



# TRAINING TALK

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# ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS NOW AN OMNIPRESENT, OMINOUS CONCERN

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**A**mid the large number of health, economic, political, and other macro-crises of late, organizational stress is at an all-time high. For many, stress has become so burdensome that it is more than just a personal issue that can be placated with a few mental health days out of the office. Workplaces have become overwhelmed by employees struggling with stress — whether driven by feelings of unease, anxiety, depression, frustration, or any number of unwanted emotions. Given the current level of demands, pressures, and uncertainties, employees and businesses can be severely undermined over time.

Since it's clear that any number of stressors will remain an indelible and formidable foe that distracts and derails staffers to an extent that impacts the bottom line, employers are eager to find ways to efficaciously deal with this unfortunate truth. This is understandable, given the extensive amount of research substantiating the calamitous effects of excessive levels of stress on employee performance. One notable cost-of-illness study<sup>[1]</sup> estimated that “the cost of work-related stress ranged from US \$221 million to upward of US \$187 billion...”

A more inclusive analysis<sup>[2]</sup> conducted by the American Institute of Stress found that after including

factors such as absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity, increased medical costs, and increased legal costs, the total economic impact of stress to US employers was estimated at \$300 billion.

This expert interview with Dr. Gabe De La Rosa, Chief Behavioral Science Officer for training company Fierce Inc., reveals what business owners and managers can do to gain a better grip on organizational and operational stress. Dr. De La Rosa has valuable experience measuring the impact of stress on individuals in one of the highest stakes workplace cultures: the United States Navy. There he works as a contractor in the role of Industrial/Organizational Psychologist for the Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control and is responsible for understanding and enhancing organizational factors impacting performance among sailors and marines. His work has been published in peer-reviewed empirical journals including the *Military Medicine Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *Journal of Addictive Behaviors*, and *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*. He's also edited books such as *The Handbook of Employee Engagement*, which is considered a valuable resource for organizational psychologists.



**De La Rosa**

The first step, according to Dr. De La Rosa, is for companies to have a proactive communication strategy to help address and alleviate staff stress and anxiety. “It’s key to create cultures that eliminate the gap between what people feel and what they say in workplace conversations, as this is at the center of what drives a lack of mental and emotional health,” he says. “Leaders who steer their groups toward eliminating this gap produce higher-performing company cultures. When employees feel safe to truly show up as they are, they can invest more of themselves into their work roles. While stress has always been a cause of operational unease, the ensuing pandemic has raised the stakes far higher. It has exacerbated concerns far beyond the health realm — a reality that can have grave consequences for individual businesses and industries at large.”





**Q:** How would you say stress impacts our ability to tap our relatively limited resources?

**Q:** What about the stress of dealing with COVID impacts at work?

**Q:** Can you share some insights about the efficacy of formalized stress management programs in the workplace?

**A:** For many of us, talking about our emotions is not a skill we've learned. In many workplaces, talking about our negative emotions has a bit of a taboo attached to it. Employees often feel one emotion internally but are forced to externally display another emotion. This can be incredibly taxing. That gap — the empty

space between what we feel and what we actually say in conversations and relationships — is in large part what drives a lack of mental and emotional health.

Research suggests that stress has an incredibly destructive impact on employee productivity, wellbeing, and social relationships. Because of this well-documented relationship, forward-thinking organizations have invested in resources designed to help their employees cope with stressors, and research on the effects of stress management solutions reveals promising results. Those participating in stress management programs tend to experience beneficial changes in psychological wellbeing, somatic symptoms, and work-based performance outcomes.

**Q: What about factors correlating stress and employee performance?**

**A:** Today, employees and leaders can be equipped with tools to proactively address some of the prickliest interpersonal stressors. There is often an overarching layer of pressure or stress that is felt, but instead of confronting it head on, a common choice is to try to ignore it or just carry on and hope it gets better by itself. This common choice is not sustainable. People have limited resources, and performance will eventually decrease or they may burn out and completely leave the organization. By procuring the tools necessary to create meaningful change, people can be empowered to take the bull by the horns and move forward. Outcomes include lowered stress, increased productivity, and enhanced relationships with coworkers or leaders who were previously sources of stress.

Of course, the negative effects of stress extend far beyond an employee's work role into a work-family conflict that can present in a variety of ways.

According to Dr. De La Rosa, this can include time pressures that cause parents to miss out on key developmental milestones or psychological strain that causes parents/spouses to be mentally checked out from their home life when they are physically present. "Indeed, work stressors have been linked to poorer physical health, decreased emotional health, and coping behaviors such as drug usage, alcohol use, and other counterproductive behaviors," he says.

## CONCLUSION

Those currently in a leadership role should strive to not only remain vigilant about managing their own level of stress, but also establish a way to identify, measure, and proactively address employee stress within their organization. Awareness of employee stress levels is incredibly important. Without some knowledge of how well employees are managing the demands of work or home roles, it is unlikely that a leader would even know when to provide additional support.

One important factor in getting employees to open up about how they are feeling is authentic leadership. When leaders show up in an authentic manner as real human beings, employees can take this as a cue that it is safe to be honest and open about their own levels of stress and the causes thereof. It will surely prove cathartic to have this kind of open and frank two-way conversation about stress, work, and life. The intention and exercise is itself an inherent win.

## SOURCES

- [1] National Center for Biotechnology Information. Accessed at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8091069/>.
- [2] American Institute of Stress. "Workplace Stress." Accessed at <https://www.stress.org/workplace-stress>.



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