

Helping employees maintain productivity in an always on global workplace

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In a world of global business where time on the clock blurs with time off the clock, leaders have a practical interest in helping employees manage health-damaging stress. High stress has been linked to many health concerns such as high blood pressure, unhealthy fat distribution in the abdomen, and decreased learning and memory capability (Sapolsky, 2008). Ultimately, the long-term effects of stress decrease the productivity and efficiency of employees and limit their ability to cope with the continuing change that is a reality in business today.

In the documentary “Stress: The Portrait of a Killer,” Dr. Robert Sapolsky of Stanford University (2008) highlights the impact of stress on a troupe of baboons over time. The troupe experienced high blood pressure, unhealthy fat distribution in the abdomen, decreased learning and memory capability (stress actually killed brain cells in the hippocampus). One of the most fascinating parts of his study resulted from a terrible misfortune; some members of the troupe ate tainted meat and died. The ones that died were aggressive males with few social ties; the “nice guys” and the females lived. This changed the dynamic of the troupe in a way that still holds true 20 years later. They spend more time on stress-reducing activities and less time causing stress in others. And they are healthier—they have lower blood pressure and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. When there was less stress in the environment, the troupe experienced better health.

What can leaders learn from these baboons? The leaders of our organizations can impact the health of employees, and ultimately their productivity, by creating and supporting a culture that values stress reduction. Research shows us that activities such as the following can help reduce stress:

- practicing mindfulness
- yoga
- exercise
- laughter
- meditation
- enjoying music
- spending time in nature
- and having more fun (whatever that means to you)

Organizations can also offer ways to increase social affiliation, giving instead of receiving, and compassion (connecting with and helping others). When an organization offers opportunities like these, employees know that their health and well-being are important. Studies have shown that if employees take advantage of these opportunities, organizations will earn higher marks from employees, resulting in lower turnover and higher recruitment success, increased productivity, and higher morale (APA, 2014).

References

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