Organizational stress management

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Abstract

Organizational stress cannot be ruled out in any organization. It has negative impact on both employers, employees and the overall performance of an organization. The present study reviews the causes, signs and effects of organizational stress. Furthermore, effective strategies for addressing organizational stress are also discussed.

Introduction

Organizational stress can be defined as the perception of a discrepancy between environmental demands and individual abilities to accomplish these demands (Topper, 2007; Vermunt and Steensma, 2005; Ornelas and Kleiner, 2003; Varca, 1999). Organizational stress poses great concern to both the management and employees of organizations. A report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) showed that inefficiencies arising from organizational stress may cost up to 10 % of a country's gross national product (GNP) (Midgley, 1996). Furthermore, organizational stress might lead to increased morbidity and mortality (Mark, Jonathan and Gregory, 2003).

According to Christo and Pienaar (2006), the causes of organizational stress include perceived loss of job, and security, sitting for long periods of time or heavy lifting, lack of safety, complexity of repetitiveness and lack of autonomy in the job. It is also caused by lack of resources and equipment; difficult work schedules (such as working late shifts or overtime) and organizational climate are seen as contributory factors of organizational stress. organizational stress usually manifests in form of dissatisfaction among the employees, job mobility, burnout, poor work performance and less effective interpersonal relations at work (Manshor, Rodrigue, and Chong, 2003). Johnson (2001) opined that interventions like identifying or determining stress signs, identifying the possible causes for the signs and developing possible proposed solutions for each signs are required. Approaches such as these, enable individuals to build coping skills and develop strategies to develop individualized stress management plans that include eliminating the sources of stress. Also, an increase in individual coping skills is another intervention which will be used by the management to minimize stress.

The present study reviews the causes of organizational stress, effects, signs of stress and management approaches for effective handling of organizational stress.

Causes of organizational stress

There are several factors responsible for organizational stress; however, work overload has been identified as a major cause (Topper, 2007; Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004). A high work load in an organization

without taking into account the availability of staff to carry out the tasks, may lead to organizational stress. Therefore, it is imperative that an increase in work load in an organization should tally with the availability of work force. Buchanan and Huczynski (2004) identified the causes of stress in an organization to include inadequate physical working environment, inappropriate job design, poor management style, poor relationships, uncertain future and divided loyalties.

According to Tehrani (2002), stress is caused by unsympathetic organizational culture, poor communication between managers and employees, lack of involvement in decision-making, bullying and harassment, continual or sudden change, insufficient resources, conflicting priorities, and lack of challenges. Communication channels in the organization should be accessible to all employees and they should be allowed to participate in the decision-making process of the organization. Lack of involvement of employees by the management will make employees feel stressed. It was reported by Bland (1999) that stressors that seemed to be popular with employees in the workplace include too much work, inadequate time to do the work, stressful environment, relationship problems with partners, boss or colleague and financial insecurities. It has also been shown that conflicts between home and work, as well as the impact on personal relationships are also contributing factors to stress (Fairbrother and Warn, 2003).

According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the causes of stress are: physical environment, role conflict, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, job future ambiguity, job control, employment opportunities, quantitative work load, variance in work load, responsibility for people, underutilization of abilities, cognitive demands and shift work.

A study by Kirkcaldy, Trimpoo and Williams (2002) showed that the causes of stress include inadequate guidance and support from superiors, lack of consultation and communication, lack of encouragement from superiors, feelings of isolation, discrimination and favoritism and inadequate or poor quality training/management development. Other contributing factors to stress include keeping up with new technologies, ideas, technology or innovations in organizations, attending meetings, lack of social support by people at work and simply being visible or available.

The effects of role ambiguity, conflicting performance expectation, political climate of the organizations and poor relationship with co-workers have also been associated to organizational stress (Manshor, et al., 2003). Stress has been linked to environment demand factors which include job content such as work load; employment conditions, such as flexible employment contracts; working conditions such as physically demanding work, and social relations at work such as mobbing expenses (Otto and Schmidt, 2007). Organizational stress has also been shown to be greatly affected by factors such as individual and family factors, socio-economic and financial status, mental and physical (Manshor et al., 2003).

