

Effective Ways to Combat Excess Workplace Stress

Do you feel stressed? Chances are, if you're an executive or manager in the chemical or allied industries, the answer is a resounding "yes!"

Companies in these industries are not only exposed to common workplace stressors such as office politics and deadlines, but they are forced to deal with even heavier burdens such as lawsuits, time-to-market pressures, strict quality standards, and tough EPA and FDA compliance guidelines.

Workplace stress has been blamed for everything from absenteeism and accidents, to employee turnover, diminished productivity, skyrocketing medical, legal and insurance costs, and even an increase in workers' compensation awards. Statistics show that 40% of employees state that their jobs are stressful, and 25% view their job as the No. 1 stressor in their lives.

With all of this stress, how do you prevent your team from becoming a statistic?

First, it is important to note that stress in and of itself is not an entirely bad thing. Some types of stress actually help



drive performance and can be the basis for extraordinary accomplishments. The problem occurs when stress becomes excessive. Too much pressure can be crippling. However, with the implementation of a few simple measures, you can help identify, harness, and channel the stress in your department and use it to your advantage.

To eradicate negative stress, you must first identify the root causes—not only in the company, but within each department. In order to accomplish this task, you must get feedback from your employees. This can be done through one-on-one reviews, town hall meetings, or attitude and opinion surveys. Some of the common causes of stress are outlined here—along with suggestions for combating them.

Heavy Workload and Burnout

Burnout and turnover are the natural products of excessive workloads. While tight budgets require that we get more done with fewer resources, the pressure can become too much to bear as existing staff become stretched beyond their capacity or capability. Here are some solutions:

- **Provide a light at the end of the tunnel.** We can all force ourselves to work harder—to a point. When there's no end in sight to the demands being made, we

often lose our motivation. So, when you ask people to step up and do more, let them know how long the new responsibilities will last. If there is no defined end point, articulate the results that have to be achieved to put an end to the extra work.

- **Reward results.** Provide incentives for achieving improved productivity and cost savings. By sharing some of the gain, you create a stake for employees and the stress becomes more bearable.

- **Provide training.** One of the most often overlooked causes of stress is not the quantity of work, but the employee's ability to perform the work. As workforces shrink, people are frequently asked to perform duties for which they are not adequately trained. While often a great opportunity, this can lead to frustration, depression and burnout.

- **Take a break.** Encourage employees to take brief rest breaks throughout the day. Even professional staffs need an occasional time-out to recharge their batteries.

- **Redesign the workspace.** To reduce physical stress, have workspaces ergonomically designed.

Poor Communication

Supervisors who do not communicate openly with their staff do themselves and their companies a disservice. Nature abhors a vacuum, and in the absence of accurate information, people will draw their own conclusions. Frequently, the assumptions they make will be worse than reality. Here are ways to improve communication:

- **Be candid.** Bad news is better than no news. Candid conversation reduces fear and uncertainty, demonstrates trust in your employees and helps involve everyone in seeking solutions.



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- **Ask for input.** People want to be heard. When executives fail to consider the opinions of their subordinates, those subordinates quickly become disgruntled. On the flip side, the most loyal employees are those who feel that their opinions matter.

- **Explain the reasons for decisions.** Your decisions will not make everyone happy. To minimize negative repercussions, explain the reasons why decisions were made and the alternatives that were evaluated.

Lack of Flexibility

Most employees appreciate flexibility in their work hours, especially working parents. Without flexibility, work can sometimes feel like a prison sentence. To commute that sentence, try:

- **Flextime.** Consider implementing a formal flextime program that allows employees to design their schedules to fit their personal lives.

- **Job sharing.** Many highly skilled people simply can't work a 40-hour schedule. Where feasible, offer the option of job sharing where two people will split the hours or workdays during the week.

- **Telecommuting.** Although not appropriate for everyone, part- or full-time telecommuting can be an ideal way to help sales, technical, professional, and administrative personnel reduce stress.

- **Consideration.** Sometimes simple things like allowing an employee to attend a parent-teacher conference can greatly boost morale. And it costs almost nothing to offer.

Change

They call it the FUD factor—fear, uncertainty and doubt. Most human beings do not like change. We're afraid of the implications. Recessions, changes in SOPs, or even a new project or promotion can cause significant stress and anxiety. Here are some ways to cope with change:

- **Eliminate uncertainty.** Be clear about future plans and the implications of decisions that are being made. Explain what is going to happen and how people will be affected.

- **Help employees plan their futures.** Map out specific opportunities for growth and advancement. Talk with employees about personal and professional goals.

- **Be a salesperson.** One of the biggest barriers to change is getting "buy-in." Start from the employee's perspective. Learn to present change in terms of the opportunities and benefits it affords.

Low Morale

Excessive work, poor communication, inflexibility, and change can all lead to stress and negativity in the workplace. Left unchecked, negativity becomes a cancer that consumes morale, motivation, productivity and quality. Over time, the negativity becomes its own source of stress. Here are a few ways to quiet complainers:

- **Address concerns.** Give employees a chance to address their concerns in an open forum. This will help to diffuse speculation and give the staff a place to channel their negative energy.

- **Seek improvements.** Ask your staff for their ideas to improve the current situation.

- **Provide feedback.** Make sure supervisors are providing positive feedback and encouragement. This can be done in the form of employee recognition rewards or in one-on-one meetings.

- **Set a positive example.** The leaders of the organization must become role models. Their actions set the tone for the organization and their positive thinking will carry down to their subordinates.

- **Have some fun!** Coordinate social interaction to balance the work. Have a lunch time get-together or a holiday party. Making work a place of enjoyment will help foster a positive environment where creativity and productivity will flourish.

You Are in Control

CEOs, senior executives and management dictate the level of stress in the organization. As such, your role is to determine the level of stress that's acceptable—even beneficial—for performance. Then actively manage the workload, policies and communication process to control stress and maximize performance.

Some stress factors inherent to the chemical industry will never disappear. In fact, they may even become exacerbated with fluctuations in the economy and availability of skilled workers. But if you remain focused and dedicated to eradicating the sources of negative stress on your team, you will find they will continue to produce great results for you and for the company!