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Working through the stress



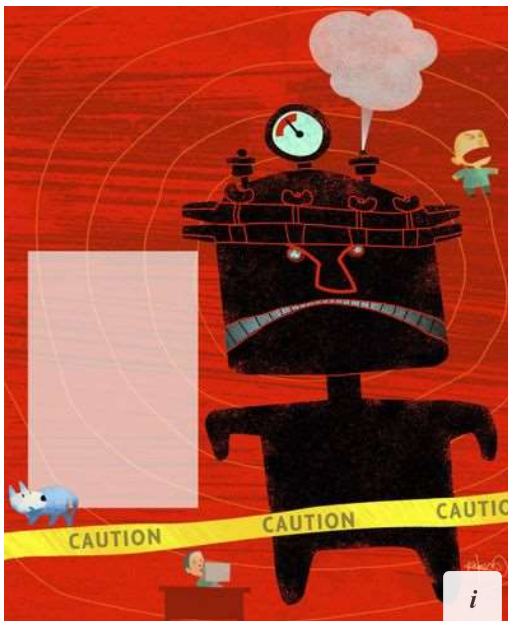
~~WITH THE RULES CHANGING ALMOST DAILY, IT'S IMPORTANT TO LEAD BY EXAMPLE~~

By: Barbara Bowes

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Another stressful week of trying to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. Many companies are still scrambling to put pandemic procedures in place to protect employee and client safety. Yet, this is pretty difficult to do when the ground continues to shift as new daily government announcements change the landscape.

Managers in every business no matter what the sector are feeling overloaded and buried in work. They simply don't have a minute to spare in spite of the fact the phone is ringing off the hook and emails are arriving at lightning speed. Internet systems are being stretched to the limit. And, just when you try to call someone, the phone rings busy and/or you hear a message that the phone cannot be answered so please try again later. All of this contributes to increased stress.



Kirk Lyttle / St. Paul Pioneer Press

However, managers are leaders and we just have to keep going. We don't have a choice; employees are counting on us. We are facing unprecedented times where everyone is facing similar crises and constraints, so we need to pay extra attention to the stress being experienced by our employees. Work still needs to get done.

I know managers are well aware of stress and have been coaching employees on how to manage their stress while working at home. However, when we get busy and stressed, we can lose focus and forget about our phone/email etiquette. Thus, a few reminders and a few new tips might assist managers as they sift through all

the issues of the day.

Managers have often been told that when an employee calls or makes a request by email, that the manager should respond as soon as possible. While that is all well and

good, there must be some caution. First of all, you need to engage in solid thinking and assessment of the problem before providing a response. So, be careful about how quickly you send that email and/or dial the phone.

Prior to reconnecting with the employee, take time to reflect on their personal situation and the unique stresses they may be experiencing. While the employee may be working at home during this crisis, they may also have family responsibilities and need to deal with children who are home from school. This means they are having to make more complex adjustments than others.

As well, some employees may be taking on new roles that require training and a learning curve. Finally, keep in mind all this transition is also happening while the employee is experiencing real worry and fear about their own safety and health as well as their dependents.

As a problem solver, a manager can easily sort through the technical issues of a presenting problem; however, the emotional part of the equation is often forgotten in the moment. Remember, your employee is under a good deal of personal stress and may be overreacting to a problem they would normally see as a straightforward challenge.

So, take extra care and time to listen. Carefully assess what you hear behind the question. Are you hearing more anxiety than usual in the employee's voice? Can you take a guess what emotional thoughts might be driving the question? How will this new assessment impact your approach and your answer.

When you sense more emotion than usual, then know this is a question that requires a personal phone call. When connecting with the employee, make the first question about how the employee is feeling about the issue in order to get some sense of their anxiety. With the rules changing in the employment field almost daily — temporary layoffs, permanent layoffs, forced holidays, allowing someone to work at home — some managers are afraid of making mistakes. All you can do is focus on whether it is fair, consistently applied to all your employees and legal.

Avoid patronizing the employee by reminding them they have dealt with a similar problem before. That might be the case but "this problem" feels different because of the crisis situation. Avoid giving your expert answer unless it is a "yes/no" factual type of question. Instead, focus on a coaching approach where you very deliberately involve the

employee in creative solutions and decision making. Participating in decision making is well known to reduce stress.

It is also important to lead by example. In doing so, share with your employees where you stand in this COVID-19 environment and what you are doing to keep yourself healthy and safe. Be open and honest. Show empathy and compassion when speaking with employees and working through workplace challenges.

Continue to be sensitive to the symptoms of stress both for yourself and for the work-at-home employees. When you sense more stress than is warranted, suggest the individual take a break every 20 minutes to refresh themselves. Watch for a deterioration in work performance and listen for behaviours such as being argumentative, whining, irritation and even memory loss due to stress. Be extra careful not to make your employee the "villain" and be careful about overusing terms such as "we are all in the same boat." This global type of comment is not very comforting and is frankly annoying. Keep in mind that when in a crisis situation, it is natural for employees to be thinking about themselves.

Now that employees have been working at home for a couple weeks, you might start seeing how personal character creates challenges for some workers. Therefore, it is important to do a quick review of how everyone is coping and determine if there are more supports that need to be put in place. For instance, a headset and microphone might help one individual concentrate more effectively. Another person might request to change their work hours somewhat to help deal with family responsibilities while continuing to work the required number of hours. Work with each person to create the supports needed to be most effective and efficient under the circumstances.

Finally, it is important to keep up those motivational messages during your team conference calls. Share coping strategies such as asking everyone to comment on a question such as "what was a good thing that happened today?" Send out positive sayings and try to lighten the mood with an appropriate joke or two. There are plenty of these circulating on the internet. Remind employees their contributions are valued and thank them for their dedication and courage. Their job, no matter what the title or tasks, is important to the organization.

Our work lives as well as lives in general for that matter are changing at lightning speed. It's the first time for the majority of management teams to be experiencing anything like

this COVID-19 crisis. It means a merry-go-round of new challenges as we are being forced to create new ways of doing things on the fly. No matter what, the people side of management remains the same. Employees need direction and followup, empathy, compassion, encouragement and objective, factual problem solving.

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