

Managing

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Reducing Stress in Your Workplace

You've had a couple of clients complain about your staff in the past month. One client indicated that the receptionist had been rude to her when she arrived for a meeting. Another client informed you that he was having difficulty getting a particular lawyer to return his calls. Are these isolated incidents or symptoms of something more? You assess the situation. You discover that absenteeism is up. Staff are not being supportive of each other. Interpersonal conflicts are on the rise. As you reflect further, you realize that your own fuse is shorter, you are not sleeping well, and you are having difficulty concentrating. What's behind all this negativity? These are all signs that the stress level of your office is unhealthy.

Workplace stress. We can't seem to completely alleviate it, especially in the legal profession. However, when it gets too high, the results are detrimental to your organization, ranging from increasing incidents of illness in your staff, to alienating valuable

clients, and to negatively affecting morale, productivity and, ultimately, your firm's financial well-being. Is it time to address the stress level in your workplace?

Challenge Is Good, Stress Is Bad

We often hear that stress on the job can be good for us, but actually we are confusing challenge and stress. Challenge is a stimulating task or problem. Challenge makes work interesting, motivating and often fun. Stress makes work dangerous, both on a psychological and a physical level. And stress can have an extremely negative effect on client satisfaction. It is difficult for you and your staff to maintain a high level of service and commitment to your clients while dealing with the harmful effects of stress at the same time.

If you suspect that your firm is under the influence of high doses of stress, it is important for you, as a firm leader, to proactively seek out ways to reduce the stress—and gain the support of others in doing so—as quickly as possible. Too often we in the legal profession believe that high levels of stress are just natural by-products of our industry. But healthy environments are not highly stressful. Stress is present, but it never reaches levels that negatively affect the organization, the people in it or the clients they serve.

What Causes Workplace Stress—Four Hot Spots

To begin the process of reducing workplace stress, you must first understand what causes it. The causes stem from several areas, including four that are particularly relevant to the legal profession.

Supervisory styles. Supervisors can have the greatest impact on the stress level of those under their direction. Inadequate supervisory skills often go hand-in-hand with poor communications, unreasonable demands, unclear instructions and little involvement in decision making for those being supervised. All those factors contribute to increased stress for everyone, including the supervisor, since it's likely his or her needs are going unmet as well.

Interpersonal relationships among personnel. Often people describe law firm environments as places with little interpersonal interaction. Many describe the feeling as one of isolation. When the social environment does not allow for developing interpersonal relationships and support for one another, stress results.

Responsibilities and characteristics of specific positions. This encompasses major stressors such as unclear job expectations, too much responsibility given for the level of experience, a hectic pace that doesn't allow for enough thinking and creative time, long hours with little or no time to



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reenergize, and little meaning in or control over one's work.

Individual career concerns. Feelings of job insecurity and lack of opportunity for growth, challenge and advancement all induce high stress for individuals.

How Managers Can Decrease the Strain

Once you understand the root causes of workplace stress, you can recognize the essential role that you, as a supervisor, play in creating an environment that boosts morale and keeps stress at a minimum. Take a look at your own management skills and make sure they are up to par. (See the January/February 2003 Managing column, "Resolve to Become a Better Supervisor.")

Your guidance and support for staff is your number one tool here. Make sure employees understand that their contributions are valuable and they play an important role in the firm's success. Ask them what they need to reduce their personal stress levels. You'll probably find that each person has some specific needs to be addressed. For example, one may need to have her role with specific clients clarified. Another may need some morning schedule flexibility because he has to drop off children at daycare.

Communication is a critical element in reducing stress. Communication goes to the heart of any relationship, whether we're talking personal or professional. Without it, individuals do not have a sense of belonging or commitment to the relationship. That, in turn, results in higher stress, as well as decreased morale and motivation.

So what should you be doing to enhance the environment in your workplace?

■ Always make sure important information is communicated to staff at all levels and that open communication is the rule in your firm, not the exception. Research finds that when individuals are encouraged to share information, to be listened to and to listen to others, most report a high level of satisfaction and little long-term stress.

■ Promote a team environment whereby individuals feel comfortable supporting and helping one another. Creating a workplace that encourages social interaction is one of your firm's best defenses against stress. It also promotes higher levels of efficiency and productivity—important side benefits of a collegial environment.

■ Give employees appropriate decision-making control over their jobs. Empower them by allowing them to make as many job-related decisions as possible, to organize their work in ways that best fit their own styles, and to have the freedom to improve how the work is done as they progress. Make sure that employees have the necessary training, coaching and other resources that will allow them to face challenges with effective and productive behaviors.

The Outcome Is Greater Career and Client Satisfaction

Some workplace stress may be an inevitable part of practicing law. But leaving high levels unchecked and unaddressed can only have negative impacts on your life and the lives of others with whom you work. Reducing workplace stress, therefore, is an essential goal in creating an environment in which you and your employees can enjoy satisfying careers and keep your clients happy. LP

Action Plan

- Assess the stress level in your work environment. Is it causing unproductive behaviors, low morale and client dissatisfaction? Working with your staff, identify the root causes of the stress.
- Determine whether your own supervisory style or that of other supervisors contributes to the high stress level. Consider ways to improve supervisory skills and begin working on them immediately.
- Is there positive interaction between people in your workplace? Make it a rule that your office be a supportive environment. Don't just say it! Be a role model of supportive behaviors, including open communication.
- Talk with each person you supervise about his or her position. Do your people have the responsibility level and decision-making power appropriate for their abilities and experience? Do they receive the necessary training and support, so that challenges are motivating instead of stressful?
- Read these helpful resources:

Managing Workplace Stress: A Best Practice Blueprint by Stephen Williams and Lesley Cooper. J. Wiley & Sons, 2002.

Managing Workplace Stress by Susan Cartwright and Cary L. Cooper. Sage Publications, 1997.

Stress in the Workplace: Past, Present and the Future by Jack Dunham. Taylor and Francis Group, 2000.

Keeping Good Lawyers: Best Practices to Create Career Satisfaction by M. Diane Vogt and Lori-Ann Rickard. ABA, 2000.

The Lawyers Guide to Balancing Life and Work: Taking the Stress Out of Success by George W. Kaufman. ABA, 1999.