CHAPTER 6

Stress and Coping during Change

Introduction

Stress has been defined as a relationship between a person and the environment in which the factors within that environment exceed the person’s abilities, thus putting his or her health or well-being at risk (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasize the interplay between the person and his personal characteristics and events occurring within the environment, recognizing that the degree to which an event or events are described as stressful depend on the person’s cognition of those events and how he evaluates them relative to his abilities to cope with the situation. Stress occurs when competing demands lead to overload (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). A perceived inability to either avert the event or cope with the demands of the situation, therefore, will create some degree of stress. Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, and LePine (2004) recognize that most jobs contain aspects that are stressful, being either challenge- or hindrance-related. When stresses continue indeterminately and become the norm, then this creates a baseline with any additional occurrences taking people over the brink. When it is perceived that there is an absence of any alternatives to alleviate the pressure, people feel that their choices are limited, which increases distress (Lazarus & Folkman 1984).

Stress is not always the villain it is made out to be, however. It is acknowledged that moderate levels of stress, known as eustress (Lazarus 1974), can actually enhance performance (Gruner 2006) and provide a sense of accomplishment or attainment (Selye 1982). We need a certain amount of stress to maintain our survival. If this were not the case nothing difficult would ever be accomplished and the human race could not have achieved many of the advances that have occurred over time. Stress is vital for human development and assists with adaptation. Distress occurs when this arousal is persistently either absent or prevalent. Gruner (2006, p. 13) defines distress as “an
emotional or physical state of pain, sorrow, misery, suffering, or discomfort.” A baseline of reduced stress increasing occasionally when required to perform necessary tasks is therefore the optimum state of affairs. Any elevated level of stress should not extend over the longer term as this causes distress; however, an absence of stress that occurs over an extended period can also lead to distress. Yerkes and Dodson (cited in Gibbons, Dempster, & Moutray 2007) illustrate this point, where stress or arousal is low resulting in low performance and where stress is high also resulting in reduced performance. There is a level at which stress is moderate and at which eustress occurs. At this point performance is optimal.

This model has attracted some criticism in that it has been deemed to be overly simplistic in nature and fails to distinguish between different types of stressors, lumping both challenge- and hindrance-related stressors together (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine 2005).

Coping effectiveness is based on the perception of whether a stressor is a challenge or a hindrance. Challenge-related stress is brought about by high pressure situations that can lead to high profile successful results. Hindrance-related stress is caused by such factors as office politics and bureaucracy that can create barriers to the successful attainment of objectives. Whereas challenge-related stress has been found to enjoy a positive correlation with job satisfaction (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau 2000), and is perceived to be associated with the achievement of goals, improved opportunities for development and advancement and increased performance (Podsakoff 2007), hindrance-related stress has been linked to a negative association with job satisfaction (Cavanaugh et al. 2000). Factors giving rise to challenge-related stress have also been found to promote positive attitudes and employee loyalty, suggesting increased feelings of employee commitment to their employer. They have also been found to create an increased desire to learn, help to develop favorable employee attitudes and align employee goals with those of their employer (Hargrove, Nelson, & Cooper 2013). They are also linked to increased incentive as people have a propensity to believe that increased effort will result in meeting work demands thus increasing the likelihood of reward (LePine et al. 2005).

Hindering factors are viewed as impediments to the achievement of tasks and individual progress, advancement, and improvement (Podsakoff 2007). Hindrance stressors are associated with reduced motivation because people are likely to believe that their efforts will not result in the successful achievement of work demands. In other words, hindrance stressors provide “all of the pain but none of the gain” (Boswell et al. 2004, p. 167). This leads to reduced motivation to adopt coping strategies due to the belief that these will be unsuccessful. For example, those faced with conflicting demands