



Taming the Beast:

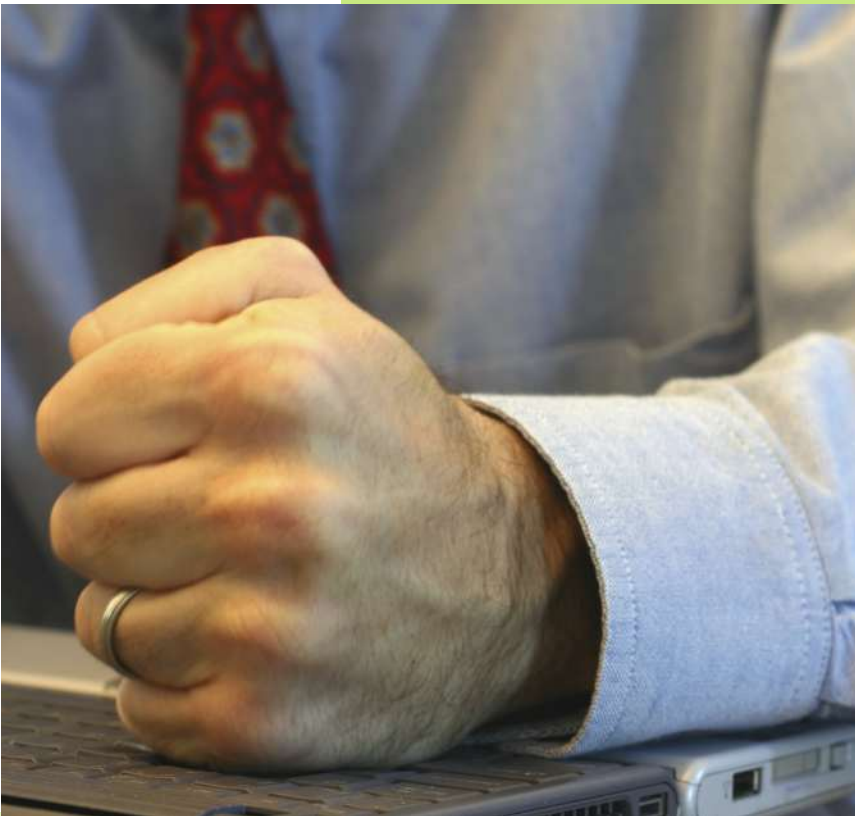
Stress Monsters or Stress Busters?

***National Stress Day:
1 November***

Gordon Roscoe

The Slow Build Up of Pressure

It is rarely a single major issue that is the trigger of stress amongst managers but usually a host of small events that together quietly build a pressure. Stress does not come galloping out of the blue one day and descend on an otherwise enthusiastic individual. It creeps slowly and quietly; at first un-noticed the changes are persistent and subtle.



It may begin with the occasional sleepless night, a shortness of temper every now and again, a passing irritability. Then gradually the attention span shortens, concentration in meetings becomes poor, you get more jumpy at sudden noises, a feeling of constant pressure is building, a grey cloud of worry lurks in the back of your mind. Irritable, restless, tired, working longer hours to achieve less, sometimes impulsive, you are becoming difficult to live with and difficult to be managed by.

Why does this happen and how can it be cured (or avoided in the first place)?

The majority of those that suffer from stress do not go off sick, but instead endure a poor working environment and perform to a standard that is much below their capability.

The Causes of Stress

There are competing theories around the development and cure of stress. The word itself has become something of a catch all term for symptoms that range from the foothills of mental illness to the downright malingering who is seeking an easy route out of a situation they don't like. This short piece is about those who hold a managerial role and are in the middle ground of this spectrum i.e. experiencing a pressure that impacts on their ability to perform.

The majority of those that suffer from stress do not go off sick, but instead endure a poor working environment and perform to a standard that is much below their capability. This has a substantial impact on themselves, their employer, their team members and their families, which means that organisations, businesses, families and society at large all under-perform because of workplace stress. It is to the benefit of all who are interested in that individual to see this stress reduced to a healthy level.

Organisations, business, families and society at large all under-perform because of workplace stress.

A little stress is good for us. We need the challenge, the threat that we might not succeed, the unexpected events to keep us on our toes. But there is a clear point beyond which that natural and invigorating stress becomes a threatening and unpleasant beast.

One factor that can substantially reduce stress for a manager is the team members who are managed by that person. When poorly managed, people become a source of stress; when well managed they become a solution. Stress monsters or stress busters - that's the choice.

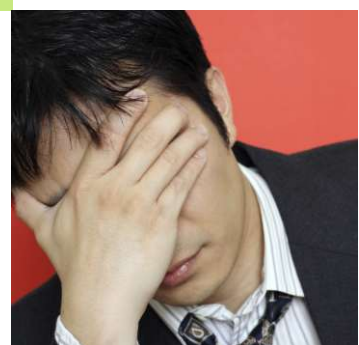
But what if that manager has never learned the skills of effective people management?

