

Stretch us out don't stress us out

This article emphasises the importance of feeling good at work for better performance, advocating for attention management, delegation, mindfulness, and inclusion as key strategies to distinguish between being 'positively stretched' and stressed, for maintaining well-being and productivity in the workplace.

As the adage goes, people who feel good about themselves do good work and people who do good work feel good about themselves. You would think, wouldn't you, that this simple (and dare I say irrefutable piece of logic) would be sufficient provocation even for the most expedient amongst us to make a conscious and sustained effort to ensure that people feel good about being at work and feel good about their work. Yet, surprisingly, many workplaces don't prioritise this, even though the *[Gallup State of the Global Workplace 2023 Report](#)* found that 44% of employees experienced high levels of stress. Prolonged periods of stress make people feel unwell. To put it both crudely and simplistically, think of people being like individual elastic bands. Each band can be stretched, but if the band is stretched past its elastic limit, it eventually reaches a fracturing point and snaps. This highlights the need for treating people equally well, but not just that, it highlights the need to rethink resilience in a radical way.

High-profile sports and media figures like Owen Farrell, Ben Stokes, Adam

Peaty, Ellie Downie, and the incomparable Simone Biles have recently taken mental health breaks. Their actions have permissioned a public conversation on mental well-being and helped to challenge stigmatising stereotypes. Work-related stress, a reaction to excessive pressure, is a significant issue. If our aim is better performance, then it is important to create a work environment where more people feel better more often.

The Gallop survey – which is focused on employee engagement – demonstrates that low engagement is related to higher stress and the point is that 70% of team engagement is attributable to the manager. Ah, you say, in that case, all you need to do is understand that the role of management here is to help people feel good. QED! Well not entirely, if our client universe is in anyway typical, it is not uncommon to find ourselves working with organisations whose manager populations' levels of emotional intelligence (EQ) are markedly lower than their levels of cognitive intelligence (IQ). Moreover, so far-reaching is the ever-deepening *cost-of-not-really-living crisis* that many, maybe even, most managers are experiencing high levels of prolonged stress and are disengaged too.

I am convinced that human inclusion is the key to the virtuous feel-better-do-better economy. By combining psychological safety with compassionate efficiency, inclusion enables a culture of belonging and 'positive stretch' for everyone, in contrast to exclusion, which leads to stress and unbelonging.

Belonging is crucial for psychological safety, connection, and shared future contribution. Inclusive cultures drive the human capital economy. In the 'do it quicker, faster, and do more and more with less and less for less and less' world in which we operate, we tend to use humans as disposable resources rather than thinking about how to resource at the disposal of humans. This needs to change.

I learned the importance of non-doing, as opposed to doing nothing, through meditation. This aligns with the concept of working from rest, not resting from work. Inclusion is not just a social ideal; it's a business imperative. Treating employees well affects their treatment of the organisation.

Understanding the difference between being 'positively stretched' and negatively stressed is crucial. Positively stretched individuals feel energised and accomplished, while stressed individuals experience anxiety, worry, and burnout. Not only does prolonged stress compromise our ability to perform effectively, but it also hampers our ability to think creatively. Work induced stress is both corrosive and pervasive and can easily end up encroaching upon and negatively affect our personal lives and relationships.

Each of us have our own internal alarm system. If it goes off – don't ignore it. Signs that you are moving into stress vary but might show up as your experiencing increased irritability and frustration; having difficulty

concentrating and making decisions, with physical symptoms like headaches, muscle tension, or sleep disturbances can also be clues.

To address work-related stress, consider the following:

1. Manage what you give your attention to, not how you manage your time: Time management is about efficiently organising your time; attention management is about effectively utilising your mental focus and energy.
2. View delegation as a strength: Some people misinterpret delegation as a sign of weakness, an admission of incapacity, or a lack of responsibility. Delegation is not about admitting defeat but about recognising the value of collaborative effort and the diverse capabilities within a team. It's a way to enhance productivity, encourage team members' development, and ensure that tasks are completed in the most effective manner.
3. Give yourself (and others) a break: Take Breaks, whether you are an introvert or extrovert; regular breaks are essential to recharge and prevent burnout.
4. Set Boundaries: Establish clear boundaries between making a living and making a life.
5. Reflect and Reassess: Regularly assess your workload and work environment and make changes if necessary to maintain a healthy balance.
6. Remain Mindful even (or especially) when your mind is full: Consider practices such as meditation. Too much of what we do is driven rather than being undertaken with mindful awareness.
7. Exercise to Exorcise: Physical activity and regular exercise can significantly reduce stress levels.
8. Get Support: Don't hesitate to ask for help from colleagues or supervisors. Consider professional help if needed.

Recognising the signs of stress early and taking proactive steps to address it can help maintain well-being and productivity in the workplace ensuring that that you and others feel better and thus do better.

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