THE CONCEPT OF STRESS AND WAYS OF MANAGING IT

Assist. Mărăcine Mihaela
"Constantin Brâncovean" University
Faculty of Management Marketing in Economical
Affairs, Piteşti, Romania

Abstract: There is no doubt that nowadays stress has become an element which exists in everybody's life. Although it is not by far a new phenomenon, nevertheless it becomes more and more important and it affects all countries, all professional and social categories, as well as family and society as a whole. It is very important both for human beings and for organizations to become aware of stress and to manage it in the right way, so that its negative effects can be annihilated and the performed activity not be affected.

JEL classification: M2, M16, M30.

Key words: organizational stress, stress effects, stress management.

The general concept of "stress"

The frequent social and economic changes, often unexpected and profound, maximally strain the capacities of the human body on the line of adaptation. The last five decades were marked by the concern of the liberal arts for defining, characterizing and theorizing the adaptation of the individual to the demands of modern life. No wonder that under these conditions, a series of terms - neurosis, stress, maladjustment syndrome - were transferred from the scientific language in the daily one.

This paper tries to capture some aspects related to the concept of "stress" and highlight ways in which this phenomenon could be approached in order to find those solutions and practices necessary managing it.

The word "stress," of English origin, circumscribes a series of nouns related in meaning, but with slightly different nuances: pressure, heaviness, effort, demands, tension, coercion, nervous tension.

The one who launches in medical language, since 1946, *the concept of "stress"* is the Canadian scientist Hans Selye IV. According to this view, stress is *the non-specific reaction of the body to any type of demand.*

Described by H. Selye (1946) as the effort made by the body to respond to the demands of the environment, and called by him the "General Adaptation Syndrome – GAS" - later called by others the "Selye syndrome," the concept has proven useful in the speed with which it has imposed itself in daily language internationally. Overall, it can be said that stress occurs in any situation in which the human body's state of equilibrium or physical and/or mental integrity is threatened by internal and external factors, and to which the individual has no standard solutions to minimize or eliminate the threat.

Stress represents *that situation which exerts a mental or physical pressure on a person*. Stress can cause changes and disturbances in the human body.

From this description of stress one can derive two main components: the stressor agent and the state of the human body.

The multitude of stress-generator factors has imposed their classification as well, a process necessary to knowing and mastering the effects.

The criteria and categories of stressor agents can be summarized as:

➢ *according to the number of stress agents in action:*
- unique stressors - loud noise which tends to be longer or noise occurred suddenly in the middle of the night;
- multiple stressors – noise associated with heat and hazardous emissions.

➢ *according to the number of individuals affected:*
- stressors with a strictly individual significance – found in the extended dissatisfaction of some physiological needs: intense thirst and lack of perspective in quenching it, hunger, sleep;
- stressors with collective significance, of family or business "group" – a child's failure in an exam, unemployment prospects in an organization;
- stressors with general significance – they affect any individual, being specific to some situations of natural disasters (flooding, earthquakes, war, etc.).

➢ *according to their nature:*
- physical stressors - noise, vibration, radiation, prolonged physical exercise, trauma, external bleeding, burns, etc.;
- chemical stressors - chemical hazardous emissions with toxic action on the human body: they can include psychological stress as well when they are perceived as an imminent danger to human health;
- biological stressors - viruses, bacteria, parasites, though which internal and external diseases get into the human body and viewed as danger to the functioning of the human body;
- psychological stressors - stimuli with noxious or non-noxious significance, subjectively interpreted by the human psyche at the level of the thought operations.

➢ *according to the connection with the problems of life:*
- peripheral stressors - resulted in transient problems: severe weather, congestion, road blockage etc.;
- central stressors – found in the important issues that can cause disturbances in a person's life.

The effects of stress can be positive in the short term (they help people think more clearly in situations of panic or be more creative). But if there is not a stress release valve, through actions meant to help the human body, either to avoid the stress factor or to cope with it, the cumulative effect can become dangerous.

The work-associated stress is one of the biggest problems for health and safety that we are facing in Europe. Nearly one in four employees suffers from stress, and the studies suggest that between 50% and 60% of all lost working days are attributed to it.

This means huge cost in terms of both human suffering and economic performance. Stress at work can affect anyone at any level. It is produced in any sector and in organizations of any size. Stress affects the health and safety of individuals and at the same time the welfare of organizations and of national economies.

Stress represents the second problem related to health at work, affecting 22% of employees in the 27 EU countries (in 2005). And the number of people suffering from diseases associated with stress, produced or caused at work, is likely to increase.

The changing world of work has increasing demands from employees, by cutting and outsourcing services, the increasing need for flexibility in terms of job position and skills, adopting a growing number of fixed-term contracts, the growing insecurity of employment and increased labor (with working volume and higher pressure), and an unstable balance of life and work.

Stress can also compromise safety at work, thus contributing to other health problems related to the place of work, such as musculoskeletal disorders.

