is not producing stress-related health problems. It's not only in the interests of employees. It's also simply good business. DBR

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## TIPS & TECHNIQUES: STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE DELEGATION

***"If you want a job done well, you should do it yourself."***

Sound familiar? If you've fallen into this do-it-yourself syndrome, chances are you're crippling your own potential for success. You can't move forward if you're tied down by your day-to-day workload.

So how do you delegate effectively? Try these seven pointers:

### **Take the risk.**

It's a great temptation to give work to the most experienced and senior staff. But are you asking too much of them—and ignoring others who might be desperate for a chance to prove themselves?

Try giving the assignment to someone who is less experienced. Yes, it's a risk, but you may uncover hidden talents.

### **Prepare.**

If you give assignments to people who aren't ready for them, they're almost doomed to fail.

Ask yourself these questions first. Are they adequately trained for the job? Do they have access to the correct/necessary information? Can they operate the necessary equipment?

In other words, are they prepared?

### **Be patient.**

Allow a cushion of time for a person to fully understand and complete an assignment. Be reasonable with your demands—don't expect a budget report in half a day from a novice. Try to remember how long it took you the first time you did it.

### **Don't breathe down their necks.**

When you've delegated the assignment, carefully explain the requirements, and set the deadlines—stand back! Leave them to it. Constant monitoring only hinders performance. It can create a sense of inadequacy, so give them a reasonable amount of independence, and let them prove their abilities.