Effects of organizational stress

Organizational stress has negative effects on both the employers and employees of any organization. They include reduced efficiency, decreased capacity to perform, dampened initiative and reduced interest in working, increased rigidity of thought, lack of concern for the organization and colleagues and a loss of responsibility (Greenberg and Baron, 2000; Ivancevich, Matterson, Freedman and Philips, 1990).

In a study on Workplace stress and student learning experience, Stevenson and Harper (2006) showed that the effects of stress on academic staff include teaching below par, absence from work, conflict with students and seeking employment elsewhere. These lead to detrimental effect on the student learning experience.

Organizational stress gives rise to low motivation and morale, decrease in performance, high turnover, sick leave, accidents, low job satisfaction, low quality products and services, poor internal communication and conflicts (Schabracq and Cooper 2000; Murphy, 1995; McHugh, 1993).

Organizational stress has been shown to increase the risks of work-related diseases and accidents in both developed and developing countries that have experienced rapid industrialization (Manshor et al., 2003). According to Sapountzi-Krepia (2003), stress has been identified as a major health hazard of the contemporary century and undertakes diverse conditions such as psychosomatic diseases, behavioral changes and is a

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major contributor to disturbances in one's emotional, social and family life.

Signs of organizational stress

According to Cohen and Single (2001), stress signs can be any of the following:

· *Emotional*

This includes anxiety, nervousness, worries, depression, anger, irritability, guilt, moodiness, and loss of enjoyment of life, loneliness, loss of humor, lack of confidence, isolation, and job dissatisfaction.

· *Physical*

This includes feeling restless, feeling uptight, jumpy, high blood pressure, back and neck muscle tension, lack of energy, dry mouth, headaches, insomnia, dizziness, loss or increase in appetite, and ringing in the ears.

· *Behavioral*

This includes impatience, impulsiveness, hyperactivity, short temper, aggressiveness, alcohol abuse, use of drugs, avoiding difficult situations, loss of sex drive, and overworking.

· *Mental*

This includes frequent lapses of memory, constant negative thinking, being very critical of oneself, inability to make decisions, difficulty getting things done, distorted ideas, very rigid attitudes and difficulty in concentrating.

· *Health*

This includes high blood pressure, higher than usual susceptibility to colds and flu, migraines, irritable bowel symptoms, ulcers, stomach disorders, heart attacks, angina, strokes, asthma and skin rashes.

Management strategies to address organizational stress

If organizational stress is not well managed, it could lead to an increase in absentee rates, internal conflicts and low employee morale (Christo and Pienaar, 2006).

Three strategies; primary, secondary and tertiary, have been proposed for effective management of organizational stress.

The primary strategy includes redesigning jobs to modify work place stressors, increasing workers decision-making authority (Jackson and Schuler, 1983) or providing co-worker support groups (Defrank and Cooper, 1987; Kolbell, 1995).

The secondary strategy is designed to provide training to the employees. It involves seminars to help participants recognize and deal with stress and identify organizational stressors. It also serves a dual purpose of identifying the current stress factors and helps to prevent future stress. Secondary strategy is aimed at reducing the severity of stress, treating symptoms before they lead to serious health problems in an individual and the organization at large (Murphy and Sauter, 2003).

The tertiary strategy involves interventions which take care of individuals who are already suffering from the effects of stress. it includes counselling and employee assistance programs, consulting a stress manager or mental health professionals to assist employees to cope with stress (Arthur, 2000).

Stress management workshops could also include instructions in time management, goal setting, delegating, counselling of subordinates, self-awareness, relaxation techniques, conflict resolution and identification of stress situations and symptoms.

Conclusion

This study has shown that organizational stress is mostly as a result of an increase of work load, uncertainty about the future, poor communication in organizations, insufficient resources and conflicts. The study also

highlights the effects of organizational stress which negatively affect an organization, especially in reducing efficiency in an organization's operations, health implications on employees, low motivation and accidents. To address organizational stress, every management in an organization should embrace the three strategies to manage organizational stress at the work place. The first step is to assess the workplace factors that contribute to stress; secondly, implement management measures to reduce work place stress; and lastly, one has to monitor the progress with an objective of developing an appropriate intervention to manage stress.

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