

WOMEN EXECUTIVES AND STRESS

BY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The prevailing decade is a challenging one to organisations and to managers within them. Many organizations are facing turbulent times as they restructure to meet various changes and demands of an economic, technological, social and political nature and increased competition rate.

To help meet these challenges managers must operate at peak performance and learn to operate effectively under various stressors and increased stress-levels. (Cranwell-ward, 1993).¹ The situation is even more challenging and stressful to women executives due to demands at home and the nature of organisational cultures within which they operate. The following sentences capture the situation:-

"Far more pressures at work and at home, compared to their male counterparts.... women who break into middle and senior levels of management have to be better at their job and better copers than their male colleagues". (Davidson and Cooper 1992)²

Its against this background that this paper attempts to discuss the nature of stress as it applies to women executives, causes and effects of such stress and practical

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strategies for managing stress. In order to achieve its intended objectives the paper is divided into five parts. Part I is the introduction which lays the background for discussion. Part II discusses the meaning of stress and stress response, characteristics and types of stress. Part III explores various causes of stress to women executives while Part IV narrates the effects of such stress. Part V discusses the potential strategies for managing stress while the conclusion summarizes the discussion and points the way forward for Women Executives in thriving with stress through the turbulent times and challenging organisational environments.

2. STRESS AND STRESS RESPONSE

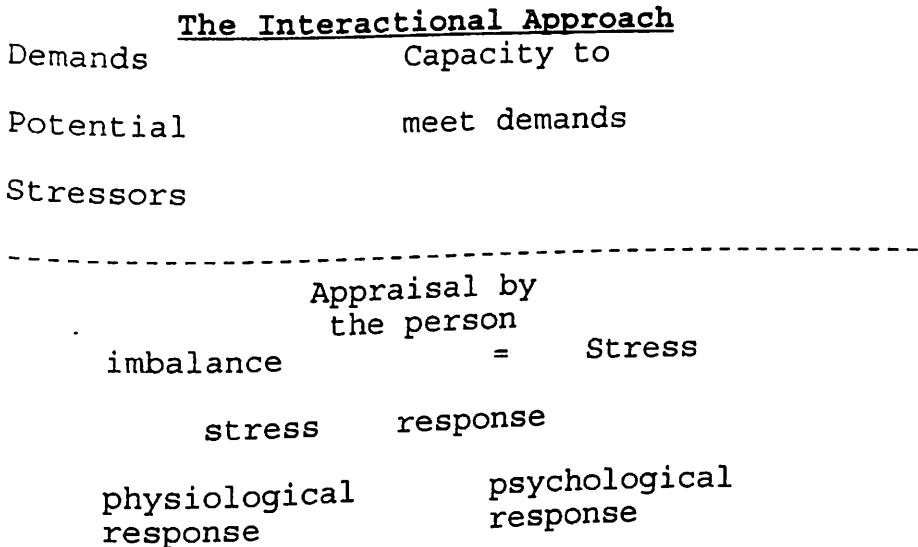
2.1 What stress is; Characteristics and type

Stress is essentially a response to our perceived relationship between demands or pressure on us and our ability to cope.

"It is a physiological and psychological reaction which occurs when people perceive an imbalance between the level of demand placed upon them and their capability to meet those demands".³

(Cranwell-ward, 1993 p.10)

The diagram below illustrates more on stress:-



Source: Jane Cranwell - Ward, Thriving on Stress: self Development for Managers, 1990 p.9

The definition and the diagram above suggest that the nature of a particular event, individual perception of a situation and capabilities determine whether any given event will act as a stressor or not. Consequently, a major characteristic of stress is that it is a very individualized phenomenon because not two individuals will have precisely the same perception of even very similar events or possess similar capabilities.

Most of us have worked with secretaries. The following case illustrates the individualized nature of stress.

A case of three Secretaries

Kazobe, Bahati and Mala were secretaries working for Igembes Limited Corporation. Kazobe was a very capable secretary who seemed to thrive on pressure. She provided secretarial service for several Managers and demonstrated exemplary performance.

