

Chapter 4

The Stress Profile: The Influence of Personal Characteristics on Response to Occupational Trauma

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the interrelationship between personal characteristics, such as resilience, emotional intelligence, and optimism, and the ability to cope with occupational stress and organizational trauma. Although the availability of stress management resources can offer some pre-emptive measures to reduce the mental, physical, and organizational impact of trauma, this is but part of the prevention equation. The role of the individual, and the person's character in particular, is of paramount importance, as it can also offset and even deter the impact of trauma, and the effects of stress in general. Even in situations where individuals are exposed to the same type of stressor and same degree of pressure, the ability to cope can vary a great deal from person to person. The proposal of the authors is that the nurturing of specific personality traits, attitudes, and behaviors can prove beneficial both on an individual and organizational level.

INTRODUCTION

Companies have made great strides toward understanding the value of “human capital”; after all, the web overflows with articles on how to lead, Top 10 lists of Dos and Don'ts for managers, and tips on how to structure salary and benefit packages. However, many companies still fail to grasp the importance of employee well-being, paying only lip service to the concept of work-life balance. Some even feel that catering to employee well-being would detract from productivity. The truth, of course, is that efforts to promote well-being at work makes a lot of business sense, and failure to do so can be expensive in terms of increased risk for accidents, absenteeism, productivity cost, and stress-related health issues.

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The Statistic Brain Research Institute (2015) quotes the annual cost of stress-related healthcare and absenteeism at \$300 billion, with nearly a third of the American sample indicating that they are “always” or “often” stressed at work.

Well-being is a broad concept that can represent and include many things. It can encompass physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being. It takes into account everything from healthy personal relationships to sleep hygiene, leisure, and a fulfilling career. Moreover, well-being extends far beyond financial prosperity. In a nutshell, well-being is a state of being content, healthy, and prosperous. At the bare minimum, it is a satisfactory condition of existence. However, in order to truly grasp the concept of well-being, it is important to understand what it isn't: Well-being is not the absence of stress, because stress can be healthy, at least to some degree. In the right circumstances and with the right mindset, it offers people a motivational push or the momentum to take action and to keep trying. It is only when stress reaches an unhealthy level that it starts to affect well-being (Müeller, Heiden, Herbig, Poppe, & Angerer, 2016).

What is an unhealthy level of stress? The answer to this loaded question is: “It depends.” While all humans go through the same pattern of stress response, there are major individual differences in how we react to stressors. People's perception of the same stressor will vary widely, and their reaction can go from a mild annoyance to a full-blown panic. Some people take on a challenge with ease and enthusiasm, while others are paralyzed when faced with the same obstacle. In the same vein, people react to trauma in a variety of ways, depending on their psychological make-up, physical and mental fortitude, attitudes, beliefs, past experiences, support network and available resources. In fact, psychological trauma can be conceptualized as a case of extreme, acute stress, resulting from exposure to a severely distressing event, oftentimes outside the realm of normal human experience.

There are many factors that influence our reaction to stress and trauma. Our genetic make-up may predetermine our level of reactivity, but it is modulated by life experiences, training, and environment. This chapter focuses on clusters of personal characteristics; it explains how they influence the stress reaction and how they impact a person's response to trauma. Certain personality traits, attitudes, emotional processes, behaviors and competencies, if developed and nurtured, can help employees deal with traumatic experiences, while other characteristics can predispose them to an exaggerated stress response. Research on paramedics revealed that those who practiced adaptive coping strategies in response to trauma experienced better post-traumatic adjustment (positive psychological changes as a result of the trauma), while extroversion, one of the Big Five personality traits, can offer the same benefits for police officers (Paton, 2005). In times of distress, these characteristics come into play on 1) an individual level, with personal constellations of adaptive or maladaptive characteristics determining how a person copes, and 2) on an organizational level, in which employees may feed off each other's fears *or* strengths, based on the combination of the team's individual personal characteristics and team dynamics. The authors' propose the theory that the best way to make an organization resilient, particularly when dealing with trauma, is to help individuals develop and nurture specific protective traits, attitudes, and skills. Stress and trauma may be inevitable, but they do not have to completely impede the operational functions and progress of an organization. The goal of this chapter is to offer insight into how to reduce employee stress as a result of trauma and mitigate its impact on the company. In order to do so, it is essential to understand the different personal factors that can contribute to a person's response to stress and trauma, and how both the individual employee and management can play a role in reducing their impact.

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