An Overview of Strategic Planning To Combat Occupational Stress – Need of the Hour in the Present Indian Context

Shyamala.M
Assistant Professor Post Graduate Department of Commerce and Management Studies, N.S.S. College, Nemmara College P.O.Nemmara, Palakkad Kerala-678508

Abstract: Job or occupational stress is something we all face as employees or employers and we all handle it differently. Always there is a mismatch between the individual capabilities and organizational demands, the expectations of both individual and organization. Stress not only affects the physical, psychological and financial balances of an employee but also the employers as well. Desired results cannot be expected from employees who are burnt out, exhausted or stressed, as they lose their energy, accuracy and innovative thinking. By this, employers may lose more working days there by a decrease in productivity and increase in cost to company. In the present day scenario, IT and BPO companies’ jobs are termed as more competitive and stressful. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, states that job stress, now more than ever, poses a threat to the health of workers – and the health of organizations. The present paper shall bring out the general broad outline of causes of occupational stress at individual employees level and at the corporate level. It shall suggest some urgent strategic planning needed to combat the alarming raise of disorder in the health of the employee and the organization as a whole, in the present Indian context and scenario.

Key Words: Strategic Management, Stress, Coping Strategies, Occupational Stress.

I. Introduction

Occupational stress is the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. Downsizing, increased workloads, high competition, growing population etc. are taking their toll. “Stress, in essence, is a feeling of doubt about being able to cope, a perception that the resources available do not match the demands made. When it persists, stress can cause physical and psychological ill-health and adversely affect social functioning.” Occupational stress has become a common and costly problem, leaving few workers untouched. Not all stress is bad. Learning how to deal with and manage stress is critical to maximizing job performance, staying safe on the job, and maintaining physical and mental health.

Sources/Causes of Stress

The factors leading to stress among individual are called as stressors. Some of the factors/stressors acting on employees are-

1. Organizational factors- With the growth in organizational stress and complexity, there is increase in organizational factors also which cause stress among employees. Some of such factors are-
   a. Discrimination in pay/salary structure
   b. Strict rules and regulations
   c. Ineffective communication
   d. Peer pressure
   e. Goals conflicts/goals ambiguity
   f. More of centralized and formal organization structure
   g. Less promotional opportunities
   h. Lack of employees participation in decision-making
   i. Excessive control over the employees by the managers

2. Individual factors- There are various expectations which the family members, peer, superior and subordinates have from the employee. Failure to understand such expectations or to convey such expectations lead to role ambiguity/role conflict which in turn causes employee stress. Other individual factors causing stress among employees are inherent personality traits such as being impatient, aggressive, rigid, feeling time pressure always, etc. Similarly, the family issues, personal financial problems, sudden career changes all lead to stress.

3. Job concerning factors- Certain factors related to job which cause stress among employees are as follows-
   a. Monotonous nature of job
   b. Unsafe and unhealthy working conditions
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c. Lack of confidentiality
d. Crowding

4. Extra-organizational factors- There are certain issues outside the organization which lead to stress among employees. In today’s modern and technology savvy world, stress has increased. Inflation, technological change, social responsibilities and rapid social changes are other extra-organizational factors causing stress.

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Strategic Remedy

Individual Level Strategy

What is the remedy to Stress? Leaving the job – No.
Corporate change occurs, only when the staff changes individually. As an individual, an employee must change his life style with intake of healthy drinks and diet, regular physical and mental exercises.
NIOSH research suggested examples of individual and situational factors that can help to reduce the effects of stressful working conditions include the following:
• Balance between work and family or personal life
• Create support network of friends and coworkers and talk out openly
• Maintain relaxed and positive outlook/attitude
• Change the motto - No one is perfect – perform the best
• Have realistic expectations
• Have a balanced diet
• Practice relaxation and meditation
• Have thorough medical checkup at frequent intervals

Corporate Level Strategy

The corporate body has also a moral responsibility to practice healthy work culture and environment. The employee during most of the productive period of the day ie eight hours of his awaken period of the day, is available in the work place of the company. Each corporate policy makers must analyze their environment (general as well as organizational), evaluate alternative contingency strategies for likely future scenario like one that is being discussed now “The Occupational Stress”, choose the right option and implement it to equip their middle and operating level employees to cope the situation.

