

Human Resource Professionals are Human Too!

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Introduction:

The purpose of this article is to explore the question of whether or not you as a human resource professional are taking care of yourself. The first part of the article will give an overview of what is happening in today's corporate world in the area of stress and its cost. One of the primary roles of the Human Resource Professional is to assist in the management, retention, and development of human capital. To do this effectively it is paramount that Human Resource Professionals also take an active role in maintaining themselves. This article is intend to be a vehicle to help you self-evaluate how you are doing, as well as to offer a recommendation for what you can do to improve your present situation.

"The quality of an organization can never exceed the quality of the minds that make it up."

Harold R. McAlindon

Have you heard of the plumber theory before? The theory is based on the notion that people who do one thing for their profession too often have a difficult time applying these best practices at home. For example, consider these points, and look around and see what you notice. Consider the following to get you started: why do many plumbers have leaky faucets at home? Why do many auto body professionals drive rusty cars? Why do many Human Resource (HR) Professionals have a great deal of stress in their personal lives? The theory suggests that what we do for others, when it comes to doing it for ourselves we do not have the same focus and energy. Can you relate to this? This theory is not 100% indicative of all professionals, though how accurate is it really? Where it is or not does not make any difference. The point is are you practicing what you preach?

Many HR professionals are challenged by the pace of change, and one of the growing demands for them is to figure out how to keep the workforce in place and retain the most valuable talent. The fact is that the tremendous amount of change in the workforce is creating an increased number of pressures (e.g., one of the biggest is increased work related stress). According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), four out of 10 American workers view their jobs as the largest cause of stress in their lives. The cost to an organization is becoming a large concern. For example, just look at the cost of lost time in regard to replacing staff or the loss of productivity due to stress. To calculate this it would be very difficult, however, from a statistical prediction model, the cost would most certainly be staggering.

As you know the function of the HR professional is to not just attend to the mechanics of managing people's salaries, hiring, and employment protocol and procedures. With all the

change and demands, there is a need for the HR to take more of an active role in the workforce's health. HR professionals are working with a growing number of stressed employees, so it is paramount for the HR's wellness and effectiveness of their post to not forget to take care of themselves too.

"It is better to ask a lot of questions than to know all the answers."

James Thurber

To begin any self-reflection one needs to ask themselves the tough questions, then be honest with one's self. In your position you are exposed to a lot of decision makers, and make many decisions yourself. You do and will continue to have a great deal of challenge ahead of you. The fact is that staff related issues continue to be a growing issue in the workplace. HR professionals are not bullet proof. They will be exposed to stress, and will be influenced by the amount of stress in the air.

Stress has become a major health concern for UK companies. Statistics reveal that stress costs the country between 3.7 billion and 11 billion pounds sterling, or up to 10% of the national GDP. A 1995 survey of nearly 2,000 human resource managers reported that stress was their number one occupational health research issue. Two years ago, respondents to a joint IPD/Institute of Occupational Health survey of nearly 2,000 personnel managers placed stress at the top of their list of occupational health research priorities. And in a survey of 200 personnel managers at Sedgwick Noble Lowndes' HR conference last year, 66% said that stress was an area that required special budgeting, although only 2 per cent of respondents' companies had policies to tackle it. The TUC, which surveyed 7,000 health and safety officers last year, found that more than two-thirds said stress was their biggest concern, Simon (1997)

Harden (1999) provides an overview of the impact of stress today: Stress is now a recognized feature of contemporary life. The Little Book of Calm by Paul Williams was in the Sunday Times top-ten list for over 80 weeks, and sold 2.3 million copies. Stress induced by work results in about 20 million days lost each year in the UK at a cost of more than £12 billion. According to a survey commissioned for the 1998 Mental Health Awards, 93% of managers claimed that they suffered from excessive or moderate levels of stress in their work and 80% felt that stress was damaging productivity (p.245). As you look at this growth, it is easy to draw the conclusion that if stress is growing in the workplace it must be proportional in the HR profession.

Hiltrop, Jean-Marie's (1998) research demonstrated that stress related illness has increased by 500%, by the 1990s, compared to the 1950s. With the variable of increasing stress in the workplace it becomes challenging and stressful for HR managers to address the large growth and results of stress in the workplace. Work stress can show up in many forms, such as an addiction, workplace violence, and turnover. Stress leads to other challenges and problems. For example, addiction is seldom the original problem; rather, it is a symptom of a more pervasive problem. Similarly for anger.

