

Hardiness Development Adds to the Bottom Line

By Barbara Semeniuk, CRSP & Leslie Furlow, Ph.D., RN

With the current shortage of labor resources, strategies to attract and maintain quality employees must be improved. The idea of creating a workplace that will act as a magnet and pull more quality people into the organization needs to be explored in detail.

Employees are experiencing more stress in the workplace. Stress is especially increased when there are not enough employees to perform the work. Employees who work in an understaffed organization often are required to do more with less. They feel a sense of powerlessness and a loss of control, which create a vicious cycle and escalate stress.

Stress was first explored scientifically as a result of battle fatigue among soldiers in combat situations. Symptoms of stress lead to failure to fire arms, surrendering without cause and generally becoming ineffective.

Selye, often identified as the father of stress research, defined stress in terms of eustress and distress. He recognized that although a certain amount of stress—called eustress—is necessary for normal function, too little stress as in the use of isolation chambers that were popular for some types of therapy, can result in psychosis and other kinds of mental distress.

Less dramatically, too little stress can result in boredom and lack of engagement in work activities. Optimum levels of stress result in individuals feeling engaged and challenged by life. They enjoy what they do, and they have maximum productivity. Stress follows a bell curve (Figure 1). If too much stress, referred to as distress, exists, it can result in frustration and burnout.

Burnout is epitomized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low

FIGURE 1 Stress Level

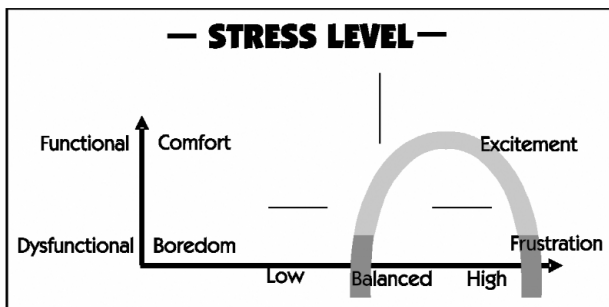


FIGURE 2 Individual Consequences of Stress: Burnout

Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Low Personal Accomplishment
Feel drained by work	Have become calloused by job	Cannot deal with problems effectively
Feel fatigued in the morning	Treat others like objects	Does not have a positive influence on others
Frustrated	Does not care what happens to others	Cannot understand others' problems or identify with them
Does not want to work with others	Feel other people blame you	No longer feel exhilarated by job

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personal accomplishment. Depersonalization results in a calloused response where empathy is lost and people are treated like objects. These calloused individuals tend to blame others for their problems, or they feel persecuted.

When they lose productivity and focus, they cannot deal with problems effectively, cease to be positive role models and no longer seek to understand people's issues. They see work as a chore and are no longer excited about their job. These are the consequences of burnout, which many companies fail to recognize or address effectively (Figure 2).

According to a survey by *USA Today*, people work for their supervisor, not for the senior administrator. By increasing the hardiness of managers, we increase the hardiness of the employee and provide a skill set that can be applied in all realms of their lives. By becoming harder, individuals are able to perform better and become more productive in all aspects of their lives.

Therefore, if burnout is present in the management ranks, the problem is exacerbated. As they no longer model appropriate positive behaviors, their frustration and irritability are reflected in their subordinates. This engages the feedback mechanism, which further increases workplace stress and creates a toxic workplace environment where absenteeism increases and productivity plummets.

Although companies are quietly aware of this syndrome in their environment, they do not discuss it, as they lack a method of correcting it. Thus, there is the

flavor-of-the-month mentality where thousands of dollars are spent with little or no return. Exacerbating this tendency is that few training methodologies even track the impact of training over time. These metrics must be measured and trends analyzed to gain maximum benefit from this training strategy.

Research has shown that hardy individuals perceive less stress and thrive in challenging environments. Hardiness, first described by Maddi and Kobasa, provides the necessary skill set to address burnout effectively. For many companies, growth is hampered by huge payments they must make to disabilities resulting from stress-related illness and accidents.

It is reported that by 2008, stress, as part of mental illness, will be the number one cause of workplace absenteeism. By not addressing this issue, companies are leaving millions on the table. By decreasing unscheduled absenteeism alone, companies can increase the bottom line without spending a dime to increase market share (Figure 3).

