

Synopsis of the HR stress, pressure and subsequent underperformance in Public Organizations

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Abstract: *This paper explores performance impact and professional behaviour of the human resource in international public organizations under the new pressures of client orientation, budgetary constraints and over-specialization of the personnel in such a milieu. The research is empirical but it was lead by factual observations and data on HR stress, prompted by institutional change in large public organizations. It stays mainly onto the stress factor as both promoter and dissuader of the HR performance, while large organizations are generally being perceived as inertial and reluctant to change. Their employees' stress level is increasing and is, nonetheless, a reality despite this fact.*

Key-words: *performance, stress factor, institutional change, international public organizations*

1. Introduction to the concept: stressors and strains

What is stress at work and why such concept needs to be observed and taken into consideration by employers? A general definition of the concept is given by the World Health Organization (WHO) and it is referred to as “the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope”.

Several key-words are contained in this phrase; as they lay out, connected in the expression, we want to emphasize the differences that exist between the notions of: pressure, challenge and (work-related) stress.

Although the three coexist in the same definition, they do not complement each other, but they bring out distinct facets of the complex way in which the employee is impacted. While pressure is unavoidable at the workplace, due to demands, schedule, deadlines and, ultimately, effort, the stress brought up by an increased level of pressure can be avoided or, at least, reduced. The challenge is another type of strain that can lead to stress, but again the “optional” side of its occurrence is modifying the imminence of this factor and its impact along.

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While challenges can motivate employee to perform better and to voluntarily take an increased amount of pressure, the stress as such is often unavoidable and “mandatory” in the sense that it does not give the employee a choice whether to go through it or not. This inevitability can create the “trap” sensation to which stressed employee submerges and the consequent vicious circle is one step away to being created. Managers who choose to ignore these facts face not only the risk of decreased HR performance, but also the risk of spoiled organizational culture (Baba, 2011 and Neacşu, 2015).

2. Literature review

Stress is classically defined as "the reactions of individuals to new or threatening factors in their work environment" (Arnold and Feldman, 1986, p. 459). Since in nowadays work environments employees are often facing new situations, this definition may suggest that stress is inevitable. The threatening factors mentioned in this definition, on the other hand, depict that reactions to stressful situations can turn into emotional, perceptual, behavioural, and physiological changes. Williams and Huber (1986) describe stress as "a psychological and physical reaction to prolonged internal and/or environmental conditions in which individual's adaptive capabilities are overextended" (p. 243). The cited authors maintain that stress is an adaptive response to a conscious or unconscious menace. Like McGrath (1978), they point out that stress is a result of a "perceived" threat, and may not necessarily be related to actual environmental conditions. Thus the amount of stress entailed by a given situation may depend upon the person's perception of that situation, and not the situation itself. Is it then stress just a personalized or, even poorer, a collective illusion? That is to be discussed at a later stage.

Perls (1969) proposes a more general definition, where stress is an indicator of (employees) dreading the future. Anxiety is created by a strong attention focus away from the current standing which creates a form of tension between the present and the uncertainty of the future. In our opinion this taxonomy is too vague to express the essence of the phenomenon, thus less precise as we come to study causes, responses and HR management solutions to be put in place.

On the other hand, French, Kast, and Rosenzweig (1985) underline that stress itself is not necessarily bad. They propose a paradigm that defines an optimum range of stress in terms of its effect on staff's performance, that is: stress levels that exceed an optimum level result in decreased performance and ultimately burnout, while stress levels below a minimum result into (the same) decreased performance and what we can call "rust-out". That is no new approach, as many authors have tried to look on the bright side of the phenomenon and to emphasize the input of work-related stress as possible motivator onto staff's performance. Opinions differ drastically there, as no “average” level can be rationally defined to attend all

personalities even in a small team, not to speak about larger populations. The larger the sample, the smaller the probability to establish a rationale as to the minimum, the optimum and an (unacceptably) high level of stress at work. It all depends on each individual's perception of some specific situation at work, the moment in time when the situation occurs, the personal status of the employee facing that situation and all sorts of quite particular and irreproducible conditions that merge into creating the employee's response to stress. All those get blended in a cocktail of untenable parameters that simply cannot ensure avoidance of stress at work. As desirable this could be, the reality is that managing stress is more a solution than trying to suppress it. According to Perls (1969), there is no difference between good stress and bad stress. They are both created in the employee's mind by thinking about the future. It sounds simplistic, but it pictures quite clearly the basis of the concept, while solutions remain to be found and implemented at several levels (Anton, 2009).

Stress within an organization is managed at two levels: at organizational level, by organizational arrangement, and at personal's level, by individual arrangements. (Caracota and Mitovski, 2009). Organizational arrangement looks into the relationships between stressors and strains, without taking into consideration any individual differences. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that, as stated above, stress cannot be addressed as an average phenomenon, because the very nature of it is personal and depends on one's perception of the same situation. This level consists then just into an arrangement linked to the job design and task alleviation, schedule arrangements, flexible working hours, part-time arrangements and similar.