Solomon (1999) states that stress is getting much worse in the workplace, and companies need to now ensure that they have strategies in place to identify and help employees compensate with stress. In our society, the word stress is used very openly and is a very common term. However, many are not aware if they have stress, and if they do what is it really doing to their minds and bodies? Using your definition, do you have stress? If so, how much? Are you aware of the impact of this stress if it continues or becomes unmanageable?

Professionals who help others with life challenges such as stress unfortunately all too rarely truly **stop** and do this for themselves. Due to the very nature of the fact the HR professionals are intensely involved with people, they are very often not taking the best care of themselves (Maslach, 1982). Gensing-Pophal (1999) provided the following insight to describe what some HR professionals are saying today. As you read this, ask yourself how true is it for you? "I am one of two people managing a workforce of 145. In addition to 'normal' HR functions, I handle payroll as well as several other accounting functions. Add all the emotional issues that are encountered daily in our profession, and it adds up to 12- to 14-hour work days - not counting Saturdays - and a lot of stress. I am on emotional overload. Help." Do you ever find you do this, though since you are where the buck starts and stops for wellness issues and other initiatives, you are looking around and saying to yourself, "who do I talk to?" (p 82)

As you consider this statement, is it relevant to you? Very often many HR managers do not have a person who they can talk to and trust. As a professional, we are expected to be in control and it is undesirable to admit our limitations (Pines and Aronson, 1998, p5). HR professionals today are expected to be able to manage the most critical asset of the firm, its people. There is, however, little agreement on the precise guidelines needed to meet such an objective (Yehuda, 1998). With all of this unclear terrain for many HR professionals, they are still expected to have the answers. They are expected to build the framework for the employees and the employer to walk on so that there is consistency, with the main determinant being that the Human Capital is producing to their full potential. For this to happen the employees need to have their needs met and be motivated. This challenge alone can increase the stress in the employee who is not getting their needs met, and the HR professional's stress in figuring out what else they can do to slow the revolving door of talent. The fact is that the talent pool is shrinking, and HR professionals are now in the business of keeping the talent, while the company wants to cut out fat.

This is a challenging paradigm to be in because there are mixed messages being sent to the workforce. Put into economic terms, billions of dollars are lost each year because of workers in all fields who can no longer function adequately in their jobs (Gillian and James, 1997). Dealing with the day-to-day problems of others can wear down anyone's optimism and motivation (McRaith, 1991), again verifying that HR professional stress will be directional proportional to the employees. This only makes sense. When an organization is filled with stress and fear, the HR professional is not immune. It is important that stress does not have to be so external and obvious that one can see and notice it is present. Very often stress is kept inside, and denied. Employees, especially Generation X professionals, are more likely to come forward and talk

about stress than the forty-five-year-old plus bombers. The terrain is changing. Employees are more sensitive today, and will not tolerate stress as they once did.

As more companies are hiring and firing and do both concurrently, the overall growth of the workforce is continuing to slow down in growth, according to the findings of the American Management Association's (AMA) 13th annual survey of the U.S. workforce.

1. *The survey of 1,192 large and mid-sized firms shows that staffing increased by an average 5.0 percent in the twelve months ending in June 1999, compared to 7.7 percent in the prior twelve months.*
2. *Of those surveyed, 77.2% reported creating new jobs, up from 72% in the previous twelve-month period, while 49.6% eliminated jobs, up from 40.9% previously. Actual downsizing, or net reductions in the workforce, rose to 24.1% of the surveyed companies from 21.9% previously. Many job cuts were offset by concurrent hiring: 36% of surveyed firms both created new jobs and cut existing jobs in the period, up substantially from 27.1% previously.*

Reichheld (1996) states, "On average, US corporations now lose half their customers in five years, half their employees in four years, and half their investors in less than one (p.1). *The Economist* (US), (2000) reported that across the board, Americans' average tenure with their current employer has remained relatively steady at around three years for most of the past decade, but some industries are doing far worse than the norm. For instance, part-time retail workers (the largest category of employees in that industrial sector, which employs in total more than 20 million people) had an average turnover rate in 1999 of 124%, according to a survey by the National Retail Federation; turnover of full-time workers was a still-shocking 74%.

