Leadership

The Latest On Handling Job Stress

Michael Morris, 03.17.10, 01:43 PM EDT

It's all about a psychological technique called reappraisal.

As long as we've had management gurus, we've had strategies for how to manage stress. Emotional intelligence. Problem-focused coping. Creative visualization. These lofty constructs sound a bit impractical to many business leaders. Is there any concrete evidence about what works, and why?

To answer these questions, researchers are increasingly looking at the underlying physiology of coping with stress. Some of their most striking findings tell us a lot about keeping cool under pressure while avoiding the emotional patterns tied to long-term health risks. Recently, Columbia Business School's Program on Social Intelligence hosted a workshop on this topic, featuring Kevin Ochsner, a professor of psychology and expert on the neuroscience of emotion, and David Rock, an executive coach and author of *Your Brain at Work*. Rock led the audience through a series of exercises that demonstrated two different strategies for managing stress, *suppression* of one's emotions and *reappraisal* of the situation.

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For example, suppose your sales team gets stuck in traffic on the way to an important client meeting. It's natural to feel anxious about being late. Many managers would try to suppress their rising anxiety so their emotions don't affect their staff. An alternative is to reappraise the situation by focusing on a positive aspect, such as that the longer journey will give the team additional time to review the sales pitch.

Using techniques from psychology and physiology, researchers have studied the effectiveness of suppression and reappraisal strategies. They've found that suppression has many drawbacks, from poorer memory of a stressful situation to temporarily elevated blood pressure. In fact, researchers have found that suppressing our emotions tends to raise the blood pressure of those who work with us, suggesting that bottled-up stress is contagious. And these recurrent episodes of elevated blood pressure take a toll on our cardiovascular health.

Recent studies have taken this further by using functional MRI scans to see what happens in the brain during emotional regulation. Threatening situations activate the amygdala, a small almond-shaped structure buried deep in the temporal

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lobes, which functions like an alarm system that can give rise to flight-or-fight adrenaline responses. It is not like a car alarm, however, that is triggered in one instant and then sounds until turned off. Amygdala activation has to be continually regenerated by your moment-by-moment, ongoing perception of threat. Activation typically escalates over time, however, because the emotion of anxiety creates vigilance and narrows your attentional focus on the possibly threatening aspects of the situation. That is what happens when we feel a rising panic that might push us toward a rash decision.

The prefrontal cortex, the brain area behind the forehead that handles higher intellectual processes such as problem solving and self-control, is inhibited by strong amygdala activation. We've all experienced how a spike of anxiety (e.g., "Whoa! A snake on the sidewalk!") can derail our train of thought. We literally lose our minds when the alarm system hits high volume. Fortunately, the influence can also run the other way. Cognitive reappraisal in the prefrontal cortex (e.g., "Relax, that's just the neighbor's garden hose!") can break the cycle of rising amygdala activation by eliminating the ongoing perception of threat in the situation.

In research studies, participants in fMRI brain scanning have been shown highly upsetting film clips and instructed to either suppress the emotion they feel, to cognitively reappraise the stimuli or (in the control condition) to just respond naturally. Both emotion regulation strategies involve heightened activity in the prefrontal cortext, as that area supports both self-control and reasoning. The difference is found in the amygdala. Reappraisal decreases activity in the amygdala as the stimulus comes to be seen as less threatening. Suppression, however, increases amygdala activity. It is as though the alarm gets louder because the person isn't doing anything to express the emotion. Essentially, when we successfully mask the external expression of emotion, we experience an intensification of the internal physiological emotional alarm. No wonder suppression is associated with impaired memory and elevated blood pressure!

Given that the reappraisal strategy works better, how can we become adept at it? As David Rock explained in our workshop, many executive coaches borrow techniques from cognitive behavioral therapy, a form of therapy that teaches how to substitute more positive interpretations for negative and limiting patterns of perception. A key part of mentoring younger colleagues is teaching them to reappraise threatening, stressful situations as challenging, engaging ones.

In my academic world, for example, success depends on getting published in top scientific journals. That requires going through a review process that can be extremely stressful. Anonymous peers try their hardest to poke holes and find flaws in your research, and you often have to go through several rounds of responding to their critiques with new experiments or new data analyses. Many aspiring researchers experience these critiques of their work as unfair attacks and give up on the process. To avoid this, I always encourage my younger colleagues to reappraise the review process as the essence of science--the debate through which the scientific community drives its members forward.

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