

Stress: It is Your Business!

by Chris Pullig, Ph.D.

Are you stressed? Are the people you work with stressed? Undoubtedly, we all feel somewhat stressed these days. However, stress is not universally bad. In some cases it pushes us to achieve, but there are sources of stress that are counterproductive. One source of stress that isn't positive is stress that arises from the conflict between work and family roles. A question that arises and has not before been clearly answered is how this type of stress impacts your business. More specifically, when customers interact with your company's service providers and they encounter stress, does this have a negative effect on your business? In a series of studies, some published in a recent *Journal of Marketing* article and others still not yet published, my colleagues and I addressed this basic question.

We All Suffer from Stress

Stress is a part of our everyday lives. We feel stress with our investments, our businesses, the demands of our work, and balancing this with our responsibilities at home. In recent years, with an increase in the number of dual-career couples, family roles have changed. This has given rise to even higher levels of stress related to balancing work and family responsibilities. **This conflict between work roles and family roles is even more pronounced in industries such as residential real estate sales where much of the work involves evening and weekend hours, hours when family-time is most demanded.** We need to work at times when our children are busy with important activities. We need to simply be at home when our spouses have time off from their own busy schedules.

Not surprisingly, studies show that work-family conflict is a significant source of stress in many Americans' lives. For many of us, this conflict creates excessive levels of stress which can be harmful to our health, both physically and mentally. Conceptually, it is thought that stress operates as a type of *resource drain*. Stress makes it difficult to concentrate on our work or our family limiting our capacity to perform either task to the best of our abilities. Stress drains our emotional and physical energy, and as a result, the enthusiasm we display as we do our job, attend our child's concert or soccer game, or simply take care of important family issues. The impact of stress may have serious implications in both our personal and professional lives.

But, Does this Conflict Really Impact Your Business?

Our Research. Our research is the first to look at the impact of stress in a customer-relationship setting. In a series of studies, my colleagues and I examined the impact of stress due to work-family conflict on individual job performance, customer satisfaction, and customer's intention to

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patronize the service provider in the future. We conducted our studies across multiple industries with a focus on examining these effects for personnel in a sales or customer-interfacing role.

We first measured each individual’s level of work and family role conflict and their felt stress. We then separately asked supervisors to rate each individual’s job performance on three dimensions – 1) how the individual performed their prescribed roles in their interaction with the customer, 2) with others in the organization, and 3) how they performed in terms of *extra efforts* to provide customer service. Since stress from work-family conflict is conceptualized as a “resource drain” we expected that it should have a negative impact on performance of these work-related roles, especially the extra effort put into satisfying customers. Customer-level data was then used to determine the extent to which individual stress impacted not only job performance but also customer-level outcomes – satisfaction with the service provided and intention to patronize the company again in the future.

Using these measures we estimated a nested hierarchical linear model (HLM). This statistical method allows us to estimate regression paths for variables that exist at differing levels (i.e., individual personnel, supervisor, and customer level). Given that we are using measures from three independent sources enhances our ability to show causal relationships between our variables. The conceptual model we estimated is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Our Results. As expected, individuals who reported higher levels of work-family conflict felt higher levels of stress. In turn, individuals with higher levels of stress were rated as lower in their job performance with the greatest impact on extra efforts to provide customer service. More importantly, customers served by higher stressed and lower performing personnel reported lower levels of satisfaction and intent to use the service again. In an interesting and somewhat unexpected effect, individual stress had a significant direct effect on customer impressions. It seems that customers can sense stress when interacting with service providers and that this has a significant direct impact on customer satisfaction and future intentions.

What Does this Mean for Your Business?

Our results have several implications. First, it is important to know that stress is not only harmful to the individuals who work at your agency, including yourself, but stress



also has negative effects that can hurt your customer service personnel's performance and, in turn, customer satisfaction. In knowing these effects are likely to exist, you are in a position to do something about this type of stress. Second, if you sense that work-family conflict is a significant source of stress for your organization, then you have options to address this stress. The following is a four-step process to use in addressing stress and, in particular, work-family conflict stress:

Step One: Educate Everyone on How Stress Can Impact Your Business

Educate everyone in your organization, employees and supervisors, about the detrimental effects of stress and especially the effects of work-family conflict in generating stress. In knowing and understanding more about the importance of this issue, you and all your personnel can begin to address ways to minimize its impact on your business.

Step Two: Assess How Stress Occurs Within Your Organization

Ask your personnel and take time yourself to reflect on how work-family and other types of stress occur for your organization. Identify sources of stress for your personnel, especially those who interact with your customers the most. In knowing how work-family conflict and stress arises, then you can begin to address specific sources of stress. It is important that you identify sources of stress within your organization so that you can address specifically these issues.

Step Three: Create a Stress-Sensitive Culture

In creating a culture where everyone knows that stress is something that is taken seriously and its impact understood, you have a better chance of finding ways to alleviate the negative effects. A culture that appreciates work-family conflict will be one in which conflict can be effectively reduced and coped with more readily. Empathy and a supportive climate will allow you to institute programs and methods that will encourage active and meaningful participation in work-life programs and other steps you might take as an organization to address stress.

Step Four: Develop a Program to Address Sources of Stress and Coping with Stress

A good program will address stress in two ways. First, the program will attempt to reduce the sources of stress. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways and should be examined within the context of what creates stress for the organization (Step Two above). One method addressing the source of stress created by work-family conflict is to create a work-life program for your organization. The second manner of addressing stress is to assist personnel with methods to deal with stress.

- Work-life programs are commonly used options in addressing work-family conflict by lowering the barrier between work and family roles. The specifics of these programs

should be designed to address your personnel's needs. Each organization will have unique needs. Be creative. Some work-life programs, in addition to serving to reduce work-family conflict, operate as perks generating additional HR advantages. Common examples from industry include on-site daycare, flextime, and telecommuting. But, more creative solutions might include concierge services (i.e., dry cleaning pickup and delivery) to deal with life's minor details that take so much time during critical times of the day. The idea is to create solutions that address your people's needs that also are cost effective for your organization.

- Work-family conflict and related stress will occur, so it is important to teach personnel how to reduce and cope with stress. Stress reduction techniques can be taught and encouraged. Nearly one-half of large companies in the United States provide some type of stress management training. Stress management programs teach personnel about the nature and sources of stress, the effects of stress on health, and encourage personal skills to reduce stress. For example, time management or relaxation exercises can be taught. Also, one of the best methods known to reduce stress is regular exercise. Exercise can be integrated into a culture at work. Exercise also can be encouraged through on-site facilities or in financial support for off-site facilities. Exercise can be a part of the social interaction within an organization.

In general, stress is a given in our lives. It is not always bad. Certain sources of stress can have negative effects on our personal and professional lives. The conflict we feel between family and work roles is one such area. This type of negative stress can have significant effects on your organization's ability to provide the kind of customer service you seek to deliver. While it may not be possible to eliminate stress, it is something we can address through a reduction in its sources and by facilitating individual coping and reduction strategies.

About the Author:

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Before beginning his academic career, Professor Pullig worked in the retail industry as the CEO of a chain of specialty clothing stores and also as a consultant with the Small Business Administration. He received his PhD from Louisiana State University and was previously on the faculty at the University of Virginia. His research is in consumer attitudes and decision making, with an emphasis on effective creation and protection of consumer-based brand equity. His previous work has been published in the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Retailing, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing and others.