The individual arrangements look rather at the cognitive processes and emotional reactions of employees facing stressors. Management's response is much more personalized and can generally be found in small teams. For public (large) organisations, this type of response started to occur though due to general trends on enforcing stress perception policies. Seen, initially, as a reasonable approach by the employees taking (promised equal) advantage of such policies, their implementation stopped being perceived as being correct once the most "talented" part of the personnel in stress mimics started to enjoy the associated benefits as per policies, while the less endowed could not reach the same advantages anymore. Such competition started to be all of a sudden seen as unfair.

3. Stress factors and subsequent underperformance

It is of obvious organisational interest to investigate the link between stress levels and the individual performance at work. In this case, a common sense premise would suggest a reversed correlation.

For public organizations the issue is complicated as both concepts in question, as well as the link between them, are quite blurred. It is unclear what can be defined as a public organization performance. For a public organization, i.e. non-profit

oriented, performance as concept is in use but difficult to quantify in a realistic way (Bacanu, 2014), hence the ambiguity of the staff's individual performance.

Assuming afore stated correlation as being valid, in the public organization case the "normality" would be to invalidate the hypothesis in case. For example, if performance is associated with level of obedience to the head in command - which should be seen as normal in the army for example, then one can assume that a higher level of stress prompts an increase in staff's obedience, hence performance.

On the other hand, as stated above, we can discuss about the difference between a stressful situation and a challenging one, but it is difficult to obtain a firm conclusion. HR managers claim that a "challenging environment" improves performance. It matters less that staff involved deem that the appropriate term is rather "stressful" instead of "challenging" for such an atmosphere generated in a premeditated way.

If we exclude these circumstantial considerations, which otherwise are defining and determinant for our research, it is likely to identify a positive correlation between stressors and/or challenging milieu and the upsurge of physiological stress indicators such as: heart rate, sweating, breathing rate etc. It remains to be discussed whether these effects play a positive role into the employees' exertion. Experience shows that for example the military posttraumatic stress occurrences show that such reactions are strongly negative.

4. Occupational stress as motivational tool

Stress may be commended with an operational function in a manner similar to that of the functional conflict. This role can occur if stress is used as a motivational tool. As such, one of the current issues for public organizations - that is the blurriness of its objectives, amplified at the individual level of the pyramid hierarchy - could be offset by a constructive use of stress.

On the other hand, stress occurs in public organizations due to blurred relations between positions, objectives or procedures used. Moreover, it may befall from an overregulation of business, otherwise with no impact on results.

From the above reasoning will result that stress can have a beneficial effect if used as a tool and if the emphasis moves towards "stressing", underlining of a hierarchical set of elements as symbol of the organization's functioning under the precepts of modern public sector. In real life, this reasoning would mean that the employee should be stressed with requirements and results delivery under the terms of a de-stressing clarification of relationships, goals and procedures. In this particular case, obviously, the task of managers ensuring above clarifications may become very stressful!

The positive effects would occur by creating an organizational mechanism that would make the employees focus more on the work they perform. The idea

would reflect an organizational approach similar to biological mechanisms. In other words, the reaction that can be obtained from an athlete by using a type of biochemical stimulator is aimed to be obtained by using organizational stressors which might have similar stimulant effects on personnel. The difference would be that if the biological changes should be mild and short-termed, the organizational stressor's effects are expected to persist on the long-term.

Do not forget that stress management means a control level of it, not necessarily a reduction or elimination thereof. Consequently, the transfer of sporting performance management approaches in the field of public organization HR performance management, for example, would not be out of scope.

In most cases improving organizational performance means marking a positive trend of quantitative work indicators. The immediate consequence is that better performance is equivalent to higher productivity. Issues not covered by this formalized approach are left out by the performance management procedures. Given the fact that in public organizations the quantitative aspects are the core issue, as performance is very difficult to measure, it would be considered as satisfactory an approach that solves the problem at least partially.

Obviously, the problem of creativity or problem solving situations for which there are no procedures and common sense solutions are to be taken, go out of the performance management area, and implicitly, out of the associated stress. De facto, a stress management solution will be adopted in the sense of a decisional approach with an accent on power conservation and ultimately a solution based on limited rationality. In other words, a combination of political and organizational behavior patterns of Allison (1971).

5. Organizational stress and solutions

Any change in the processes flow, in the daily routine, in the way we do things induces a form of stress, mainly known as resistance to change or inertial behaviour. It gets verified for the various processes of our lives and it is factual also for companies, organizations and economic entities, as people replicate their stress to change onto the processes, context and performance of their respective organisations.

Besides the cumulative behavioural stress shown before, there is an additional institutional burden that comes into place once a new solution (on the technology, software or other fields) is implemented. Whether we talk about a technological change, a geographic one (like delocalizing staff) or simply a change in the way the staff's performance is judged, the stress factor occurs.