Two new Managers joined the corporation and Kazobe was required to provide secretarial service to them. Up until that time, Kazobe experienced a balance between demands and her capacity to met those demands. The extra demand placed upon Kazobe were such that she felt unable to cope, her work output fell dramatically and she failed to meet deadlines. She was suffering from excessive stress and her job performance deteriorated as a consequence.

Bahati was a lively girl and had been promoted to personal secretary, more on account of her personality characteristics than her secretarial skills. She had problems in determining priorities and was uncomfortable to work on her own initiative. Whenever her manager gave her work without clear guidance, she experienced stress. Unlike Kazobe, she perceived herself as inadequate, rather than experiencing excessive demands.

Mala, like Kazobe, was very capable and normally managed to meet the demands of the job. Unfortunately, she regularly caught severe colds and this caused her to experience stress. In this case Mala lacked the stamina to meet the demands of the situation.

The three examples demonstrate the individual nature of stress. Everyone has different capabilities and perceives situations differently. Even the same person can perceive the same situation differently on different occasions.

A second characteristic of stress is that it induces further stress not only to the over-stressed individual, also to one whom that individual interacts with (Green wood, 1979).⁴

The following case demonstrates this fact.

The stress virus: A Case of an Overstressed Manager

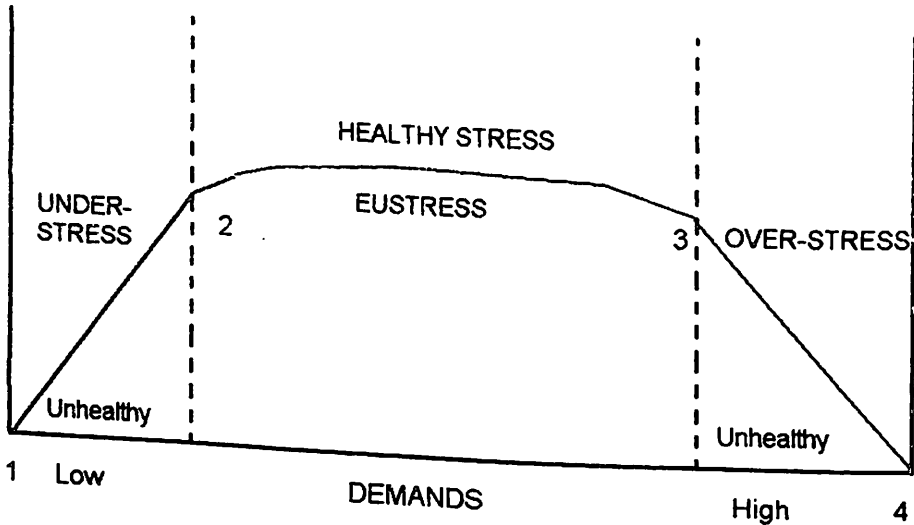
Kayanda is a Project Manager of Kasuku Textile Mill. Whenever things went wrong on the production line in the busy mill, Kayanda would fly off the handle, blame anyone who came near him and spend lunch time at a drinking place, coming back definitely worse off. Long-standing members of his staff kept their heads down until the storm blew off. Newer members of staff were sometimes upset by Kayanda's accusations. In such situations, production time was lost which led to late deliveries of textile to clients. Clients were dissatisfied with the late deliveries and this information came to the notice of the Sales Director, who inevitably put more pressure on Kayanda to keep up with the production schedule.

This case shows that an over-stressed individual in an organization tends to produce stressful effects on other individuals with whom she/he is interacting with in accomplishing organizational objectives. Thus stress infects an environment where people work together (Warren and Toll, 1993).

