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Stress management for social and organizational excellence

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Abstract

Intensions by a person behind doing any type of work, be it personal, social, organizational or religious are reflected in results of that work. Intensions are usually not known to others. By nature everybody hides his/ her intension. Close interaction with various groups of managers, supervisors and workers reveals that an individual invites stress/distress for himself/ herself in personal, familial, social and organizational setups, if his/ her intensions are dominated by Tamoguna i.e. his/ her intensions are self centered, oriented towards gaining larger benefits for himself/ herself, oriented towards showing others down and not caring for the benefits for others and for organization. On the other hand, if his/ her intensions are dominated by Satoguna i.e. he/ she wants to share the larger benefits with others and the organization, he/ she will feel Eustress. Suitable interventions of this type are to be designed and tested of utility to meet the challenges posed by globalization.

Keywords: Tamoguna, Satoguna, eustress

Introduction

Adjusting to the continually changing environment is the essence of human growth and development. The same environment produces positive and negative feelings in individuals. Depending upon the ways individuals react to the environment, feelings become positive or negative. Positive feelings propel to action, reflected in new awareness and new experiences. For example positive feelings about deadlines, competitions, punctuality, frustrations, sorrows etc activate one to show one's mettle, bring dynamism and vitality in human lives. They lead to physiological, psychological, social and organizational fitness. Negative feelings on the other hand, push one to inaction and result in distrust, rejection, anger and depression etc. Not only this, they lead to health problems such as headache, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke etc. With the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion or a new relationship, readjustment appears difficult at the first instance whether one has positive or negative feelings. Potentials of individual differences in this regard to interaction and readjustment with the constant changes taking places in the environment, have long since been recognized.

Such a paradigm of changes and process of adjustment towards them, undoubtedly vibrates and shakes human life. Therefore, it is called stress and is an inseparable part of human life. Clinical psychologists recognized its presence and negative consequences on human behavior a long time ago. Psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and medical practitioners identified it as a source of all types of physiological and psychological ailments. Organizational psychologists have been rather late in analyzing how it operates in work settings. Revisiting and redefining the concept of stress appears to be essential in the context of globalization of business.

Stress is a word derived from the Latin word 'Stringer' meaning to draw tight. Early meaning and definition of stress as strain or load eventually originated in the field of structural engineering and physical science. It has been used to explain behavioral problems in extreme kinds of military situations.

From the viewpoint of physical sciences, the phenomenon of stress is evident in all materials, when they are subjected to force, pressure, strain or strong effort. Every material-steel, rock or wood has to be drawn tight in order to be brought to a functioning stage, but it has its own limits upto which it can be strained without being damaged. Similarly, human beings also require to be tightened for being brought to a functional stage, but can tolerate stress up to certain levels. Damage- psychological or physical occurs when they are continually exposed to low or high levels of stress. But unlike physical structures human beings also have the unique ability to move, change or modify their relationship with

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the situations of stress.

Physiologist Canon (1932) ^[2] spoke of the 'Wisdom of the body' which postulates that an organism is endowed with an automatic equilibrium maintaining tendency which is helpful in preserving its existence in the face of a hostile environment. Canon called this tendency 'homeostasis' to indicate that there are coordinated physiological processes that maintain the steady state of the organism. Wherever the homeostatic balance of an organism is disturbed, the entire organism is mobilized in an effort to restore it. He also noted that in a situation of external threat or severe stress, an organism resorts to a fight or flight response. A person is called brave when he fights and is labeled coward, discreet or shrewd, when he adopts the flight response. The internal cost or bodily wear and tear is the same in both the options. In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand the phenomenon of stress in the global context, with a view to demystify its meaning held in common parlance. After reviewing literature, efforts have been made to develop a new acronym, a new working definition and a new working model. Besides, intervention strategies have been identified, tested and suggested to bring about a change in one's perceptual, cognitive and conative process, by using one's own personal resources and organizational resources towards managing stress for organizational excellence. A need of relooking into one's perceptual, cognitive and conative processes by each individual has been raised.

