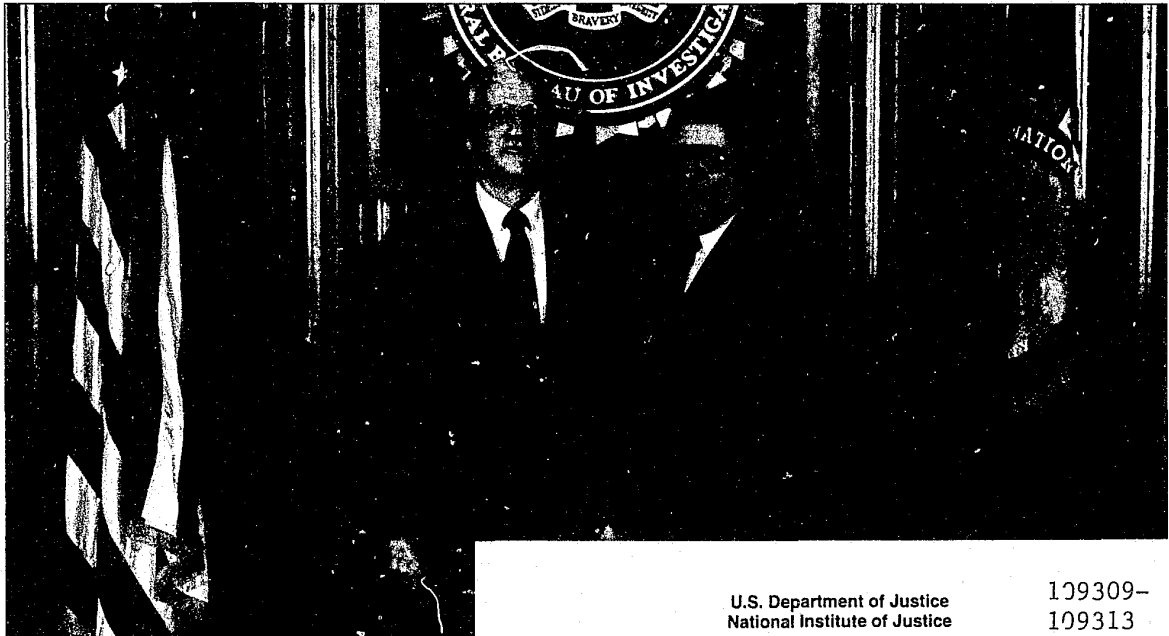


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William S. Sessions, Director

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Director William S. Sessions meets Julien C. Gallet, the new President of the FBI National Academy Associates.

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Stress — A Major Enemy of Law Enforcement Professionals

“A manager’s attitude to the work situation or environment will directly affect, positively or negatively, the stress level of subordinates.”

Most of what has been written about stress is directed toward an individual’s analysis of stress in his own life and the ways in which he might diminish the stress that has a destructive effect, recognizing, of course, that stress can have both positive and negative effects.

But let’s examine the part a manager plays in creating unhealthy stress among his staff, the symptoms of such stress, and some measures that might help relieve stress among the staff.

The public calls upon the law enforcement person to serve as pastor, doctor, psychiatrist — and at the same time, be prepared at a moment’s notice to lay down his life in service. The officer is then expected to accomplish a mood swing to loving husband or wife, understanding parent, school supporter, and community volunteer.

To some degree, this has always been the case for those who choose law enforcement as a career. But it has been only in recent years that stress created by such a dichotomy has been recognized as a causal factor affecting personal and mental hygiene.

Law enforcement tends to impose a higher degree of stress and a multi-

licity of stressful situations on the individual than do most other professions. Studies have shown those in law enforcement experience a higher rate of suicide than the national norm.

People involved in law enforcement are constantly exposed to other people’s problems, as well as their own; separating their public and private lives is not always easy. In fact, it may grow more difficult as the law enforcement professional moves up on the career ladder. As responsibility for subordinates is added, his concerns are compounded by those of the people managed.

The person opting for career advancement is faced with the stress brought about by protecting and serving the public, the private stress experienced in family or social life, and the institutional stress created in moving ahead. Much has been written regarding executive stress, and the rising young executive should avail himself or herself of this information.

