

Managing Stress at Employee Level in the Nigerian Private Sector

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ABSTRACT

Stress is arguably the most mentioned word these days. With growing complexity and uncertainty in world activities, it has for obvious reasons become the number one issue that individuals of different class and stratum have to confront and contend. There is no place this is glaring than in organizations and among the working class. This work looked address its implications on private sector employees in Nigeria and suggested ways to a) dress its many negative effects. One major effect was that it leaves the employee in a state of psychological trauma and physiologically unfit. It was established that both employees and managers of organizations have an enormous role to play in reducing its effect among the workforce. On the employee side, time management, physical exercise, relaxation and meditation, social support network, and behavior control were mentioned as factors that militate against its negative effects. On the manager's side, it was identified that removing the stressor of which resource and conflict management, empowerment programmes, and personnel policies come under; withdrawing from the stressor, which comprises annual vacation and leave, inter departmental transfer as well as termination of employment; and others including awareness programmes, personal development, and health programmes as factors for controlling stress in organizations.

Keyword: *Stress Private Sector, Employee, Organizational, Manager, Welfare*

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I. INTRODUCTION

So many things are happening simultaneously in our lives and each leaves a lasting mark and influence. Family members, neighbors, friends, fellow workers that we interact with, the machines and equipment at our disposal in workplaces, visitors to the workplaces, security agents, regulatory agencies, etc expose us to a wide range of circumstances. The mode of living has in recent times changed tremendously and as a result subjecting oneself to unconscious re-examination, excessive work, comparison others, and competition. That extra psychological and physiological activities have become paramount (Ojukwu and Otti, 2007:1). These circumstances expose us to stress.

Wellington (2006:158) notes that we live in a world where stress has become a common word as modern life generates a lot of it. As places where individuals assemble to pursue identified goals, organizations have become breeding ground for convergence of stress. Workers try frenziedly to cope with the combined load of family upkeep, workplace tasks and results, other diverse engagements such as social, political, and economic activities, and so on. Each of these circumstances presents mixture of pleasure and sadness which ends up causing stress. We can then state categorically that for the vast majority of people, the word "stress" has become a household word. It has come to be used synonymously with tension, pressure, and anxiety.

There is no place this state of affairs is more rampant and increasing than in organizations. Robbins and Judge (2007:665) state that most of us are aware that employee stress is an increasing problem in organizations. In a manufacturing factory, for example, various classes of workers are bombarded with both mental and physical aspects of jobs. The computer operator is flooded with lots of documents to typeset and generate (information overload); the machine operator is inundated with machine sound and raw materials for processing (sound pollution); and the cleaner/messenger is besieged by heaps of trash and paper documents to move from one table to in the workplace (boredom challenge); and relations s have dominated the basis for treatment/recognition of workers (fairness or equity challenge). These circumstances create job -related tensions. Some other identified job -related tensions are associated with what is generally called downsizing. Downsizing is simply a reduction in the employee strength of an organization. Recall that in 2005/2006 the Obasanjo administration trimmed the federal workforce by about 33,000, The result is -an increase in the workload of unaffected workers. Increased workload does create longer working hours for existing workers. Some other job-related tensions are caused by feeling of job insecurity (organizational stressor); trying to balance work and family responsibilities (internal stressor); and where workers cannot clearly see or identify their contribution or achievement with their jobs or simply the output of their jobs. Most often, each of the e factors leads to unpleasant and disastrous ends (Robbins and Judge, 2007).

We hear about exchange of words or conflicts between workers, inflexible supervisors,' and difficult clients. Physical attack or fighting by workers and with supervisors and clients, infliction of wound by workers on fellow workers, outright insanity of workers, sexual harassment, etc. To explain, workplace violence has reached an alarming state that it is a major concern of management. Some workers labour dangerous and diabolical items that can maim or kill people. As a result, employees are in much stress living in anxiety and fear of the unknown. These are evidences of work place violence and psychological torture. These are some of the resulting effects of job related tensions (Ojukwu and Otti, 2007).

