Emma works for a financial services company that many would consider to be a very stressful workplace. Her boss, however, makes her work something that she loves. Just about every time she talks about her work, she sings the praises of her job and her boss. What does this boss do? He is flexible!

Many things can influence the effectiveness of managers and their subordinates. One of the most influential of these is stress. Even in an otherwise healthy workplace, stress can be extremely detrimental. According to a 2000 report from the American Institute of Stress, workplace stress costs US industry $300 billion annually. This figure includes stress-related employee accidents, absenteeism, turnover and diminished productivity. For example, 40% of employee turnover is due to stress at work (Rosch, 2000). Job stress can also result in increased medical, legal and insurance costs for an organization.

Recent research has found that most job stress is attributed to an individual’s manager or boss (Savic & Pagon, 2008). Whether the boss is the actual cause of the stress is irrelevant. Subordinates perceive that supervisors and managers have greater control over stressful events than they do. They perceive the organization’s demands through their manager’s demands. One positive aspect of this perception is that, sometimes, a good boss can help workers see the company and the work they are completing in a more positive light. Their work seems much easier to do when they enjoy doing it and enjoy working with their boss.

Managers and supervisors have the opportunity to lessen subordinate stress levels and make them happier and more productive. There are two main ways in which bosses can affect their subordinates’ stress at work. First, the manager’s stress can “rub off” on subordinates. Almost everyone has had an experience when someone in the department or work unit has had a bad day. That person’s negative attitudes and emotions always seem to make everyone else’s day that much worse. The same applies to managers. If the boss is having a bad day, is stressed out and feeling down, subordinates may be prone to the same feelings (Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010).

Second, bosses can manage their behavior in order to avoid causing undue stress for their subordinates. So, what behaviors should bosses manage? According to leadership research (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000), there are three types of behaviors that bosses exhibit to their subordinates. Think of them as the “leader behavior types toolbox.”

Task-related behaviors are those that direct subordinates to completing a task: “For this report, I want you to do A, B and then C.” This behavior “tool” is also referred to as “telling” or “transactional” behavior – telling the subordinate to do something, complete a certain goal or giving them something to do (work) in exchange for something else (paychecks).

Relationship-related behaviors are those that are more socially oriented or designed to provide some sort of emotional or instrumental support: “How can I help you complete the report by this deadline?” Relationship-oriented behaviors have also been called “supportive” or “transformational.”

Finally, laissez-faire behaviors involve taking a completely hands-off approach, giving employees the maximum amount of autonomy and control over their own workplace behaviors and results. Relying on this behavioral tool puts accountability for performance and results squarely on the subordinate. However, without fully competent and conscientious subordinates, this behavioral tool may result in unintended negative consequences.

Managers may think that increasing their subordinates’ well-being may be too complicated and hectic, given they already have too much work to do and too little time to
complete it in. Using the three behavioral tools, there are a few small changes managers can implement easily, without exhausting too much time or energy. These changes can mean a world of difference to employees.

Relationship-oriented, or "transformational" managerial behaviors have been popular and widely hailed as the “best” type of behavior. Individuals with managers who use mostly relationship-oriented behaviors have been found to have less stress in the long term than individuals who have managers who exhibit more task-oriented or laissez-faire behaviors (Seltzer, Numerof, & Bass, 1989). Relationship-oriented behaviors have been found to be the most effective behaviors overall in the workplace (Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010).

Managers should ask subordinates whether they are effectively demonstrating support for subordinates and their work. If not, managers should make sure to give employees more support in any way they can. Being considerate is also a relationship-oriented behavior. Managers should aim for mutual respect between themselves and their employees.

On the other hand, more recent research suggests that managers should pay attention to certain situational characteristics to decide which behavioral tool to use. There are specific times when relationship-oriented behaviors can be detrimental to employees. Research has shown that when managers use too many relationship-oriented behaviors and too few of the other two types of behaviors, employees can start to get more stressed (Harris & Kacmar, 2006). In other words, there is an optimal amount of relationship-oriented behaviors that managers should use; anything above and below this optimal level can trigger stress-related experiences.

Previous research provides some direction on identifying the optimal amount of relationship-oriented behaviors:

- Employees who are more self-directed need more relationship-oriented behaviors to lessen stress, while employees who are less self-directed need more task-oriented behaviors to decrease stress (DeHoogh & Hartog, 2009).
- Employees who are highly stressed by their current work or home life may need more task-related behavior, at least until they become less stressed (Harris & Kacmar, 2006).

- Some employees may just not like relationship- or task-oriented behaviors. Some people consider relationship-oriented behaviors to be "unassertive," "over-trusting" and "boring." Others consider task-oriented behaviors to be "dogmatic," "strict" and "pushy" (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001, p.171). The former usually like to have their roles and goals for a project or task clearly defined (task-oriented behaviors), whereas the latter usually like the extra support and autonomy that comes with relationship-oriented behaviors.

- No matter which type of behavior a manager uses, s/he should ensure that communication with subordinates is clear (Driscoll & Beehr, 2000). It is essential to reduce confusion and make the manager and subordinate roles in a project clear. If employees do not know what they are doing or why they are doing it, confusion leads to stress very quickly.

Even though these ideas may seem obvious, it is important not to disregard these research findings in the workplace. Research also indicates that what the manager thinks may be causing stress for an employee may not be what is actually causing that stress. Subordinates' views regarding the causes of stress are usually completely different from their manager's view (Offerman & Hellmann, 1996).

What should managers conclude about their role in employee stress? There are at least three important recommendations:

- Employee stress is very detrimental and costly to the company and to a boss who wants high productivity from their employees and to increase employee well-being.
- Relationship-oriented behaviors result in long-term stress reduction for employees. However, using these behaviors too often, to the exclusion of other behaviors, can lead to greater stress for employees.
- Flexibility is very important. Using the three behavior "tools" when they are needed is essential to reducing employee stress levels.

The next time you are in the office, pay attention to things such as how much work each of your subordinates has on his plate and whether or not he seems to prefer relationship- or task-oriented behaviors. Perhaps Mary is getting along just fine, but Bob seems very stressed and confused. In this instance, make sure to use a relationship orientation with Mary and a task orientation with Bob. But above all, be flexible with your approach to each situation to ensure that you are reaching your employees in the most effective way.
References


