Stress Games: Can you reduce stress by creating more of it?

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By: Ash Patel

STRESS CAN BE good and bad at the same time. Mira Sermanissian understands what stress is and knows how it influences behaviour. Sermanissian is particularly interested in the causes, effects and use of stress in the workplace. Director of HR at an aircraft equipment manufacturing company in Montreal, she has experienced and observed the dysfunctional outcomes of stress in many organizations. Sermanissian has been a consultant, HR coordinator, EAP counsellor and director of a large department. Through years of tenure, she has developed a reputation as a tough cookie. Sometimes called "the general," Sermanissian has proven herself as a turnaround guru when it comes to taking a stagnant, unproductive and de-motivated workforce and realigning it to be the best in its industry. She has accomplished wonders in the past.

Her current employer, a relatively new company, hired Sermanissian to start the HR department from scratch. The founders realized that the work she is known for should be started at the outset. Sermanissian was charged with creating the ultimate department and workforce. Guided by total management support and more than adequate funding, she set out to build a conventional department with unconventional ideas.

To know why the owners of the company were committed to unconventional approaches, you need to understand the nature of the work. The company operates in an industry where pressure is very high. Development efforts require the highest of tolerance, accuracy and quality. Production activities operate in a just-in-time environment and contractual obligations are tied to heavy penalties for failure. To top all of this off, everyone knows that the equipment they produce will go into aircraft that carry hundreds of people. On a day-to-day basis, the pressures, stress and fears of disappointment can be felt on the production floor and the administrative offices. "You can almost cut the stress with a knife around here," Mira said, when asked why she had taken on the role. "The environment in which my employees and managers work might as well be a brain surgery operating room. I am here to diagnose, assess and treat every aspect of the HR function so that the unexpected can be dealt with effectively."

Knowing that the health of the company rests with the health of the employees, the HR department introduced the usual employee wellness programs. Combined with leading compensation packages, superior working conditions and perquisites, employees enjoy floating days off to rejuvenate their body and mind, as well as subsidized fitness club memberships and access to nutritionists. Yes, much is in place to help employees and managers cope with the pressures that are a part of working for the company.

After two years of building the workforce and significantly contributing to the high profitability of the company, Sermanissian's next move is to introduce more stress into the equation. The program, called "stress games," is meant to ensure preparedness for future contingencies. The program design began at the outset, when the jobs were being designed. All job descriptions and specifications were created with added requirements. Applicants to jobs were made aware of all that might be required of the job but, in reality, a typical employee would only do 70% to 80% of the duties. The added elements were documented for the eventuality that the employee might be called upon to perform the duties and possess the skills. Over time, employees would be given specific training to maintain currency of knowledge and preparedness to take on these other duties.

Once the workforce was completely in place, attrition was low and all was well, Sermanissian developed a

committee to plan the stress games. The committee, made up of area supervisors, two HR staff and an external consultant, was responsible for systematically implementing the plan. Over a period of six months, all jobs were assessed for potential stress situations. The jobs, grouped into operating categories (management, supervisory, production, development and marketing), were investigated to determine potentially high levels of pressures resulting from a variety of factors including deadlines, testing, customer concerns, fear of errors and financial losses. For each job area and group of employees, the ultimate set of adverse conditions was identified. These conditions, called stress packages, represented a likely, but hypothetical, set of situations that might occur and must be dealt with effectively. Mira and her committee felt that the average employee would not be able to cope with the stress package without prior preparedness and planning.

On a continual basis, a group of employees would be exposed to a stress package. Additional resources and management support through coaching would be made available for the employees to deal with the situations, and their behaviours would be closely measured. The committee would learn from the measured behaviour and would modify future stress packages to gain maximum results.

Senior managers understand the stress games and support Sermanissian. Convinced that the application of hypothetical stress will lead to the strengthening of workers, both mentally and physically, management gave the go ahead to make the program permanent.

Mira does worry occasionally about the long-term effects of the program though. In her work journal, she wrote, "I have seen the results of this program in the past and am a believer that employees need this and will eventually thrive on the added stress. We are helping them cope with the stress and providing an environment of total support and high compensation. I just hope we don't lose qualified people because they can't handle what we are doing."

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What are your thoughts? Are Sermanissian's "stress games" a valuable part of being in a business requiring the highest of performance, or has she gone too far?

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Expert Commentary

SERMANISSIAN SHOULD DO BETA TESTING ON ONE DEPARTMENT FIRST
LISE R. DESCHÊNES

MIRA SERMANISSIAN'S CONCEPT of introducing "stress games" to the employees is a valid and important part of any organization trying to gain strategic growth and advantage in today's globally competitive market. If the training is as successful as Mira anticipates, then it should produce the following outcomes for the employees: being able to manage stress effectively in a just-in-time environment, creating a workplace that is focused on collaboration, and fostering teamwork rather than individualism. Also, being

able to deal with change and setbacks if a product or service is not effective and being able to better problem-solve to find solutions.

