How Leaders Cause Stress

For the leaders of an organization there are two levels at which workplace stress must be addressed. First at a corporate, strategic level, where a degree of stress is inevitable, given the pace and frequency of change that businesses of all kinds are experiencing today. Political, economic, environmental, social, and technological changes combine to make it essential that the organization is equipped to respond to or, better, to forecast and prepare for change. The need to manage change successfully adds to the complexities and pressures facing the leaders of the organization. Secondly, at the operational levels, stress, which affects the managers and operational staff, can be caused by many factors, not least the behavior of the operational managers themselves.

However, the leaders of the organization are responsible for the way in which the organization responds to the threat of negative stress, at both strategic and operational levels. In fact, it is often the behavior, the actions, or the style of the leader that causes the stress. Some of the most common areas in which the negative behavior of the leader can cause stress are described below.

Successful leaders ensure that their organizations are appropriately resourced. The needs of the organization's strategic objectives are assessed and funds are allocated and activity planned to deliver the necessary resources as and when required. Human resources, physical resources, technological resources, funds, and systems should all be in place or planned for. A monitoring and control process should be in place to respond to the need for changes to the plans. If these processes are not followed, then wherever the plans reach a point where the necessary resources are missing, or incomplete, the stress levels of managers and their teams will rise, as they attempt to achieve the set objectives with inadequate resources. As in most situations where the actions of the leader have lead to problems or difficulties, it is the operational level people who are the first to suffer. However, ultimately it is the organization that is damaged, through the direct repercussions of the initial mistakes causing problems in areas such as sales or customer satisfaction, and then again from the problems caused by the increase in negative stress levels.

In any organization one of the most common sources of conflict, dispute, and ensuing personal distress, are the related issues of equality of opportunity, diversity, and discrimination. The leaders of the organization must ensure that the culture of the organization and the actions of individuals supports equality of opportunity and diversity and prevents discrimination of any kind. Effective leaders do this by: making equality, diversity, and prevention of discrimination an essential, high profile element of the organization's strategies and objectives; ensuring that all staff are familiar with the organization's policies in this area and that they understand their personal responsibilities in complying with the policy; ensuring that the organizational structure and processes are receptive to the different needs and abilities of a diverse workforce; implementing a rigorous monitoring and control process to identify and deal with any breaches of the policies; dealing ruthlessly with any employee, of any status, should they act in an unfair or discriminatory manner. Leaders who do not give strong, visible leadership in these areas will be risking considerable damage being done. Without strong leadership there is a grave danger of discrimination and unfairness happening, not just at operational levels but also at the executive level. Managers behaving unfairly or in a discriminatory way, or not dealing with such behavior in others, are the cause of considerable negative stress. The repercussions of these unacceptable actions can include personal distress, the break-up of teams, the collapse of projects, internal disciplinary action, industrial tribunals or civil court action, and leave a climate of hostility, blame, conflict, and unhappiness. The impact in terms of negative stress being generated is enormous. Effective leaders prevent such disastrous repercussions, by ensuring they promote, support, and insist on fairness and equality towards all.

One of the key responsibilities of the leaders of organizations, indeed in some cases a legal requirement in itself, is to ensure that the organization complies with relevant legislation and regulations. Effective leaders do this by: monitoring the legal and regulatory environment to identify where the organization must comply; developing, implementing and maintaining effective policies and procedures to ensure that the organization meets all legal and regulatory requirements; making certain that relevant people are aware of the policies and
procedures and their responsibilities in maintaining them; implementing a monitoring, control, and corrective action system to maintain compliance; and providing appropriate resources for operational managers to carry out the policies effectively. Leaders who do not take this responsibility seriously will create opportunities for inadvertent and deliberate non-compliance. The pressures caused by this flawed approach will be felt most by individual operational managers. It is these managers who will be faced with the repercussions of non-compliance, particularly in areas such as health and safety, recruitment and selection, accounting, and finance, equal opportunities and discrimination. For these managers, and by default the operational staff, one of the results will be increased negative stress levels.

The most visible role of the leaders is, by default, to lead the organization into the future. This means planning and managing desired changes, while also responding to external forces of change. The manner in which the leader approaches this can influence the response to the changes by the organization's managers and employees, which in turn affects the levels of stress caused by the changes. Ways in which to lead change successfully are well documented. To lead change in a manner that will lead to negative stress being generated would need the leaders to: not communicate their vision of the future (or worse, not to have a vision); to actively or passively discourage consultation and participation in the change planning process; not give individuals clear information on their roles and responsibilities in implementing changes; deny individuals the influence and authority they need to successfully implement and manage change in their area; set objectives which are unachievable; make no effort to provide resources and support for the removal of barriers to change; not provide information on the progress of change activity; or not to reward successful change implementation. The result of such negative behavior would be to create delays, misunderstanding, tension, uncertainty, and conflicts, and would seriously damage the chances of the change being implemented successfully. The change process raises the negative stress levels of those implementing, or directly affected by the change. Unsuccessful change would inevitably have other negative impacts on the organization, which in turn would potentially cause more stress.

Effective leaders cultivate and develop a culture that is positive, ethical, and value driven, in order to support the organization's strategies. The personal actions and behavior of the leaders and the management of the organization should reinforce this. Agreed values are communicated across the organization and people are encouraged to pursue these cultural objectives as rigorously as the operational objectives. The condition of the organization's culture is monitored and corrected as required to maintain the set values. Poor leaders do not view developing a positive culture as important, pursuing instead only the profit-related objectives. Under such leadership the organization will deteriorate, and managers and staff will have no guidance as to how to behave professionally and ethically. One by product of this will be that unethical practices will flourish and levels of trust and openness will diminish. Conflict and disagreement will grow. In such a climate it is inevitable that an increase in negative stress will occur, as motivation and morale levels fall.

The role of a leader is, of course, to lead, but they should lead in a way which represents the values and mission of the organization. In areas such as ethics, equality of opportunity, non-discrimination, fairness and openness, the leaders must also take on the mantle of acting as a role model for others in the organization. Positive leaders will ensure that managers throughout the organization are properly trained in management skills and undertake continuous development, and that innovation and creativity is encouraged. Strong leaders will ensure that managers or staff who behave inappropriately in contradiction of the values of the organization will be removed. Leaders who do not lead in these ways will confuse and dismay others in the organization. Without strong, value driven leadership, the organization is as a ship without a captain, drifting at sea, at the mercy of the winds and the tides. The chances of the organization not running into difficulties will be slim. In such an organization stress levels will rise and the ensuing damage will add to the organization's difficulties.

It is clear that the leaders of organizations have enormous influence on the culture, the values, and the behavior of individuals, teams, managers, and the corporate body itself. It is also the case that poor or inappropriate leadership behavior will damage the organization. Until now this has not been linked to the amount of negative stress that is generated within an organization. But it is equally clear that poor, unfocused, unethical, or weak leadership will cause serious damage to the organization, both directly in terms of the consequences of poor decision making, or indirectly due to the repercussions of increases in negative stress levels in individuals within the organization. It is no longer sufficient to assess the success of a
leader by evaluating visible success factors only. The effect on stress levels, caused by the style of leadership and the actions of the leader, should also be taken into consideration. The behavior and actions of an effective leader will reduce stress levels and generate a positive, productive, and healthy workplace. The behavior and actions of a poor leader will do the opposite and increase negative stress levels and create an unhealthy and unproductive workplace. Those with responsibility for the success of the organization must ensure that the leader is one that produces a positive, healthy, and productive organization.