Even though stress is usually conceptualized negatively in terms of being destructive, bad and causing tension and anxiety (i.e. distress) it has some positive effects (i.e. eustress) in certain circumstances during which it creates extra energy needed for demanding situations, helps one to innovate explore, unknown territory and rise to new challenges. (Cranwell - Ward, 1990).⁵

Therefore stress can be healthy or unhealthy as the following diagram illustrates:

THE STRESS CURVE



Source: Warren and Toll, The stress work Book, 1993 p.11

According to the diagram, there are 3 types of stress; understress, healthy stress and overstress. Understress is experienced when an individual is understimulated, bored or lethargic during which performance effectiveness would be reduced. As stress increases the energy level generally rises and individual performance grows until the optimal stimulation point is reached (i.e. point 3). In area (2-3) on the curve, an

individual is performing at his/her absolute peak. One feels stimulated, excited and challenged by the opportunities presented by a demand, appropriately in control and with the right amount of variety and change (Warren and Toll, 1993). At this level one is experiencing healthy stress. If pressures increase, one begins to feel overstretched and overstimulated and performance diminishes. At this level one begins to feel that the demands are too great and commitments cannot be fulfilled as overstress is experienced.

Given the fact that stress is an individualized process, there is no standard level of stress which is optimal to everyone. The optimal stress level differs among individuals and changes from situation to situation depending on the nature of the stressor, previous exposure to the stressor, prevailing state of health, diet, and genetic factors.

2.2 Stress response

As indicated previously, a perceived imbalance between demands of a situation and capacity to meet them i.e. stress triggers off reactions of a physiological and psychological nature.

The physiological response involves the release of various hormones which affect the functioning of various parts of our bodies. The heart beats faster to pump the blood more quickly and to supply more energy.

The blood pressure rises as a result of the heart's increased activity. The rate of breathing is increased to keep up oxygen levels. Cholesterol is released from the liver to provide energy. More blood flows to the brain and the senses become more alert to warn of danger. Muscles release more blood to supply energy for action. (Warren and Toll, 1993).⁷

These responses in themselves do not harm if energy released is actively used or if there is relaxation period after the effort has been made so that the body returns to its normal state.

If stress continues or increases and more energy is needed, other hormones will be released into the blood stream. These help to make more energy available from the stress in the body. If these are actively used no harm occurs.

If demands/pressure persist and no physical activity takes place, then fats may attach themselves to the walls of arteries, leading to chronic high blood pressure. Ultimately stores of energy become depleted if time for re-stocking is not provided. At this point the only remedy initially is complete rest and then a gradual building back to health.

As far as the psychological response is concerned, it involves thought processes. If we are experiencing optimal stress level, our thinking becomes clear, creative and innovative enabling us to rise to challenges, find solutions to problems and to determine priorities and strategies for operating effectively.

If pressures/demands persist for too long, we may suffer from mental overload. Our thoughts become confused and we may be so tense and anxious that we fail to make decisions or to solve problems.

3. CAUSES OF STRESS TO WOMEN EXECUTIVES

3.1 Multiple Roles

Being an Executive does not exempt a woman from multiple roles in a society. Multiple roles essentially mean more than one set of roles that women play in ensuring the well-being and survival of their families and communities on one hand and meeting the demands of the workplace on

the other.

As the Accountant (1994) observes,

"Women Managers have to carry the burden of simultaneously balancing four roles which include managing the activities of the organisation where they are managers, reproductive functions which encompass child bearing, and rearing and management of the household as well as the community". (P.42).⁸

In the course of fulfilling these roles, Women Executives have to work within a complex set of domestic and work-place relationships, sometimes as a superior and at other times as a subordinate. At the work place a Woman-Executive is a leader and a decision maker and the decisions she makes may bind a number of individuals. At home she may have to succumb to an inferior, dependent and subordinate position and become a mere implementor of decisions made by the spouse/male partner (IDM, 1988).⁹

This situation is stressful and difficult to handle, more so, because neither the household nor the workplace offers necessary support. Some of the indicators of lack of support include:-

"Lack of day-care centres for children at places of work. Spouses/partners being upset with frequent official trips. Spouse/partners being upset by Women Managers coming home late from work. Bosses being upset by absenteeism resulting from need to handle family responsibilities" (The Accountant, 1990 Pg. 29).¹⁰

Even though Women Executives may employ domestic help, the reliability of such help poses a major problem. Employment within house-holds is considered to be a low-status job, as such

houseboys and housegirls are constantly in search of better jobs. Consequently the probability of them leaving without giving a notice or giving a short notice is very high. When they leave, women executives have to stay at home to take care of the young, thereby going against the employer's expectations, and arousing in themselves fear of failure on the job, a situation which is stressful to them.