This shows that companies are losing talent at rates which they cannot replace in some cases. This will add to the stress of HR departments to ensure they can staff the workforce. HR departments are looking very diligently at how to keep staff. What they are finding is that they now need to help staff with stress more than ever before. One only needs to look at the number of Employee Assistant Programs and the growth of this. Though this is a model that is based on helping once there is an identifiable concern, it cost much more to help an employee to correct something that is ingrained or they perceived is broken. When an employee has a chronic history of stress, this puts them at risk of burning out. Without question we all know that prevention is the best method of keeping employees happy and in the workforce. Many companies are looking at coaching as a tool to prevent the stress, burnout, and turnover that is all too real in the workplace of this new millennium. Companies are using coaching as a tool for self-growth and development to be proactive in the quest to offset stress and performance plateauing.

"It is a most mortifying reflection for a man to consider what he has done, compared to what he might have done. "

Samuel Johnson (in Boswell's Life, 1770)

Looking Into The Mirror

The place to begin is to reflect for a moment on exploring your stress level, and how it is impacting on your life balance and work. The above shows what is happening overall, though research is meaningless unless it impacts your situation, meaning that what is important is not what the numbers say, it's what you say! Statistics are only guidelines; they are not law. It is paramount that you make the decision for yourself if you are doing what needs to be done to take care of you.

Quick Self Assessment of Your Current Stress Level

Answer the questions below with a yes or no response, then read on for how to score.

1. Are you often nervous and tense and unable to relax?
2. Do you perceive you are under a great deal of pressure?
3. Do you feel overwhelmed a lot of the time?
4. Do you have trouble sleeping?
5. Do you get frustrated easily?

If you answered yes to four or more, then you are most likely in a place in your life that you would greatly benefit from becoming more proactive to offset your present stressors. Nathan (1994) writes, "the risks of exhaustion, the burnout syndrome, as a consequence of stress has been recognized as a problem and has been investigated by science. Anyone who works in social professional with other persons in the role of continual giver is especially at risk" (509). We can talk about stress and its impact, though the fact is we all need to learn and become aware that stress is real, and we need to take actions so we can live a healthy life, and not allow stress to rule us. Signs and symptoms of stress and burnout will display themselves in terms of turnover, absenteeism, lowered production, and psychological problems (Riggan, 1995). No one is immune to the effects of stress and burnout (Watkins, 1983). As an HR professional, as with any other profession, it is important to be aware and active in your own health maintenance program.

"All lies and jest; still, a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."

Simon & Garfunkel, The Boxer

We all have different thresholds for stress. What stresses you out may not another. Each of us has our own limits and tolerances. This is called your personal frustration tolerance threshold. The way we perceive and then behave in the world will determine what is and is not stress for us. We all develop different levels of tolerances for the amount of stress we are able to cope with. Our health habits and how we manage our mental states will have a great determination on how

we address stress. For example, if you are stressed at work, and then come home to a crying baby it can put you through the roof if you allow yourself to lose your composure. The fact is that the crying is not the stressor; it is a trigger that will release the symptoms of stress such as irritation and/or anger. It is important to know your triggers to help prevent you from escalating on your path to personal balance. It is easier to take steps to avoid triggers than to address the more pervasive stress as system frustration. It may take time to learn to cope with these, though you can immediately help yourself by becoming aware of your triggers, and putting a plan of action in place to reduce their impact on you.

If stress is left unattended it will become chronic, and lead to burnout. The origin of stress has been shown to be related to two main work characteristics (Mullins, 1993, p. 533):

1. The workload and the day-to-day demands of the job;
2. Discretion on how to do the work, the pressure for conformity and the need to adopt an approach with which the professional does not identify.

As just mentioned, if stress is left unattended it can lead to burnout – a complex individual-societal phenomenon that affects thousands of Human Resource managers each year. Burnout has been described as a state of mind resulting from consistent exposure to some perceived intense emotional stress. Burnout will involve three major components: physical, emotional and mental exhaustion (Pines et al., 1981).

