

Necessity and Opportunities for Organizational Stress Management

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Abstract: The problem of the adaptive and functional abilities of people has become very topical in the contemporary, fastly developing social, economic and technological environment. Over the last years this has provoked an increasing interest in the issues of organizational stress because it causes various negative consequences which affect the sustainability of the organizations and the strategies through which stress could be influenced on an organizational and personal level. The possibilities for managing the levels of stress in the organizational environment provide opportunities for the reduction of the negative stress effects as well as utilizing them as a productive and natural impetus for the development of the modern organization. However, if the problems related to stress are neglected by the managers, this could lead to extremely serious consequences both for the individual and the organization.

Key word: organizational stress, stressors, organizational change, biological stress, psychological stress

I. INTRODUCTION

The organizational stress and the problems related to its management are a comparatively new phenomenon in the contemporary society. It is closely related to the manner of performing working tasks and the lifestyle of the individuals. Over the recent years it has been the object of considerable interest on behalf of researchers and practitioners in the sphere of management, organizational behaviour, organizational psychology, medicine, etc. This interest is entirely justified since work stress could lead to many negative results both for the employees and the organization itself. With reference to this it could be said that the study of stress in organizations is of mutual interest not only for the personnel but also for the managerial team who want to increase the organization's effectiveness and sustainability.

In line with this, for the purposes of the detailed study of the organizational stress it is necessary to do a brief retrospection of the issues related to the nature of stress.

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II. CHARACTERISTICS AND ELEMENTS OF THE CONCEPT OF "STRESS"

The concept of stress is used more and more frequently in the daily life of contemporary people although its scientific definition is not well known. This is partly due to the fact that in the scientific literature there is not a commonly accepted definition of stress. The origin of the word is from English and means pressure, tension, deformation, strain. Stress could be generally defined as a change in the behavioural, psychological, and physiological reactions of the individuals whose aim is the adaptation to various conditions appearing in the process of their social and biological development.

The early research interests in this phenomenon are associated with the name of the American scientist Walter Cannon who developed the **theory of homeostasis**. After series of systematic experiments of stress he introduced the concept of homeostasis and defined it as the ability of the body to maintain a constant state of balance [1]. The idea advocated by Cannon states that stress causes strong emotional reactions - fear and aggression, in particular, which force the body to react. These reactions are responses from the "fight or flight" type.

The notion of "stress" has become widely popular due to the work of the Canadian scientist Hans Selye (1907 – 1982). He developed and later elaborated his **theory of biological stress**. According to this theory stress influences the ability of the body to cope with and adapt to tension caused by various factors (or stressors) from the environment on a physiological level. On the basis of his observations Selye defined stress as "non-specific reaction of the body to any requirement it has to meet." [6] Regardless of the type of requirements, the reactions cause a stereotypical biochemical reaction in the organism. This reaction is called a "general adaptation syndrome" and goes through three stages [6]:

- **First** – the reaction of anxiety is the stage when the organism shows symptoms of change. It is typical of the initial influence of the stressor.
- **Second** – the stage of resistance. At this stage the body fights back and adapts to the situation. This stage is also characterised by the beginning of stabilization.
- **Third** – the stage of exhaustion (distress). It starts when the adaptation abilities of the body are



exhausted as a result of the more continuous and intensive influence of the stress factors. This in turn leads to the inability of the body to maintain balance between the external conditions and the internal environment. At this stage the reaction indicators of anxiety appear again. At this case they are irreversible and with fatal outcomes for the individuals.

It is necessary to mention here that stress, being an inevitable part of human life, is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. It could also have a mobilizing effect. According to Hans Selye "stress is the taste of life" [6] and could only be avoided if people do nothing.

Undoubtedly, the physiological aspects of the studied phenomenon form an important basis for its thorough and more-detailed understanding. Nevertheless, Selye's theory is not commonly accepted in the academic circles since it takes into account only the biological factors and does not acknowledge the psychological processes.

