

# *Managing Through Pressured Times*

## **Overview**

Understanding and recognizing pressure in the workplace and ways to support employees as well as yourself.

- How pressure and stress affect employees
- Take care of yourself
- Ways to manage work pressure
- Offering support

Many factors contribute to pressure in the workplace, including change and reorganization, tight deadlines, understaffing, overwork, and the rapid pace of work today. Employees and managers alike may feel under pressure from time to time given these conditions. While some work pressure is good -- it can motivate us to push ourselves and reach toward higher goals -- too much pressure can adversely affect our health, well-being, and productivity. This is true for both you and the people you manage. Managers who recognize the pressures people are under and who make efforts to ease these pressures in the workplace have more productive and committed teams.

## **How pressure and stress affect employees**

Begin by becoming familiar with the signs of pressure and stress in yourself and others. The signs include

- an increase in work-related complaints
- negative comments about co-workers, management, or customers
- being less focused and taking longer to complete tasks
- making more mistakes than usual
- being irritable or losing your temper
- an increase in physical complaints
- a rise in absenteeism

## **Take care of yourself**

Before you can help employees manage feelings of pressure and stress, you must first take care of yourself. Flight attendants always advise parents to put on their own oxygen masks before helping their children put on theirs. The same logic applies here: You'll be a more effective and engaged manager, and a better role model, if you take care of yourself. Here are some suggestions:

- *Develop relationships with people whom you can turn to for support.* These might be colleagues, friends, mentors, family members, as well as a counsellor or therapist.

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Pressure can build up and be harder to manage when you try to handle it on your own.

- *Be aware of how many hours you are working.* Plan your time so that you can accomplish your work goals while making time for yourself.
- *Be aware of the symptoms and signs of stress in yourself.* Then be deliberate about managing these feelings. The signs of stress include:
  - trouble falling asleep or going back to sleep once awakened
  - fatigue
  - depression
  - feeling nervous, anxious, irritable, or on edge
  - trouble concentrating
  - overeating, or having no appetite
  - withdrawing from family or friends
  - tearfulness or frequent crying
  - tense muscles
  - stomach pain, upset stomach, or headache
  - drug or alcohol abuse
  - lower productivity at work
- *Get exercise and find ways to relax.* Both are excellent ways to reduce feelings of pressure and stress.
- *Take advantage of the programs and benefits your employer offers to help you reduce stress.*
- *Seek professional help if you are feeling under a lot of pressure or if symptoms of stress persist.* Contact your doctor or the program that provided this publication. Or you might talk with an on-site nurse or doctor if this service is available in your workplace. Talk with your health care provider if you are concerned about any aspect of your physical or mental health.

### **Ways to manage work pressure**

Here are specific ways to manage work-related pressure:

- *Be aware of people's workloads.* Avoid giving people more work than they can handle. It's easy to fall into the trap of offloading extra work, especially to your top performers. Eventually, the pressure and overload will take its toll on people, productivity, and morale.
- *Know how long your staff works.* A manager should know who's pushing himself or herself too hard. If someone's hours seem particularly long, watch and keep a record for your own use only. It's not micromanagement to make sure that your valued

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producers don't burn themselves out. If people work late consistently, take the time to discuss this.

