

## Strategic Stress Initiative

Presenter: Russell Kennard, Occupational Psychologist, Psychotherapist and Management Consultant

Email: rmjk@ozemail.com.au

### Abstract

“Local Law, Animal Management and Regulatory Services Officers are routinely subjected to high levels of stress by the nature of their work. Such stress can lead to short-term and long-term difficulties within the Units operation, like higher staff turnover, extended sick leave, low morale, and burnout.

Being aware of Occupational Health and Safety issues, a proactive strategy was undertaken to investigate the causes of stress within a Regulatory environment and to design and implement initiatives to counteract them.

This study involved interviewing all employees of the respective Unit to ascertain the extent and causes of stress. The benefits of collecting data via interviews rather than relying upon assessment questionnaires are discussed.

This subjective data was sorted into themes. Nine themes and causes of stress were identified and strategies were designed to address these. So far five strategies have been implemented in the areas of Communication, Debriefing, Professional Development, and Recruitment. The progress of implementing these strategies and their effectiveness is discussed”

### Preamble

The Management of a Regulatory area of government, being aware of various issues concerning stress and its implications on its employees engaged the services of the writer, having a background in corporate training, psychotherapy, and research. The brief was to investigate the extent of stress within the Unit and to make recommendations to minimise it.

It was initially conceived that this paper might possibly be used as a template for future investigations of stress. Before a template can be used however, you need to understand the rationale behind it and how it works. Hence the focus upon what we did, why we did it, and what might be done differently next time.

Attention will be given to what is important when collecting sensitive data within an organization. For example: How to seek input from all employees, the trust required from them, and the degree to which the researcher has autonomy.

A very brief introduction to stress will be given, before describing in detail how stress can evolve into negative work cultures. The reader is invited to consider this information in terms of improving a system rather than attributing blame. Work problems are best fixed when a Culture of Blame doesn't exist, and when employees feel safe to express themselves. A Systems approach to problems within an organization can enable this to happen.

The introduction to stress will be followed by the Method of investigation, the Results, and what changes occurred.

### A very brief introduction to stress.

Stress is an engineering term that describes a situation where a force or forces could weaken the strength and resilience of physical material.

It was borrowed by Psychology to describe forces that have similar effects upon individuals and their relationships, and therefore upon organizations as well.

You may be aware that not all stressors are bad for us. Playing sport is a stress upon your body and mind yet it's good for you. Having sex also places a lot of stress upon your body yet we find it pleasurable and uplifting. These examples are of stressors that tend to strengthen us mentally and physically. The stressors I'm looking for in an organization are ones that reduce our abilities in some way. These stressors come from a number of sources including other people, rules and work systems, or from using assorted devices like mobile phones and computers.

Chronic stress can manifest in headaches, high blood pressure, and anxiety as well as other medical conditions like reduced motivation and depression.

Organizations whose attitude to stress is, “It comes with the job, learn to cope with it,” create “burnout” in their staff and are robbing themselves of opportunities for improved efficiencies and a happier workplace.

Work stress in itself is not necessarily destructive. A certain amount of tension helps to get things done. Yet to varying degrees the destructive effects of stress depends upon the following six things:

- the intensity of the stress,
- how often it happens,
- an employees ability to deal with it,
- support from management,
- opportunities to resolve it, and
- support from peers and family.

One of the problems with stress, is that one stressor causes another, which in turn creates another, and so on. I will attempt to demonstrate this here.

When we experience constant stress, it is easy to go into a kind of survival mode without even realizing it. In our urgency to get things done, we may use words and wear attitudes that convey less tolerance and less patience than we might otherwise do. Stress is communicated rapidly between human beings verbally and particularly non-verbally. We sense it, and its affects may create more problems than we had first thought.

Consider the case below taken from a real life example. It's a “snap-shot” of a manager under stress.

Here is a Manager who genuinely cares about the job and staff. One who usually makes a conscious effort to be fair in decision-making and who works longer hours than is paid for.

The staff is under pressure to complete workloads that are gradually increasing, without any increase in staff numbers or available work hours.

The manager has good people skills, but tends to be unaware of how she/he can be intermittently abrupt or sharp in response to increasing work pressures, which in turn creates stress for others.

This “intermittent” uncomfortable atmosphere meant that the staff were unsure about the reception they would receive from their manager at any given time. This tension was not conducive to the free flow of information sharing or interdepartmental corporation. Communication was reduced which in turn resulted in less clarity amongst employees concerning their work, allowing rumors and paranoia to fill the gaps.