Experts feel that change in the attitude of the management is essential and needed. Simple measures could improve greatly the contentment and morale. Commonsense recommendations include redesigning the job
to increase variety, prevent excessive hours, and provide better support. Rewards should also be improved—both praise and interest from more senior staff and, more tangibly, working conditions, holidays, and opportunities for study leave. Participatory decision-making, skill building, social security, support etc. are some of the other attentions management must throw upon its employees. Management has to recognize its responsibility for minimizing stress, thereby reducing ill health among employees, including potentially fatal coronary heart disease.

NIOH also has identified organizational characteristics associated with both healthy, low-stress work and high levels of productivity. Examples of these characteristics include the following:

- Recognition of employees for good work performance
- Opportunities for career development
- An organizational culture that values the individual worker
- Management actions that are consistent with organizational values

Corporate Stress Prevention Strategy

- Talk to individual employees, if possible or else to their first supervisors
- Hold group discussions with employees
- Measure employee perceptions of job, working conditions, stress, satisfaction etc.
- Design a survey method
- Collect objective data
- Analyze the data and identify the problem
- Find out remedial measures
- Exposure to stressful working conditions (called job stressors)

Stress Management through Promotion of Mental Health

M - Money Management, Minimize needs, Meditation
E - Earnest Expectations, Enjoy the work you do
A - Avoid Negative thinking
T - Try to be happy Today
A - Accept and Adopt Reality
L - Avoid Loneliness
H - Develop good Hobbies
E - Live in good Environment. Express yourself clearly
A - Be Active and have positive Attitude
L - Try to Learn more and Manage Life
T - Have realistic Targets and Tackle one at a time
H - Maintain Healthy life style

The Importance of Coping

So, what is coping? One formal definition says that it’s a "process by which an individual attempts to minimize the negative emotions that arise from the experience of negative events." Another defines coping as "cognitive and behavioral efforts to deal with experiences that tax or exceed one's resources."

Organizations are continuously shifting, growing, downsizing, merging, and acquiring people and resources. Developments in technology mean that we need to learn new ways of working and communicating. We also need to know how to cope with smaller changes, such as getting to know a new team member, or learning new standards in a particular industry.

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman give us a useful way of doing this with their "Transactional Model of Stress and Coping"..

There are three stages in this model:

1. Primary appraisal.
2. Secondary appraisal.
3. Coping efforts.

II. Primary Appraisal

In your primary appraisal, you evaluate the event and its significance to you, your unique situation, and your sense of well-being. You're answering the question "Is this change going to affect you in a positive or a negative way?"

A major part of coping with change is deciding whether the change represents a threat: at this initial stage, you might not be sure what risks or opportunities this change poses for you. Conduct a SWOT
Analysis to identify the possible threats and opportunities that you will face or experience. Next, conduct a Risk Analysis to get a better sense of the risks that you might experience in this situation. It can also be helpful to conduct an Impact Analysis to identify the positive and negative consequences of the change you’re facing. Does it threaten your expert status or your job, or is the impact smaller? Or will this change make your work easier or enhance your skills? You’ll feel more in control and informed when you know both the positive and negative consequences, and this will also guide your actions in the next step. It can often be useful to talk informally about what you’re feeling – remember that it usually helps to have social support in these situations. It’s also important to manage your emotions. Try not to take negative feelings out on others, and use techniques like thought awareness to keep control of your emotions. And keep in mind that not all change is bad – often, it can be a very good thing!

III. Secondary Appraisal

Once you’ve determined how this change is going to affect you and your well-being, you can then go through a second appraisal. In this assessment, you think about how you can control what's happening by asking, "What can I do about this situation?" You also begin to look at the resources you have available for coping with this change, and you start thinking about whether these are sufficient.

Next, make a list of things that might help you through this change. Which of your current skills will help you to succeed? Do you have a skill or knowledge gap that might hinder your ability to navigate this change? And do you need additional training?

