Editorial: Should we stress about stress?

Javier Bajer

According to the latest global data, we should be panicking

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that work-related stress is the second most common health problem globally. In a survey conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO), 74% of people reported experiencing work-related stress. Despite a hefty supply of well-being programs delivered practically everywhere, Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2023 Report just announced a staggering 44% of employees experiencing "a lot of stress" the day before, a record level for the second year in a row.

But I do not think that awareness is the problem. Everyone is talking about stress: the International Stress Awareness Day, the World Mental Health Day (the USA), the National Stress Awareness Month and the National Stress Awareness Week (the UK), to name a few.

The problem is that we are seeing stress as our enemy, ignoring that stress is a *natural physiological and psychological response* to a perceived threat or challenge. The WHO defines stress as "[…] a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. Everyone experiences stress to some degree."

We cannot have it both ways. We cannot design work that engages people without producing a corresponding level of excitement. The alternative would be to create undemanding jobs and then deal with apathy and depression as a consequence.

However, this is not a new dilemma. In 1908, psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson, coined the Yerkes–Dodson law, suggesting that there's a necessary level of stress if we want to achieve optimal performance. They proposed that performance *needs* a certain amount of arousal to reach a peak. Beyond this point, increasing stress would cause performance to drop (imagine an inverted U-shaped curve).

High performance lives inside a sweet spot, where lower stress can cause apathy and greater stress leads to discomfort followed by burnout.

So, asking people whether they are experiencing stress at work might be the wrong question, as it suggests that in an ideal world we should rid ourselves from stress as much as possible.

Instead of stressing about stress, perhaps we need to stop seeing it as our enemy and start considering it a building block to create environments where people can happily use their talents while doing good work.

Enjoy this great issue of Strategic HR Review!

Warmly,

Javier

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