WHAT THEN IS STRESS

Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines stress as conditions causing hardship, pains, etc. The Webster New Basic Dictionary defines it as strain, impelling force, effort, and emphasis. Stress is an adaptive response to a situation that is perceived as challenging or threatening to the person's well-being. In other words, stress develops from the individual's interpretation/reaction to an event or development that affect him. Also we can say that one experiences stress when he or she believes that something will interfere with his need fulfillment. Stress is a person's reaction to a situation, not the situation itself (McShane and Glinow 2000: 134). In other words, stress develops from an action or a perceived one. Sickness, death or accident involving a loved one incites stress. Also, where one perceives a situation as the exigent or frightening such as a planned medical/pro that is generally unsafe. etc each provokes stress is an involuntary response to a situation which confronts an individual in his home, immediate environment, the workplace and the wider society.

It is in this general sense that Robbins (2007:5 3-4) associates stress with what he called "constraints and demands". In his words, constraints are forces that prevent individuals from doing what they desire. Demands refer to the loss of something desired. An example is when a worker is subjected to annual performance appraisal at work. This is a stress situation since the individual is facing opportunity, constraint and demands. The opportunity here refers to what could result from a successful appraisal, such as recognition, promotion, higher salary, greater - on - the - job responsibility. On the other hand, a poor appraisal report may result in denial of these benefits. Again, a bad appraisal report might lead to e individual losing his job.

Employees frequently experience enough performance and increase their risk of mental and physical health problems. Recasting the unpleasant effect of stress, notes that too much stress leads to distress and stimulates a chain of body reaction that results in ill health. In his own contribution, posits that because stress is the body's instinct to defend itself, it aggravates. ill-health. Good examples of this instinct are one's reaction when he is coming to use dangerous machine/equipment in the workplace; a female employee approaching a man who sexually harasses her; going home to meet a troublesome partner; etc. This goes to show that stress affects all parts/organs of the body.

Going by the above information, two dimensions of stress was identified. These are psychological and physiological dimensions. According to them psychologically, people perceive a situation and interpret it as challenging or threatening. This cognitive appraisal leads to a set of physiological responses, such as higher blood pressure, sweaty hands, and faster heartbeat. They associate these events with distress which in their words is the degree of physiological, psychological all behavioral deviation from healthy functioning.

Rotheldon (2004:324) writes that stress is a state of the mind and its effect intensifies with suppressed probability. As origin ting from a state of the mind, Schuler (1980: 189): identifies two conditions for potential stress to become actual stress. These are uncertainty and importance. To explain, in a promotion exercise, if an employee is unsure of e outcome, feels that the constraints facing him are real and unlikely to be remove, and acknowledges some chances of being promoted, it builds up his stress. In Oth r words, where one is not sure whether he will either win or lose, he is at the highest level of stress. By implication, an individual who is certain about the outcome of the promotion interview (successful or unsuccessful) will have little or no stress at all. Wi respect to 'importance', where the employee downplays the outcome of the exercise, that is, he sees the outcome (whether he did well or not) as unlikely to affect him in any way, then there will be no stress.

INEVITABILITY OF STRESS

So far we have established that stress is the body's immediate response to change. Because of the negativity associated with stress, it is the wear and tear the body is subjected to as it us ally regulates itself to the developments in life. However, Selve cited in Aderferin (201: 72) notes that without stress there could be no life. This is to say that although associated with ill health, we need some level of stress to live. As Gerald and) People (20 6:33) speculate: Top little stress lives the body under-stimulated, and the individual bored and possibly isolated.