IV. Coping Efforts

Your coping efforts determine how well you handle the situation. This is where control coping and escape coping strategies often come into play. It's important to avoid common escape coping strategies, like drinking too much alcohol, lashing out emotionally, and other negative behaviors. Instead, focus on control coping, and think about how you can take control of this situation and create a positive outcome for yourself and for the people around you. People who have a positive outlook find it much easier to engage in control coping. So, use positive thinking techniques like Affirmations and Visualization to foresee a great outcome.

Symptoms of Stress

Some of the symptoms of stress at workplace are as follows-
- Absenteeism, escaping from work responsibilities, arriving late, leaving early, etc.
- Deterioration in work performance, more of error prone work, memory loss, etc.
- Cribbing, over-reacting, arguing, getting irritated, anxiety, etc.
- Deteriorating health, more of accidents, etc.
- Improper eating habits (over-eating or under-eating), excessive smoking and drinking, sleeplessness, etc.

It is thus very essential to have effective stress management strategies in an organization.

Strategies for Managing Stress

Stress experienced by the employees in their job has negative impact on their health, performance and their behavior in the organization. Thus, stress needs to be managed effectively so as to set off these harmful consequences. Strategies for managing stress are as follows-

Organizational strategies for managing stress

1. Encouraging more of organizational communication with the employees so that there is no role ambiguity/conflict. Effective communication can also change employee views. Managers can use better signs and symbols which are not misinterpreted by the employees.
2. Encourage employees’ participation in decision-making. This will reduce role stress.
3. Grant the employees greater independence, meaningful and timely feedback, and greater responsibility.
4. The organizational goals should be realistic, stimulating and particular. The employees must be given feedback on how well they are heading towards these goals.
5. Encourage decentralization.
6. Have a fair and just distribution of incentives and salary structure.
7. Promote job rotation and job enrichment.
8. Create a just and safe working environment.
9. Have effective hiring and orientation procedure.
10. Appreciate the employees on accomplishing and over-exceeding their targets.
Individual strategies for managing stress
1. The employees should make a “to-do” list daily, prioritize the acts in the list and plan the acts accordingly. Take regular breaks during work to relax you. By effective time management, the employees can achieve their targets timely and can meet work pressures and, thus, avoid stress.
2. Do hard work. Strive to achieve your goals but do not do it to the harm of family, health, or peer.
3. Indulge in physical exercises. It helps in effective blood circulation, keeps you fit, diverts mind from work pressures.
4. Encourage a healthy lifestyle. Take a regular sleep, have plenty of water, have healthy eating habits. Promote relaxation techniques such as yoga, listening music and meditation.
5. The employees should have optimistic approach about their work. They should avoid connections with negative approach employees.
6. The employees should have emotional intelligence at workplace. They should have self-awareness, self-confidence and self-control at workplace.
7. The employees should build social support. They should have close connections with trustworthy peer who can listen to their problems and boost their confidence level. This social network will help the employees to overcome stress.
8. Employee counseling is a very good strategy to overcome employee stress. Through counseling, employees can become aware of their strengths and how to develop those strengths; their weaknesses and how to eliminate them; and they can develop strategies for changing their behavior. Employees are also given career counseling which helps in reducing their ambiguities with regard to career.
9. Find a fun way to release stress, such as, cracking jokes, playing tennis, golf, etc.

Dealing with Stressful Situations: The Four A’s

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change the situation:</th>
<th>Change your reaction:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid the stressor</td>
<td>Adapt to the stressor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alter the stressor</td>
<td>Accept the stressor</td>
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Stress management strategy #1: Avoid unnecessary stress
Not all stress can be avoided, and it’s not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

- **Learn how to say “no”** – Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, refuse to accept added responsibilities when you’re close to reaching them. Taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.
- **Avoid people who stress you out** – If someone consistently causes stress in your life and you can’t turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.
- **Take control of your environment** – If the evening news makes you anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic’s got you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online.
- **Avoid hot-button topics** – If you get upset over religion or politics, cross them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it’s the topic of discussion.
- **Pare down your to-do list** – Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you’ve got too much on your plate, distinguish between the “shoulds” and the “musts.” Drop tasks that aren’t truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

Stress management strategy #2: Alter the situation
If you can’t avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Figure out what you can do to change things so the problem doesn’t present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

- **Express your feelings instead of bottling them up.** If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you don’t voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.
- **Be willing to compromise.** When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you’ll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.
- **Be more assertive.** Don’t take a backseat in your own life. Deal with problems head on, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them. If you’ve got an exam to study for and your chatty roommate just got home, say up front that you only have five minutes to talk.
- **Manage your time better.** Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you’re stretched too thin and running behind, it’s hard to stay calm and focused. But if you plan ahead and make sure you don’t overextend yourself, you can alter the amount of stress you’re under.

