

Reflecting on stress and work

Stress, the ubiquitous element found more and more in today's workplaces is the one insidious quality that drives folks to experience bodies that are anything but relaxed — tired, sore, hurting and weak; hearts that are anything but peaceful — angry, sad, depressed, resentful, broken and jealous; and minds that are anything but quiet — racing, on overdrive, obsessing, and caught up in constant debilitating and negative self-judgments and criticisms, all of which bring folks to the sad realization that, in fact, much of the time "I can't think straight and I can't think clearly" and "I feel lousy" — the mantra of many stressed folks these days at work (and at home, even at play).

There is a direct correlation between physical, emotional and psychological well-being and cognitive ability. It's no wonder that folks can't think straight, and feel lousy, in many of today's workplaces (and homes, and places of play).

The kicker is that for every Google — where it's a fun place to be and work, where management truly is committed to the health and well-being of its employees — there are thousands of companies which fail to align their corporate story, philosophy or mission/vision/values with the well-being of their employees. Many of these organizations haven't a clue, or don't really care, that many of their employees are physical, mental and emotional wrecks — even though their well-being has a direct effect on profitability.

Many leaders, managers and supervisors profess to belong to the "Church of Employee Concern" but very, very few leaders, managers and supervisors actually show up at the services.

The downside is that many, if not most, of these stressed folks are not engaged but, rather, disengaged, slowly dying on the vine of work as a result of work-related stress. What is a reality is many of these folks come to work in a state of "presenteeism" — showing up in a fog — basically unable to perform at maximum due to their emotional, mental, physical and/or psychological state of imbalance.

The kicker is that while some companies, maybe yours, espouse wellness centers, gyms, meditation classes and the like, the truth is many, if not most, workers fail to take advantage of these perks because of a subtle or outspoken workplace culture (driven from the top by leaders, managers and supervisors) that communicates: folks who spend company time to take care of their health and well-being are not committed to the company. The other kicker is that such perks at most companies are NOT seen as a worthwhile "investment" in folks but as an EXPENSE. What does that tell you about organizational commitment to employee health and well-being?

However, there are two sides to this stress coin.

There are those employees who perpetuate their own stress, their dis-ease, their imbalance and their mind-body-spirit disequilibrium. These are the folks whose stories are self-defeating and self-sabotaging, but tell these stories as if they are true: "I'm young so I can get away with 70-hour weeks"; "I have no time to exercise"; "I can't afford to take care of my health right now"; "Taking time to work out at work on company time is selfish or self-serving"; "Not working out is OK because I devote my free time to my family", and on and on.

The unfortunate scenario that sooner or later (and in today's fast-paced workplace it's happening much sooner than later) accompanies such denial of one's mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health and well-being is not pretty: heart attack, mental, emotional, psychological, or physical imbalance, illness or dis-ease, life-changing accidents, divorce and/or estrangement from one's spouse/partner and children, extra-marital affairs, addictions, and on and on.

Many do wake up and smell the coffee, and the flowers, when they feel the Universe tugging on their sleeve. These are the fortunate ones who realize it's important to take time for self-reflection, and re-visit

their values, motivations, needs and wants, life and work choices. These are the ones who explore deeply the meaning of work for them, their purpose in life and whether they are honestly "on purpose" in their work.

Reflection, true reflection, requires a certain level of "superconsciousness", higher consciousness or self-awareness. Here are four words that identify different levels of consciousness:

Not conscious - instinctual, follower

Subconscious - habitual, robotic, drone-like, reactive

Conscious - aware, intelligent, conceptual, reflective

Superconscious - intuitive, guiding, truthful, loving, universal

When we reflect from a deeper level, taking time to really "go inside" and ask ourselves if our stories are honest, sincere, authentic and true, we reflect on a superconscious level. As we go deeper and reflect on how we typically move through our day at work (and at home and play), we use our heart and body's inner wisdom and intelligence and open up to the superconsciousness. Using our superconsciousness allows us to enter into communication and harmony with the universal mind, our inner mind and wisdom body that is the secret of personal power and informs us about the "truth" of our life.

Others, however, choose to just keep on keeping on, habitually, in a non-conscious, or reactive subconscious way, until it's quite late in the game...and often pay a steep penalty on many levels.

So, life, even our life at work, is about choices. Choices have benefits and choices have consequences. Which are you experiencing in your everyday life at work — benefits or consequences?

Perhaps some "superconscious" reflection is in order. If so, will you choose to take the time?

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Does my company provide opportunities to take care of my health and well being on company time? Do I take advantage of these opportunities? If not, why not? What's my "story" around this?
- If my company does not provide such opportunities, what is their rationale for not doing so? Is there an "our employees are our most valuable asset"- type of statement in my company's story or mission? If so, do I see any discrepancy here? How do I feel about this discrepancy?
- Is my health suffering on some level? Do I disengage from my health and allow myself to suffer? What story am I telling myself that allows me to sacrifice my health? Why do I choose (it is a choice) to stick to my story, even though I am suffering on some level?
- Is my family suffering in some way due to my stress level? Is that OK? Do I have a story that allows me to remain stressed and them to continue to suffer? How do I justify my story?
- Is my work a burden or a joy; fulfilling or an addiction? Is money or social status an addiction for me?
- How would you rate your happiness over the last six months (1-10)? Is that rating OK? Even if it's low, do you tell yourself a story that "justifies" or "rationalizes" your low happiness rating?
- Is there a direct relationship between your work and your happiness? Between your family and your happiness? Are you happy at work? At home?
- Is happiness, for you, an afterthought, a secondary-in-importance quality?
- What one or two baby steps can you choose to take this week and next to begin to (a) reduce the degree of stress in your life and (b) move one area of your health (mental, physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual) up a notch on the 1-10 scale of wellness? Is there someone you can call on to support you with this effort?
- Do you ever take time for deep, superconscious, self-reflection? If not, do you have a story that you tell yourself and others about why you choose not to engage in deeper self-reflection? Is your story, true, sincere, and honest?

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