Improving Organisational Performance

Learning these skills does not mean completing a process that enables them to recite management theories, although this is the sole outcome of so much management training. Such an outcome is meaningless in the face of the 'real-world' challenges in their workplace (How many trained managers really know what to do with Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs'?). Managers need a process that leads them to achieve real behavioural change enabling them to get better performance from their people.

Are we demanding enough of this area of management development? Management Development should be something that is used to improve organisational performance and solve business challenges, and that includes the reduction of stress amongst our managers. It is a testimony to how weak management development has been that so many who hold the purse strings don't think this way. If the training of managers meant better performance and bigger profits the queues to sign up would be record breaking. Stress in the workplace is one of the greatest inhibitors toward achieving that better performance and a direct outcome from poorly managed people.

The Blue Water Partnership has conducted in excess of 600 staff surveys over the past two years, in very particular circumstances - before and after management development initiatives. The results show a distinct increase in motivation, job satisfaction and general happiness when particular management skills have been effectively developed i.e. the skills around how people are led, managed, developed and motivated.



How many trained managers really know what to do with Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs'?

Happy motivated people have less absence, are more productive and are likely to be innovative.

Happy motivated people have less absence, are more productive and are likely to be innovative. In this condition team members become an invaluable support to their manager and to each other. Not only do they dramatically reduce the amount of stress that they themselves cause their manager but they also become a source of support with regard to the stress inducing factors that come from elsewhere.

Consider one simple example. You are spending a proportion of your day troubleshooting mistakes that have taken place because of misunderstandings e.g. you ask for something to be done that is not done or not done as you expected; your people make mistakes between each other leading to circumstances that you must correct; customers sometimes misunderstand what is expected of them with troublesome results and so it goes on with suppliers, colleagues, family and anyone else that is on your radar. None of the above are major things by the way, and the organisation carries on absorbing these little bumps and bashes to its efficiency until they become part of the wallpaper, no one notices them any more. But stop, stand back and consider how the results of these miscommunications impact on you. How much of your time and energy is spent addressing them in any day or week. A five or ten minute interruption means that whatever you were doing is delayed or remains undone. Several of these in a day and that's you staying late again tonight! Work it out for yourself observe and listen to misunderstandings that take place within your team and calculate the time taken to repair the consequences.

The solution to management stress?

Is sorting out communication amongst team members the solution to management stress? No of course not, it is just one example of the kind of issue that contributes to the problem. Communication, problem solving, response to change, allocation of work, personal organisation, development of team members, respect and attitude are all contributors, and there are more. These are all aspects of the subject I am referring to as people management.

As I observed earlier stress builds not from a single large issue but from many small items. Each chips away at your time, your temper and your effectiveness. An effective focus on people management skills can go a long way to making the stress problem manageable.

Consider these two scenarios:

You are the manager of a team of enthusiastic, co-operative people. They show initiative, suggest solutions to problems, demonstrate an awareness and interest in the working of the team as a whole. They are positive and support each other to overcome challenges in times



of personal disappointment or trauma. They do this for you, just as you participate in doing it for them. Your role is to provide direction, encouragement and resources. Your team respects you as you respect them. As a unit you are productive.

You are the manager of a group of demotivated and un-cooperative people. They lack enthusiasm, bring problems to you and wait for your solution. Some of them appear to be falling behind the standards required to do the job and as such are increasingly isolated by the others. Illness and absenteeism is rife and frequently causes you to compromise your plans. Respect is grudging and between some non-existent. There are small sub-groups who knit tightly together but in strong opposition to those who are not in the group. As a unit you are struggling.

Of course both alternatives are extremes and the second is a stress inducing nightmare. I hope you are one of those enjoying the first description rather than having to live with the second.



Meeting the Challenge

My point is that both sets of circumstances are the output of management behaviour. Achieving the first stress busting model should be the objective of every manager. The primary solution to stress lies in the ability of our managers to create great teams. Add to this the responsibility placed on Senior Management by Health and Safety guidelines to reduce stress in the workplace and to assist any employee known to be suffering from stress related illness, and we have a challenge that should not be ignored.

If an organisation has not helped its manager to develop people managerial skills then we are placing those managers in unfair circumstances when we put them in the role of managing others.



When poorly managed, people become a source of stress; when well managed they become a solution.



3 big questions you need to ask yourself

- 1 *What steps do you need to take to assess the ability of your managers to handle stress in your business?*
- 2 *Does your organisation have a process of continual development for managers that will help them motivate team members and achieve measurable increased performance from them?*
- 3 *Would it be worth an hour of your time to explore the first two questions with a specialist in this field?*

Fact - measuring the difference:

The Blue Water Partnership are specialists in developing the most effective behaviours in people managers and were commissioned to develop stress reducing people management programmes for Honda (the 31st largest company in the world). The successful partnership between Blue Water and Honda UK since 2001 attracted the attention of Honda Japan and as a result Honda have requested that Blue Water's innovative coaching and mentoring techniques are delivered to Honda organisations throughout Asia and Europe.

Gordon Roscoe is Managing Director of The Blue Water Partnership, and is the author of 'Hidden Treasure - Learning to lead doesn't have to be dull' (published by Matador ISBN 1904744923), an educational novel about the skills required by managers to get the best from others.