**Stress management strategy #3: Adapt to the stressor**
If you can’t change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.
- **Reframe problems.** Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to your favorite radio station, or enjoy some alone time.
- **Look at the big picture.** Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.
- **Adjust your standards.** Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with “good enough.”
- **Focus on the positive.** When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.

**Adjusting Your Attitude**
How you think can have a profound effect on your emotional and physical well-being. Each time you think a negative thought about yourself, your body reacts as if it were in the throes of a tension-filled situation. If you see good things about yourself, you are more likely to feel good; the reverse is also true. Eliminate words such as “always,” “never,” “should,” and “must.” These are telltale marks of self-defeating thoughts.

**Stress management strategy #4: Accept the things you can’t change**
Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You can’t prevent or change stressors such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it’s easier than railing against a situation you can’t change.
- **Don’t try to control the uncontrollable.** Many things in life are beyond our control—particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.
- **Look for the upside.** As the saying goes, “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.
- **Share your feelings.** Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with a therapist. Expressing what you’re going through can be very cathartic, even if there’s nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation.
- **Learn to forgive.** Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

**Stress management strategy #5: Make time for fun and relaxation**
Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you’ll be in a better place to handle life’s stressors when they inevitably come.

**Strategies adopted by different organizations**

**Volvo Car Company**
Volvo Car Company in Sweden is an example who adopted stress management techniques. It introduced innovations such as job rotation to widen workers’ skills, and less authoritarian management style that improved productivity and decreased depression and tiredness.

**Disaster Risk Management Programme**
A Disaster Risk Management Programme has been taken up in 169 districts in 17 multi-hazard prone States with the assistance from UNDP, USAID and European Union. Under this project, the States are being assisted to draw up State, district and Block level disaster management plans; village disaster management plans are being developed in conjunction with the Panchayati Raj Institutions and disaster management teams consisting of village volunteers are being trained in various preparedness and response functions such as search
and rescue, first aid, relief coordination, shelter management etc. They have been conducting classes and offering training to reduce stress when they are prone to a disaster.

**GlaxoSmithKline**

GlaxoSmithKline’s approach to stress prevention is significant as it is characterized by the support and commitment of individuals at the very top levels of the company to employee well-being. Top management shows awareness of the importance of employee health and provides the funding necessary to introduce stress prevention activities. Sixty six members of staff make up the Employee Health Management Group, which is a part of the Human Resources department that has been given the role of developing standards and strategies for understanding, preventing and managing stress in the workplace. Under the guidance of this body and the Health and Safety department, managers are responsible for implementing employee health and well-being standards, for example the global ‘Resilience and Mental Wellbeing’ standard, which was introduced with the support of senior officials in the organization such as the Corporate Executive Team and the Senior Vice President of Human Resources.

**TATA GROUP**

To deal with work-related or personal stress of employees, companies are increasingly setting up helplines. Last year, Siemens India initiated Employee Assignment Programme (EAP) to assist employees in dealing with stress at work or in their personal lives. There are times when businesses need to be restructured and jobs become redundant. Organizations will do well in using counseling services and outplacement agencies to help employees in such situations.

**JOHNSON AND JOHNSON**

Resiliency Training and Energy Management technique is adopted by Johnson and Johnson. Employee assistance programs are both reactive and pro-active. Johnson & Johnson offers services to help employees learn to manage stress before it manifests in physical or emotional illness. Resiliency training gives employees stress management skills and provides techniques that increase personal ability to quickly bounce back from the ups and downs of life. As a means to achieve optimal employee performance the concepts of Energy Management are being brought to Johnson & Johnson employee populations at site locations through an internal initiative called, Energy for Performance in Life. This is an integrated solution designed to teach participants how to maximize their personal energy, to feel physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused and more aligned with their own personal mission.