Maximizing Job Performance in Times of Stress

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Job Performance & Stress

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1. Stress- Definitions & Forms

- A physiological response to any change—good or bad, that alerts the adaptive fight-or-flight response in the brain & the body.
- 2 types of stress:
  - “Good Stress” (Eustress) that energizes & motivates us to put forth our best effort & achieve results.
  - “Bad Stress” (Distress) that leads to deteriorating relationships & health problems. Occurs when stress-inducing problems exceed our resources to deal with them.

2. Relationship Between Stress & Work

Yerkes-Dodson Curve

- Want to avoid extreme levels of stress and prolonged periods of stress
3. Tools to Deal with Stress

- When confronted with high levels of stress, we must learn to cope with that stress.
  - Active Coping- a proactive, healthier way to lessen the adverse impact of experienced stress.
  - Control- a method of coping to gain power over the stress-inducing situation and minimize the stress. Generally can control 3 things:
    - Work process
    - Work Schedule
    - Work decisions

3. Coping Tools (1): Exercise & Relaxation

- Exercise- decreases stress hormones and increases endorphins (the body’s “feel-good” chemicals).
- Relaxation- stop analyzing, surrender control & completely detach yourself from the stress-producing thoughts.

To be effective, should be part of a 4-step process (HBR, 2005):

1. Struggle at length and great effort with the problem.
2. When you feel frustrated, angry, tense, it’s time to step away from the problem & engage in something to induce a relaxation response.
3. Return to the problem- with rest & gain a sudden insight, “flow”.
4. New-Normal state- feeling of self-confidence from the breakout will continue through work performance
3. Coping Tools (II): Social Support

- Multiple definitions: resources provided by others, coping assistance, an exchange of resources, a personality trait.
- Multiple types
  1. Instrumental: assist with a problem, donate goods
  2. Informational: give advice
  3. Emotional: offer reassurance, listen empathetically
- Type 3 helps individual to cope with stress where Types 1 & 2 help one to gain control over the stress-inducing problem.

3. Control Tools (I)

- Personality Traits (See handout for measures):
  - Locus of Control represents how a person’s decision making ability is influenced- internally or externally.
  - Efficacy represents a person’s confidence in their ability to perform a task in a given setting. In the workplace, this may reflect person-job or person-organization fit.
- Information Overload can cause Attention Deficit Trait: people with ADT have difficulty staying organized, setting priorities, and managing time. (See handout for techniques to manage information)
Locus of Control Scale

1. a. Many of the unhappy things in people’s lives are partly due to bad luck.
b. People’s misfortunes results from the mistakes they make.

2. a. One of the major reasons why we have wars is because people don’t take enough interest in politics.
b. There will always be wars, no matter how hard people try to prevent them.

3. a. In the long run people get the respect they deserve in this world.
b. Unfortunately, an individual’s worth often passes unrecognized no matter how hard he tries.

4. a. The idea that teachers are unfair to students is nonsense.
b. Most students don’t realize the extent to which their grades are influenced by accidental happenings.

5. a. Without the right breaks one cannot be an effective leader.
b. Capable people who fail to become leaders have not taken advantage of their opportunities.

6. a. No matter how hard you try some people just don’t like you.
b. People who can’t get others to like them don’t understand how to get along with others.

7. a. I have found that what is going to happen will happen.
b. Trusting fate has never turned out as well for me as making a decision to take a definite course of action.

8. a. In the case of the well-prepared student there is rarely if ever such a thing as an unfair test.
b. Many times exams questions tend to be so unrelated to course work that studying is really useless.

9. a. Becoming a success is a matter of hard work, luck has little or nothing to do with it.
b. Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time.

10. a. The average citizen can have an influence in government decisions.
b. This world is run by the few people in power, and there is not much the little guy can do about it.

11. a. When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work.
b. It is not always wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyhow.

12. a. In my case getting what I want has little or nothing to do with luck.
b. Many times we might just as well decide what to do by flipping a coin.
a. Who gets to be the boss often depends on who was lucky enough to be in the right place first.
b. Getting people to do the right thing depends upon ability, luck has little or nothing to do with it.

13. a. As far as world affairs are concerned, most of us are the victims of forces we can neither understand nor control.
b. By taking an active part in political and social affairs, the people can control world events.

14. a. Most people don’t realize the extent to which their lives are controlled by accidental happenings.
b. There really is no such thing as “luck.”

