

"MANY PEOPLE IN MANAGEMENT POSITIONS ARE CARRIERS OF STRESS-PRODUCING STYLES AND ARE UNAWARE OF THE IMPACT THIS MAKES ON SUBORDINATES AND PEERS AND THE EFFECTIVE OPERATION OF THE ORGANIZATION."

ARE YOU A STRESS CARRIER?

BY R.D.
HUMPHREY

As much as any group in the history of mankind, today's executives are overworked, pressured and pushed to the point of physical illness or emotional misery. Whether this is in fact real or imagined is irrelevant. People generally behave in ways that support their feelings, and today's executives feel they have their share of fears, anxieties and stress.

Part of the catalyst promoting a person's inability to handle the environmental problems and the accelerating fears, anxieties, and feelings of threat is the rate at which technology has outstripped his or her ability to adjust to the environment. This is succinctly described in Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock*.

It is not my purpose, however, to define stress nor to debate our innate ability to handle stress by the employment of principles of Transcendental Meditation, Zen, Yoga, Autogenic Training, Progressive Relaxation, Hypnosis, or any of the other techniques for re-

ducing hypertension. Enough hard evidence exists to satisfy even the most hardened skeptic that relaxation techniques work.¹

Many people are subjected to stress situations and to people who generate stress. Some who generate stress are aware of it and it shows in varying degrees of fear, anxiety, and feelings of being threatened. I would like to examine the converse premise that many people in management positions are carriers of stress-producing styles and are unaware of the impact this makes on subordinates and peers and the effective operation of the organization. There are still others who are aware of the fact that they are stress carriers and either do not possess the readiness, willingness or capacity to change . . . or have decided to continue with their present management style because they are unwilling to pay the price that change always exacts.

Being a "stress carrier" gets in the way of individual and organizational effectiveness. The creative genius of a staff may not reach full potential to be turned loose on the

problems of the business. Energy is directed to such games as personality confrontation, covering-up activities, win/lose strategies, blame and destructive competition rather than free-wheeling problem-solving in an organizational climate of mutual support and trust. Not only the organization suffers, but the individual, the family, and friends bear the brunt of the frustrations and torment.

Not long ago, a manager in a large industrial plant called me to discuss his relationship with his staff. The staff perceived him as being threatening. His style was abrasive and distant. The staff's perception of the manager was that he was highly intelligent and knew as much about their particular departmental functions and responsibilities as they did, which was threatening in itself for most members of the staff. It didn't take me long to diagnose this manager as a classic example of a "stress carrier." The manager felt that, as professionals, his staff should have been able to handle his incisive comments, his abrasive, probing interaction with them, and his high

expectations. He looked upon their inability to handle his style and stay with him in his emotional tirades as an indication of weakness. He confided that what he really wanted was people to stand by their guns, if right, and take him on.

After personal interviews with the staff concerning their perceptions of the manager, his style of managing, his perceptions of the staff and their interrelationship with him and with each other, I got a handle on what was going on and suggested an off-site meeting to discuss the issues of style.

During this meeting, those feelings were confronted and explored in a problem-solving atmosphere, and for the first time in years real progress was made toward a mutuality of goals. The process and content of that meeting is the subject of another discourse.

The manager realized that he still had the option of maintaining his style, but once aware of its impact, he had to own part of the responsibility for the lack of total staff commitment and the fact that all their energies were not being brought to bear on solving the organizational problems. Fortunately this manager had the capacity and the willingness to change . . . and, furthermore, he was ready!

Recent follow-up meetings with this manager indicate that the progress made during the off-site meeting is being maintained in intermittent meetings with the staff as the need arises. When things are not going right the manager and his staff now have a mechanism to get things moving again.

Once the destructiveness of certain styles is made apparent to a manager and he or she is willing to face up to it, the manager begins to realize that, if he or she elects to continue with his or her style, he or she is actually undermining the business. Most managers confronted with this option decide no matter how painful the change process, it is worth it.

Counterpoint to the manager's responsibility to change is the obligation of the staff to work with him, to work through the discom-

fort and the conflict that change always presents.