Obviously, the individual has a personal responsibility to insure that he is managing his own stress. Equally important is giving consideration to the

By

LEE COLWELL, D.P.A.

*Former Associate Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, DC*

EDITOR’S NOTE:

This article is reprinted, with permission, from the February 22, 1987, edition of the Arkansas Democrat.



Dr. Colwell

amount of stress he is causing others as he meets his professional responsibilities, while moving through the managerial ranks.

A Role Model

The police executive, by his position, causes people under his management to react in unique ways. The manager or executive reacts to his subordinates also, but what is important here is that subordinates tend to key on the persons for whom they work. A manager's attitude to the work situation or environment will directly affect, positively or negatively, the stress level of subordinates.

Evaluating the attitudes and actions of subordinates in three areas will provide valuable information to the executive regarding the level of stress and its extent experienced by subordinates. These areas are emotional, behavioral, and physical. Symptoms may materialize in very noticeable, visual ways, or they may be hidden.

Virtually everyone exhibits emotion by degrees of intensity as a result of various stresses brought to bear. The most rational of beings must be able, periodically, to experience intense emotional episodes.

But, if an employee exhibits a particular type of emotion with sustained intensity and with significant frequency, and the emotion tends to last an extended period of time, a stressful situation may be causing the inordinate behavior.

Prolonged, intensive apathy may be a clue that a person is experiencing stress difficulty. A mood swing to apathy by a reasonable, well-adjusted person may suggest a problem with which the individual is unable to cope.

Signals of Stress

There are other emotional signs a manager may encounter. The executive may have an employee who, over the years, is well-organized, is at his duty station on time, and habitually sees a job through. All of a sudden this person becomes jumpy, restless, and is easily distracted.

This condition is anxiety. It frequently presents itself, from an emotional standpoint, as restlessness, agitation, and insecurity. Stress can cause the individual to develop a feeling of worthlessness.

There are other emotional responses which, when present out of norm, the manager must be sensitive to: The person who becomes overly defensive of his position; one who is overly sensitive to comments whether personal or work related; a person who becomes argumentative or arrogant; a person who takes an insubordinate air or is outright hostile to both personal and institutional issues. All of these represent reaction to stressful situations.

Mental fatigue is also an emotional response to burdensome stress. An employee who becomes preoccupied with matters not work related during periods when his best effort should be directed toward work may be sending signals of stress.

Another emotional symptom of stress is the condition of overcompensation; the manager must be sensitive to the employee's working to the point of exhaustion.

Understanding the Signs

The foregoing only touches on the emotional characteristics which may be indicators of stress in subordinates. It

“The potential for the manager to be an inordinate stressor for his subordinates is considerable.”

is difficult for the manager or executive to rely wholly on emotional indicators. One must look at other aspects of the individual's makeup in order to determine if the subordinate is under stress that is detrimental to his or her productivity.

There is an old saying that we should not judge people on what they say but rather on what they do. When a manager is observing his subordinates, there is some value in this statement. The employee who acts out a different agenda than the one he verbalizes may be under some form of stress.

Behaviorally, a person who is under burdensome stress may take up activities for which there is no precedent in his or her lifestyle. Examples of this are such things as serious abuse of alcohol, gambling, sexual promiscuity, and excessive borrowing.

In terms of behavioral characteristics, there are other elements of conduct which can lead to personal and professional disaster on the part of the employee. One may lose interest in personal appearance, ignore the constraints of working hours, or become accident-prone.

Antisocial Behavior

Of even greater concern is the individual actually violating the law, threatening his or her social freedom. These are all indicators of stress being manifested by antisocial behavior. The good manager is constantly alert to behavioral indicators which may be signals that a subordinate is experiencing stress and requires assistance.

There is a third area of which the manager should be aware, but unlike the foregoing emotional and behavioral

characteristics, it is more difficult to detect.

