



Executive Briefings

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Keeping Cool Under Stress Translates to Higher Productivity

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Most people acknowledge that workplace stress can lead to a host of health problems. But it's only in the last decade that neuroscientists have begun to pinpoint its specific effects on key leadership functions, such as decision making and creative thinking, and link it to performance.

"What's most important is that higher order brain function — the executive functions — all of these are negatively impacted when a human being is chronically stressed," said Don Joseph Goewey, author of *Mystic Cool: A Proven Approach to Transcend Stress, Achieve Optimal Brain Function, and Maximize Your Creative Intelligence*.

Even before the recession, employee stress, and the resulting rise in absenteeism, had a significant cost to organizations. Health care industry consultancy Medstat found that absenteeism can cost large companies on average \$3.6 million per year, not to mention the cost of "presenteeism," where workers are present but functioning below expectations.

Despite the cost, few companies take action. A February 2008 study from HR consultancy Watson Wyatt reported 48 percent of U.S. employers said stress is affecting employee performance, but only 6 percent said they were taking action to address the issue. And of the programs that have been developed, results have been lackluster.

"For years, we've been developing stress reduction programs, but they haven't worked," said Goewey, adding that 8 out of 10 employees have stress and 4 out of 10 report serious problems with it.

Stress is particularly acute among people in leadership positions, he said. Ninety percent of leaders report work is the primary source of stress, and 60 percent report

that they are not given any help managing it.

“Most people in leadership positions have come to accept stress,” he said. “It’s so pervasive that we’re oblivious to it.”

That’s the bad news. The good news? Workers can be taught to successfully manage stress and raise productivity in the process.

“Most of these people are capable of recovering the personal and neurological power to move forward,” Goewey said, “whatever you’re doing.”

Goewey said the root of stress lies in the amygdala, the brain’s fear center, which controls the fight or flight reaction. In real danger, the reaction is useful, causing the brain to take quick and decisive action. But in many cases, the brain now initiates fight or flight reactions in mental situations that the brain perceives as real danger.

“When fight or flight kicks in, stress hormones start flooding the bloodstream” Goewey said. “When those stress hormones reach the brain, they knock down higher brain functions — the very things needed for peak performance.”

In the past, neuroscientists believed that most patterns of thinking were set at an early age, sometimes as early as age 6. A series of breakthroughs in the past 10 years has led to the theory of neuroplasticity, which proposes that the brain is more “plastic” than previously thought and able to structurally adapt and change in response to new behaviors and habits, sometimes in a matter of a few weeks.

“A fundamental shift in attitude will rewire your brain,” Goewey said. “It starts building the brain structure to help you in what you’re doing.”

Stress is a problem with which Goewey is intimately familiar. In a one-week span, he lost his job as an executive at the Department of Medicine at Stanford University, was diagnosed with a brain tumor and found his marriage on the rocks.

Now the president at ProAttitude, a San Francisco-area provider of stress management services, Goewey said the experience helped him change his reactions to stress and be more successful as a result. Goewey said CLOs can help employees find the same emotional balance and be calm and positive in stressful situations.

“It couldn’t be simpler — that doesn’t mean it’s easy — but results in the brain structure happen rather quickly,” he said. “Then your brain builds the neurostructure that make you immune to stress.”

CLOs can offer training, starting with courseware, on how to make the shift from fearful, stressful reactions to calm decision making, and then follow up with coaching, both individually and as a group.

“After that, it becomes a culture change in the organization,” Goewey said. “As individuals make that shift, the attitude of the organization makes that shift.”

Learning to more effectively handle stress leads to changes in attitude, and ultimately better performance, he said.

“We don’t tap the full measure of our innate performance because of stress,” Goewey said. “Stress hormones dumb us down, but you can get rid of them.”

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