FAT Level

When things begin to fall apart now, the staff says to the manager, "Hey, boss, you're doing it again. Our FAT level (Fear, Anxiety, Threat) is going up!" They now have a mechanism to get things moving again.

The manager and his staff were eager to explore the effect of FAT levels on organizational effectiveness and some time was devoted to an understanding of these terms. Anxiety can be expressed in verbal and nonverbal behavior and is carried by everyone to some degree, and is not harmful unless it gets too high. Those individuals who suffer anxiety at severe chronic levels suffer real pain and in turn compensate emotionally by evidencing all kinds of behavior, much of which is ineffective and/or dysfunctional. Compensating behavior may be expressed in anger, fear, irrationality, withdrawal, defensiveness and antagonism. The individual feels weak, guilty, wrong, and unable to handle the problems of interrelationships or environment. His or her situational response may be "fight or flight" behavior.

Anxiety in many cases presents a companion dysfunctional behavior, that of Blame.² Since anxiety is painful and oftentimes reaches debilitating levels, it rarely is owned by the individual who suffers from it and he or she most often blames only the outside agencies as the causative agent for the anxiety.

In the subject staff's case, during the data-collection phase preparatory to the off-site meeting, I continually heard laments such as: "The boss makes me angry"; "It's his fault that I'm not as effective as I could be"; "I'd like to perform up to expectations but I can't because of his autocratic style"; "He treats me like a damn child!" It was easy and a way out of owning at least a share of the responsibility for the status quo, to blame the boss and his style of managing.

Part of the meeting activity was devoted to a layman's exploration

of emotional maturity and responsibility.

When the manager and his staff began to understand some of the psychological processes generated during humanistic interaction and situational perceptions, they began to realize the emotionally healthy individual will continue to test his or her perceptions and identify them as real or imagined. This individual learns to inhibit instinctive behavior at a stage short of its formation and by subjecting those perceptions to a test for validity or reality, he or she can then opt for behaviors that are effective and functional.

This is not easy! It can only be accomplished by painstaking communication and exploration even in the face of risk that openness and feedback always presents. Much as a person is in a continual process of "becoming," so it is with the emotionally healthy staff which is in a continual state of flux and growth.

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develop into a highly effective team, but must continually hammer out an open, mutually supportive, trusting relationship. Ideal, yes! Impossible, no. I've seen it happen on too many occasions for it to be nothing more than a whimsical dream. Where the manager and his staff are collectively involved, and committed, and understand that individual goals and organization goals can be compatibly mutual and are willing to work toward the best interests of all involved, it often does happen.

My experience in facilitating all kinds of groups, composed of varying levels of educational and cultural diversity, and interviewing hundreds of people over the past 20 years, has been that one of the causal factors in deteriorating, interpersonal relationships, including staff and manager, is that dimension of perception. It is unwise to generalize about diagnoses or organizational problems before es-

tablishing a base by data collection. However, the symptom of perception seems to emerge continually — perceptions, real or imagined.

A staff must be continually aware of perception and the effect it has on managerial decisions. A staff must be willing to continually test for validity by painstaking communication with each other and to probe the reality or the fantasy of those perceptions. Sometimes their perceptions of verbal and nonverbal behavior are real. In those cases, in order to change that client system, there must be a willingness to confront the issue of perception differences and work through problem-solving. If on the other hand the perceptual difference is imagined, then the exploration can have the effect of "clearing the air" and energies can then be directed to effectively running the business.

There is one other issue worthy of exploration that inevitably arises in any client system, whether it be a manager and his staff, husband and wife, PTA group, church, etc., and that is the issue of the desire for change. It emerged in the off-site meeting which I have briefly described. The manager at one point in the meeting turned to me and emotionally inquired, "Why can't I get my staff to do what should be done? Why can't I get them to respond to the need to change?" I asked him for more detail and he went on to explain that the quality of the product was much less than the standard he expected, the plant housekeeping was in shambles, cost and efficiency were below his expectations, and operations were over budget.

He continued he had tried to legislate change but that only made matters worse because the staff became more guarded and engaged in underground subversive activities. He commented the only way he could get what he wanted done was to periodically kick the hell out of people, and he was smart enough to realize that this method was not having the desired

result. His final complaint was that his staff would not respond to "his" needs to run the business effectively.