Stress as a concept

Hans Selye (1956) is regarded as the father of 'Stress Concept'. He was working actually on search of a new sex hormone. However he serendipitously discovered that 'tissue damage as a nonspecific response to virtually all noxious stimuli'. He called this phenomenon General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) and after a decade named it as stress. In common parlance, stress is usually taken in a negative way, as distress (characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment). Stress is used synonymously with strain tension and pressure. According to Kaplon (1996) ^[7], the study of stress is arguably one of the more vibrant, enthusiastically endorsed and rapidly growing sub specialities in behavioral sciences. Our efforts in revisiting the conceptual framework of stress is from the perspective of developing and intervention/action program to audit existence of stress in the workplace, develop a new approach to view stress with a positive outlook, motivate people to identify their optimal levels of stress for Organizational excellence as also to prevent rusting out of their potentials. Therefore, it will be appropriate to review and revisit some of its popular definitions and then develop our own working definition, our own working model of optimization for organizational excellence. According to Schuler (1980) 'stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he/ she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important'. Ivancevich and Matteson (1987) ^[5] define stress as 'the interaction of the individual with the environment, an adaptive response, mediated by individual difference and or psychological process'. A consequence of any external (environmental) action, situation or event that places excessive psychological and or physical demand on a person. For Beehr & Newman (1978) ^[11] stress is a condition

arising from the interaction of people with their jobs, characterized by changes within the people that force them to deviate from normal functioning. Lazarus, Deese and Osler (1952) ^[8] and Janis and Leventhal (1968) ^[6] viewed stress as an intervening variable with antecedents/ causes and behavioral consequences or unreleased emotional experiences associated with elements of fear, dread, anxiety, irritation, annoyance, anger, sadness, grief. Stressors are additive (Hans Selye, 1974) each new and persistent stressor adds up to an individual's stress level. A new single stressor may seem relatively unimportant in itself but if it is added to an already high level of stress, it can be the straw that breaks the camel's back. In view of such relations, greater attention is being paid in identifying micro level (individual related) and macro level (organization related) stressors.

Approaches to study Stress

Stress has been approached in at least four different ways: as the stimulus or external force acting on the organism, the response or change in physiological function or interaction between an external force and the resistance to it, and finally, a comprehensive view is taken encompassing all the three.

Stress as an External force: it focuses on the circumstances which people experience as stressful. Stress is taken as an independent variable, more or less beyond the control of the individual. The most stressful stimuli are:

- Speeded up information processing
- Noxious environment stimuli
- Perceived threat
- Disrupted psychological function
- Isolation and confinement
- Blocking
- Group pressure and
- Frustrations

Physiological function: based on experiments conducted on infrahuman subjects, General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) was developed. It postulates that when an organism is confronted with a threat, general physiological response occurs in three stages.

Alarm Reaction: it is an initial 'shock phase' in which resistance is lowered and a 'counter shock phase' starts and the defense mechanism becomes active. It is characterized by autonomous excitability. Adrenaline discharge, increased heart rate, muscle tone, blood content and gastrointestinal ulceration. Depending upon the intensity of threat and the condition of the organism, the periods of resistance vary and severity of the symptoms may differ from a mild invigoration to disease of adaptation.

Stage of Resistance: maximum adaptation occurs during this stage. The bodily signs characteristic of the alarm reaction disappear. Resistance increases to levels above normal. If the stressor persists, or the defensive reactions prove ineffective, the organism deteriorates to next stage.

Stage of Exhaustion: adaptation energy is exhausted. signs of the alarm reaction reappear. The resistance level begins to decline irreversibly. The organism collapses.

Major Shortcomings in This Approach Are

1. The theory is based mainly on researches carried out on infra-human subjects. In such experiments stressors are usually physical or environmental whereas the human organism is not always affected by such stressors.
2. Non-specific physiological response theory does not hold good with certain stimuli like exercise, fasting and heat etc which cannot produce non-specific responses.
3. Intra-psychic or social (interpersonal or interactional) factors being major stressor in human beings have not been given due place in this approach.
4. Lastly, the reaction of infra-human subjects are more direct, perceptible and easily measurable. This is not true of human subjects always, because their responses are mediated through several layers of cultural and social filters.

In contravention to this approach, stress is used to refer to the highly energized psycho-physiological state when an organism is faced with a situation that threatens or places unusual physical or psychological demand on it. For example in hyper stress, there is over activation or heavy demands in terms of time or responsibilities, in hypostress there is lack of activation, characterized by lassitude and boredom.

Interactive Approach: according to this approach, stress is looked upon as an interaction outcome of the external demand and internal resources. Stress occurs when there are demands on the person which tax or exceed his adjustment resources. Similarly, there is potential for stress when an environmental situation is perceived as presenting a demand which threatens to exceed the person's capacities and resources for meeting it, under conditions where he has expected a substantial differential in the rewards and the costs from meeting the demand versus not meeting it.