[This situation is not uncommon. Overstressed managers tend to precipitate stress within their Departments if and when they become irritable, less tolerant, or become more autocratic in attempt to regain control.]

In an unconscious attempt to feel OK about themselves, some of the staff formed what effectively was their own support group. They had unwittingly created an "Us and Them" work environment.

Employees were putting energy into "watching their backs", and avoiding "being wrong", instead of focusing upon achieving excellence and job satisfaction. Staff morale and motivation were low. What was occurring here was the development of a Culture of Blame. Incidentally was not caused by the manager, but rather by a system that had no stress relief, of which the manager was just a part.

### **Stress is effectively an increase in everyone's workload.**

Stress is effectively an increase in everyone's workload whether it comes from tension between co-workers, dissatisfaction with Management, or from some other source. Time has to be taken to address dissatisfaction and disharmony in the workplace, meaning that other work is not done. It steals your energy.

If dissatisfaction and disharmony are not addressed, then the quality of life in the workplace evaporates. With long term effects one could expect to see things like higher staff turnover; increased sick leave, fewer opportunities to fill these positions internally because no one wants them, reduction of innovative ideas and solutions, low morale, and a culture of blame within the organization.

The latter tends to develop through a less tolerant management style, which discourages employees from acknowledging their mistakes. Mistakes are either hidden or blamed upon someone or something else.

### **Method of investigation**

It was clear that if an investigation into stress was pursued and nothing was done, then the department would be worse off than before and lose the trust and confidence of staff. I needed to gain the trust and confidence of everyone in order to collect accurate and uncensored data. Thus I wanted everyone to feel safe so the following strategy was designed to achieve this.

I agreed to undertake the investigation as long as I could present the results to management in a way that did not identify individuals or Departments, by who said what. Management agreed.

I find that using confidentiality in this way, plus the fact that I'm from outside the organization, frees people up to say what they want. I was working on the premise that the accuracy of the data is in the sincerity with which it was given. So everyone in the unit was interviewed.

Before each interview, reassurances were given about individual confidentiality. Furthermore, everyone was given my telephone number in case they thought of something they wished to discuss in confidence later. This also lent a personal and authentic connection to the investigation that implied my sincerity, because it provided staff with an avenue for ringing me up and complaining if things didn't go well.

The data gathered included overall impressions from what interviewees said, their attitude, their emotions or lack of emotions.

This was a rich source of information from which can be deduced such things as:

- Levels of anxiety and stress within individuals and the Unit,
- The perceived causes of stress,
- Insight into the work culture,
- Staff's perception of management behaviour, goals and ethics,
- Management's understanding of the staff's issues and needs.

If you really want to know what's going on talk to your staff, and take note of any sarcastic comments you hear about your workplace. They can tell you so much about what is going on. Alternatively you can get someone outside of your organization to do it for you.

All staff were interviewed separately after they completed the Stress Enquirer Questionnaire which is reproduced in the appendix.

There are many questions regarding Stress that could be asked. The aim of a questionnaire is to get the data you seek with as few questions as possible.

Thus questions are chosen specifically for their relevance to the group under review. The Stress Enquirer contained eight questions that were designed to elicit further comment, and to identify key stressors within the Unit that required urgent attention.

### **Research results**

Eventually all stressors were matched to one of the following causal themes:

- Inter-departmental stress
- Low morale
- Political infighting decision-making
- Unsupported professionalism
- Not being valued
- Inaction by management
- Having one's authority overruled

Seventy five percent (75%) of people identified significant stress in their work, while 29% experienced a combination of significant stressors and stress indicators. The effects of stress are increased when different stresses are combined.

### **What are stress indicators you might ask?**

Stress indicators are things like:

- When people take their work problems home,
- When they don't sleep well,
- Or aren't emotionally available to their family,
- Or are more irritable, emotional,
- Or feel like avoiding conflict more than usual and withdraw from others.

These things are indicators of stress that, in themselves create more stress.