- *Make sure that work is appropriately and fairly distributed.* Some people are adept at getting less than their fair share of assigned work. Others can't say no, even when they are already overloaded.
- *Help people prioritize tasks.* Perhaps assignments with a lower priority could be eliminated to focus on the most value-added work during pressured times. Perhaps a tight deadline could be extended. Partner with and coach employees to come up with solutions to manage job demands and reduce stress. It's OK to say, "Put that on a back burner for now."
- *Manage upward for relief.* At times, it can be hard to balance the needs of your group with your need to support your own manager. But it's well worth the effort. When your group is asked to do too much, negotiate for resources. Perhaps part of a new project could go to another group; maybe a support department, like finance, could help with the numbers. Can you get a temp or have someone from another area assigned to you temporarily? Be prepared to quantify the problems you see for your area and to provide specific examples such as, "Last month we had a 20 percent increase in workload. If we're going to do more work, could we look at our project list and decide what can go on a back burner?"
- *Give people plenty of recognition for work done well.* Show that you appreciate everyone's hard work. People need to feel appreciated, especially during challenging times. Give public or private recognition -- at meetings, and by sending e-mails to employees and the team calling attention to people's hard work and good efforts. (Remember to copy upper management when appropriate.) Positive feedback always counters the pressure.
- *Communicate often.* Sometimes in a high-pressure environment, it's easy to stop meeting with people both as a group and individually to keep them informed and listen to their ideas. If you make meeting with people a priority, however, the payback in morale and productivity will outweigh the cost of the time you spend.
- *Help employees maintain a sense of control.* Encourage people to set concrete goals each week. Especially during pressured times, we all need something positive to focus on -- goals we can achieve and feel good about. Help break projects down into small steps. Say, for example, that someone is starting a product-development initiative. Together, choose a first step. "This week get the introductory memo to the group written and sent out," or "This week begin benchmarking activity." This results in a concrete achievement, something to cross off the list at the end of the week. Also, to the extent that people can have input about their assignments and how they're carried out, they'll feel a greater sense of control.
- *Work at building trust.* Be as open and candid as you can be and tell the truth whenever possible. Honest leaders inspire a greater sense of teamwork and their

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employees have more positive work attitudes. If you are honest and straightforward, employees will trust you and the organization. Employees appreciate a direct, "I don't know" answer when it's the truth. It's better than giving a vague or an untruthful answer.

- *Share what you know with employees.* Use staff meetings to share information that is given to management. Give frequent updates, especially during times of change, so that employees won't feel you're keeping information from them.
- *Help people keep moving forward.* For example, if an employee talks with you about all the objectives she did not accomplish this year, you might say: "Well, it was good to review last year's challenges and learn from our experiences. Now think of all the great things you *have* accomplished and concentrate on putting a plan together to get back on track to finish what's left on our list."

#### Offering support

During pressured times, it's more important than ever to offer support to employees and to be responsive to people's needs and concerns. Here are ways you can offer support to people during pressured times:

- *Encourage people to take short breaks.* Even a 10-minute break away from a stressful or tense situation -- to get a few minutes of fresh air or to practice deep breathing or relaxation techniques -- helps.
- *Offer your support in big and small ways.* Research shows that support from one's manager is a key driver in reducing employees' feelings of pressure and stress.
- Ask what you can do to help.
- Be available. Create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable enough to drop by your office to ask a question, talk, or express a concern.
- Make sure people know you are available for coaching and advice.
- *Let employees know that there's an end in sight.* If you know that the workload will lighten up or that this period of change will be over by a certain time, give your employees this information. We can sprint for a long time if we can see the light at the end of the tunnel.
- *Talk about the pressure employees are feeling.* Acknowledge the pressures people are under. You might say, "We are all going through a difficult time. We'll find solutions together."
- *Give employees the support and training they need to handle difficult customers* and to get through challenging days at work.
- *Focus on building relationships.* Friendships and social support at work take the pressure off for all of us. Encourage team activities that are not connected to work or performance, such as potluck lunches or quarterly celebrations. If employees

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complain that they don't have time, tell them you consider it important and value people's participation. But don't force anyone to participate.

- *Encourage people to pay attention to their physical and emotional health.* Without being intrusive, remind employees of the importance of getting regular exercise and of taking care of themselves. Give people permission to make time for exercise or to go to a quiet space for relaxation. During casual conversations, you can also talk about health in the news. "Did you read the study about the health benefits of walking?"
- *Make sure employees see you take time to de-stress and to exercise* or take time out for lunch or a walk. Talk about the things you're doing to protect your own well-being. If you go to a gym, talk about it. If you go hiking with your kids, talk about it. Then ask people if they have any interesting plans for the weekend. This allows you to set an example and to get people thinking about their own need for balance and rejuvenation.
- *Watch for signs of burnout.* Signs of burnout might include a loss of interest in or enthusiasm for work, as well as an increase in health problems such as headache or backache. If you have concerns about an employee, your human resources representative or the program that provided this publication might be able to help.
- *Help people maintain their perspective.* It's easy to lose focus and can be difficult to plan ahead when you're under a lot of pressure. Remind employees to step back and regain perspective from time to time.
- *Remind people to enjoy their lives outside of work.* When times are difficult, it's especially helpful to say something like, "Well, this weekend, I'm going to focus on being with friends. That's what helps me feel better."

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