Comprehensive Approach: this approach views stress not only in interactive terms but also as an individual phenomenon, peculiar to the individual and his environment. It is to be seen with reference to the characteristics unique to the individual and his environment.

Person Environment Balance: individuals differ in their aptitudes, abilities and innate potentials and consequently, in their perception of stress and the resultant interaction with the environment. Looked at thus, stress is essentially an individual phenomenon and must be understood with reference to the characteristics of both the focal individual and his environment. It is the outcome of a particular combination of the two.

Burnout Stress Syndrome: BOSS

All gainful activities classified as work or job are fraught with some risk of stress. In a recent treatise on stress, Paine (1982)^[12] has observed:

Burnout stress syndrome (Boss), the consequence of a high level of job stress, personal frustration and inadequate coping skills have major personal, organizational and social costs and these costs are probably increasing.

BOSS is a debilitating psychological condition brought about by unrelieved work stress. Four types of consequences can arise from it (Veningle and Spradley, 1981)^[16]:

- Depletion of energy reserves,

- Lowered resistance to illness,
- Increased dissatisfaction and permission and
- Increased absenteeism and inefficiency at work.

They have also identified five distinct stages in a burnt-out.

- Honeymoon,
- Fuel shortage,
- Chronic symptoms,
- Crisis and
- Hitting the wall.

Honeymoon Stage

In the honeymoon stage, there is a euphoric feeling of encounter with the new job. There is excitement, enthusiasm, pride and challenge. Dysfunctional features emerge in two ways. Firstly, the energy reserves are gradually depleted in coping with the demands of a challenging environment. Secondly, habits and strategies for coping with stress are formed in this stage which are often not useful in coping with later challenges.

Fuel Shortage Stage

In an attempt to deal with job-related crisis, some individuals overdraw on reserves of adaptation energy and realize too late that the energy reserves are limited. In the fuel shortage stage, there is a vague feeling of loss, fatigue and confusion. The symptoms are job dissatisfaction, inefficiency, fatigue and sleep disturbance, leading to escape activities such as increased eating, drinking and smoking. Future difficulties are signaled at this stage.

Chronic Symptom Stage

The physiological symptoms become more pronounced and demand attention and help at this stage. Common symptoms are chronic exhaustion, physical illness, anger and depression. A sense of fatigue and exhaustion overtakes the individual.

Crisis Stage

When these feelings and physiological symptoms persist over a period of time, the individual enters the stage of crisis. He feels oppressed, there is a heightened pessimism, and self-doubting tendency is ascendant. One develops an "escape mentality". Peptic ulcers, tension, headache, chronic backache, high blood pressure and difficulty in sleeping are some of the better known symptoms of the crisis period. They may become acute.

Hitting the Wall Stage

The phrase "hitting the wall" is taken from athletics. It is said that a marathon runner feels that he has hit the wall. It is an experience so devastating that it can completely knock a person out. The marathon runner experiences this when he finds his glycogen reserves are used up, the body is becoming dehydrated and temperature is shooting upto 106°F-107°F with an accompanying loss of blood volume. This leads to muscle paralysis, dizziness, fainting and even complete collapse. Similar experiences have been observed in the executive world at times. With all the adaptation energy depleted like the glycogen of a marathon runner, one may lose control over one's life; it may be the end of a professional career. While recovery from this stage may elude some, others may be resourceful enough to tide over the crisis.

Rust Out Stress Syndrome: ROSS

Researchers have observed a phenomenon which is opposite of BOSS, which is called ROSS, it is indicative of stress under load, occurring when there is a gap between what the executive is capable of doing and what he is required to do. Stress under load can arise due to both quantitative and qualitative aspects of work. Clearly a situation appraisal is a prerequisite for countering stress.

Sources of Stress

There are two types of social systems to which we all belong: the primary system and the secondary system. Family and religious, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups are the examples of the primary social systems. Membership of these systems is involuntary and automatic. The family ties are strong because one acquires one's basic identity as a member of the family. The secondary system to which we relate are the social groups such as neighborhood, schools, colleges, technical institutions and clubs. Membership of these systems is optional. The functional requirements and role-related expectations from the primary and the secondary systems differ. The demands made on the individual in one system have their effects on his performance in the other and often prove to be a source of stress. Further, the resources from one system can also be invested in the other system to take care of the problems arising in it.

