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Coping stress at Individual and Organizational Level

When we look at stress from organizational point of view, management may not be concerned about the low to moderate levels of stress experienced by the employees. The reason is, that some functional level of stress is necessary to improve employee performance. But high levels of stress and sustained low levels of stress are a cause of action by the management. But when we look at stress from individual's point of view even the low levels of stress are perceived to be undesirable. Keeping this in mind we can discuss the individual and organizational approaches towards managing stress. Before discussing these approaches, we must keep in mind two points :

(i) Firstly, we must not make any generalization. Each of us have different limits, different optimum stress levels and will perceive the sources of stress differently. One person's overstress may be another person's challenge and optimum stress.

(ii) Secondly, we need to differentiate between what we can do to equip ourselves and to organise our environment to prevent us from becoming over or under stressed. We label this as **Prevention**. Yet, however, well, we prepare ourselves and try to control our environment from time to time, we will still experience undesirable stress. It is then that we need to have developed **Management Skills**.

Now we discuss the individual's and organizational approaches to managing stress.

Individual approaches

As we know that stress has got a number of negative consequences for the individuals, that is why every individual should take personal responsibility for reducing his or her stress level. There are a number of ways by which a person can either avoid stressful conditions, change them or learn to cope with them. Stress can be managed by an individual, which will enable him to regain control over his life. Some of the stress reducing strategies from individual's point of view are :

1. Knowledge About Stress : in the first stage, an individual should become knowledgeable about stress. He should know about the process and effects of stress. He must find out the major sources of his stress. He must anticipate stressful periods and plan accordingly in advance. He must be honest with himself and decide what he can cope with what he cannot.

2. Physiological Fitness : Exercise in any form can help people in coping with the stress. Non competitive physical exercise such as aerobics, walking, jogging, swimming, riding a bicycle, playing softball or tennis have been recommended by physicans as a way to deal with excessive stress levels. There is evidence to suggest that individuals who exercise are much less likely to suffer from certain types of stress related exercises. With proper exercise, diet control and nonsmoking habits, blood pressure and cholesterol become controlled and the body becomes more resistant to pressures. People are more likely to get physically sick or emotionally depressed if they are overweight or poorly nourished.

3. Time Management : Most of the people are very poor in managing the time. They do not know that what must be done and when it would be desirable to do so. The result of poor time management is feeling of work overload, skipped schedules and tension. A well organized person can often accomplish twice as much as the person who is poorly organized. Therefore, an individual must understand how to manage his time so that he can cope with tensions created by job demands. A few of the well known time management principles are :

(i) Preparing a daily list of activities to be attended to.

(ii) Prioritizing activities by importance and urgency.

(iii) Scheduling activities according to the priorities set.

(iv) Knowing your daily schedule and handling the most demanding parts of a job when you are most alert and productive.

4. Assertiveness : An individual should become assertive. He should not say 'Yes' when he wants to say 'No'. He should start saying No to people or managers who demand too much of his time. Being assertive is an important factor in reducing stress.

5. Social Support Network : Every person should have people to turn to, talk to and rely upon. Good friends become highly supportive during times of stress and crisis. Social network includes friends, family or work colleagues. Expanding your

social support system can be a means for tension reduction because friends are there when needed and provide support to get the person through stressful situation.

6. Readjust life Goals : Every individual must know what he really wants to do. This should relate to not only the major decision of the life but to all activities in our life. He must know what is important for his. Because of the severe competition in life to go ahead, most individuals set very high standards and goals for themselves. These high expectations and limited resources to reach such expectations result in stress. Accordingly, every person must readjust his goals and make sure he has ability and resources to reach such goals. Perhaps the goals should be established after the resources have been analysed.

7. Relaxation Techniques : Every individual must teach himself to reduce tension through relaxation techniques such as Yoga, mediation, hypnosis and biofeedback. 15-20 minutes a day of deep relaxation releases tension and provides a person with pronounced sense of peacefulness. Deep relaxation condition will bring significant changes in heart rate, blood pressure and other physiological factors. Yoga is probably the most effective remedy for stress. Studies have revealed that Yoga has cured several stress related diseases.