Here are a few examples of what can happen when stress is left to the point of growing into burnout:

1. *Role ambiguity* – lack of clarity concerning rights, responsibilities, methods, goals, status, and accountability to themselves or their institutions.
2. *Role conflict* – demands which are incompatible, inappropriate, and/or inconsistent with their values and ethics.
3. *Role overload* – quality or quantity of demands placed on them are too great.
4. *Inconsequentiality* – the feeling that no matter how hard they work, the outcome means little in terms of recognition, accomplishment, appreciation, or success.
5. *Isolation* – a perceived loss of a social support system.
6. *Autonomy* – the perceived loss of ability to make decisions independently of work bureaucracy.

Gilliland and James (1997)

One Method to Keep your Edge!

In the world of Human Resources, most of you are witnessing the growing trend and the implementation of professional coaching with members of your workforce from the front lines to

managers. Morris (2000) stated, “corporate coaching is one of the stranger wrinkles in management these days—one of the hottest things in human resources, except that it doesn’t usually come out of human resources (in fact, HR is often the last to know) (p. 44). My perception is that in the last 24 months HR for the most part is becoming much more aware and involved in this new kind of professional development. In some cases it is you who is choosing the external coaching vendor or new internal coach(s).” Eleena Delisser, a staff reporter with the *Wall Street Journal*, reported from her research that coaching is one of the fastest growing trends in the business community. In this report she notes a Price Waterhouse study found from interviewing 441 chief executive officers that coaching is booming. The research is vague on specifying if HR professionals are using coaches at the same levels as other kinds of department managers. However, if stress is pervasive, and is being reported at the levels it is, HR professionals are not bullet proof, and are susceptible to the effects of stress. The old adage that what is good for the goose is good for the gander, holds true. The question again is, are you aware of your current stress level, and are you taking action? If not, it is not too late. Coaching is an excellent tool for you to consider. Brian Tracey (2000) reported, “The head of training for Motorola recently estimated that the company is getting thirty dollars back for every dollar it spends on training its people” (162). Coaching is one of the biggest, newest, and most effective methods of providing personalized professional development. Not everybody who goes to coaching has a problem or is in some kind of trouble. The point is that many executives and professionals are going to coaching to keep their edge.

Many people have done OK without a coach for years, however, today many professionals are finding where they were doing OK they can now do great, and enjoy life more than they ever believed possible. Stress is the result of a perceived influence in the internal dialogue of the difference between what you have and what you want. This will lead to internal anxieties with symptoms such as loss of appetite, sleeplessness, irritability, and feeling tired. Depending on the stress, it will influence your life balance. Below you will see five areas that we all attempt to balance daily:

Money – fair compensation, saving and effective budgeting.

Career – having satisfying, rewarding work with a future.

Relationships – maintaining strong ties with spouse, children, friends, and colleagues.

Self worth –self-esteem, confidence, cultivating the spiritual self.

Health – good diet, exercise, rest, and health management activities.

The five are really ranked in a hierarchy. On average, people will focus on money and career more than the other three. I explain it like this: If you have only ten mental units of energy in a day to spend totally, how many do you spend on each area? The majority of professionals will say that they spend a great deal (in the neighborhood of seven) focused on money and careers. This leaves three for the rest. Now, is it little wonder that 60-70% of the population is getting

divorced, that 80% are influenced more by what others say in determining their self-worth, and that 90% are overweight or out of cardiovascular shape? Grover (1999) stated that, "... in the 1990s he is expected to spend – any maybe really wants to spend – more time with his kids, engaged in more family activities and taking care of household chores." This is an example of how professionals are looking for balance at work so they can enjoy home.

What coaching really does is to help the professional improve overall balance and performance in their life. Coaching focuses on creating and ingraining your personal strategies to balance your life in all five areas. Professionals are discovering the value of coaching to help them grow professionally to levels they only dreamed of. Some report that coaching has helped them process their week, make career and personal goals, plans, and decisions for their coming week. With the end goal of the professional being able to function at an optimal level of effectiveness.

To explain how coaching works, I using a three-step model. Step Three is the output step. This is where a behavior is measured and observed, for example, sales production. This is what you, your manager, customer, family, and everyone can see you are doing at this level. Step Two is what coaching is for. It is a place to explore new knowledge and skills so that you will increase in a desired area, whether it is sales or elsewhere. Coaching a tool for professional growth, and to maintain your focus on a determined area in Step Three. You obviously have a lot going on in your life in Step Three. The fact is that we are always being measured in many different parts of our life daily. This leads to the true value of coaching. Coaching understands the impact of Step One, that is your balance of the five areas of money, career, relationships, self, and health. Coaching helps you focus on balancing these five areas so that you will be able to perform and continue to grow. For example, if you have a problem with your self-esteem, learning new sales technologies alone will not help, because if you do not work on your self, regardless of what you learn in Step Two, it will not impact your output in Step Three. Coaching is based on what you need in the moment of coaching. The ultimate goal is for you to be balanced, and to be growing in Step Three in the area of your life you choose.