Ideational Sources

It is important to note that images of action can have as much of an effect as action itself. One may be tempted to dismiss such ideational sources of stress as irrelevant, but according to physiologists, ideas and imagery can arouse the same type of internal physiological changes as the actual actions do. Thus blood pressure rises even when one thinks of being angry. Most threats are either self contrived or born out of misunderstandings and detective cognitive structuring. A wholesale situational appraisal is a prerequisite for countering stress. Recent researches on hypertension indicate that even the response need not be an overt or expressed behavioral response: it could be on the ideational plane "shadow boozing" is one such well-known response.

Audit of Organizational Role Stress

Organizational membership is a dominant source of stress. A number of psycho diagnostic tools are available to make diagnosis of stressors. One of the most popularly used tools is 'organizational Role Stress', developed by professor Pareek (Pareek, 2002) ^[13]. It diagnoses 10 stressors, namely- Inter Role Distance (IRD), Role Stagnation (RS), Role Expectations Conflict (REC), Role Erosion (RE), Role Overload (RO), Role Isolation (RI), Personal Inadequacy (PI), Self Role Distance (SRD), Role Ambiguity (RA) and Resource Inadequacy (RIn). The tool is reported to have sufficient psychometric properties. It is widely used in HRD interventions by HRD specialists. High scores indicate high stress. Usually, scores on 10 dimensions are ranked in order and a further probe is made into the three dimensions from the highest, to the second highest and to the third highest. If the individuals cooperate in diagnosing the causative factors and are interested in their betterment, their problems are alleviated easily. However, lack of expertise and professional experience may not come to the expectations.

Strategies for Alleviating Stress

What can an Organization Do?

What can an organization do to alleviate stress? Some proactive interventions are listed below:

Undertake a Stress Audit

Study systematically the dominant stresses prevalent in the organization, its departments and divisions. A stress audit should include data gathering on the climate of the organization, role stresses, satisfactions and frustrations.

- **Use Scientific Inputs:** Disperse information on how to factor face stressors in the organization and outside. People derive Immense benefits from knowing something about the fundamentals of the stress response, dietetics, exercises and meditation.
- **Check with the Company Doctor:** What can he do to help the employees cope with the identified stress? Several progressive public as well as private sector organizations depute attend stress management programs. They have acted as a valuable resource to fellow participants and to their organizations.
- **Spread the Message:** The importance of regular habits of work, leisure, proper diet, exercise and mental pace should be emphasized.

What Can An Individual Do?

The following five strategies to overcome stress affliction.

- **Take a hard look at yourself:** Determine where stresses originate in your life. Critically examine source and their contribution to stresses experienced by others around you, be they in the organization or outside it.
- **Stay alert:** Do things, other than your job, which give you a sense of meaning and satisfaction.
- **Take risks:** Growth and productivity result from taking moderate risks in various types of activities.
- **Avoid isolation:** Withdrawing from others can lead to isolation and depression. Keep the channels of communication open with colleagues, friends and the family.
- **Stretch for success:** Stretching for success keeps you on your toes. Make an effort with the hope to achieve your goals. Effort and desire to overcome the obstacles are essential to tide over ROSS.
- **Overcome obsolescence:** Update your knowledge and skill to face the challenge brought about by the changing technological environment.

Concluding Remarks

It can be concluded that a continually changing environment (stress) can bring distress or EU-stress, depending upon the intensions with which an individual plays his/ her role, as has been mentioned in Shloka 9, chapter 14 of Geeta

Sattwam sukhe sanjayati rajah karmani bhara.
Gyanmavratya tu tamah pramade sanjayatyuta.

The meaning portrayed by this verse in the context of modern management is that sattwam sukhe attaches to happiness. Rajah to action, while Tamah verily shrouded knowledge, attaches to heedlessness. Sattwam sukhe to happiness means experiencing the thrills of creative moments in life by a scientist, an artist, a poet, an engineer or for that matter by any independent thinker. Rajah to action means passionate with hundreds of thirsty desires and

deep attachments and in course of their fulfillment, one is made to sweat and toil in the fields of endless activities. Tamah veils wisdom and attaches to heedlessness, wrong comprehension. All actions pertaining to setting of goals, selecting strategies to attain them, resetting of goals, reselecting strategies to attain and so on continuous through life, when an individual is under the influence of Rajoguna. In the background of the actions are intensions. If the intensions of the individual are controlled by Satoguna, the individual will feel happiness, however if the intensions are dominated by Tamoguna, the individual is sure to distress. In present work setups, Rajoguna is focal (R), in its back is Tamoguna (T) and Satoguna (S) is far away i.e. STR. If it is changed to TSR then there will be no stress. This will mean that actions in organizational setups are to be performed with intensions of larger benefits to the organizations and to the larger masses.

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