8. Plan Your Life in Advance : So many times, people create situations which induce stress because they either did not plan or did a bad job of planning. The traditional Indian attitude of "Whatever will be, will be" a way of accepting the unexpected difficulties in life. This attitude may be relevant in those situations over which we do not have any control like death in the family, but for other events in life, it is better to plan in advance, so that we can confront them with confidence when they occur.

Organizational approaches

Individuals may design their own strategies to reduce stress, but it is a must for the organizations to develop programmes that will help the employees in reducing their stress. This will lead to less employee turnover, absenteeism and as a result productivity will improve. Some of the measures which organizations can take are :

1. Selection and Placement : Individuals differ in their response to stress situations. We know that 'Type A' individuals are more prone to stress. On the

other hand, in the organizations there are certain jobs which are more stressful as compared to other jobs. While doing the selection and placement of the employees, these factors must be kept in mind. The individuals who are more prone to stress should not be put on jobs which are stressful. The individuals who are less prone to stress may adapt better to high stress jobs and perform those jobs more effectively.

2. Goal Setting : Based on extensive amount of research it has been concluded that individuals perform better when they have specific and challenging goals and they receive feedback on how well they are progressing towards those goals. Goal setting can reduce stress as well as provide motivation. It will result in less employee frustration, role ambiguity and stress.

3. Improved Communication : Sometimes due to lack of effective communication from the superiors, the employees do not know what they have to do and how they have to do it. This results in role ambiguity. Similarly, when two or more persons have contradicting role demands from an employee, it reads to role conflict if there is lack of proper communication. Effective communication with employees reduces the uncertainty by lessening role ambiguity and role conflict.

4. Redesigning Jobs : Organizations should redesign the jobs in such a way as to give employees more responsibility, more meaningful work, more autonomy and increased feedback. This will help reduce the stress caused by monotony, routine work, work overload and role ambiguity. Job redesigning enhances motivation, reduces the stress among the employees and enhances "Quality of work life".

5. Participative Decision Making : If the organizations give the employees participation in those decision that directly affect them and their job performance, it can increase employee control and reduce the role stress. The main reason of role stress is that employees feel uncertain about their goals, expectations and how they will be evaluated. These uncertainties can be reduced by the management by giving the employees a right to participate in the decision making.

6. Building Teamwork : The management should try to create such work environment in which there is no provision for interpersonal conflict or intergroup

conflict. Such conflicts are the causes of stress, such should be prevented from building or eliminated if they develop. Accordingly such team work should be developed that groups and the members are mutually supportive and productive. Members of the group should consider themselves as members of the same family and seek social support from each other.

7. Personal Wellness Programmes : These personal wellness programmes focus on the employees total physical and mental condition. Organizations can provide facilities at their premises for physical fitness such as gyms, swimming pools, tennis courts etc. as well as psychological counseling. They should hold seminars or workshops to make the employees understand nature and sources of stress and the possible ways to reduce it. These workshops should help those individuals who are already under stress. Moreover, a supervisor can improve personal wellness of his subordinates through positive example, encouragement and by practicing the basic concepts and techniques of human resource management. To conclude we can say that all these strategies or a combination thereof should be applied to make the work environment less stressful to a level which is positive and challenging.

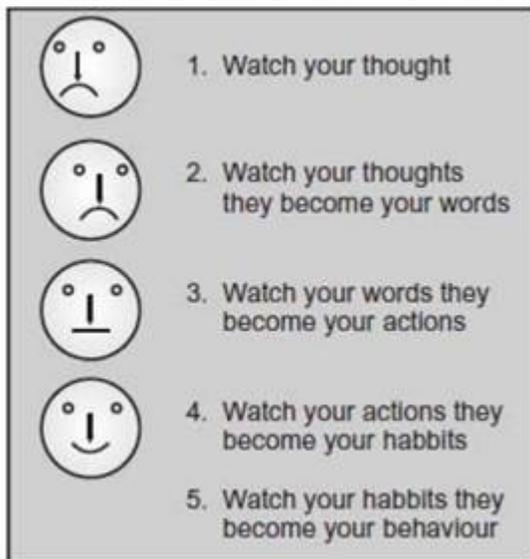


Fig. Organizational approach