Overcoming stress is often very closely related to first becoming aware of the challenge, and then to taking action. Coaching helps the professional hold up a mirror and make the self-evaluation if their present actions are in their best interests or others. Ray (1999) states, "coaching helps individuals define their goals and discover what makes them happy." It is not rocket science; it is the science of people having an outlet to process their world objectively. This is why coaching is growing so fast, and is seen as the most effective way for professional development, because it will design and build the curriculum and the focus around the professional's needs at that moment in time. For those of you broker coaching out or oversee coaching, you are obviously aware of this model and the impact it can have. However, are you aware of how it can help you, because you are human too, and can greatly benefit from this model as well?

Coaching will help you do more then be OK, it can help you create a new morph genetic field, a perceived limit, such as the sub-four minute mile, which many believed impossible until Roger

Banister broke it. Another example is the single season record of 62 home runs that had been held by Roger Maris for decades, and was broken not by one but by two players in one year. So now, a new standard of 70 has been created. Where you thought it was impossible to feel content or happy or balanced, professionals are finding that coaching is helping them find out what they did not know was possible. This is what coaching does – it shows how to be released from limiting beliefs and rules. It helps us stay new, and keep moving ahead, by providing a different perspective on our lives and performance, and while adhering to what the Japanese refer to as KAIZON (consistent and never ending improvement).

When I think about the premier athletes of this century, one of the first names that comes to mind is that of Michael Jordan, who single-handedly brought the NBA into prime time TV, and generated the huge profits that come from television contracts. He was a very important part of the Chicago Bulls' six NBA championships, where he was the MVP each time. With his retirement, the game of basketball lost one of its most influential stars.

If you have followed Jordan's career, you know that he attributes much of his success to the famous North Carolina basketball-coaching guru Dean Smith. Jordan has been quoted many times referring to Smith as one of his great teachers, not only for basketball, but for life. Jordan also makes reference to another important coach in his life, Phil Jackson. As one of the greatest basketball players of all time, Jordan has publicly acknowledged that if he did not have such a great coach, he may not have become the player he is now. That tells me that Jackson must know as much or more about coaching people as he does about basketball. Today's new super star, Tiger Woods, credits a great deal of his winning to his coach, Butch Harmon.

As Dr. Stephen Covey (1989) promotes, you can only improve the world by first improving the part of your own world that you can control, what he defines as your circle of influence – your physical health, work load, stress, relationships, etc. As professionals start to be mindful of their actions, they can reevaluate what they can do to maximize personal control, and focus on what they can directly influence. We know coaching is a new and exciting opportunity for many professionals to balance their lives, and/or keep their edge. As an HR professional, it is important that you stop too, and ensure that you are taking care of yourself!

Conclusion

With change comes challenge. The world is changing fast, as are employees changing employers. Employee retention is an increasing issue. One of the most pervasive is the impact stress is having on the workplace. The HR professional's role is growing now than more ever to address and to help staff cope with and overcome stress so that they will be more likely to build loyalty, and stay with the employer who is helping them.

If you are finding that you too as an HR professional are having a difficult time keeping up to the demands and expectations being put on you, you are not alone. Professionals are now hiring coaches to help them improve in all areas of life, especially in the area of careers. Pro athletes

have coaches; the heads of governments and companies have their coaches in place; but the only person who can determine if you need a coach is YOU. The truth is, some of you are very successful, and looking to go to the next level. Others are not happy, and are looking for a way to find personal happiness and fulfillment.

We are all like machines in that to operate at peak performance we need regular service and fine-tuning, as well as upgrading with new technology. We sometimes need to turn to a trusted and competent individual to help keep us on track, and striving for ever higher goals. Regardless of who we are or what we do as an HR professional, we work with people, and we need to be role models for our peers. The place to begin is with ourselves. I hope you take a good look at where you are, pay attention to yourself, and take action. The price is too high when we ignore what we know. We need to do!

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