Richard Lazarus made an exceptional contribution to the analysis of stress with his *theory of psychological stress* (1966). He proved that mixing the importance of the physiological and psychological levels could lead to a wrong understanding of stress since a physiological reaction could occur not only as a result of physical but also of psychological factors that influence the organism. In other words, the physiological and psychological stress cause similar physiological reactions [3].

Lazarus and Folkman defined the so called modern understanding of stress which is widely accepted in scientific literature. According to it, the psychological stress occurs due to the interaction between the individual and the environment. The individual evaluates the environment as challenging, that is the environment put them on trial or requires resources which exceed their coping resources and thus threaten their psychological wellbeing [4].

An important aspect of Lazarus's theory of physiological stress is the emphasis he puts on the level of the experienced stress in a particular situation. In this case the individual's appraisal and stress coping mechanisms are of key importance. According to Lazarus, there are three forms of appraisal. First, the primary appraisal refers to the importance of the situation to the individual's wellbeing. Next, the secondary appraisal involves the evaluation of the personal resources for coping with the threat. Finally, the reappraisal is applied when there is a change in the situation provoked by receiving new information about it. With reference to the stress coping mechanism, Lazarus defines two main methods: coping which is focused on problem solving (the individual's attitude to the situation is changed by undertaking active measures for achieving positive results) and coping which is focused on emotions (the individual changes only their attitude to

the interpretation of the situation or the way they refer to it) [4]

As a result of the retrospective analysis of the stress theories it could be said that while H.Selye's *theory of biological stress* accepts the existence of a common adaptational reaction which is independent from the specific nature of the stressors and the uniqueness of the individuals, Lazarus's *psychological perspective* puts an emphasis on the specific nature of the adaptational reaction. According to this point of view, the reaction depends not only on the nature of the stress factors but also on the individuals' personality characteristics.

III. FACTORS AND SOURCES OF STRESS IN THE ORGANIZATION

The organizational stress and the issues related to its management are a considerably new phenomenon in the contemporary society because of their closely relation to the performance of work tasks and lifestyle of individuals.

Although some scientific progress has been made in the sphere, this problem continues to accompany people's activities and has become particularly intense over the recent years characterized by global competitiveness, dynamic changes in the business environment and an economic crisis. In addition, it could be pointed out that people are exposed to numerous stress factors (stressors) which are often above or on the limit their adaptation abilities. In this case, what is of interest is the workplace stress and stressors within the framework of the organization, though. In fact, it is obvious that the individual who is stressed outside the organization is also much more vulnerable inside it. This creates a new organizational reality which is oriented towards researching the organizational stress. This study is of mutual benefit both for the organization's employees and its management whose main goal is its high effectiveness and sustainability.

Organizational stress can appear as a result of the influence of the environment or the individual characteristics of the employees. It is determined by factors such as [2]:

- the nature of the work - in particular this involves the need for personal realization; professional conflicts; ambiguities related to the roles of the subordinates; too many tasks that have to be done for a short time and require fast work; lack of feedback about the performance of assigned tasks, etc.;

- work conditions in the organization - this refers to factors such as temperature, lightning, noise, frequent downtimes, etc.;

- salary and benefits - if the subordinates think that they receive a deserved payment, this leads to

higher work ethics. Otherwise they may acquire a negative attitude to work;

- the work team - it could be a stress factor, if the individual does not share the same social values as their co-workers or some of them are hostile to them;

- the personality and the management style of the manager may become stress factors if there is not agreement between the manager and the subordinate;

- the type of organizational structure and the individual's place in the company hierarchy – in this case the stress factors may involve unclearly and improperly determined roles related to power and responsibilities; breaching the control boundaries, excessive bureaucracy and paper work, etc;

- organizational change – in particular this could imply the introduction of new work procedures, technologies, downsizing and people being made redundant, people being transferred to work in other cities, etc;

- lack of time - usually this stress factor causes rushing and is due to bad planning and distribution of tasks. It also leads to taking on additional tasks.