Sermanissian has spent a total of two years orchestrating the details in preparing the members of the organization for the launch of the stress games training program. At this last stage, it's crucial to make certain that the program will be welcome and get buy-in from employees. To guarantee a smooth run before the national launch the training program, I would propose the following suggestions to the committee:

1) Introduce the training program to all employees from one department. The purpose of this beta testing is to select a department that illustrates various personalities and strengths that represent the general population of the company in a controlled environment for the first three months. These individuals should experience the training program and their feedback should be collected after every session. The objective is to build advocates of the training program.

2) Sermanissian stated in her journal that she has seen the success of this program in her prior work experience. I suggest inviting successful participants (guest speakers) from these past organizations to speak to the employees. This would add value and strength to the program and should remove any fears the employees may have. The speakers would discuss personal triumphs and how the "stress games" have helped them to achieve personal growth as well as deal with the increasing level of stress in the workplace.

3) Consider doing applied research in this area of study and document the process of the implementation. This information could later be used to write and publish articles on the knowledge and experience they have gained from the project.

4) Modify existing training workshops on stress and time management that employees can take before or after being exposed to the "stress games."

5) Add emotional intelligence workshops for employees. Before adding or creating new stress in the workplace, people need to know how to manage their own emotions and to manage their relationships with others.

Here are 10 general things to keep in mind when launching a new concept program in an already stressful workplace.

1) Communicate. Make sure the goals and methods used to achieve the objective are clearly stated and let your employees know what's going on. This will make it easier to sell the message and get buy-in from all employees.

2) Use yourself and the team committee as a model to set the tone for the new program.

3) State the short- and long-term goals of the program. This should include items that benefit both parties and should be used as part of the introduction. Employees should be able to relate to what's in it for both their employers and themselves.

4) Share the vision of the program, and make sure it links with the organization's mission and vision statements.

5) Have a backup plan, in case the program does not work.

6) Coach, coach and coach some more. Let your employees know there are people around to assist and support during the learning curve of the program. Offer a mix of feedback approaches to the employees, for example 360-degree feedback.

7) Offer leadership development training that supports the corporate philosophy.

8) Create a learning environment in the organization and follow good knowledge management strategies.

9) Add emotional intelligence (EQI) into the training and organizational culture.

10) Lastly, to quote Alexandre Dumas, "All for one, one for all." Everyone in the organization should be able to share in its wins and losses. Mistakes should be identified and addressed right away, without blame or finger-pointing.

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STRESS GAMES HAVE NO REAL VALUE IN ANY BUSINESS, REGARDLESS OF THE PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

PAUL KRASZEWSKI

THESE ARE PARTICULARLY stressful times for businesses and employees alike. Indeed, in today's high-pressure, fast-paced business environment, effective stress reduction has become a mission-critical ingredient for running a successful enterprise. Employers are quickly realizing that workplace stress is having an adverse effect on their workforce and ultimately their bottom line. From a human perspective, the influence of stress on physical and psychological health has been well documented. Simply stated, stress is proven beyond doubt to make people ill in a variety of ways. Similarly, from an organizational perspective, workplace stress adversely affects organizational performance in a variety of ways, including decreased productivity/efficiency, decreased quality of products/services, decreased employee morale (job satisfaction, work motivation), increased insurance benefits and WSIB costs (more absenteeism and increased frequency of short- and/or long-term disabilities), increased employee turnover costs (recruitment, selection, training), bad publicity and/or loss of reputation.

Therefore, keeping in mind the aforementioned negative implications of workplace stress on people and the organization, I believe that "stress games" have no real value in any business, regardless of performance expectations. In fact, "stress games" can have irreversible negative effects on the workforce and the organization as a whole.

In analyzing the concept, I think it's important to reflect on the responsibilities of employers. First and foremost, it is the employer's duty to exercise due diligence in providing a safe and stress-free work environment for its employees. Unfortunately, in most cases, internal and/or external forces dictate an employer's ability to safeguard its employees from potential harm. As a result, workplace stress is inherent in most organizations.

Indeed, most employees accept reasonable amounts of workplace stress in exchange for extrinsic and/or intrinsic benefits attached to a particular job. Moreover, there is an implied understanding that the employer is doing everything reasonably possible to reduce and/or eliminate unnecessary workplace stressors. Thus, when considering Mira Sermanissian's "stress games," it seems that the employer is dismissing its paternal responsibility of safeguarding its employees in favour of creating a workforce that is desensitized to stress. Although this noble idea may be effective in theory, in practice "stress games" is unethical and oblivious to the human element of employees.