Not minding that stress is discussed in a negative way, it has a positive aspect. This type of stress Ezenwa calls positive stress, while McShane and Glinow call it eustress. Although stressful, it refers to the healthy, positive, constructive outcome of stressful event and the stress response. LePine, LePine and Jackson (2004:883-9) call it challenge stress and associated it with challenges in the workplace such as job enlargement and job enrichment. Eustress is stress experienced in moderation, enough to activate and motivate people so that they can

achieve goals, change their environments, and success in life challenges (Sauter and Murphy 1995). In other words, we need some stress to survive. When an employee is preparing for promotion interview, he and she goes through the work/job manual to be adequately prepared. Although, a stressful situation, the benefit far outweighs the stress. Another example is where a worker is perm to go before dismissal time provided he or she finished his or her work schedule for the day. The fact that y u will leave early compensates for the extra effort to achieve that goal. Exposure to job rotation, job enlargement and job enrichment, job redesign, etc are meant to reduce boredom of jobs. To many employees, high exposure to these job management characteristics, although creates higher level workload, is desired and so is a form of eustress.

ADDITIVE NATURE OF STRESS

Once an individual develops stress it remains with the person. All the person can do try to control it. If poorly controlled, it builds up to a critical stage. As noted by Selye: a fact that tends to be overlooked when are reviewed individually is that stress is an additive phenomenon. Stress builds up and each new and persistent stressor adds to an individual's stress level. In other words a new stressor may not pose a threat in itself but when added to a poorly ma aged stress level it can be what he called the straw that breaks the camel's back (Selye 1956).

THE NIGERIAN PRIVATE SECTOR WORKPLACE

In general, the workplace is where people go to perform their assigned jobs every day of work. It is characterized by several forces which include machines and equipment; neighboring organizations; socio-economic activities; the level of safety provided in terms of gadgets and security of lives; human beings, etc. Each of these forces presents a lot of circumstances which are most often challenging to the worker (Lanikpeku 2006:45).

Like many developing countries, the Nigerian private sector is growing in leaps and bounds. The private sector has about 8 million employees and mostly in the extractive and service sub-sectors (Lanikpeku 2006:45). These industries, are especially characterized by heavy and often antique machines and equipment and therefore high levels generate of stress. To illustrate, machines and equipment generate excessive noise (noise pollution) which is harmful to the body. In addition to this is where neighboring organizations generate their own noise. These people know that noise is a gr at stressor. Good examples are people who work and /or live around places such as inker-Coal Camp, Kenyatta and Ogebe markets, and Timber shed in Maryand, all in Enugu metropolis. The same is case in Alaba market in Lagos, Onitsha Main Market in Anambra State and major intra-city roads in the co try. Related to this is that some of these tools of production are on their own dangerous that outmost care is required in operating them. All these breed apprehension among workers and therefore build up stress (Lanikpeku 2006).

Another area that generates workplace- stress has to do with safety of lives. Many Nigerian organizations have poor safety standards. Examples are factor that is poorly ventilated or lighted, improper water supply, etc raise anxiety and fear among worker. Other examples are slippery floor, chemicals not properly secured, constant breakdown of m chines and equipment, frequent power outage, and unsafe water supply (Lanikpeku 2006). Sexual harassment is another issue that exposes workers to stress. Nigerian workers, particularly female employees are subjected to high level sexual harassment by their male bosses. The unfortunate thing is that cases and threats of unsolicited sexual relationship are generally not reported. It is a taboo as it stigmatise the victim.

Perpetrators usually get away with it and therefore continue with the practice (Lanikpeku 2006). Also in the workplace at times workers-are confronted by opposing demands that generate stress. In at McShane and Glinow (ibid) and Robbins a d Judge call role conflict, this is a situation where one's job prevents him from e ting or even resting (outside break-time) when nature calls. A common example is where people do shift work (night duty and consequently the employee is required to be awake all night as scheduled. This is a fight against nature (McShane and Glinow, 2000).

There is also a situation where one is advised not to blow- the whistle on his boss or requested to assist the boss cover a nefarious act such as stealing of organization's money. He e the individual will be battling against his conscience. As a result, he becomes tensioned- up (McShane and Glinow, 2000).

