

# THE IMPACT OF STRESS AT WORK

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## MEANINGFUL WORK AND STRESSFUL WORK

Our work offers meaningful benefits to us. Beyond the obvious financial incentives, work offers employees a chance to connect socially, to gain a sense of purpose, and to focus their effort on things that are meaningful. Valued work can invigorate employees and lead to a great sense of purpose. However, some aspects of work can lead to emotional, physical, and behavioral detriments. When jobs are characterized by stressors such as repetitive tasks, excessive time demands, conflicting demands, a lack of clarity in one's role, interpersonal conflicts, toxic work environments, untrained management, or a myriad other stressors, employees are more likely to develop work related strain.

It is important to note that this is not an "either or" proposition. A given job can be both highly rewarding and incredibly stressful at the same time. The case of Mary Proctor Trane will help to illustrate this paradox. Mary was very satisfied and felt that she was making a meaningful impact at her job as an executive coaching professional. She had great professional relationships and was well known throughout the organization. One day, while coaching her company's President on a presentation in front of other senior leaders, she asked for clarity on the purpose of the project "What is the main objective of this presentation?" One of the newer Vice Presidents responded in a tone of voice that was aggressively condescending. Unaccustomed to this tone, Mary was taken aback. She took a breath and looked at the Vice President. She realized that this was not the time to address this. She "kept calm and carried on" and continued through the end of the presentation. Following the meeting, she went straight to her office where she was able to unpack the emotional stress of the previous hour.

This type of scenario is incredibly common. Oftentimes, all it takes is one negative encounter to begin a downward spiral into avoidance, rumination, anxiety, self-doubt or other counterproductive states of mind. In the case of Mary, she was working at the top of her game and this stressful interaction could have been the type of thing that could unfold over weeks or months ultimately sapping her motivation and decreasing her overall performance.

## STRESS AND HUMAN PERFORMANCE

There is an extensive amount of research documenting the disastrous impact excessive levels of stress have on employee performance. The majority of studies focusing on the relationship between stress and employee performance suggest that as levels of stress increase, employee performance decreases. Studies have shown that excessive amounts of stress can cause employees to be absent from work, to quit their jobs, perform poorly at work, and suffer from several medical ailments. If you're in a leadership role, it's important to stay vigilant about managing not only your own stress but maintaining an awareness of employee stress levels within your organization.

The negative effects of stress are not limited to the employee's work life. Oftentimes the stressors experienced at work will bleed over into other aspects of the employee's life. For example, work stressors have shown to make it more difficult for employees to meet the demands of their family life. This "Work-Family-Conflict" takes on many forms from 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.



# FINANCIAL COST OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

**\$187 Billion**

Including factors such as absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity, increased medical costs, and increased legal costs

**\$300 Billion**

These physical and behavioral consequences of stress are not only shouldered by the individual employee, but are felt by organizations as well. The cumulative impact of things such as high blood pressure, alcohol consumption, and drug usage can lead to workplace accidents, lost work time, and increased medical costs for the organization. In addition, heightened stress contributes to lower work-related performance, lower quality of output (services and products), and can breed a cut throat work environment, thus causing individual employees to be absent from work or leave their jobs altogether. From an organizational perspective, this means a loss of productive workdays, a loss of key talent, and ultimately has a negative effect on profitability of the organization. Numerous organizations have attempted to financially quantify the impacts of occupational stress and typically estimate factors such as lost productivity, loss in talent, increases in medical expenses, and decreases in customer satisfaction. For example, a review of research conducted in North America and Europe suggested that annually, the financial cost of occupational stress was estimated to be up to \$187 billion (Hassard et al., 2018). In 2019, a more inclusive analysis was conducted by the American Institute of Stress which 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.

## STRESS TAPS OUR LIMITED RESOURCES

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, errors cause more stress. If employees anticipate some form of punishment or feel they have no safety to experiment or make mistakes, culture will dwindle, innovation and creativity will suffer, and stress levels will rise.

## THE STRESS OF DEALING WITH COVID AT WORK

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 navigate a work and personal life impacted by a global pandemic. The current COVID pandemic is an example of a stressor that is largely out of any individual's control, is ever changing, and is completely novel such that we have not seen a stressful condition like this in recent memory. Stressors of this nature are likely to elicit anxiety related symptoms such as excessive worry, loss of concentration, and loss of sleep.