The poor economic conditions which have contributed significantly in eroding the purchasing power of families have contributed to an additional burden on some of the women executives, in terms of forcing them to participate in informal sector income generating activities such as poultry keeping, dairy, sewing, retail and other business activities. The Women Executives have to devote time and energy in ensuring the success of such informal income generating activities (Mbilinyi, 1990).¹¹

3.2 Time Pressure

The multiple roles that women have to play at home and place of work put them in a situation whereby they have too much to do and too little time to do it. In the office they have to beat deadlines in accomplishing various important tasks such as preparing financial reports, quarterly and annual progress reports, various Board papers, attend several meetings as well as plan for future development of the units/departments they manage.

At home they are responsible for managing the household including taking care of the sick and the old sometimes under situations of unreliable household help. All these compete for women executives' time. As a result, they have little time to relax and to even exercise a situation which exposes them to greater risks of excessive stress compared to their male counterparts.

3.3 Organizational Culture within which Women Executives operate

Organizations within which female and male executives function, are gendered in the sense that some tasks are perceived as women's and other tasks are seen as specifically men's work. One of the tasks which has traditionally been considered to be men's work is managing within organizations. As a result, the majority of organizations have males as top executives and senior managerial/administrative officials. Shakeshaft (1989) observes that this is a result of societal beliefs/norms that activities and positions considered to be important, authoritative and prestigious are appropriate for men. Consequently, Women Executives operate in organizations which are male dominated and driven by male values, in which they are perceived as wanderers/travellers in a man's world.

In other words women executives operate in a rather hostile environment to them. As a result they have to work much harder than their male counterparts in order to gain same recognition.

When relating to subordinates, women executives are generally expected to act in a supportive, motherly or sisterly manner but not in a task-oriented and authoritative manner (ODA, 1990). When they act in an authoritative task-oriented manner they encounter more rejection from subordinates compared to their male counterparts (The Accountant, 1991).¹²

Women executives are also under greater pressure than their male counterpart to perform well from the very beginning. If a woman executive makes a mistake then opinions are formed that "women are inappropriate" for the job". If she does well, then she is exceptional, either way women are placed in an awkward position (The Accountant 1991).¹³

Being left out when important, organisational decisions are being made is a common phenomenon experienced by Women Executives, indicating that they are not part and parcel of the old-boys network or organizational power politics. This situation is difficult, and stressful to operate in.

3.4 Women Executive's style of Managing

While certain aspects of the interpersonal and communication styles that women tend to bring to their job as managers are strengths, others stand in the way of effective management and result in self imposed stress upon them.

It has been found out that, most Women Executives have difficulties in delegating and they are prone to close supervision styles. In many cases, it has been observed that women executives are overly concerned with nitty gritty of everyday operations instead of delegation to make time for more important tasks such as making key decisions about the future of the departments they manage. Reasons for not delegating include fear that others may make a mistake and a false belief that they can do better than anyone else. Failure to delegate results in them being overloaded with unnecessary burdens and exposes them to risks of experiencing excessive stress.

It has also been found out that women executives do not grasp the notion of organisational political system its importance, how power is acquired and experienced in organisations and how to tap informal power. Most women executives do not think about what is going on around them i.e. the politics, the power bases that are being built and the evolving power acquisition strategies. Instead they spend time and energy on short-term career goals such as becoming as competent as possible on the present job.

Their male-counterparts on the other hand are

very active members in organisational power politics. They build powerful networks of supporters. They pass on and share power with peers and subordinates and they plan their future careers with stark determination. Men's basic game is "learn and move on". As a result, Male Executives advance in their careers at a faster rate than women executives. Staying on one job for a long time without prospects for movement upwards, can be a course of frustration and stress to women executives.