A person under stress, while maintaining an emotional and behavioral equilibrium, could exhibit an inordinate amount of stress through physical reaction. A person who develops a sense of preoccupation with illness (hypochondria) is unquestionably giving signs that he is under harmful stress. An employee's preoccupation with illness is a distress signal and should be monitored by the responsible executive.

The efficient manager will check leave records. People who suddenly begin needing more sick leave than in the past may have problems totally unrelated to the reasons given for having taken leave. Illness complaints and abuses of leave policies are easily identified, and to some degree, lend themselves to documentation.

What is more difficult to perceive on the part of the good supervisor is the frequency with which employees suffer minor physical problems: Inability to sleep, erratic appetites, headaches, or gastrointestinal difficulties. These changes or dysfunctions of the metabolic process are not generally observable, and subsequently, may go undetected by even a responsible manager.

The executive who has a close working relationship with his immediate subordinates is in a much better position to identify physical difficulties and is, in turn, better able to lend assistance within the limits of his or her abilities.

Prevention

Whether sheriff or chief, the senior executive is in an ideal position to develop as healthful an environment within the agency as is possible. The

executive who is sensitive to the potential of damaging stress factors will attempt to develop support systems which allow for the easing of those stresses which are most harmful to the individual, as well as the agency.

The agency must provide escape mechanisms for its personnel. These mechanisms take on different forms and not all of them will be accepted.

A substantial number of agencies employ professional counselors; and while this practice, when first adopted a few years ago, met with resistance, it has now become an accepted support system for agencies' personnel.

Obviously, not every agency can easily engage the services of professional counselors on a full-time basis.

Physical Fitness

Another remedy that an agency can develop is a formal physical fitness program. Research has shown that exercise is a good reducer of stress. By developing a formal program, it is more likely that the agency's personnel will participate.

Along this same line, developing an intramural-type sports program can accomplish similar goals. Sports activities do not have to be limited to the more common activities such as basketball or softball but can also include tennis, swimming, etc.

An activity which has caught the imagination of many is aerobic exercise. Instituting an aerobics exercise class may be a useful tool for reducing stress.

It has been shown that diet can play a significant role in stress reduction. Such elementary things as cholesterol reduction, salt reduction, and

"The good manager is constantly alert to behavioral indicators which may be signals that a subordinate is experiencing stress and requires assistance."

diminishing the amount of intake of such things as alcohol and coffee can affect the severity of stress experienced.

Another proven activity which acts as a stress reducer is meditation. Researchers have found that practicing meditation, yoga, or some similar relaxing exercise is beneficial.

A manager may not be able to initiate such activities, but he can develop an environment which brings to his staff's attention ways to reduce stress.

Friendly Communication

A very personal way in which the manager can begin to develop feelings of acceptance and appreciation on the part of his employees is to develop lines of friendly communication. The manager communicates formally as a nec-

essary element of his job. Employees expect this.

A manager may consider communicating by a handwritten note expressing appreciation for a good piece of work. This is not a formal commendation, but rather an indication that the manager has recognized excellence in a very special way.

The manager must educate himself in the area of stress management before he can begin to evaluate the impact he has on his own subordinates in regard to stress. While the manager may have reached his position of responsibility with a certain executive style, it does not mean that he will continue to succeed with the same style.

Self-evaluation must be a constant procedure if the manager is to be productive. In this regard, it is suggested

that the good manager be flexible and able to change his relationship to subordinates.

The potential for the manager to be an inordinate stressor for his subordinates is considerable. The good manager recognizes this potential and is able, through education, evaluation, and self-imposed change, to satisfy the needs of his subordinates.

Ask yourself, "Am I the type of manager for whom I would enjoy working and for whom I would feel impelled to produce my best?"

You should consider how much stress you cause others. You set the mood for the work environment. If you feel good about yourself, your competence, and your work force, those positive feelings will transfer to your subordinates.

FBI

Jackknife Handgun

A stainless steel jackknife designed in the shape and appearance of a small handgun is currently on the market. The knife is nearly 8 inches in length when full extended and has walnut-finished wood grips. It is carried in its own brown leather holster which can be clipped to a belt.

*Courtesy of the Knox County Sheriff's Department
Rockland, ME*

