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THE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE STRESS ON HEALTH: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress. One-fourth of employees views their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives. Stress sets off an alarm in the brain, which responds by preparing the body for defensive action. The nervous system is aroused and hormones are released to sharpen the sense. Mood and sleep disturbance, upset stomach and headache are some of the ailments caused because of job stress. The above paper focuses on a "CASE STUDY" of how stress plays an important role in several types of chronic health problems, supporting the studies that problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than are any other life stressors -more so than even financial problems or family problems. Corporate have found that bringing spirituality in work place has made them feel better in order to tackle the mounting pressure and stress.

KEYWORDS

workplace stress, spirituality in the workplace, health care.

INTRODUCTION

Job dimensions such as hazardous situations, work vigilance and responsibility are associated with cardiovascular disease (Murphy, 1991); whereas ambiguity or conflicts in one's role at work and level of responsibility have all been linked to mental or physical stress levels (Saute and Murphy, 1995). Correlations between life stress and illness have been very modest (typically below; Rabbkin & Struening 1976). But there is lack of consensus on the definition of different types of stressors, such as daily hassles, chronic stressors, stressful life events, and acute stressors (Hahn & Smith, 1999). Health care expenditure is nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress (Goetzel et.al., 1998). A number of studies have been conducted over a period of time to identify the various coping strategies employees use to manage their workplace stress. Changing to non-work activity, compartmentalize work and non-work-life and physical exercise are some of techniques for handling stress. (Howdard et al. 1975). The present study is designed to explore the interrelationships between stress and health and to evaluate predictors of psychological distress through a CASE STUDY Analysis.

CASE: STRESS IN TODAY'S WORKPLACE

The longer he waited, the more David worried (name changed). For months he had been plagued by aching muscles, loss of appetite, restless sleep, upset stomach and a complete sense of exhaustion. At first he tried to ignore these problems, but eventually started developing acute pain in stomach when his wife insisted that he gets checked up. The health diagnosis on various parameters did not show much of discrepancies.

David is very hard-working, straight forward and believed in personal values and ethics. He joined at an age of 30, as an executive with the excise department, at Chennai. Within few weeks of his appointment he realized that corruption appeared to be recurring feature of organizational life. Bribes were received by most of his colleagues who eventually were forcing him to be one among the group.

David always wanted to keep his hands clean. Some of his colleagues even went to the extent of calling him by names and branding him as a "fool" who did not know how to make money when an opportunity was given. On the other hand there were David's relatives and friends who misunderstood him and taught he was enjoying with the "additional income". Torn between the two extremes of his personal values, ethics and demands of materialistic values, David was at crossroads. It led to the feeling of alienation, inadequacy and powerlessness. Mounting peer pressure and daunting thoughts started deteriorating his health. He had to pay for being a perfectionist. Soon, he approached a Yoga centre for help and started practicing Yoga and Meditation, which has profound effect on stress. At any cost he wanted to act in accord with "dharma" which translates in one way into ethics and responsibility. Within few months he got himself transferred to another section of that organization, which was free from "acute job conditions" and stress.

Source: Yoga Raksanam, Yoga and Research Centre, Chennai.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected by Interview technique, to understand the intricacies of stress on health of individuals. An attempt was made to find out the role of Yoga as stress combating technique. Scheduled Interview was conducted with the Yoga trainer of Yoga Raksanam- Yoga Training Center at Chennai. It was followed by analyzing the various cases sheets of Yoga trainee members at the Training Centre. A total of 76 Trainees' case sheets were selected who were suffering from certain ailments. Out of which 12 cases were chosen who reported ailments due to stress. All the 12 cases were thoroughly studied to ascertain the reasons for stress. There was one case which reported stress due to organizational factors. This particular trainee enrolled himself for Yoga therapy for treating his health issues that aroused from organizational stress. Since the case well matched with the objective of the study, it was included for the case study analysis and case is herewith presented.

DISCUSSIONS

JOB DIMENSIONS AND STRESS

Researchers in job stress have long been interested in delineating the job and organizational attributes that characterize healthy or low stress work environments. But increasingly, attention has shifted towards organizational or contextual factors in diagnosing and remedying the causes of stress with organization (e.g., Cartwright, Cooper & Murphy, 1995; Cooper & Cartwright, 1994; Lindstrom, 1994; Peterson & Wilson, 2002; Sparks et al., 2001).

While its definition has long been debated, stress can generally be defined as an aversive or unpleasant emotional and physiological state resulting from adverse work experiences, particularly experiences that are uncertain or outside the employee's control (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985; Har & Copper, 2001). The work experiences that give rise to stress are often referred to as stressors, while the effects of stressors in as strain (Hart & Cooper, 2001; Kahn & Byosiére, 1992). Past research has examined several different kinds of stressors, including aspects of the employee's role, particular job demands and characteristics and facets of the physical work environment (Hart & Cooper, 2001; Kahn & Byosiére, 1992). Marshall & Cooper's (1979) model of work stressors included relationships with superiors and a lack of social support, while Howard (1980) studied various stressors including problems concerning personal shortcomings and the price paid for being a perfectionist. The Job conditions that may lead to stress include the Design of task, management style, interpersonal relationship, work role, career concerns, and environmental conditions.

