



RELIEVING THE STRESS OF OTHERS

BY EDWARD MILLER

Here's a story from the *Harvard Business Review* about helping other people manager stress ("Leading in Times of Trauma" by Jane E. Dutton et al., January 2002):

We spoke with the manager of a billing department at one hospital who makes it a point to know the workloads and the personal circumstances of each member of her unit; that way she can cut people slack when they need extra support. For example, when one employee's husband suffered kidney failure and was awaiting a transplant, the billing manager gave the woman a pager and organized a team of people who could step in and pick up the woman's work on a moment's notice. That way, the employee would be able to take her husband to the hospital without delay if a kidney became available.

Is the leadership in your organization as empathetic and flexible as that hospital's billing department manager? Stress is on the rise in all organizations. The pressure on earnings at publicly traded companies has created a demand for "doing more with less." At the same time, consumer expectations for uniquely tailored products and services have led to customer dissatisfaction. That there seems to be no relief to the stress makes the workplace even more stressful.

Empathy and Flexibility

Managers trying to alleviate the stress felt by colleagues have two strategies available: *empathy and flexibility*. Empathy is nothing more complicated than caring about someone, but authentic caring begins with knowledge. That billing department manager had to know a lot about the circumstances of her colleague's family. What's more, she had to care enough to feel responsible for a solution. Most managers think they know a lot about people they work with; countless studies show they

don't. Most managers say they care a lot about the people they work with; experience casts doubt on that as well.

Here's a simple test. Think of someone who works with you. Write down their three most important values. Then write a short sentence describing their primary career goal. Finally, write down two of their fears. To get an "A" in this test, check out your answers with the person you selected. Let them confirm what you do or do not know about them. I've done this countless times in organizations. The pattern is always the same: Few workers know much about their colleagues' values, goals, and fears.

As the stress increases in organizations, managers' success will be based on how well they help others deal with it.

Flexibility is equally important to stress management. Here's another story, this one from Barbara Ehrenreich in *The New York Times* ("Two-Tiered Morality" by Barbara Ehrenreich, June 30, 2002):

When I applied for a job at Wal-Mart in the spring of 2000, I was reprimanded for getting something "wrong" on this (job applicant's) test: I had agreed only "strongly" to the proposition, "All rules have to be followed to the letter at all times." The correct answer was "totally agree."

That kind of inflexible adherence to rules, regulations, and dogma prevents smart managers from putting empathy into action. I'm sure the billing manager's hospital had some regulation on the books that might have prevented her flexible response, but wisely, she found a way around

it. How flexible is your organization in allowing you some wiggle room to take care of people?

Reciprocal Trust

Often, the issue is trust. Do companies trust their managers? Do managers trust the people they supervise? Trust is reciprocal. If you trust others, they are more likely to trust you. Here's a story from Peter Scholtes, author of *The Leader's Handbook: A Guide to Inspiring Your People and Managing the Daily Workflow* (McGraw-Hill, 1998):

The Falk Corporation of Milwaukee found its restrictive funeral-leave policy was creating widespread dissatisfaction among employees and resulting in a lot of time off for funerals. Managers at Falk realized that although they believed more than 95 percent of their employees were "trustworthy," company policies were designed to keep the 5 percent in line. To align company policies with employee trustworthiness, Falk changed its rigid, seven-graph policy on bereavement leave to read: "If you require time off due to the death of a friend or family member, make arrangements with your supervisor." The result surprised everyone: In the next year, the number of days off for bereavement declined more than 50 percent.

As the stress increases in organizations, managers' success will be based on how well they help others deal with it. If you don't know much about your people, and care even less, you won't be very effective. If you don't find ways to work the system to help them get what they need to cope, you will fall short of your own potential as a leader. ■

Edward Miller (miller@newsroomleadership.com) is a personal and professional coach to journalists and news executives. "Reflections on Leadership," his weekly e-mail essay on newsroom management and leadership, is read by more than 10,000 journalists around the world. A consultant to media companies in the U.S., Finland and Sweden, Edward is the former editor and publisher of *The Morning Call* in Allentown, PA.