3.5 Genetic and Congenital Factors

Certain physiological predispositions to (or causes of) stress are the result of factors which develop before birth; one of these prenatal factors is the individual's genetic composition. For instance the susceptibility to hypertension, may be inherited traits (Greenwood, 1979).¹⁴

According to Greenwood, the entire physical and mental characteristics of each individual, including the whole range of strengths and weaknesses are controlled to a significant degree by genetic composition.

The process of foetal development during pregnancy also predisposes one to stress. Ingestion by the child-bearing mother of certain medications, drugs, poisons, alcoholic beverages may serve to produce congenital defects in the baby and the effects may last the lifetime of the child (Greenwood, 1979).¹⁵

3.6 Increased rate of change

Organizations are facing rapid changes of a technological, economic, social and political nature and increased rate of competition. The challenge to executives, female and male, alike is to manage the change creatively and effectively and to ensure the survival and

prosperity of organizations they manage. This is not an easy task to handle and it is quite stressful.

An interplay of several factors including the women's multiple roles, time pressure, male-dominated organisational culture, self-defeating styles of managing, genetic composition and congenital factors as well as increased rate of change act as predominant sources of excessive stress to women executives. The effects of excessive stress are catastrophic as the following section shows.

4. EFFECTS OF EXCESSIVE STRESS

4.1 Stress - related illnesses

Stress related illnesses are essentially diseases of adaption that result from inappropriate responses by body-systems to stressors. Such diseases can be of a physical or mental nature. Physical illnesses include ulcers, heart attack, palpitations, arthritis, asthma, constipation, insomnia, diabetes, backache and neckache. Mental illnesses or emotional disturbances include certain psychosis, certain neuroses and depression (Greenwood 1979);¹⁶ Cranwell-ward, 1990).¹⁷ Diseases of adaption lead to restricted activity, incapacity to perform to normal levels, absenteeism and illness and may even cause death to the victim.

4.2 Increased Medical and Hospital expenses

Due to stress related illnesses of a physical or mental nature, medical and hospital bills have to be paid to medical practitioners, hospitals and others by employing organizations or victims themselves for health services.

4.3 Lowered effectiveness and efficiency:-

Excessive stress disrupts thought processes and reduces general body stamina. It impairs clear, creative and innovative thinking. It affects retrieval of information from the brain and renders one ineffective in decision - making and finding solutions to problems.

4.4 Poor Interpersonal Relationships:-

Executives are members of many organisations including a family. Any event which affects them including stress also affects their interrelationships with every other person in every organisation of which they are members. All those members of organisations who must deal with the stressed executive therefore end up suffering some of the same adverse effects.

4.5 Turnover

Those executives who cannot stand the heat in the stressful positions they occupy, get out of the positions so as to relieve themselves from excessive stress.

Even though an optimal stress level enables one to perform to the peak, excessive stress is destructive and leads to stress-related illnesses, increased medical expenses, lowered individual and organizational effectiveness and efficiency, poor interpersonal relationships and executive turnover. As such managing stress in ways which prevent it from getting to extremes is important to executives.

5. POTENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING STRESS

5.1 Self Analysis

Self analysis involves determining one's own physical and psychological strengths and weaknesses as well as identifying the specific stressors and types of contexts which constitute the greatest contributors to stress.