- the level individuals have reached while climbing the corporate ladder – this factor may have various aspects as a stressor such as a missed promotion opportunity, lack of perspective on the particular position, lack of opportunities for career development of young employees, fear of being made redundant. The older an employee becomes the more intensive the stress factor of possible uncertainties in the work place becomes.

Although there is a great variety of stress factors that have a negative influence on the organization and its personnel, in particular, many scientists and researchers of organizational stress think that the reasonable stress levels could stimulate employees to perform better and with higher willingness for work. At the same time, the excessive stress could make them feel demotivated which in turn could lead to a drastic decrease in the effectiveness of the performed tasks.

IV. STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS

The management of the organizational stress is a complex and rather ambitious task. In order to minimize the negative consequences of the issues related to, it is necessary to take into account not only the relationship between managers and their subordinates, on one hand, and managing the subordinates' behaviour on the other hand, but also the managers' personalities and their resistance to stress.

Being aware of the great significance of the stress issue in modern organizations, managers have many reasons to look for different methods (strategies) to manage it. Some of the most important reasons are as follows [9]:

First, with reference to the quality of their work life, the employees are more satisfied and productive when the work environment is safe and comfortable;

Second, from an ethical point of view, the managers should reduce work stress because it has a general negative effect;

Third, the consequences from stress lead to considerable economic losses;

Fourth, it is an undeniable fact that in the developed countries an increasing number of employees take legal actions to claim compensations for damages caused by the stress on their workplace.

Being aware of the consequences related to the organizational stress, managers simply could not afford to ignore it. They apply two main approaches to eliminate this problem:

- On the individual level – they train employees to reduce the stress caused by the heavy workload by themselves;

- On the organizational level – they develop strategies for foreseeing and coping with the stress factors.

The objective of the organizational stress management is to use it as a natural and productive force by minimizing its negative effects. The main goal of the organization's management is to secure conditions for manipulating the stress so that it is maintained at levels that allow the individuals and the organizations to function properly and increase their effectiveness. This could be achieved by being aware and applying the following stress management strategies:

- Strategies for improving the individual-organization relations. These measures refer to improving the work conditions and the work process in the organization;

- Strategies for improving control. They aim at increasing the manager's control on the employees' exact performance of the technological processes on one hand and the appropriate and effective distribution of the tasks among the members of work team, on the other hand;

- Strategies that prevent employees from trying to avoid control procedures. They are also targeted at fighting the avoidance of problems [5];

- Strategies which involve increasing the requirements towards the employees and defining the organizational standards. They are related to the opportunity of the managers to manipulate their expectations of the employees' work and with reference to this to improve the workers' individual achievements;

- Strategies referring to the opportunities for obedience. They are connected to the assessment and the resulting effects of the assumed and current abilities of the subordinates [8];

- Strategies involving the physiological, psychological, and behavioural responses to stress. They refer to taking actions for relieving the effects of the reactions of disfunctioning caused by stress;



- Strategies which aim at increasing the employees's feeling of control by providing them opportunities for participation in the decision taking process, giving them bigger responsibilities or allowing them greater autonomy or independence [7]
- Strategy for improving communications. Good communication makes employees better informed with reference to their work and the coordination of the performed tasks. The appropriate communication could prevent staff from experiencing stress caused by feelings of insecurity or isolation in the workplace.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it could be summerized that stress has become a serious social problem in modern society. Its importance continues to increase because it affects directly the stability of the individuals' organizational behaviour and social life in general. Stress is a problem which corresponds directly to the effectiveness of human actions on one hand, and the sustainable development of organization on the other hand. The opporunities for managing the stress levels within the organizational environment allow not only the reduction of their negative affects but also their utilization as a productive and natural force which beneficial to the development of modern organizations. Therefore, when managers ignore the stress issue, they reveal a very poor management culture. This in turn could lead to serious negative consequences both for the employees and the organization.

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