

MANAGING STRESS

Job stress is one of the banes of being a manager. But there are ways to relieve the day-to-day stress the job causes. Here are some suggestions.

by Rudd McGary, Ph.D.

The caveman comes upon a saber-tooth tiger. He has two choices to reduce the immediate threat and accompanying stress: he can fight or he can run. Most of the time the caveman runs. He reduces his stress immediately and in a physical manner.

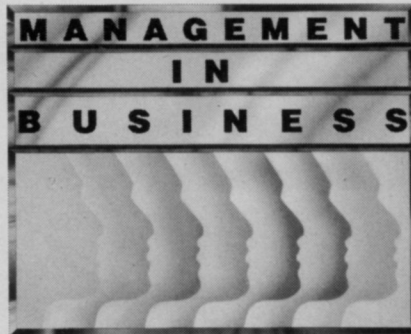
Wouldn't it be nice if, in the modern world, dealing with stress was as simple as that? But it's not. Let's show two examples of stress in the real world.

1. You are required to install some major landscaping at a golf course. It took you almost a year to land the job and a long time to plan out your materials, equipment and vehicles. You have them all ready to go on the start date. The entire crew shows up, on time. On the way to the site, your trailer loaded with the heavy equipment gets stuck on the railroad tracks and is hit by a train. You can't run and you can't fight. It's stress time.

2. In your other division, you find that a certain client—as a matter of fact, the single most important client you have—isn't happy about some construction you have done on his property. You agree to a walk-through with him. You find the staircase off his deck actually leads straight to a cesspool cover. You ask the foreman later what happened, and he replies, "That's what the architect said he wanted." You can't run and you can't fight. It's stress time.

The difference between these two examples lies in the control that you have over both. In the first illustration, having a train run over a piece of equipment isn't within your control. Sometimes things happen. But in the second illustration, communication with the production department is something you can manage.

Many green industry managers cause stress for the people who work with them because they fail either to plan, or to write down what is expected at a job site. While it isn't always possible to get everything



perfect on a drawing, the better companies seem to do it most of the time.

From the planning standpoint, you must know what is going to be needed on a given job. You also need to know if the same piece of equipment is going to be needed on two sites around the same time and plan for that ahead. I'm aware that it isn't always possible to foresee every future need. But, surprisingly, managers at better companies seem to be able to.

The key to planning, and to helping lower the stress level, is to go through contingency planning.

Remember the first time a truck broke down when it was needed on a job? Everyone ran around for a while and then decided what to do. Now you know how to deal with this type of emergency so that you can take faster action. Your stress is relieved somewhat by the fact that you know what to do. That is contingency management. Most companies learn it as they go. Some actually learn to plan for it, and that can help reduce stress.

Unfortunately, even the most brilliant planning isn't going to help if an unforeseen accident occurs: someone gets sick, a piece of equipment isn't shipped to you from the dealer on time. Different things can happen that will stress you. What can you do to help manage stress with these things that occur in every company?

Here are some general rules to follow to alleviate that type of stress:

1. Recognize when stress sets in. Usually, changes in patterns of communication occur. You start seeing

more errors of judgement and errors in performance. Be aware of these changes and when they occur, as difficult as it may be, take some time for yourself and reduce your stress. It sounds simple, and it is. Doing it is the trick part.

2. Find your own personal way of reducing stress. It might be exercising, or reading, or praying, or meditating, or talking with a confidante. What works for you?

3. Don't do something that will stress you further. For instance, having a beer or two may help reduce stress—but drinking too much will hurt you physically. The next day, you'll feel worse. Another example would be to work out so hard that you actually injure yourself. This will add to the stress. So know the limits of your stress reduction mechanisms. Don't overdo them.

4. Understand the difference between work and recreation. Sometimes people believe that simply doing physical work will relieve stress. But if the physical work is what you do for a living, it's unlikely that it'll help. For instance, taking a push mower and doing one more lawn isn't likely to reduce much stress, although it's a physical activity. You must change the pattern of the physical workout to something that is recreational.

5. Find time to do it. If you say that you're going to take some time off and go fishing, do it. Talking about it won't get you relief. Most of the time, it's possible to take some time off: the manager who is certain that he is the only one who can do the job is going to crash and burn sooner or later. He'll be short with his people, probably make a few more errors than normal, and generally not be a very good manager. Sure, it's often hard to find time, but being under constant stress isn't macho, it's stupid, and it hurts both yourself and the company. **LM**

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