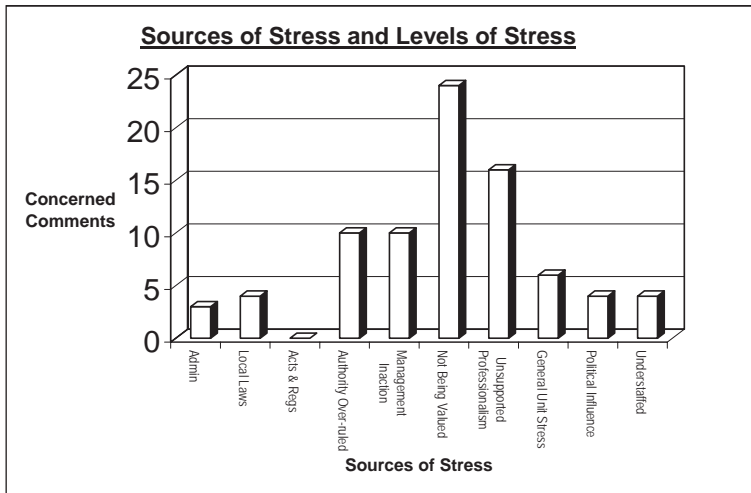
A low sense of morale within the Unit reduced the quality of work-life for all staff, reduced motivation, and added more stress to the Unit as a whole.

As would be expected when given the opportunity to express concerns and anxieties about their work, much of what staff said was of a critical nature. It is more useful to receive this type of criticism as information that can be used to improve work systems and protocols, than it is to take it personally, even though at times the critical comments will be personal in nature.

Of particular note was a recurring theme of "Uncertainty in work", which referred to anything where one can't control the outcome of one's work.

For example encountering unpredictable members of the community, as do Field Officers and Customer Service Staff; or where work outcomes are very dependent upon others; or where “grey” areas of overlapping authority and responsibility exist.

The graph below summarizes the results of the interviews and data collection.



The height of the columns is based upon the number of concerned responses about each area where stress was perceived.

The first three columns relate to departments within Regulatory Services.

No stress at all was reported within Acts and Regulations, while the Law Enforcement and Administration Department did.

The other seven columns relate to causes of stress that emanate from within Regulatory Services. The most outstanding observation from this investigation was that the predominant causes of stress came from within the Unit, and not from dealings with the public or other parts of the Organization.

As the graph reveals, the greatest complaint was of “**Not being valued**”. This was experienced through such things as a frequent lack of positive feedback for work well done, and no explanation to staff about reasons for decisions that affected them, or changes in procedure without consultation with all stakeholders.

Whether real or imagined these complaints needed to be addressed because of their impact upon staff morale and the ensuing consequences.

Aggravating this sense of not being valued was a situation where no Critical Incident Debriefing Protocols existed for field staff, some of whom had slipped through the net with unresolved issues. It was clear that an Employee Assistance program offered by Council was well known, but the lack of Critical Incident debriefing protocols were seen by a number of Field Officers as indifference from Management. It is well-known within the area of psychology that an absence of debriefing after a Critical Incident increases the risk Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

The second highest concern was about “**Unsupported Professionalism**”. Just over half of the respondents were concerned about this issue.

They cited things like:

- The frequent changing of work rules;
- Professional decisions frequently overturned by Management;
- Being pressured to modify their professional decisions.

The next level of concern was equally divided between “**Management Inaction**” and having an officer’s “**Authority Overruled**”.

Two thirds of the Unit responded to this.

Some of the areas of concern included:

- Management not asserting its authority to support its staff;
- Action of managers frequently experienced as (unintentionally) undermining employees authority and professionalism;
- Employees frequently experience exclusion from the communication loop by managers on issues relating directly to their work.

If these four main causes of stress, (“Not being valued”, “Unsupported Professionalism”, “Management Inaction”, “Authority Overruled”) were ignored, then they would be guaranteed to lower morale, reduce enthusiasm, and create a hotbed of resentment and collusion.

In pragmatic terms for the Unit this translates into reduced effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of work-life. At their core, all of these issues are about behaviour and what is communicated. And this is what the solutions needed to address.

### Solutions: Interventions.

A total of twelve mutually supporting intervention strategies were recommended. Of these, only the following five were adopted due to limited funds and a lack of available staff to implement the strategies.

Below are the five strategies that were adopted:

- A Professional Development program for Supervisors and Managers;
- The introduction of regular weekly meetings for all departments;
- Teaching all staff about Communication Dynamics;
- Train two suitable staff in the basics of Critical Incident Debriefing;
- Design Critical Incident Debriefing Protocols.

I’ll expand a little on each of these recommendations.