A recent study published in the Journal of Applied Psychology suggests that the current COVID-19 pandemic causes decreases in work related performance, decreases in work related engagement, increases in feelings of anxiety, and increases in emotional exhaustion (a hallmark symptom of burnout). This particular study is noteworthy because it



# SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF THE PANDEMIC

demonstrated that as numbers of COVID cases increased over time, levels of anxiety in employees subsequently increased. These increases in anxiety were then linked to various work related outcomes on the following day. Employees were asked to document their daily experiences and noted several anxiety related thoughts and helped to paint a picture of a workplace that is difficult to manage. The study asked for candid observations of the workplace. An illustrative example reported by Fu et al., (2021) highlights how the anxiety from stress can paralyze the workforce: "We're waiting until an announcement is made about coronavirus. Nobody is really working, just mass panicking." This study highlights the fact that stress can negatively impact employee performance, and when stress levels are extremely high, it is very difficult to even complete routine tasks.

A recent article by the Harvard Business Review provides some illustrative statistics: "Since the outbreak of the pandemic, 75% of people say they feel more socially isolated, 67% of people report higher stress, 57% feel great anxiety, and 53% say they feel more emotionally exhausted.

It's worth noting that these stats are related to the pandemic alone, not the larger complexities within which we're living. It's also worth noting that though we see words like "socially isolated," "stress," "anxiety," and "emotionally exhausted," many of us do not know what words to use to describe all that we're feeling. And even if we do, we're often loathed to speak them out loud.

For many of us, talking about our emotions, is not a skill we've learned. Nor has it been affirmed or even allowed – especially in the workplace. 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.

When taken together, both traditional and contemporary research suggests that stress has an incredibly destructive impact on employee productivity, wellbeing, and social relationships. 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. For example, a recent meta-analysis (a statistical analysis summarizing individual studies) of 36 individual studies of stress management programs for employees across numerous occupations and geographic locations concluded that stress management programs were associated with reducing strain and increasing employee performance (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008).

## OVERCOMING STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

Mindfulness, meditation, professional communication trainings and interpersonal communication trainings have demonstrated to be successful in helping people cope with the challenges that they encounter in their professional and personal lives. Mindfulness, is often defined as a state of focusing one's attention on the "now" or being "fully present" in the moment while observing stimuli and reactions to stimuli without judgment. Stress management programs focusing on mindfulness training have shown promising results in helping to alleviate the physical, emotional, and behavioral consequences of occupational and personal stressors. For example, mindfulness training often begins by focusing on the sensations experienced while doing something as simple as eating a raisin. In this example, participants first focus on the visual aspects of the raisin, then the smells, the texture, and both the feeling of chewing and the taste



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that they get from eating a single raisin. Participants would then reflect on how fulfilling it was to mindfully eat a single raisin in contrast to passively consuming an entire handful of raisins. Generally speaking, mindfulness based techniques have been demonstrated to reduce stress (Janssen, et al., 2018). Mindfulness has enjoyed increased relevance at work. Leaders become even more effective when they use mindfulness based techniques (Reb, Chaturvedi, Narayanan, & Kudesia, 2019). When leaders use mindfulness based techniques, they are perceived as treating their employees more fairly, their employees report less stress, and their employees are empowered to perform at higher levels (Reb, Chaturvedi, Narayanan, & Kudesia, 2019).

Meditation is an umbrella term that has been used to describe a mental discipline of focusing one's mind on an image, an act, a thought, or – more challenging – to focus on nothing at all. For example, several guided meditations can reduce the body's stress response by focusing the mind on a relaxing image such as a forest, a beach, or a stream. Providing meditation to employees at work has been linked to such beneficial outcomes as increased emotional intelligence, decreased perceived stress (Valosek, et al., 2018), decreased depression, decreased burnout (Elder, Nidich, Moriarty, & Nidich, 2014) increased job satisfaction, and increased job performance (Shonin, et al., 2014).

Interpersonal and professional communication training, like Fierce Conversations are designed to help participants overcome the barriers to successful communication. For many, the act of communicating can be an incredibly stressful and anxiety inducing activity. Receiving feedback, offering feedback, confronting colleagues, sharing honest opinions, public speaking, and speaking with figures of authority can induce high levels of anxiety in most people. By incrementally building the participant's knowledge base and skill level on how to effectively communicate, these types of training initiatives help to both reduce perceived stress while at the same time help to build crucial skills needed to connect, support, and influence people at work and in their personal lives. Research has shown that communication skills training courses produce reliable improvements in communication skills (Barth & Lannen, 2011), increase levels of confidence with communication (Braga et al., 2021), increase satisfaction of consumers/clients on the receiving end of communications (Boissy et al., 2016; Lundebj, Jacobsen, Lundebj, & Loge, 2017), and can lead to reductions in levels of aggression of medical patients (Baby, Gale, & Swain, 2018).