15. a. It is hard to know whether or not a person really likes you.
b. How many friends you have depends on how nice a person you are.

16. a. In the long run the bad things that happen to us are balanced by the good ones.
b. Most misfortunes are the result of lack of ability, ignorance, laziness, or all three.

17. a. With enough effort we can wipe out political corruption.
b. It is difficult for people to have much control over the things politicians do in office.

18. a. Sometimes I can’t understand how teachers arrive at the grades they give.
b. There is a direct connection between how hard I study and the grades I get.

19. a. Many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me.
b. It is impossible for me to believe that chance or luck plays an important role in my life.

20. a. People are lonely because they don’t try to be friendly.
b. There’s not much use in trying too hard to please people, if they like you, they like you.

21. a. What happens to me is my own doing.
b. Sometimes I feel that I don’t have enough control over the direction my life is taking.

22. a. Most of the time I can’t understand why politicians behave the way they do.
b. In the long run the people are responsible for bad government on a national as well as on a local level.

To calculate your locus of control, award 1 point to External Locus of Control for each italicized option chosen. Award 1 point to Internal Locus of Control for each non-italicized option chosen.

External Locus of Control: ___________ Internal Locus of Control: ___________

People with internal loci of control have greater likelihood to proactively manage stress.
Is Your Job a Good Fit?

Your answers to the following questions can help determine if you’re in a job that combines what you like to do, what you do best, and what adds value to the organization. If you aren’t, consider shifting some of your responsibilities or even finding a different position or career.

1. What are you best at doing? It is amazing how many people spend years trying to get good at what they’re bad at instead of getting better at what they’re good at.
2. What do you like to do the most? This is not always the same as the answer to question 1. Unless it is illegal or bad for you, do what you like. If it is also productive and useful, it ought too be your career.
3. What do you wish you were better at? Your answer may guide you to a course you should take or a mentor you should work with. It may also indicate a task you should delegate.
4. What talents do you have that you haven’t developed? Don’t say none.
5. Which of your skills are you most proud of? This often reflects obstacle you’ve overcome.
6. What do others most often say are your greatest strengths? This question helps you identify skills you may not value because they seem easy to you.
7. What have you gotten better at? This gives you an idea of where putting in additional effort can pay off.
8. What can you just not get better at no matter how hard you try? This tells you where not to waste any more time.
9. What do you most dislike doing? Your answer here suggests what tasks you might want to delegate or hire out.
10. Which skills do you need to develop in order to perform your job? Your answer to this question might lead you to take a course, read a book, or work with a mentor or a coach.
12. What sort of organizational culture brings out the best in you? It is amazing how many people won’t leave a culture for which they are hideously unsuited.
13. What were you doing when you were happiest in your work life? Could you find a way to be doing that now?
14. What are you most cherished hopes for your future work life? What could keep you from realizing those hopes?
15. How could your time be better used in your current job to add value to the organization? Your answer here gives your manager valuable input he or she may never have thought to ask for.

TEN TIPS TO REDUCE INFORMATION OVERLOAD

One of the often-complained-of time robbers is e-mail. But information from other sources can waste time as well if not handled properly. Below are ten ways to help reduce information overload.

1. **Unsubscribe to e-mails that offer no value to you.** Are you spending too much time deleting e-mails that you no longer read? It’s time for a clean sweep. Go through your e-mail box and spend 15 minutes a day unsubscribing to e-mails that are just cluttering up your e-mail box.

2. **Set e-mail standards for your team.** Many of us waste time reading e-mails that are not relevant to us. Set some rules in your office about the protocol for copying others on e-mails. Make sure you copy only those who need the information.

3. **Flex your e-mail management muscle.** Choose specific time blocks to read and answer e-mails so you can have uninterrupted time to think, write, and give your most strategic work the attention that it needs.

4. **Use color, size, and shape coding for organizing information.** A report or project plan is much easier to read if assignments and contacts are differentiated by a color code, size, or shape. Users can find what is completed and outstanding and figure out, quickly, what they need to take care of next. This process improves communication and creates a shared understanding of the project. It also builds relationships between departments and coworkers.

5. **Give your brain a break with keywords.** Keywords trigger your instant recall. Think of them as a headline that sums up the entire article. Use keywords in any communication materials you create so people can remember your top messages. Seek keywords in materials you receive to help you mentally retrieve the information.