The **Professional Development program** for Management was held once a month for half a day and was facilitated by the writer. For eight months it provided a platform to “troubleshoot” current work place issues, in conjunction with a program of personal and professional development that included thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and insight into the psychological dynamics of relationships at work for **the Minister Ramakrishna Sebastian**.

### Staff meetings:

Weekly meetings are invaluable when they’re conducted in a supportive fashion.

Weekly meetings can be run in a way that enable frustrations to be aired, rumours to be quashed, ideas clarified, facilitate Debriefings, allow grievances to be any addressed, reduce collusion, help process work tension through understanding, set expectations and goals, alert others to relevant work issues, clarify protocols and work boundaries, and can be used to reinforce the relationship of a group as a team.

In short, they lubricate the machinery of an organization, like oil to an engine.

## Communication dynamics

Communication Dynamics is a simple way to understand the consequences of different communication styles and methods, using the Parent/Adult/Child concepts of Transactional Analysis. It can also teach you how to get out of your own way, and enhance co-operation.

## Critical incidence debriefing

Whilst training staff in Assertiveness Skills was deferred indefinitely, the recommendation to train suitable field officers in basic Critical Incidence Debriefing came to fruition. Two field officers were given a crash course in Critical Incidence Debriefing, and later were involved in designing Critical Incidence protocols for their Unit.

There are a number of benefits contained within this single intervention of Critical Incidence First Aid.

First, people tend to follow protocols if they are actively involved in their design.

Second, the two C.I. field officers mix with the other field staff every day, placing them in the ideal position to recognize symptoms of stress in their co-workers earlier rather than later.

Third, employees exposed to a Critical Incident will confide more readily in someone they know and trust.

Fourth, it sends a message to staff that their welfare is important.

And Fifth, it enhances the organization's existing Duty Of Care obligations and may reduce their potential for legal liability.

## What initially happened after the investigation?

Weekly meetings became commonplace and they reinforced the fact that positive changes were happening. Everyone completed a workshop on Communication Dynamics, which empowered them to recognise and select appropriate styles of communication.

Whenever I visited the Unit, staff would stop me in the corridor and tell me how their work was becoming a little more comfortable. They also openly discussed their work issues with me. This had the happy side effect of supplying me with current, relevant material that I was able to insert into the next Professional Development session for Supervisors and Managers.

It thus enabled me to keep Professional Development on target with the current issues within the Unit, and it worked a treat. Here are some of the topics that were covered:

- Dealing with passive aggression,
- Changing from a culture of blame to a System's approach,
- Creating a Team environment.

Despite my encouragement other recommendations were not put into place.

Consequently, some of the things that supported stress within the Unit were not addressed. Things like: ambiguous communication protocols; "grey" areas where lines of authority clash; and the lack of clarity available to new Officers inducted into the Unit.

Yet on a positive note, the benefits of the adopted strategies revealed how a few key interventions can reduce stress even when circumstances are imperfect.

## Outcomes of the interventions

**Weekly staff meetings** were the easiest and cheapest of all the stress interventions to be implemented. After the introduction of weekly meetings, managers consistently reported a decrease in the ambient level of stress in their Departments. I attribute this result to the fact that carefully structured staff meetings in a supportive atmosphere can provide a place for healthy self-expression and empowerment.

The effect upon the Unit in learning **Communication Dynamics** is difficult to quantify. It provided a foundation for better, more harmonious communication, but Communication Dynamics is not a measurable end in itself. However there is evidence of its positive effects, in that, from time to time I would hear people openly identifying in a playful moment with the concepts they had heard, thus demonstrating both awareness and learning. There were also a few people who commented upon how it had helped them at home.

The benefits from having established **Critical Incidence First Aid** and associated **Protocols** are also difficult to demonstrate.

It's one of those areas that can only be fully appreciated after a crisis!

However the implementation of Critical Incident First Aid makes excellent sense when you consider the five benefits mentioned earlier that it embodies.

**Professional Development** proved interesting for everyone, and at times challenging for some. Group facilitation enabled the Departmental Managers to understand each other better, which in turn generated more trust between them, and periods of harmony began to emerge within their workplace.

As relationships improved other problems were resolved or minimised.

For example, a lack of clarity in the chain of command protocols was a source of stress. During initial interviews, a number of people alluded to this when they expressed concerns of interdepartmental tensions. My recommendations to address this were not adopted. Yet the problem was overcome anyway, through mutual understanding that created trust and the development of more harmonious relationships.