In today's information saturated workplaces, communication trainings are becoming more and more necessary. Both for the basic fact of making people better at communicating complex information but also at disentangling much of the emotional baggage from what we say and hear on a daily basis. In the case of Mary Proctor Trane mentioned above, she had previously attended focused communication training offered by Fierce Conversations. Because of this training, she was able to proactively address her stressors from a position of confidence. She leveraged the Fierce Conversations template and structured a meaningful conversation. This template gave her a clear advantage over simply "winging it". As Mary put it: "I made an appointment with him the next day, spent some time prepping the confront model, and had the conversation. I learned a lot, he learned, he apologized, I understood (not agreed with) his perspective and we ended the conversation with a hug. We had a good working relationship for years afterwards. Had we not had the conversation, I would have disliked him, avoided him, been SUPER STRESSED every time I was around him. Instead, I felt proud of myself (we teach others how to treat us) and I think he respected me more. He certainly never spoke to me like that again."

It is clear that after using this framework to prepare everything that she wanted to say, she gained meaningful insight into what was driving the behavior in question, and was



able to make a truly meaningful connection that proved instrumental in cementing a respectful working relationship with this individual.

Mary is not the only professional who has leveraged the Fierce Conversations structured templates to facilitate better working or personal relationships. So many people have used this technique that a comprehensive review would be beyond the scope of this paper. However, to help illustrate the range of issues that can be addressed using the Fierce Conversations template, one more example is offered here.

Heather Moyer is an educator with many years of experience in the classroom. She is responsible for the education of our youth and for the professional development of new teachers. One of her mentees was creating an unnecessarily unpleasant work environment for the other educators and administrative staff. The mentee in question was new to the school and had vocally complained about a range of issues.

“She was complaining about everything. As a more seasoned teacher, you want to help with advice so we did... over and over” Initially, colleagues provided advice intended to help her deal with the issues that she was complaining about. However, there was a seemingly endless array of complaints. Heather’s mentee made no attempts at change, so it seemed that the advice was being ignored. Heather was aware of the situation and for the sake of her coworkers and the sake of her mentee she decided to leverage the Fierce Conversations template to facilitate the important but challenging conversation around the mentee’s attitude and behavior at work.

“During a commute, she (the mentee) started complaining... I had a very Fierce Conversation with her. I explained how everyone was feeling at work. I told her that I was not trying to hurt her feelings but that this needed to stop.” Heather was able to get the critical information across to her mentee in a structured and helpful manner. While many people would try to avoid confrontation, because of the detailed lessons inherent in the Fierce Conversation training, Heather was willing and able to have this meaningful conversation with her mentee. Heather’s mentee was receptive to the feedback. “She was thanking me at the end of the conversation. She said ‘That was exactly what I needed to hear and thank you.’” This Fierce Conversation also helped to strengthen their relationship. “I gained even more of her trust because something deep inside us really responds to being leveled with.” This example goes to show that the well-designed templates offered by Fierce Conversations can be used in almost any situation where a conversation is needed.

## FINANCIAL GAINS FROM MANAGING WORK STRESS

Collectively, current research suggests that there are numerous solutions to reduce and manage stress. When implemented correctly, these solutions are associated with reductions in stress, increases in productivity, retention, and engagement. These types of interventions are also related to strong financial outcomes for organizations. For example, a recent analysis of a stress management program implemented at an electronics manufacturing organization found that the stress management program was associated with a 1.4% reduction in absences from work, a reduction in medical costs of approximately \$120 per employee, and more than a 5% reduction in turnover (Phillips & Phillips 2017). Similarly, a randomized controlled trial of an internet based stress management program revealed an average savings of \$204 (€180) per employee included into the program. This study is noteworthy in that employees were randomly selected to participate in the





stress management program. On average, employees who were randomly enrolled into the program experienced significantly increased performance and significantly decreased absenteeism (Ebert et al., 2018).