If self analysis reveals specific vulnerabilities, one has to take action to abate them (Greenwood, 1979). It is also helpful to adopt realistic expectations about oneself, one's job and people around oneself. (Cranwell - Ward, 1990).¹⁸

5.2 Self Management

According to Cranwell - Ward, (1990), the following principles are useful in optimizing stress levels to maximum performance:-

- (a) Development of a clear overall plan by setting objectives and sub-objectives in each of key result areas.
- (b) Develop action plans which convert goals into action.
- (c) Establish a clear system of priorities; including proactive and reactive tasks.
- (d) Use time effectively by avoiding time wasters such as interruptions, procrastination and lack of organisation.
- (e) Delegate effectively and as much as you can.
- (f) Identify time of the day when you work most effectively and schedule difficult work at that time.
- (g) Regularly review your progress and make

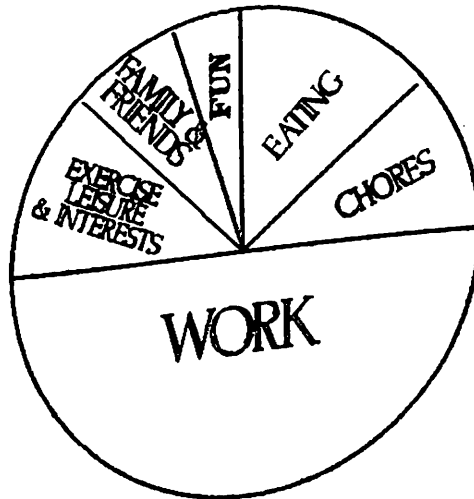
improvement to your self-management.

- (h) Have an effective system for coping with paper.

5.3 Work/Home Balance

Employment seems to require full attention and commitment which can result in our neglecting other important aspects of our lives such as family, health and friends. Without losing sight of the need to work effectively, it is useful to determine the extent to which we devote ourselves to our jobs and whether we are happy with that in the context of other important areas of our lives (Warren and Toll, 1993).¹⁹ A useful way of determining time spent on work as a proportion of the rest of our lives is to draw a pie chart representing a week or month.

The chart could be as the following one:



SOURCE: Eve Warren and Carline Toll, The stress work, Book, 1993, pg. 82

What each of us needs to decide is whether we have the right portions at the prevailing time. If not we should determine what holds us back from having them right and take the necessary action to improve the situation.

5.4 Healthy Diet:-

The essential thing is to go for balanced diet which suits us individually. Equally, important is the consideration of what not to take, for healthy purposes, e.g. excessive salt, excessive sugar and too much alcohol.

5.6 Programme of Exercise

There is sufficient evidence to indicate that vigorous exercise for someone in good physical condition helps to dissipate harmful effects of stress by burning up excessive adrenalin and preventing build-up of cholesterol in the arteries. (Cranwell - Ward, 1990).

Best exercises include running, swimming, cycling, walking. (Greenwood, 1979).²⁰ However, it is important for anyone who is about to go on a vigorous exercise program to consult a doctor before doing so.

5.7 Support Networks

We have to have people around us who can help in times of need. What we need from other people are such as follows:-

"A person with whom I can talk about work, be understood and who will not gossip to others.

A person who will accept me as I am.

A person who will be reliable in a crisis

A person who will tell me honestly what they think. A person whom I can trust with my innermost thought and feelings" (Warren & Toll pg. 98-99) "21

If one has people whom he/she can discuss, intimate problems, situations are less likely to develop out of proportions.

Stress is an inevitable ingredient of life we cannot avoid. The only practical way to approach it is to manage it creatively through practical strategies which include: understanding and accepting ourselves, managing ourselves effectively, effecting a reasonable balance of time spent at work and home, taking healthy diets and having programmes of exercise that suit us.

CONCLUSION

Stress is part of the very fabric of life; it is not necessarily evil but essential to life. Without it there is no challenge in life. To take full advantage of it, women executives need to understand it, adopt a positive stance to it and take a sound approach to managing it.

Even though several factors such as the women's multiple roles, time pressure, male dominated organisational culture, self defeating managing styles and challenges relating to managing the increased rate of organisational change have the potential of causing excessive stress to women executives, the situation can still be contained through effective management of stress.

Stress can be effectively managed by adopting practical strategies including understanding and accepting ourselves, managing ourselves effectively, effecting a reasonable balance of time spent at work and at home and going for healthy diet and programmes of exercise.

A way forward requires women executives to be more assertive in their lives within the male dominated organizations and to participate more actively in the organisational politics.

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