This becomes particularly difficult in the public sector, where the inertia is well settled into the collective mind and produces a specific behavioural response to

change. And not any kind of change, but a profound one, with implications on the day to day tasks, on the mind set and on the rhythm of work.

Considering the previous point, stress management presents different approaches depending on the purpose and the overall strategy of organization in which it operates. Typically, public organization management is more difficult to implement for various reasons, the main one being the fact that general paradigm of profit maximization cannot be used. Although experience of public organizations may be more extensive than one of a generic profit oriented company, we cannot ignore a relative delay in the use of modern management tools. That is why it may seem that the public organization presents weaker performance indicators than the ones in the private sector (or non-existent in fact), all based on disparate elements that cannot lead to a firm conclusion.

Assuming that public organization performance indicators show lower rates than profit oriented organization ones, as a consequence of weaker individual performances, then one option in explaining those differences would be related to the significant role of stress. If the management takes the decision to use stress as a tool to incite superior performance of the employees, then organizational solutions will include sacrificing attributes of the employee's job in the public organization. Or those attributes are precisely those which make such jobs attractive, despite lower salaries than those offered by private sector. For this demonstration we leave aside the rare cases in which both advantages meet in public organizations, that is: high wages and job security. As rare that they are, they do not make the rule, but they attract the most highly motivated professionals to join and to become less and less performant, due precisely to lack of stress incurred.

Those attributes which will be subject to stress management in the sense of its increase, will strengthen the internal environment of the organization by transforming it into a competitive one. The same attributes that provided advanced job security for the employee will be rethought so the subjects become concerned about their performance. It is known that in some countries, the status of public employees' gives them virtually guaranteed tenure until retirement. Same status provides also that the salary is fixed for a certain position within a public scale.

It would be useful to recall several different approaches to personnel management in public organizations, in reference to the civil servants. In Germany, starting from the time of Fredrick II of Prussia, German officials had a high salary and tenure that has turned them into devoted servants to the central power. In Soviet Russia, as in other communist countries, the civil servant was assigned a small salary, so caring for survival should engrain continuous stress to the employee, forcing him to accept corruption acts that made him dependent on the central power. Similar scenarios can be depicted in some African countries, too.

If all these rights, which turn an employee of a public organization into a sort of sacrosanct person, whose status and benefits are not affected by individual performance, are reshaped in order to reduce the advantages over-securing

propensity, then it is likely that the interest of the employee for his work will improve. It would be expected that a positive impact on the performance of public organizations and/or reducing operational costs should occur.

These benchmarks are already visible in many Western public organizations, including international for some. By redesigning the employee benefits package, we see as obvious an intention of shaping the staff's behavior in the sense of increasing his preoccupation for continuity, individual performance and compliance. Under the motto "customer's satisfaction" we find easy to depict the employer's intention to achieve from the staff a higher obedience, rather than tangible input for the citizens served.

Consequently, it seems that the solution of organizational stress management is to achieve a level of stress that finally has a positive motivational effect on staff. The plan is basically to eliminate the employment contract of indefinite duration, to introduce some form of flexible wage, possibly by creating an artificial internal competition in order to obtain the salary differentiation in regards the fixed scale. It also involves inserting pseudo-assessment of the staff's professional behavior based on the colleagues or clients' opinions, in order to actually disguise the creation of an omnipotent hierarchical supervisor and/or policy and procedures architects for the human resources management area.

6. Conclusions

First of all, getting a clear picture of such a complex phenomenon as work-related stress is a far more complicated achievement than one could think.

Exploiting a plausible link between work-related stress and the individual performance, opposite to the negative type discussed in most literature becomes well founded. These reasons seem to be consistent in both field theory and, moreover, in the public organizations' reality.

Field theory discusses an acceptable level of stress, which supposes a correlation between stress and the performance level. Stress management does not seem to suggest its elimination. The desirable level is correlated with a certain level of ambition and objectives, euphemistically labeled as "challenge".

Narrow segments of stress management area discuss though, often implicitly and for certain type of activities or institutions, about a positive correlation between increased stress and individual performance.

Public organizations practice suggests that an induction of a specific type of stress appear to be beneficial. This stress is associated with an internal working environment, having competitive features similar to the ones present in private companies. In other words, inducing fear related to the stability of employment are found to generate appropriate behavior for recent approaches of the new management of public organizations, as well as its "customer" orientation.

Nonetheless, given that public organization's objectives are unclear, it is likely that the growth of stress induced to personnel would result only into an increase of obedience towards the direct and indirect supervisors, or at least the one having an input on the performance appraisal procedure. As a result, compliance with such standards of organizational culture which becomes autocratic or even faction-type will occur with a higher probability than the seemingly desired increase in actual individual work performance.

7. References

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