Another responsibility of employers is to ensure that its workforce is sufficiently equipped to perform the required tasks. In this case, the employer must ensure that there is sufficient staff available in order to perform the job effectively.

Second, the employer must ensure that the selection and recruitment process is effective in attracting and screening qualified individuals. In particular, the individuals should not only possess the desired knowledge, skills and abilities but also organization-specific competencies such as stress tolerance and time management.

Third, the employer must ensure that the employees are equipped with specific job-related skills that are needed to perform the job effectively. In this case, the employer must ensure that employees are trained in stress management techniques and are aware of potential stressors in the workplace. Sermanissian should focus on HR interventions that will reduce and/or eliminate potential sources of workplace stress. Perhaps Sermanissian could allocate more resources toward hiring additional staff on the plant floor and quality control department. Additional staff could potentially alleviate some of the stressors associated with developing products that require the highest of tolerance, accuracy and quality.

Sermanissian could also implement more stringent recruitment and selection practices that screen and/or test for an individual's propensity for handling stress. Moreover, she could adopt the use of job previews that realistically portray the internal and/or external work-related stressors to potential employees during the selection process.

Successful stress management frequently relies on reducing stress susceptibility and removing the stressors from the workplace. As a result, adding undue stress on the workforce is not a long-term solution to the problem but rather a short-term fix that can have irreversible negative consequences on employees and the organization. More importantly, "stress games" fails to recognize the human element in the whole process. Adding undue stress into people's lives is simply unacceptable and in some cases might be sufficient enough to push already stressed out employees over the top.

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THESE PROGRAMS ARE OFTEN MET BY EMPLOYEE "EYE-ROLLING"

DANA DRAMNITZKE

MANY SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATIONS use cutting-edge HR practices and programs to gain a competitive advantage. Mira Sermanissian and the management team at this organization appear to have put much thought and time into laying the foundation for their "stress game". But the business world is littered with "clever" management tactics to optimize teamwork, improve productivity, create synergy, etc. These programs are often met by employee "eye-rolling" or cynical sighs of "yet another one of management's harebrained ideas." Given that employees are already under a tremendous amount of stress, this particular program may meet this fate.

While management believes that the high levels of stress and potential unexpected issues in the future will put their performance at risk, it is not clear what their objectives are. The goal of "ensuring preparedness for future contingencies" is not specific enough to gain employee buy-in. Employees will need more concrete reasons as to why senior management plans to create added stress in an already stressful environment. The program objectives should flow clearly out of the company's business plan. Are there specific levels of productivity that must be achieved in order to remain competitive? Have the current levels been measured? Have targets been set? Is the goal of the program to reduce the stress level to an optimal level? Or is it to increase employees' ability to cope with even more stress?

Metrics must be used to measure the current results and the results of the program. First, how are the current stress levels of the organization being measured? Absenteeism, turnover, EAP usage, employee survey results along with operational measurements should be benchmarked. Is management sure that the current stress levels are at a healthy level? If not, it would be more advisable to use resources, including the management coaching skills that have been earmarked for the stress game, to manage the current stress levels to a more optimal level.

The notion that increased productivity and business success can only be achieved by increasing employee's tolerance for stress seems rather one-dimensional and not necessarily supported by researchers in this field. There is much evidence that stress beyond a healthy level can have a negative impact on productivity. Have the risks and associated costs of this game been identified and discussed with management? Sermanissian herself has identified the risk of turnover. Research has shown that too much stress has a direct impact on the risk of occupational injury and stress-related illness. And, the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine has reported that health expenditures are 50% higher for employees who report high levels of stress. If employees do not buy into this program, the game may alienate the workforce and have a negative impact on the productivity of employees, who may remain employed with the company but disengage from their work.

The success of this program will hinge on how effectively the management team can communicate the goals and objectives of the program and create buy-in for the unorthodox methods. What is unclear is why management believes the program must be rolled out as a permanent program. Rather, given the program is to act as a lab within the workplace, it would be advisable to run the program as a pilot with a select group of employees. Successful pilots also create buzz among non-participating employees and can build positive anticipation.

It is possible that the employees will understand and accept this program, given that management has attempted to create a progressive culture. However, Sermanissian refers little to the benefit to employees. Yes, there is competitive pay and benefits, wellness programs and an EAP. But will this program promote continued employee engagement? Employees do not want to feel that they are part of a game at work in which there is little chance for them to "win." Job stress is a serious issue that can negatively impact employees both professionally and personally. The message employees may receive is that the ultimate

bottom line and concern for the future health of the organization is more important to senior management than their well-being.

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