My answer was that while I did not have all the answers, I would be willing to share my observations and experience with him and the staff.

Establish Four Dimensions

I explained that unless four dimensions were established, change on any lasting basis would probably not occur. These four dimensions have been set forth in formula form by David Gleicher of Arthur D. Little and they are referred to in Richard Beckhard's "Large System Change," appearing in *Sloan Management Review* (Winter 1975). Gleicher's formula presents itself as $C=(A+B+D)X$. I have added the initial anachronism MM to the formula so that for my purposes it appears in this manner: $C=(A+B+D)^{MM}X$. I went on to explain my conception of the formula to the manager and his staff as:

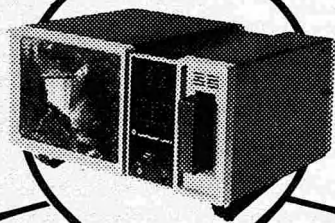
- Let "C"=change. The change desired by any client system because the formula has broad and unlimited application and presents a model for most situations.

- Let "A" designate a growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. I call it the "Ain't it awful syndrome." You can hear this all over most organizations and in any client system. Not much happens as a result of this particular factor in the formula.

- Let "B" represent a knowledge of what the relationship, situation or organization would look like if the change were to occur. Most people can get to the "A"; some can get to the "B" stage; many desire change but don't know what the results would be if the change took place. It can be further described as, "If I had a magic twanger, how would I like things to be?"

- Let "D" stand for at least a knowledge of the basic steps necessary to set the change process in motion. My experience has been that this really throws most peo-

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ple. This factor in the formula gets into problem-solving skills, takes practice, provides risk and is absolutely necessary for any worthwhile change to take place.

The dimension of "Management Model" (MM) is one I have plugged into the formula because my experience has shown that, unless management is willing and ready to model the behavior or attitudes it expects out of the client system, the system will not take the request for change seriously. It involves the incongruity between what is said and what is done and all that this implies. Any client system must model the expected behavioral change and that of the intended change, otherwise the client system will not trust the seriousness of the intent to change.

With those four dimensions in place, change probably will not occur until the desire for change is greater than the cost, which is represented by the letter "X". Cost is described as either emotional or monetary. In the case of emotional cost, I am referring to the pain of

working through the conflict, the motivating energy to work through task analysis, and the skill and patience of problem-solving. It is only then that any meaningful, lasting change will take place. I have worked with organizations and groups who never get beyond the "Ain't it awful" syndrome. They become more frustrated than their original state.

One other observation seems appropriate and that is the emergence in most confrontation meetings or problem-solving sessions involving humanistic dimensions: "We tend to excuse in ourselves the things for which we hold others accountable."

In this case the manager was in fact a true "stress carrier." He recognized it after discussion with his staff. The staff in turn recognized its counter responsibility to be true unto themselves and not embrace his style of management. For, if they were to embrace his style, this could have a modeling effect and they too would become "stress carriers."

People possess the capacity to reduce the amount of stress they carry. This capacity is known as reflection, contemplation, awareness, assessment, decision to change, willingness to risk, practice of the new style of behavior, maintenance of that change even in the face of adversity, and a continual pursuit of personal growth.

REFERENCES

1. Benson, Herbert, "Your Innate Asset for Combating Stress," *Harvard Business Review*, July, August 1974.
2. Blame, for purposes of this paper is used in the context as the propensity to transfer ownership and responsibility for our feelings to another as the agency creating that feeling and to refuse to own the responsibility for our feelings, emotions, and behavior.

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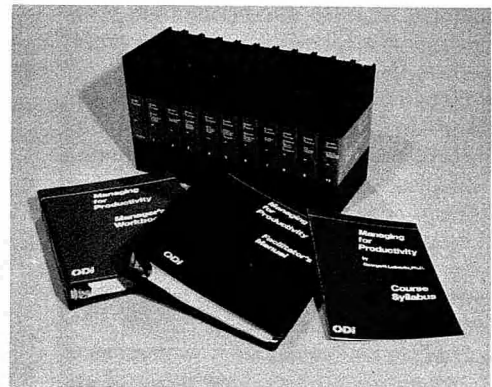
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