Stress affects very much the image of an organization. Stress can bring diseases and human suffering, both at work and at home. Reducing the stress associated with work and the psychosocial risks represents not only a moral imperative, but also a legal one. It is also a major problem of economic efficiency.

In 2002, the annual economic cost produced by the work-associated stress in the 15 EU countries was estimated at 20 billion euros (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work). The good news is that the stress associated with work can be approached in the same logical and systematic manner as other health and safety issues. There is an abundance of practical examples to address this problem in the EU space. Using the appropriate method, employees can be safe from the stress.

People feel stress when they perceive *an imbalance between the demands which are imposed and the resources they have at their disposal to address these requests* (Deaconu et al., 2004). Although stress is felt on a psychological level, it also affects the physical health of people.

Among the ordinary factors of stress at work one can include the lack of control over work, the inadequate requests for employees and the lack of support from colleagues and management.

The symptoms of stress at work

Feeling stress can change the way a person feels, thinks and behaves. These symptoms include:

At individual level:
physiological reactions (dorsal problems, low immunity, gastric ulcer, heart problems, hypertension).
- emotional reactions (irritability, anxiety, sleep disturbances, depression, hypochondria, alienation, fatigue, problems in family relationships);
- cognitive reactions (difficulty in concentrating, in memory, in learning new things, in making decisions);
- behavioral reaction (drug abuse, alcohol and tobacco; destructive behavior);
- physiological reactions (dorsal problems, low immunity, gastric ulcer, heart problems, hypertension).

At the level of organization:
- absenteeism, a high fluctuation of staff, a faulty calendar, disciplinary problems, bullying, low productivity, accidents, errors and increased costs from compensation or health care.

Organizational stress

The fact that stress has become a harmful phenomenon is no longer a shocking information, but what we should do, especially when we think of its negative consequences, is to look at things not only from the individual's perspective, whose health and psychological state can be affected, but also from the perspective of the environment, respectively from the perspective of the organization of which he is part (Organizational stress - an issue too little discussed, 2008).

Less known are the effects of stress at the level of organization. In some companies, in which the organizational culture is thus created, one even wishes to maintain a more or less high level of stress, considering that it is thereby *"Keeps the employees involved."* Psychologically, this method may be valid, but with one clarification: only when "*stress*" is limited to a slight state of activation.

But what happens when it exceeds a certain limit? Then its negative effects occur, effects that have an impact not only on the physical and mental health of individuals, but also on the individual's behavior, respectively on his/her activity and, thus, the organization suffer.

Organizational policy can be an obstacle to the development of the organization and the employees according to its orientation, such as (Pânişoară, 2005):

- if the organization is oriented towards intense control, and the employees consider that there is need only for limited control, they possess the maturity to make decisions at their job;
- if the organization considers that is has to be hermetic (closed type) and its hermetism prevents the employees from developing "healthy" partnerships with customers;
- if the organization encourages competition between departments and the employees had superior results if they used cooperation structures, etc.
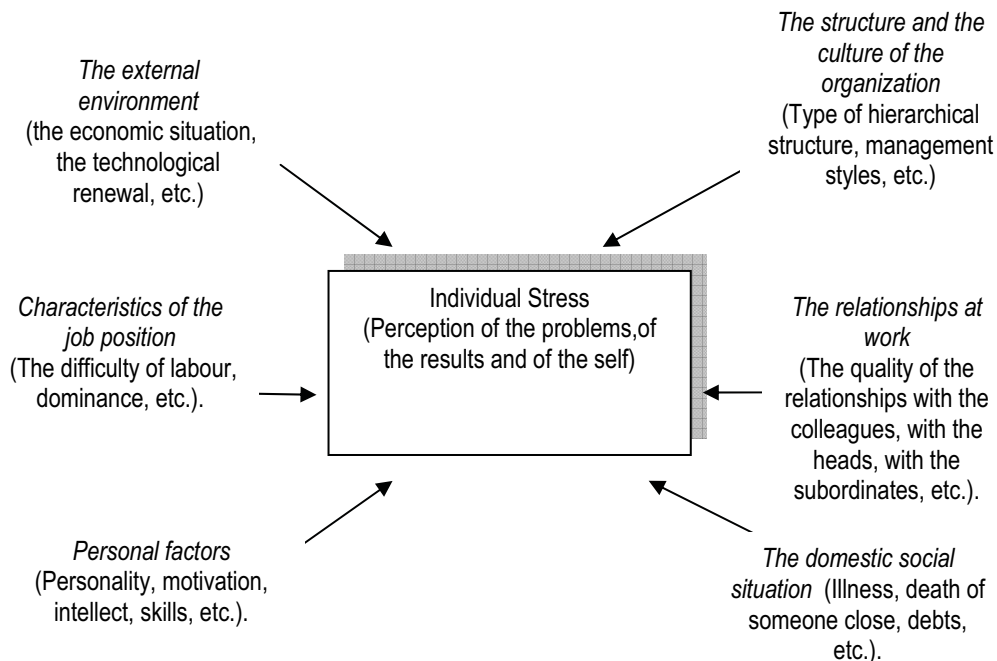
These are just a few of the examples that show how organizational policy, highlighted in the elements that comprise the respective organization's culture, may prevent the employees from achieving satisfaction at work and the results required.

