

Managing People and Projects and Pressure.

Employees today cope with greater levels of stress than ever before. A recent survey found that 40 percent of workers report their job is "very or extremely stressful." Juggling multiple projects at work together with family obligations at home, workers operate in an uncertain economy in a world filled with challenges far beyond their control.

Faced with time stress, performance stress, and relationship stress in the workplace, they become firefighters, focusing on only their most immediate priority. This approach comes back to haunt them. Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than any other life stressor, even financial or family problems, according to one insurance company survey.

Consider this situation: A merger forces a department to undergo restructuring, taking on additional responsibilities in new areas. This external change has created a great deal of stress, particularly for the project manager in charge of the reorganization. But she isn't sure how the department head feels about the changes. Does he support them and her plans, or is he just toeing the corporate line?

Instead of dealing with it head on, she works around it, compensating for any lack of support by working even harder. Perhaps she's afraid to find out what she doesn't know. Perhaps she's worried about how she would handle his response. Either way, her stress builds as her concerns remain unresolved.

In my 14 years of coaching, consulting, and working with thousands of professionals, I have learned that people make the same mistakes again and again. Most of us go out of our way to avoid uncomfortable situations in the workplace. But our short cuts have long-term consequences. Leaving our questions unasked, out of fear of conflict, we operate under a false sense of alignment that quickly shatters when challenged.

There is another way. Armed with a new perspective and the right tools, you can significantly reduce your stress level and increase your effectiveness. To start, watch out for these four common pitfalls:

Heading the Wrong Way Fast

Don't jump into a new project so quickly that you forget to ask where you're going with it. One manager was so focused on getting an operations manual written, he alienated the key employees critical to the operation by not including them in the process. His goal was to finish the manual, but if he'd thought about the project more strategically, he would have realized that a clearer goal would have been to develop a manual that everyone "owns" through their input. There are specific questions that, once learned, you can ask yourself to help you clarify your real target.

Avoiding the Tough Topics

Create an environment where disagreement is not only permitted, but encouraged. That's the only way you can be sure you're hearing people's real views on a subject. There are specific techniques you can learn to help you navigate the difficult terrain of bringing up tough topics that separate facts from feelings and personal interpretations.

The Lone Ranger Syndrome

Why don't our New Year's resolutions make it past Valentine's Day? Because we don't tap a support group to make those changes stick. If we don't tell anyone, no one knows we've failed. For similar reasons, we often act

as if we were alone in the workplace. American culture applauds the self-reliant individual. But working with a team of peers can help you establish more strategic goals and become more accountable in working toward them. Ask for help. Find a mentor. Develop a personal support structure for advice and brainstorm sessions. You will find that people find it fulfilling to help others, and you'll work more effectively.

Trying to Manage the Unmanageable

How much of your stress comes from arguing with, or resisting reality? There are things we can control, and other things we can't. Learn to let go, accept what is outside your control, and redirect your energy to a project where it will really make a difference.

So before you tackle your next project, fight off that overwhelmed feeling long enough to sit back and acknowledge that you have a choice in how you handle a situation. By tackling the difficult questions and conversations up front, you will be able to clear any roadblocks, enroll the support of others, accomplish more and worry less.