Hardiness, a personality construct consisting of commitment, control and challenge, offers a research-based answer to these and to other workplace issues. Hardiness has been shown to reduce unplanned absenteeism (or mental health days), increase productivity and decrease unwanted staff turnover by as much as 63% in a study of nurse managers by Judkins and Furlow.

Amazingly, hardiness can be learned. However, it is not a flavor of the month since it requires habituation and personal change. Hardiness requires organizational commitment from senior management as well as policies and procedures that enhance and foster hardiness.

Adaptive behaviors are an integral part of the equation. As with any change, there is resistance that must be overcome by spaced repetition and conditioned learning. Hardiness development is development in the true sense of the word. It requires planned follow-up for monitoring goal-setting activities. It has been shown to foster teamwork and friendship among participants. This often results in breaking down of silos within highly bureaucratic organizations.

Since hardiness is a learned skill, it requires practice and follow-up at regular intervals to ensure that it has stuck. Planned repetition at regular intervals will ensure that individuals remember the skills they are taught and apply them to situations they struggle with in the workplace.

Furthermore, the hardiness factor can be applied in all areas of life, thus enhancing an individual's ability to deal effectively with excessive amounts of stress in the family, home and in social activities. It may even prevent workplace illnesses, but more research needs to be done in this area.

The process cannot be one-size-fits-all. Reaction to stress is unique, like an emotional fingerprint, so the solution must fit the needs of the individual. This can be accomplished by incorporating, in the truest sense of adult developmental theory, the actual challenges faced by the participant and through structured learning with the facilitator and their peers. Solutions for issues are explored and tested in a safe environment. Follow-up on the retention and implementation of hardiness skills is essential to ensure that the learning has taken place.

To track effectiveness, metrics are identified prior to initiating any development process. These are client-specific and individualistic in nature. Assessment of hardiness and stress are the first steps in the process and are repeated throughout the training period. Improvements are made and have lasting impact. Reviews of absenteeism rates and organization opportunities for improvement, such as high employee turnover, a low job satisfaction score, negative corporate culture and ineffectual management, can be tracked and improved.

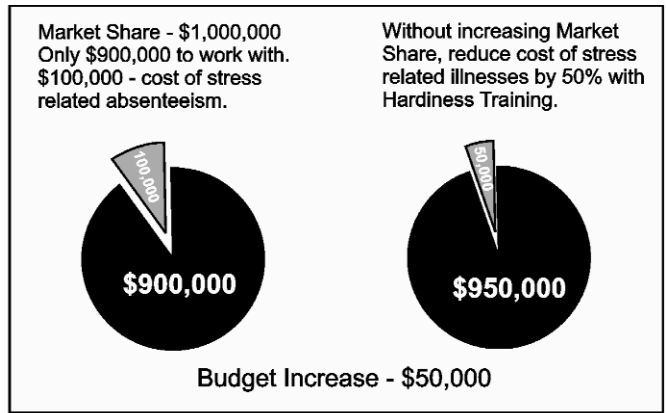
Companies can show meaningful improvement and determine the success of hardiness intervention. Scientific research methodologies are applied to

demonstrate validity and are added to the body of knowledge in this relatively new and emerging field of human behavior.

For too long, companies have ridden the process improvement wave. The time has come to begin addressing the behavioral patterns of individuals within an organization and to provide personal improvement intervention strategies. Money spent to develop effective management is well spent, as it provides a positive feedback mechanism to instill good coping strategies and model hardiness behaviors in employees. In hardiness, as in health and safety, modeling by management is one of the most effective strategies to ensure change. This positively impacts compliance and an organization's bottom line.

The use of skilled facilitators and peer interactions results in a dynamic learning environment in which bonds are forged and participants are engaged in a fun yet powerful life transformation. This investment in the company's greatest resource pays enormous dividends in loyalty, reduced turnover and increased productivity. For the 21st century this is a vital skill set to learn. Often, we are victims of organizational culture or an environment that does not affirm us as individuals.

FIGURE 3 Market Share



Changing organizational culture can be a long and drawn-out process, but adaptive strategies may be the next revolution in effective stress management. ■

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