At organization level, the high and incorrectly managed stress inevitably leads to poor performance, lack of motivation, resignations, absenteeism, conflict, etc.

Specialists in this area point out that these negative effects are "*contagious*," and could extend to other employees who are not affected by stress. This is especially true in situations in which individuals under stress are influenced in terms of their position or of the relationships they establish with the other colleagues.

The sources of stress at work can be numerous: difficult working conditions, insufficient resources, increased accountability, job descriptions overload, short deadlines, etc. Of course, a poor defining of the jobs or a faulty organizational communication, can put the employee in a situation of ambiguity of the role, not knowing what is expected of him and thus not being sure that the direction towards he is headed in the right one or not.

The changes that take place within the organization, the restructuring, the redundancies, the technological change, if not well managed, can easily become sources of stress, since the employees ask themselves if they will still be suited to new conditions, if they will still present interest to the organization or if they will be able to meet the new requirements.

The structure and the culture of the organization
(Type of hierarchical structure, management styles, etc.)

The external environment
(the economic situation, the technological renewal, etc.)

Characteristics of the job position
(The difficulty of labour, dominance, etc.).

Individual Stress
(Perception of the problems,of the results and of the self)

The relationships at work
(The quality of the relationships with the colleagues, with the heads, with the subordinates, etc.).

Personal factors
(Personality, motivation, intellect, skills, etc.).

The domestic social situation (Illness, death of someone close, debts, etc.).

Figure no. 1: Potential sources of stress
Source: Cole, G. A. (2000). Personnel Management. Bucureşti. Editura Codecs

Managers, because of the increased responsibility and of the demanding objectives that they have to meet, also experience stress (in its multiple phases), which they forward to their subordinates. But what is to be done to reduce stress?

Managers can follow some steps to eliminate stress manifested both at the level of their own selves and at the level of their subordinates. Walonick (1993) suggests several actions that can be taken to reduce stress at the level of the employees:

- Clarification of the assigned tasks, responsibilities, authority and criteria to assess performance;
- The managers' leadership style should reflect consideration for the people;
- Use of delegation effectively and empowering the individual if the situation so requires;
- Clarifying the objectives and decision criteria;

There are also three strategies to prevent stress in organizations (Jick and Payne, 1980): 1) treat the symptoms, 2) change the person, 3) remove the cause of stress. When a person is already affected by the effects of stress, the priority is to treat the symptoms. This includes identifying those who suffer from excessive stress, as well as providing treatment and psychological counseling services.

The second strategy is to help employees acquire skills against stress, to make them less vulnerable to its effects. Some examples would be learning about time management and relaxation techniques, as well as suggestions on changing the diet or the exercises practiced. The third strategy is to eliminate or reduce the environmental

factors that create stress. This includes fighting the stressor agents, such as pollution or noise and changing the program or the work tasks.

Many of the companies that turn to recruiters require even, in addition to verifying skills, to also pursue in the recruitment process the aspects of personality to ensure a match with the specific job and thus prevent stress arising from increased accountability, short terms, poor training, etc.

It also aims to increase the social support, to improve communication, to introduce coaching, specialized trainings, etc. More and more organizations require stress management programs in which employees are invited to acquire the stress-coping mechanisms (methods "*to deal with*" stress).

Conclusion

This paper work tried to capture the main aspects of the emergence and development of stress and to outline some usable instruments in order to reduce the negative effects of this phenomenon on individuals and society as a whole.

Of course, it is also important that stress can be fought, and the first step is becoming aware and accepting that it exists, it has been installed and especially that it is a particular problem. It is up to managers and organizations to select the methods and techniques to fight stress, in order to create a suitable organizational climate to carry out effectively the activity and to achieve sustainable high performance.

REFERENCES

1. Cole, G. A.   "Personnel Management", Editura Codecs, Bucureşti, 2000
2. Deaconu, A., Podgoreanu, S., Raşcă, L.   "Factorul uman şi performanţele organizaţiei", Editura ASE, Bucureşti, 2004
3. European Agency for Safety and Health at Work,   "Stress", Retrieved from http://osha.europa.eu/en/topics/stress
4. Jick, T. D., Payne, R.   "Stress at work." Exchange: The Organizaitonal Behavioral Teaching Journal 5: 50-55, 1980
5. Selye, H.   "The general adaptation syndrome and the diseases of adaptation", Journal of Clinical Endocrinology, 2: 117-230, 1946
6. Pânişoară, G., Pânişoară, I.   "Managementul resurselor umane", Ghid practic (ediţia a II-a),Editura Polirom, Iaşi, 2005
7. Walonick, David S.   "Causes and Cures of Stress in Organizations", Retrieved from http://www.survey-software-solutions.com/walonick/organizational-stress.html,1993