6. **Boost your memory with mind mapping.** Mind mapping is a note-taking technique that helps you sort and remember key information that your brain can attach to its existing stored data. Similar to the concept above about headlines, it’s best for you to identify the main ideas and then, for each idea, summarize key points associated with each main idea.

7. **Make the most of your reading time.** There is a lot of reading to tackle each day. From e-mails and reports to trade publications and how-to manuals, we often have a lot of material to review in a short period of time. Give yourself a specific amount of time to read the materials and create uninterrupted space and time for 15–20-minute increments. This will increase your ability to concentrate on that material and remember it better.

8. **Make information more fun and memorable.** Stories and anecdotes are powerful memory tools. When you are creating information for others, make it easy to ingest; choose words that evoke imagery and visual cues to drive home key points.

9. **Play it again, Sam.** The most important information bears repeating. When you want to break through the information overload, remember that people need to see an ad eight times before they will remember it. Find at least three different ways to convey main messages, and you’ll find increased retention in your audience.

10. **Lower information stress within your organization.** Another project management practice that would serve the employees well is the “5 S” approach. This is a technique that was adopted from the Japanese quality movement and has been used effectively worldwide. Although it was originally intended for organizations, I think in today’s workforce, it’s part of keeping an environment healthy by removing the stress of clutter.

    The “5 S” approach stands for:
    
    **Sort.** Only have items in your work area that you use on a daily basis. Everything else should be filed electronically or in filing systems.
    
    **Straighten.** Have a designated place for all moveable items, such as desktop organizers. Label everything in macro-work areas, and you’ll find a logical workflow for shared office machines, such as copiers and printers.
    
    **Shine.** It helps, mentally, if everything in the area looks like “new” condition and operates perfectly. Empty recycle bins and wastebaskets nightly.
    
    **Standardize.** Make visual controls for common areas, such as how to use the copier, and wall planning calendars easily accessible.
    
    **Sustain.** Have a daily and weekly system to keep up with the improvements that you have made.

How to Control Your ADT (Attention Deficit Trait)

In General,
1. Get adequate sleep.
2. Watch what you eat. Avoid simple, sugary carbohydrates, moderate your intake of alcohol, add protein, stick to complex carbohydrates (vegetables, whole grains, fruit).
3. Exercise at least 30 minutes at least every other day.
4. Take a daily multivitamin and an omega-3 fatty acid supplement.

At Work,
1. Do all you can to create a trusting, connected work environment.
2. Have a friendly, face-to-face talk with a person you like every four to six hours.
3. Break large tasks into smaller ones.
4. Keep a section of your work space or desk clear at all times.
5. Each day, reserve some “think time” that’s free from appointments, e-mail, and phone calls.
6. Set aside e-mail until you’ve completed at least one or two more important tasks.
7. Before you leave work each day, create a short list of three to five items you will attend to the next day.
8. Try to act on, file, or toss every document you can touch.
9. Don’t let papers accumulate.
10. Pay attention to the times of day when you feel that you are at your best; do you most important work then, and save the rote work for other times.
11. Do whatever you need to do to work in a more focused way: Add background music, walk around, and so on.
12. Ask a colleague or an assistant to help you stop talking on the telephone, e-mailing, or working too late.

When you feel overwhelmed,
1. Slow down.
2. Do an easy rote task: Reset your watch, write a note about a neutral topic (such as a description of your house), read a few dictionary definitions, do a short crossword puzzle.
3. Move around: Go up and down a flight of stairs or walk briskly.
4. Ask for help, delegate a task, or brainstorm with a colleague. In short, do not worry alone.

3. Control Tools (II): Humor & Political Skill

- **Humor**: amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization.
  - Joking about stress makes it less threatening and increases our sense of control
- **Political Skill**: the ability to effectively understand others at work & use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives
  - Enhances one’s understanding of self and others and one’s sense of control

4. Implications & Discussion

- We should aim to harness the effects of “good stress” and limit the impact of distress to maximize our performance at work.
- To do this:
  - Stay healthy, take breaks, engage in some physical activity.
  - Reach out to others for help on tasks, social support, advice, etc… you don’t have to suffer alone!
  - Stay positive (or refocus on positive things when it’s not possible to be positive when thinking of the task at hand).
  - Take control! Organize your work and work setting to facilitate progress.
Thanks for your attention!
Questions?

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Resources: