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# Organizational Stress Now An Omnipresent, Ominous Concern For Businesses Across America

Expert interview reveals what business owners and managers can do to gain a better grip on organizational and operational stress

 By **Merilee Kern**, The Luxe List

Amid 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, distracting and derailing staffers to an extent reflected in bottom line impacts, 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](#) estimated that “the cost of work-related stress ranged from U.S. \$221 million to upward of U.S. \$187 billion...” A more inclusive [analysis](#) 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.

According to Dr. Gabe De La Rosa, Chief Behavioral Science Officer for [Fierce Inc.](#)—a training company with over 300 Fortune 500 clients—companies should have a proactive communication strategy to help address and alleviate staff stress and anxiety.



“It’s key to create cultures eliminating 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,” says Dr. De La Rosa. “Leaders that 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.”

Dr. De La Rosa’s expertise relating to organizational stress cannot be overstated. He has valuable experience measuring the impact of stress on individuals in one of the highest stakes workplace cultures: the U.S. Navy. There he works as a contractor in the role of Industrial/Organizational Psychologist for the Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control. He is responsible for understanding and enhancing organizational factors impacting performance among Sailors and Marines. His work has been published in peer-reviewed empirical journals such as *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.

Given his experience with stress in the workplace, I connected with Dr. De La Rosa to discuss what business owners and managers can do to gain a better grip on organizational and operational stress. Here’s a bit of that conversation:

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

**GDLR:** One of the commonly cited reasons for decreased performance while under stress is that while employees are coping with elevated levels of stress, they have fewer personal resources available to focus on constructive endeavors because so much of their cognitive and emotional resources are focused on dealing with the various stressors that they perceive. Given the limited amount of physical, emotional, and cognitive resources that any person has to devote toward their work roles, it makes intuitive sense that when stress accumulates to a level that becomes unmanageable, adjustments must be made or performance in one’s work life



and personal life will suffer. This creates a vicious cycle—stress can lead to errors, and errors can cause more stress. If employees anticipate some form of punishment or feel they have no safety to experiment or make mistakes, innovation and creativity will suffer and stress levels will rise.

### **MK: What about the stress of dealing with Covid impacts at work?**

**GDLR:** The well-established relationship between stress and personal and professional consequences is even more important in today's reality. Today, employees are coping with the traditional stressors such as excessive workload or interpersonal conflicts with coworkers, clients, or supervisors all while attempting to manage a work role and personal life impacted by a global pandemic. The current Covid pandemic is something that is mostly out of any individual's control, is constantly changing and is completely unpredictable, so it is unlike anything we have dealt with previously. Situations like this are likely to elicit anxiety related symptoms such as excessive worry, loss of concentration, and loss of sleep.

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

**GDLR:** 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. Oftentimes, employees internally feel one emotion 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. 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.



### MK: What about factors correlating stress and employee performance?

**GDLR:** Today, employees and leaders can be equipped with tools that are necessary to proactively address some of the prickliest interpersonal stressors. Oftentimes, there is an overarching layer of pressure or stress that is felt and instead of confronting it head on, a common choice is to try to ignore it or just carry on and hope that it gets better by itself. This common choice is not sustainable. As we have discussed, people have limited resources and eventually performance will decrease, or they may burnout and completely leave the organization. By procuring the tools necessary to create meaningful change, people can be empowered to really take the bull by the horns and move forward. Outcomes include lowered stress, increased productivity and actually 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—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 to psychological strain that cause parents/spouses to be mentally “checked out” from their home life when they are physically present. “Indeed, work stressors have been linked to lower physical health, lower emotional health and counterproductive coping

behaviors such as drug usage, alcohol use and other counterproductive behaviors, he says.

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.

An 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, then employees can take this as a cue that it is safe to be honest and open up about their own levels of stress—and causes thereof. It will surely prove cathartic to have this kind of open and frank two-way conversations about stress, work and life. The intention and exercise is, itself, an inherent win.

#### Sources:

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8091069/>
- <https://www.stress.org/workplace-stress>



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