Another type is what is called role ambiguity. It is a situation where workers are unsure about what their jobs demand. Take a situation where one is performing a role that is outside his mandate (that is either under-performing or over-performing), be or she gets in trouble of something goes wrong. It is particularly stressful when an employee is bombarded with additional work (Gobove load). In our organizations, it is not uncommon to see a messenger combining the work of cleaner; a computer operator doing secretary's work; etc. This is characteristic of job enlargement and job enrichment.

Another issue that influences the worker in the workplace has to do with what Bouldin (2003:237) calls interpersonal stressors. The workplace is characteristic by several human to human interactions. There are managers, supervisors, employees, customers, and the wider public that intermingle with one another. Each of these relation hips often generates conflict which on its own stressful.

EFFECTS OF STRESS

Generally speaking, distress exposes one to psychological trauma and so is not good for the body. The effect of this on employees is any folds.

Effect of Stress on Employees

These can be grouped into Psychological, Behavioural, and Physiological or Medical effects.

Psychological: The list of psychological effects is exhaustible. However, many authors identify anxiety, depression, nervousness, inability, tension, moodiness and boredom as dominant. Cox (1978:83) adds apathy, low self-esteem, poor decision-making, short attention span, hypersensitivity to criticism, and mental block to the list.

Behavioural: This set of consequences concerns the many observable responses that the individual uses to wither the stress. Some general behaviours include absenteeism from work, smoking, reading, talking, engaging in sex, drinking, drug abuse, general aggressor, and being bad-tempered. Cox (1978: 84) includes impulsive behaviour, emotional outburst, eating excessively, and nervous laughter.

Medical: Many authors identify this stage as the advanced and most critical stage of stress. The most identified consequences are headache, high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, back problems, ulcer, intestinal disorder and skin irritation, Tankinfin, Megllion, and Bakky (2001:234). Hogg (1988) adds allergies, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, asthma, sleeping and sexual disorder and cancer.

Effects of Stress on Organizations

We have highlighted the consequences of stress on individuals. However, stress is a problem that stretches beyond the individual. It also considerably effects the organization. Organizational consequences of stress categories into three headings- attitude, performance and withdrawal.

Attitude: the attitude of the employee towards aspects of the organization could be a result of the stress experienced. The individual may likely expected to change develop hate for his job, express hostility towards some colleagues, departments, some individuals that the organization deals with, and some inputs of production. The overall effects of these individual consequences of stress on the organization include

- i. **Lower Productivity:** Robbins (2001) groups this under behavioural symptoms. In a bid to fight stress in workplaces, workers usually adopt strategies/measures/behaviours that curtail their effort. McShane and Glnoxv (2000: 146 state that at a basic stage, we react to stress through flight and/or fight. Behaviours such as staying away from work (flight); coming to work late, loitering in the workplace, engaging others in discussion, making mistakes an always giving excuse for them, and so forth are common. As a form of flight, absenteeism is temporarily withdrawing from the stressful situation so that we have an opportunity to re-energize. As noted by Hackett and Bycio (1996:327-38) overstressed employees tend to have higher level of absenteeism. They associate this with the fact that stress makes people sick and that is a coping mechanism. These singly and collectively reduce the individual productivity and therefore the organization's output.
- ii. Higher Operating Cost
 - a. Higher Medical cost: Robbins (2001) associates this with physiological symptom. As the degree of stress progresses, the employee loses focus which ultimately affects him physiologically in and outside the workplace. Too much stress on an individual begins to adversely affect the attitudinal, psychological, behavioural and medical aspects of their overall well-being. Clearly, under this circumstance the employees are less likely to work or to be working with high levels of efficiency and effectiveness (Jamal, 1987) adds that high stress levels impair our ability to remember information, make effective decisions, and take appropriate actions. Consequently, the employee develops anxiety, become depressed and workplace accidents-become more common. These are evidence of ill health. He or she (the employee) starts to experience deteriorating health and becomes a regular visitor to the hospital. Apart from possible increase in the organization's medical cost, it sets management on a collision course the union and employees. This is likely to affect the adrenalin level of management.
 - b. Engagement of Workers on Part-time: Because of frequent ill health, etc, organizations have had to employ people on part-time to ensure there is no disruption in production. Where these classes of workers are to be trained, that is another drain on funds and profits.
 - c. Destruction of Machines and Equipment: Where due to stress workers are prone to destroy production inputs, management might consider; increasing vigilance and therefore the services of their security agents. This; costs money.

