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## Stress and the administrator's role

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## Stress and the administrator's role

### Abstract

Stress occurs in all occupations with varying degrees of intensity and in all phases of life. It is the manner and the degree of stress as well as the effect which must be closely monitored. Stress management is the ability to control and direct the amount of stress that is present. This paper will examine the factors unique to educational administrators which cause stress; these are factors that do not apply to the general public. In addition, this paper will also describe the symptoms of administrative stress and present methods of coping with it.

**STRESS AND THE ADMINISTRATOR'S ROLE**

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**by**

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Stress occurs in all occupations with varying degrees of intensity and in all phases of life. It is the manner and the degree of stress as well as the effect which must be closely monitored. Stress management is the ability to control and direct the amount of stress that is present.

This paper will examine the factors unique to educational administrators which cause stress; these are factors that do not apply to the general public. In addition, this paper will also describe the symptoms of administrative stress and present methods of coping with it.

Administrators need to be aware of their personal stress level so that adequate coping methods can be used in order to increase their own productivity. However, awareness of that personal stress level will also then permit the administrator to direct attention to the stress level of faculty members. This paper will also focus on the administrator's role in dealing with aspects of teacher stress.

It is important to recognize that stress can be good as well as harmful. Stress is normal and, correctly channeled, it can make the person more alert, allow more energy, and provide a better performance than might have been expected. Unfortunately, however, uncontrolled stress can range from annoying to disabling. Those in authority need to be particularly able to recognize and control the stress level

in their lives, both personally and professionally (Gmelch & Swent, 1981). While too much stress affects problem solving and coping with daily crises, too little stress creates a sense of overcomplacency (Sparks, 1979). In conjunction with this idea, Hunt (1983) states that a stressless life is neither possible nor desirable. It would be a vegetable's life, and it is likely that in attempting to avoid stress one would only create a different form of stress. Cedoline (1982) states that if a person grows up in a stressful environment, there are usually one or two major outcomes: either the individual will learn effective means of dealing with the stress or will succumb to the pressure. The same is true for administrators; a decision to cope or to leave will eventually be made.

#### Factors Causing Stress

Middle-level managers are subject to more stress than any other group. This occurs because middle managers are caught between superiors and subordinates and face rapid role changes dependent on those present. For example, when the supervisor is present, the middle manager is placed in a subordinate position to take orders. However, in the presence of subordinates, and with the absence of a supervisor, the middle manager assumes the persona of 'boss' by assigning duties and making decisions. Thus, "it is the manager caught

between upper levels of management and subordinates who experiences the most distress" (Cedoline, 1982, p. 72).

Educational administrators are caught in this situation. With board members, central administration, and the superintendent, the principal defers judgment to the higher authority. However, upon returning to his/her own building, the principal regains control of the organization and assumes the mantle of command. This constant shifting of role contributes to the administrator's stress level (Bean & Clemes, 1978). Hughes and Robertson (1980) state that the administrator is the staff arbitrator and intermediary between the teachers and the higher level administration.

The administrator's role before 1970 was largely restricted to working with staff and parents, managing the building, and ordering supplies. Since 1970, new demands including community support, paper work, and resources have fallen to the administrator (Cedoline, 1982). Additionally, assuming these many roles can be viewed as a major source of stress, which can ultimately result in lowered job satisfaction (Vetter, 1976).

Cedoline (1982) cites ten examples of these new demands that have been related to administrative stress; the following factors have been ranked by administrators in the order given:

1. Lack of sufficient resources.
2. Lack of support from superiors and the public.
3. Quantity of work.
4. Paper work.
5. Collective bargaining.
6. Lack of clear direction of role from school board and superintendent.
7. Federal and state laws.
8. Lack of control of students, teachers, and schools.
9. Responsibility for child's total needs and assumption of many parental roles.
10. Parent and community relationships and pressures.

(p. 75)

Manera and Wright (1981) include some of those same "demands" in their list of factors causing administrators the most concern: (1) complying with state and federal rules, (2) spending too much time at meetings, (3) completing reports on time, (4) gaining public approval or financial support, (5) resolving parent/school conflicts, (6) evaluating staff members' performance, (7) making decisions about people known by the administrator, (8) finding workload too heavy, (9) imposing high expectations on self, (10) being interrupted by the telephone, (11) speaking in front of groups, and (12) handling student discipline.



Personal habits and attitudes can also cause stress. Too much coffee, smoking, taking drugs, getting overtired, being pessimistic, worrying about the career ladder, taking everything personally, and dwelling on past failures can increase the stress level (Yeomans, 1985).

To summarize, the factors affecting an administrator's stress level can be organized into five areas: (1) administrative constraints--dealing with time, meetings, workload, and policies; (2) administrative responsibility--relating to their characteristics; (3) interpersonal relations --resolving differences and/or student discipline; (4) intrapersonal conflicts--touching upon differences between performance and expectation; and (5) role expectation--relating to differences between expectations of self and the various publics.