The above case study throws light on twin factors namely peer group pressure and personal values of an employee. These stressors seem to be capturing, in the part, the interpersonal and work role facets of job dimensions. Personal values refer to a conception of what an individual or group regards as desirable (Guth & Tagipuri, 1965). A value is a view of life and judgment of what is desirable that is very much part of a person's personality and a group's morale (Christensen et al; 1982). A typical dilemma faced by managers is to somehow reconcile the pragmatic demands of work (which often degenerate to distortion of values and unethical business practices) to the call of the "inner voice" which somehow prevents them from using unethical means for achieving the organizational goals. This dilemma stems from the fact that apparently the value system of the organization has been contaminated beyond redemption (Kazmi, 1992). India being the biggest democracy, the second-largest in terms of population, being tagged as the ninth ranking, most corrupt nation of the world. Corruption unfortunately appears to be a recurring feature of organizational life, doing enormous damage to lives of individuals and the well-being of organization.

WORKPLACE STRESS AND HEALTH

Stress sets off an alarm in the brain and it produces high levels of two specific hormones- adrenalin and cortisol-produced by the hypothalamus. These hormones are manufactured in response to an impending threat or danger to the body or mind. Release of these two hormones gives the body a temporary increase of strength and energy, when is then considered to be general stress response syndrome.

Symptoms characteristic of prolonged exposure to stress include headache, high blood pressure, weakening of bones, general immune deficiency and muscle tension (Rabbkin & Struening, 1976). Deterioration of the body's immune system leads to other serious medical conditions such as asthma, ulcers, hypertension and heart failures, eating disorders, as well as the abuse of drugs or alcohol, which are used as common coping mechanisms (Sauter S, Hurrell J, Murphy L. Levil 1997). Kahn and Byosiére (1992) identified the frequently used indexes of strain include variables such as general depression, anxiety and tension. Health care expenditure is nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress. Studies show that stressful working conditions are actually associated with increased absenteeism, tardiness and intensions by workers to quit their jobs-all of which has a negative effect on the bottom line.

In the above case study David's story is unfortunate but not unusual. Job stress has become a common and costly problem at workplace, leaving few workers untouched. Short-lived or infrequent episodes of stress pose little risk. But when stressful situations go unresolved, the body is kept in a constant state of activation, which increases the rate of wear and tear to biological systems. Ultimately, fatigue or damage results, and the ability of the body to repair and defend itself can become seriously compromised. As a result, the risk of injury or disease escalates.

PREVENTING STRESS AT WORKPLACE

At the psychological level, it is one's awareness that it is merely the perception of a threat and not the threat itself that triggers the stress response. In other words, two individuals can have entirely different reactions to the same stress evoking situations. This viewpoint leads to prevention strategies that focus on workers and ways to help them cope with demanding job conditions. Modern medicine alone cannot deal with the original causes of stress nor can it eliminate all its symptoms. At the mind and body level Yoga is found a profound effect on stress. Spirituality has always been in existence in the corporate world; however, it is only in the recent years that it has assumed more importance. "The desire for spirituality in the workplace is a natural extension of current tendency of adults to use spirituality to get through the challenges of their everyday life". (Christine Raymond).

WHY SPIRITUALITY AT WORK PLACE?

Increasing stress levels in corporate results in the creation of negative energy within individuals, which leads to unproductive inter-personal transactions. Corporate have found that bringing spirituality into workplace has made them feel better. Marico Industries has been conducting group meditation sessions everyday at its factory at a convenient time where almost everybody can participate. The practice of transcendental meditation has enhanced the ability to handle pressure and stress, says VS Vasan, head of manufacturing at Marico Industries. A study reported in the Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine indicated that "Individuals practicing transcendental meditation (TM) had 87% less hospitalization for heart diseases than the norm. In addition, people over 40 years of age, had 74% fewer doctors visits. A Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) study on 1,000 senior executives in 25 companies who had participated in the Art of Living program mentioned that 88% of the respondents said that they could handle stress better and deal with negative emotions, while 51% felt that the program enhanced their performance. A study done at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) showed that regular practice of "Sudarshan Kriya and Pranayama", resulted in an increased "flow of positive emotions, replacing anger, frustration and jealousy". More than 120 companies in India have taken up Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's TM courses. These companies include ACC, Airtel, Bank of America, BHEL, BPL, ESPN Star sports, GE capital, HP, Oberoi Hotels and TVS Motor Company to name a few.

Spirituality at workplace is not about religion or caste but involves a set of insights, beliefs, attitudes, disciplines and a code of conduct. Indian traditional wisdom offers a slew of practices to bring spirituality to the workplace. Meditation, altruistic work, pranayama and yoga are some of them. Meditation relaxes the body, calms the mind and releases alpha waves that produce serotonin. Serotonin is an important neurotransmitter and neuropeptide that influences a person's mood and behavior in different ways. The practice of meditation also activates the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, creating a profound feeling of wellness and inspiration.

CONCLUSION

Workplace Stress poses a threat to the health of the workers and in turn, to the health of organization which results from the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. With pressure, mounting to unseen heights, organizations need to come up with more flexible and more enlightened plans of management. Spirituality in the workplace is the call of the hour.

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