II. MANAGING STRESS AMONG EMPLOYEES

Employee Role

Whether low or high level, employees see stress as disastrous and something that should be controlled or curtailed at all cost. Employees have on their own adopted measures/strategies to control it. Authors such as Robbins and Judge, Martins, McShane and Glinow Hogg, Fry and Sryle have listed time management, increasing physical exercise, relaxation training, and expanding and exploiting social support network as effective measures.

Time Management: It is obvious that many people have poor management of time. A well organized employee can accomplish set efficiently and effectively than a poorly organized person. So, an understanding and utilization of basic time management principles can help individuals better cope with tension created by job demands, Macan (1994:381-391). Haynes listed the following are effective time management principles:

- a. making daily lists of activities to be accomplished;
- b. prioritizing activities by importance and urgency;
- c. scheduling activities according to the priorities set; and
- d. Knowing your daily cycle and handling the most demanding parts of your job during the high part of your cycle when you are most alert and productive.

Physical Exercise: In what Kiely and Hodgson (1990:551-72) call non-competitive physical exercise such as aerobics, jogging, walking, swimming, and riding a bicycle, these have been recommended by physicians as a way to deal with excessive stress levels. In their words, these forms of physical exercise increase heart capacity, lower at-rest heart rate, provide a mental diversion from work pressures and offer a means to let off steam.

Relaxation and Meditation: Around the world, people are turning to relaxation and meditation techniques to offset the stressors of work (Jones, 1998). Relaxation techniques come in form of hobbies and activities in and outside the workplace such as taking break, moving around to interact or talk to people, meditation, hypnosis, biofeedback, contemplation and rhythmic breathing. These forms which McShane and Glinow (2000: 152) identify as the most frequent way employees manage stress are temporary measures for getting away or withdrawing from stressors. Their objective is to reach deep relaxation, where one feels physically relaxed, somewhat detached from the immediate environment, and detached from body sensations (Forbes and Pekala, 1993; 86-87). They have been proved to reduce fatigue and stress, and, have galvanized people to improved productivity.

Social Support Network: Social support refers to the individual's interpersonal transactions with others and involves providing either emotional or informational support to buffer the stress experience, McShane and Glinow (2000: It comes from co-workers, family, friends, and others and is undoubtedly one of the more effective stress management practices, (Uchino, Cacioppo, and Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996:488-531). House (1985:310-357) identifies three ways in which social support network reduces stress. These are that:

- a. Employees improve their perception that they are valued and worthy. This increases their self-esteem and perceived ability to cope with the stressor. Because of this, the individual can develop the feeling that he or she can do it because his colleagues have confidence in him.
- b. Social support provides information to help employees interpret, comprehend, and possibly remove the stressor. A worker develops confidence because co-workers have guided or shown him the way to handle difficult tasks;
- c. Emotional support from others can directly help to buffer the stress experience. As posited by Schachter (1999:46), people seek out and benefit from the emotional support of others when they face threatening situations.

Behaviour Control: This involves proper identification of the situation that caused every stress. The aim is to devise means of coping with the situation and so be able to anticipate and control the stress so generated more effectively anytime it occurs. An example is where one experiences stress due to ambiguous role expectations; he might seek help from coworkers for clarity.

ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE

Unquestionably, the organization has a colossal role to play in controlling role can be grouped under the following stress. This employee Remove the Stressor: Several writers argue that the only way companies can effectively manage stress is by removing the stressors that cause unnecessary tension and job burnout. Other stress management strategies may keep employees "stress fit", but they don't solve the fundamental causes of stress (Neon, Handy and Fineman, 1995:72).

Empowerment Programmes: One of the best solutions is to empower employees so that they have more control over their work and work environment (Terra, 1995:49). Some of these are employees' job rotation, job enlargement and job enrichment programmes.

Resource Management: Yet another is improving the work environment in terms of resources of production. An environment that is relatively free of noise and safety risks is desirable. Improving these conditions would go a long way in reducing on the job stress.

Conflict Management: Organizations are known to be conflict-endemic. Provision of appropriate strategies for resolving workplace conflicts and disputes should go a long way in minimizing conflicts. It is suggested that institutionalization of competition or organizational resources would help reduce conflict and invariably stress.

Personnel Policies: Many workplace tasks are complex and demanding, making employees increasingly edgy and finding it difficult to cope with the out-of-work demands. These conflicting demands make it the more reason why something must be done to accommodate them. Organizations should help employees to balance their work and non-work roles (Mellingin and Dengon 2006:59). The following are identified:

Flexible Work Time: Many firms more or less consult employees or union leaders in deciding when to begin and end their workday so that they can more easily balance personal and work activities. An example is where female workers are given flexible time of work to enable them take care of their family needs. Cleaners and messengers come to work by 7am and dismiss by 3pm. Many employers, allow parent to go on school run. Pregnant and nursing mothers enjoy months and weeks of maternity leave.

Another is where workers are consulted in scheduling annual leave.

Job Sharing: This is a situation where workers are made to split a task, which they handle at time determined by them. Examples are team teaching among lecturers; cleaners and messengers or computer operators collaborating with one another with their works; etc. The major challenge here is finding a willing and competent partner.

Child-care Facilities: Because of the increasing need to control more especially female workers, some organizations have gone to provide child-care facilities within their immediate environment. With this in place, it saves time for mothers to shuttle from workplace to home to monitor the up-keep of their children while they are working.

Telecommuting: This is a situation where an employee works from a place other than the office (usually his home) with a computer connection to the office. The advantage of this is that it reduces the stress associated with commuting to and from the office, thereby providing more time for personal matters. Telecommuting often makes it easier to switch between; work and non-work activities during the day, such as temporarily leaving the home office to pick up the kids from school (Hill, Miller, Weiner, and Colihan, 1998: 667-83).

Withdrawing from the Stressor: There are numbers of strategies that provide this in the workplace. Among these are annual leave (temporary solution); transfer to job for which employee will best perform or be self-actualized, that includes what McShane and Glinow (2000) call more effective selection and placement of employees so that their competencies are compatible with job requirements (permanent solution); and at worse, termination of employment (although not desirable, but a more permanent solution).

Health Programmes: Many consequence of stress have identified and most can be associated to health problems. Some of these are heart problem, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure, intestinal disorder, etc. Fortunately, many of these can be prevented or controlled by a programme that includes medical screening, diet and exercise. Management can put an effective medical plan in place for regular screening of employees to determine those that need counselling for improved medical ability to resist stress.

Awareness Programme: Among the workforce, it is obvious that there is little knowledge of stress, its causes, consequences and ways for dealing with it. It is in this respect that organizations now organize sensitivity or awareness programme for workers where every available information about stress is presented. This helps in avoiding situations that bring about stress as well as those that reinforce it.

Personal Development: Individuals are encouraged by management to explore and exploit self-development opportunities as a way of controlling stress. Here employees seek improvement in the areas of skill and competence. The goal of these training and educational programmes is to enable the employees remain relevant in their organizations.

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