#### Symptoms of Stress

Yeomans (1985) indicates that feelings of stress can range from nervousness to severe headaches, nausea, knotted muscles, indigestion, and panic. Initial signs of stress include feelings of isolation, frustration, and tension. Persons who are under severe stress for long periods of time often develop physical diseases such as arteriosclerosis, hypertension, heart problems, and migraines. In addition to

heart problems. Vanderpol (1981) says that back problems and even cancer often begin during times of stress.

Herlihy and Herlihy (1980) state that a crucial symptom which causes principals to leave administration is the depression occurring from the loneliness and sense of isolation that results from the position. Interestingly enough, this loneliness results from the middle-level manager position where the principal is not really in a position to confide fears and/or concerns to subordinates or superiors. Many administrators do not feel comfortable discussing personal concerns with subordinates because they do not wish to appear indecisive or lacking control. Discussions with superiors are deemed inadvisable because the principal does not wish to appear inadequate or incompetent to those who possess the hiring/firing power within the organization.

In most cases, the effective administrator handles the stress of the job; however, even he/she may occasionally succumb to the pressure. According to Lemley (1987), procrastination is a very definite sign of having resigned oneself to the pressure. While spending less time on major projects results in unsatisfactory performance, poor preparation due to lack of time creates new problems which increase the stress level.

When these factors converge, the symptoms are significant. Herlihy and Herlihy (1980) state that the increased stress level presents a feeling of being out of control, coupled with an increasingly negative attitude and a strong desire to be left alone. When these factors are ignored, the resulting stress is so great that the person is often forced to seek medical attention.

#### Methods of Coping

Stress can be, and needs to be, managed by the administrator in order for the administrator to remain effective and efficient. Gmelch and Swent (1977) indicate that there are three ways to manage stress. The first method includes physiological activity which allows the person to change and/or manipulate the outside forces that are causing the stress. The second method includes relaxation activity which permits the person to change personal habits. The third method provides cognitive activity so that the individual may improve and/or alter the reaction to stress.

Pinpointing and identifying the source of stress is considered to be the most important stress controller (Hendrickson, 1979). Once the problem has been diagnosed, the treatment can begin. Half of the coping strategy is in place when the individual acknowledges the potential problem

and recognizes the stress factors involved (Gmelch & Swent, 1977).

Since not all coping strategies work for everyone, each person needs to experiment with various strategies until successful coping can be achieved. Trying one or more strategies from the three categories listed above may eventually produce success.

#### Physiological Activity

Physiological activity includes some form of physical activity. Washington (1982) suggests jogging, walking, or biking as a release from stressful situations. Wellness programs are one source of support in this area.

Moe (1979) suggests that there are several techniques that might help the administrator relieve the stress level, including being good to oneself by buying a new outfit, going out to dinner, or going to the movies. Yeomans (1985) concurs that stressed individuals should provide their own rewards after getting through a stressful situation. The reward should be reinforced with positive thought: "See, I did it. I knew I could" (Yeomans, 1985, p. 271). The reward, if known beforehand, often reduces the stress even more since thoughts of the reward create a positive thought pattern rather than a negative one.

Weiskopf (1980) reinforces this concept by proposing that a "fun" activity or hobby should be added to the stressed person's schedule. These activities include "getting away" for awhile, taking a day off, going on vacation, or taking a leave of absence.

#### Relaxation Activity

Relaxation activity includes self-suggestion, a sort of self-hypnosis, to relax muscles and calm the heart rate. The process involves alternately tensing and relaxing muscles as well as emptying the mind of all thoughts for a period of time (Yeomans, 1985). According to Harrangue (1980), leisure is positively necessary for survival. She considers walking to be a sound physiological activity that is also a relaxation activity since it relaxes the muscles of the mind as well as the muscles of the body. According to Dunham (1984), relaxation training involves acquiring skills that can be used to cope with emotional responses in stress situations. The cornerstone of the relaxation theory is the ability to relax deeply and quickly. Deep muscular relaxation is achieved by controlled breathing.

#### Cognitive Activity

The third activity for controlling stress is called cognitive activity. This activity relates to positive attitudes. The individual needs to plan to remain calm, try

to see the humor of the situation, form a balance between the good times and the bad, and accept that some things will not get done. Dunham (1984) recommends planning to work no more than ten hours daily, cultivating the habit of listening to relaxing music, and smiling and responding cheerfully whenever meeting anyone. Additionally, the stressed person should control his imagination. Worrying about eventualities is a fruitless endeavor. If the facts are not available, they should not be invented; it is better to save one's energy for problems that do exist. The more information that is available, the less ambiguous the decision needs to be; therefore, some of the stress associated with decision making is removed.

In conjunction with controlling needless worrying, Kyriacou (1981) states that it is equally necessary for administrators to establish priorities by setting realistic goals to aid in the alleviation of confusion.

