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# The Successful Supervisor

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## Coping with “people stress”

**“Being a manager is challenging, but what I find most stressful is dealing with the people I supervise. Sometimes I have a hard time liking my staff. They get on my nerves.”** Stress is often considered part and parcel of a manager’s or supervisor’s job. As noted above, managing employees can contribute significantly to a supervisor’s overall perception of stress. This issue of *The Successful Supervisor* will focus on “people stress.” Some material is adapted from **Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness** by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, Dell Publishing, 1990. As always, we are interested in your feedback and/or questions. Please email the EAP at [ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com](mailto:ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com) or contact an EAP account manager at 1-800-647-3327.

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Managers often cite employees as a primary source of stress. Employees can interfere with the best laid plans, make demands, challenge authority, misunderstand directives, refuse to play on the team, be “difficult,” and just plain push a supervisor’s buttons. So, what is a supervisor to do? After all, you only have limited influence over other people ... even when they work for you. The degree of stress you experience in response to a situation depends primarily on how you interpret that situation and the overall meaning you attach to it. The same applies to the stress we experience with

people. This stress is almost never due entirely to something the other person is doing. It occurs as a result of our interactions with each other and our individual interpretations of what those interactions mean to us.

**“It sounds like you are saying reducing stress is more about managing myself than my staff ...”**

While there are certainly times when a manager must hold an employee accountable for actions that are in direct violation of policy or instructions, the interpersonal tension we experience in the workplace is more often in response to behaviors that fall in a gray area or are not actionable from a disciplinary perspective. They are often the result of differences in communication style, personality, cultural background, personal experience, values, or work ethic.

These guidelines can help you manage your responses to the behaviors of those you work with. You can learn to mindfully reframe upsetting interpersonal interactions instead of experiencing a knee jerk or mindless reaction that ends up leaving you feeling emotionally drained. An added benefit is that not only will you reduce your own stress; you will communicate much more effectively with your employees.

- **The best way to increase mindfulness and lessen reactivity** is to become aware of your personal stress indicators. These are the red flags that signal stress.

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Signals can include a pounding heart, rapid and shallow breathing, a sense of heightened anxiety or anger, butterflies in your stomach, etc. As soon as you notice these signals, refrain from any action and focus on your breathing. Take deep, calming breaths until you feel stabilized and able to think clearly.

- **If you catch yourself blaming someone else for your stress, step back and look at your own role in the interaction.** Take a moment to identify exactly what you are feeling. Are you angry, hurt, afraid, and defensive? When have you felt this way before? Is the person's behavior touching a sore spot for you? (e.g., Sue grew up in a family where arguing always escalated into a major battle.) Now, whenever her staff argues or experiences conflict, her heart begins to race, and she feels anxious and upset. She has a tough time supporting her staff ... she just wants to run out of the office! It is particularly important to examine your responses if you find yourself "overreacting" — your response seems to be out of proportion to the situation. Odds are you are caught up in a pattern of reacting that may have little to do with what is happening in the moment. Understanding this enables you to step back and establish a different pattern of responding.
- **What are your expectations in regards to the person you are reacting to?** One way to generate stress is to have "unwritten rules" about how other people should behave, what they should be doing, or how they should treat us. We expect others to abide by those "rules." When they don't, we can become indignant. Any time you find yourself thinking, "He should act this way," question your thinking. Maybe that is just your rule.
- **Change your unwritten rules to preferences.** "I would prefer Beth to be more appreciative of the help I gave her" is a lot easier to swallow than, "Beth should be appreciative!"
- **Deal with issues as they arise** rather than holding them in to avoid conflict. As resentments build, the potential for stress increases.

- **Recognize that there is usually no right way.** Don't expect others to see things your way, and don't take it personally when they disagree. Two points of view can be equally valid. It doesn't have to be a win-lose situation.
- **Be assertive and set clear boundaries if necessary.** You do not deserve to be treated with disrespect.
- **Avoid mind-reading.** Remember, our interpretation of an event is crucial. If I think you did something to deliberately annoy me, I will be much more upset than if I attribute your actions to a more benign motive (he just wasn't thinking). Ask if you are not sure of the intention.
- **Expect the best from others ... and remember who you are dealing with.** Accept the reality of who the other person is.

Next month our topic will be Mindful Leadership ... Why it Matters in Today's Workforce. Call LifeSolutions if you would like to learn more about stress management or would like support in developing your resources for coping with stress.

*This information is not a substitute for professional care or your organization's policies. If you have or suspect you have an issue related to the material presented here, consult an appropriate professional.*

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