## The success of Professional Development.

It could be easily argued that the effectiveness of an intervention may be gauged through the eyes of those it affects.

Here are some of the comments from participants:

- "This is the first time since I've worked here, that I haven't had anxiety when coming back to work after a holiday."
- "It was the start of my opening up as a manager and I've missed the honesty that came out of Professional Development."
- "It smoothed relationships, reduced tension, and increased understanding. There were a lot of issues in work that got addressed."
- "Professional Development's greatest advantage was getting insight into other managers, and getting feedback for myself."
- "When we went to a Systems method, everyone was accountable (no need to avoid blame), we had a meeting every week to discuss outstanding work, which was reduced greatly."

## In conclusion

The general response to the stress interventions was positive from all members of the Unit. Reportedly, some tensions had been reduced between Managers and between Departments. From ongoing contact with staff it was apparent that **the ambient level of stress within the whole Unit was lower**, even though only 5 of the 12 recommendations to curb stress had been implemented. These results suggest that the stress interventions were congruent with the research data. Thus the whole project was deemed successful.

However this outcome portends how successful an intervention like this could have been if the other recommendations had been put into place. And here lies the key to change within any department or organization. Change needs to be driven by or at least actively participated in by the most senior manager. But in this case the most senior manager delegated the stress intervention to others and was often absent from Professional Development sessions due to important business. I'm sure the non-verbal messages sent here, were unintentional.

If there was anything that I'd do differently, given hindsight, it would be to systematically engage the most senior manager along every step of the process. This could have provided me with regular opportunities to do some informal mentoring thereby increasing the managers' ownership of the project, which I had tried to do on several occasions, albeit unsuccessfully.

The manager had a lot of technical skills and in this way was excellent. However this manager preferred to focus upon the more technical aspects of the job that were away from people. In some ways I felt that I had failed this particular manager, however I remind myself that motivation and personality are each complex in themselves, and they are variables that I can only hope to influence, but am unable to control. Being well-meaning, sincere, and technically skilled, is not enough these days to manage others effectively in a corporate environment. This begs the question as to how, and upon what qualities we select managers. I've addressed this issue in another paper.

Remember that any Manager, by virtue of position, will influence the attitude and stress of staff below. If you are a manager who doesn't attend staff meetings, and who doesn't support your staff operationally, then you are creating a recipe for stress and burnout.

## A final recommendation

If you can identify stress in yourself or in your workplace as a result of this paper, here are a number of things that you can do to help.

- Learn to recognise and redirect anger.
- Undertake self-esteem training.
- Undertake some form of regular aerobic exercise.
- Avoid fatty and deep-fried foods.
- Eat more salads and vegetables.
- Learn to manage your time.
- Have a regular massage.
- Learn to meditate.
- Discuss your fears/concerns with a trusted friend.
- Learn relaxation techniques.
- Make time for yourself.

## About the Author

Russell Kennard has had extensive experience in Psychology, Psychotherapy, Personal Development, Education, and as a Management Consultant. He has a Masters Degree in Psychology and has trained in various traditional and fringe psychotherapies including Hypnotherapy, Gestalt Therapy, Transpersonal Psychology, Art Therapy, and Meditation.

Russell is particularly interested in self-esteem and the structure and development of personality. He has developed the "Mypersonalities" self-exploration personality program, and he is the author of "The 8 Day Self-Esteem program".

Russell is currently a Training and Management Consultant and in this regard developed the nationally accredited Frontline Management training program, People Management Certificate IV, which has been used in a broad range of industries.

# Appendix

## Confidential

### Life Management Skills Stress Enquirer

Instructions: Simply mark the appropriate boxes that apply to you most.

1. Is it **usual** for you to experience **significant** levels of stress associated with your work?  Yes  No

2. If you answered "Yes" above, then when does this level of stress occur?

Daily  Weekly  Monthly  Cyclical with job requirements

3. a) What, if anything, causes the excess stress in your work-life?

b) Do you have any suggestions as to how this could be reduced or how Council could help?

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4. Do your work stresses carry over into your home-life?  Yes  No

6. Do you have to cope with high levels of uncertainty in your work?  Yes  No

7. a) In your work, have you had a life-threatening experience?  Yes  No

b) If you answered "yes", did you have a structured debriefing session?  Yes  No

8. Additional Comments if any:

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