Lemley (1981) suggests that exercising some degree of control over the little details is the beginning of controlling stress. He states that the following ten questions provide clear insight into the stress level of the individual:

1. Do you keep yourself healthy and looking good?
2. What does your desk look like?
3. Is your office attractive?

4. Are you a slave to routine?
5. Do you procrastinate?
6. Can you resist the urge to keep busy?
7. Can you be passive and tranquil?
8. Do you buy into guilt?
9. Can you avoid mean and stupid people?
10. Can you avoid worrying? (Lemley, 1981, p. 21)

These questions provide the individual with some areas for self-study to permit the person to focus on the area of concern so corrective measures might be undertaken.

Hunt (1983) suggests that stress can be regulated by taking control of attitudes and adopting the following philosophy:

1. Rationalize stress--If you can convince yourself that a source of stress is useful or necessary, the aftereffects will be fewer.
2. Schedule stress--If you arrange it so that the source of stress occurs predictably, the results will be less damaging.
3. Manage stress--In the long run, you will probably adapt to most causes of stress, so what do you gain by getting all worked up? (p. 40)

By consistently using this checklist, administrators should be able to monitor their personal stress levels and

be able to take the initiative in controlling their stress levels.

#### Administrative Assistance to Teachers

The school climate is what the teachers perceive it to be. This perception determines the amount of allegiance to or alienation from the job, as well as the acceptance or rejection of the values of the organization. Thus, the perception of the school climate affects the level of stress which teachers experience.

Understanding stress causes can help administrators aid teachers in managing their stress levels. Teacher stress is often related to the amount of perceived support that is demonstrated by administrators. Any imbalance in physical or psychological equilibrium will influence the motivation, attitude, and interaction capability of the persons involved (Goens & Kuciejczyk, 1981). Since teachers spend considerable time in close interaction with others, they are susceptible to emotional exhaustion. Teachers with prolonged stress do not care about their jobs, the students, or themselves; work performance, productivity, and morale decrease. Consequently, administrators should be concerned with teacher stress levels and sources.



### Factors Causing Stress

There are two types of stress, productive and non-productive, for teachers, just as there are for administrators, and that stress can come from external or internal sources. External sources include student behavior, community attitudes, collective bargaining issues, and work advancement. Internal stress is associated with the individual's self-concept, expectations, and accomplishments (Goens & Kuciejczyk, 1981).

Researchers suggest that teacher stress levels are increased consistently by this list of ten stressors, ranked in order:

1. Disruptive students,
2. Lack of time,
3. Student apathy,
4. Nonteaching duties,
5. Financial pressure,
6. Lack of support from parents and community,
7. Dealing with multi-ability students,
8. Lack of positive feedback from administrators,
9. Lack of recognition for teaching excellence.

(Dedrick, Hawkes, & Smith, 1981, p. 32)

### Symptoms of Stress

Dunham (1984) proposes that there are three stages of teacher stress which include: the alarm reaction, the stage of resistance, and the stage of exhaustion. The alarm reaction stage includes increased hormone secretion, including adrenalin, which enters the bloodstream. The stage of resistance causes a change in heart rate, and the pulse rate is at a higher than normal level. The state of exhaustion strains the body's resources so that the body continues to draw on its deeper level of resources in order to cope. Ultimately, exhaustion becomes so severe that vacations and breaks no longer restore the body. The person is completely drained--emotionally, physically, behaviorally, mentally, and spiritually.

Physical symptoms include chronic exhaustion, low resistance to illness, and alcoholism. Behavioral symptoms include deep, impenetrable cynicism. Behavioral symptoms include chronic absenteeism, ultimately often resulting in the decision to leave the education field completely.

### Methods of Coping

Often teachers view administrators as being of little help to them in coping with work-related stress. In fact, administrators often cause increased stress levels. In order

to avoid this situation, Goens and Kuciejczyk (1981) propose that administrators implement the following recommendations:

1. Let teachers know what is expected of them.
  2. Unite the staff through a "we" approach.
  3. Emphasize cooperation, not competition.
  4. Isolate conflict to a specific issue.
  5. Establish clear and reasonable objectives and make them known.
  6. Review role expectations and resolve conflict.
  7. Communicate in a positive manner as often as possible.
- (p. 27)

Using these suggestions, the effective administrator should be prepared to help the staff cope with the stress it faces.

#### Conclusion

Administrators must seek to control the stress level within their own buildings by promoting a positive school climate and by seeking to minimize external sources of conflict both for themselves and their staff. Administrators will be able to reduce their own stress as they alleviate stress factors in the lives of their teachers.

Although the frustration level can be great, it is up to the administrator to exercise the leadership necessary to set the pace within his/her own building (Gorton, 1979).

Whatever the cause, stress is here to stay. The best the administrator can do is learn to live with it, control it as much as possible, and offer staff support as needed. The administrator's goal should be to manipulate stress so it becomes a positive influence.

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