A recent case study published by Forbes on the efforts of SAP on employee wellbeing also helps to illustrate the financial benefits of employee wellbeing. SAP takes a holistic approach to employee wellbeing and offers many of the stress reduction techniques mentioned above. “the company’s well-being efforts have improveits Business Health Culture Index from 69% in 2013 to 78% in 2018, with each 1% change in the Index delivering a \$90-\$100 Million (EU) impact on their operating profit.”

Given the well noted impacts that stress can have on an employee’s physical health, emotional wellbeing, social relationships, workplace performance and the cumulative impacts that excessive stress can have on an organization’s bottom line, more and more organizations are providing their employees with the tools necessary to help cope with contemporary stressors. Ideally, the tools offered by an employer will address the numerous types of stressors. One of the most important tools employers are providing to help employees cope with contemporary stressors (which, as a reminder, negatively impacts the business and it’s bottom line), is training that develops the highly coveted skill set of effective communication.

## FIERCE CONVERSATIONS APPROACH TO INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY

Fierce Conversations employs a systematic approach to reducing stress in the workplace by eliminating barriers to effective and authentic communication between employees and leaders. The tools offered by Fierce Conversations help individuals build communication skills and provide a solid foundation of self-awareness and self-confidence. By breaking down effective communication into a set of simple yet useful steps, this tool is useful in guiding people towards making meaningful and successful conversations throughout their career and in their personal life.

People tend to avoid conversations they think will be challenging, unaware that this avoidance leads to more stress and anxiety. Avoiding communication can cause duplication of effort, mistakes, rework, resentment, and ultimately an undesirable impact on productivity, quality, and profitability. Through Fierce’s training solutions, we’ve taught hundreds of thousands of employees across the globe how to improve their communication skills with colleagues and customers.



For example, Temple Health, a major health care system in Philadelphia, engaged Fierce to help provide mid to senior level Temple Health managers the tools needed to coach employees as well as handle interpersonal conflicts and issues within their own departments, rather than taking those issues to HR. The result was a 33% decline in turnover and a 50% drop in employee discipline.

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The collaboration between Fierce and Coast Capital, a credit union in British Columbia, produced profitable, measurable results organization-wide and exceeded the expectations of leaders. Specifically, the end result of Fierce Training was a \$300k boost in revenue and a 13% increase in successful execution of strategic initiatives.



Goodway Group, a digital advertising agency with a remote workforce of 350 employees, was struggling with the assertive working style of a new team member. “She talked and moved fast, and that would stress the team out,” recounts Kandi Gongora, the company’s vice president of people and organizational development. “Because she’d get frustrated when the team asked questions, they stopped asking and started making assumptions.” The situation seemed unresolvable until one team member, trained in the new feedback framework provided by Fierce Trainings, approached the new member after an especially tense meeting. He recounted some of the things she had said during the meeting, and their impact on the team.

“The new team participant had no idea how the rest of the team felt,” Gongora says. “She took the feedback to heart and let the team know she cared about them and was only pushing so hard because she wanted them to succeed.”

Timely feedback is essential to keeping resentment at bay and making calm, clear-headed conversations possible in the workplace. But many feedback discussions, no matter how well intentioned, often start with judgments and accusations. It’s no wonder that people try to avoid confrontation or get defensive. Rather than launch into criticism, a more effective way to begin these conversations is to provide a fact-based, objective example of what you observed and then ask the other person to share their experience. It’s an approach to communication that we call, “interrogating reality,” the idea that reality looks different to different people and that what we’re perceiving isn’t necessarily what’s true. This helps people recognize that their perspective is just that — their perspective — which is limited by many factors, including how much information they have. It encourages people to become curious about the views of others — a trait that doesn’t come easily to most people — and to use that information to build a fuller picture of the situation.

In the Goodway Group example, the person who approached the new member provided examples of statements she had made during meetings, without accusation or judgment, and shared what other team members were thinking and feeling in response to them. This enabled the new colleague to hear the feedback. And she expressed surprise and concern about the impact her actions were having — a more common reaction than our worst-case scenario brains would have us think.

In response, the new team member could explain the motivation for her intensity — that she wanted the team to succeed. It also allowed her to reveal the stress and pressure she was feeling and clear the air with everyone involved. This one conversation resolved the tension and strengthened the relationships among the entire team. Tailored to any organization, Fierce Conversations training, can lead to less stress and anxiety, as well individual and collective success.





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