

# **Workplace Stress: The need for Communication and Knowledge Sharing**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Have we ever heard of a conversation that has not ended without talking about “stress”? Very unlikely. Believe it or not, we are living in a stressful world. Today, stress is seen as a major contributor to many of the problems whether it is within the family, community, an organization and in a nation. It is obvious that today’s life is full of challenges, demands and frustrations. Although most people would accept it as a widespread attribute, the term has become so much part of our everyday vocabulary used in a casual manner.*

*This paper has been put together to discuss the common causes of stress, types, its presence and role in the workplace. It examines the symptoms and consequences of stress and the effective ways of preventing them by simply deviating from our robotic way of working and facing the reality in the work place. It also focuses on the actions of elimination of work-related stress both by employers and employees.*

Key words: *Communication, Knowledge Sharing, Stress, Work-Stress.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Stress exists in all phases of our life. Surely it is not always bad, however if not tactfully handled, it can lead one's mental state to depression. To an extent, it can motivate to perform well under pressure to get good results, but in a continuous period of time this may have harmful side effects both psychologically and physically on an individual. In the workplace, it can affect the performance of employees, thus affects the productivity of an organization.

Stress has become a common issue in our modern society mainly due to economic recession, heavy competition, modern and rapid technological changes. The life in this modern society has inadvertently introduced pressure in our lives coupled with demands of job and other. These in turn, have led to physical and mental imbalance state of human beings, by aggravating emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, frustration, or confusion (Cavanagh, 1988). Stress builds up when we are unable to get what we wanted, when workload increases in the office, when our ego gets hurt, when we feel competitive with a colleague and so on. A person could be stressed worrying about the past, fearing the unstable future and confusion about the current moment. It also depends on the individual perceptions how one reacts to the situations and this differs from individual to individual.

Though stress is expressed with different jargons, in simple words it is a feeling that is let out spontaneously when we react to particular happenings. In other words, stress is the function of mind and on how one reacts to face the threat in reality. It is defined as a condition that occurs when we mentally or emotionally get distracted due to hard pressures. In today's life, billions suffer everyday from stress and its side effects. Individual feels stressed when they undergo personal or professional problems. This is defined as negative stress where as when an individual achieves what he desires, the feeling of pressure is defined as positive stress.

In the workplace it can have many origins or may come from one incident that has an impact on both employees and employers indistinguishably. As stated by the Canadian Mental Health Association:

"Fear of job redundancy, layoffs due to an uncertain economy, increased demands for overtime due to staff cutbacks act as negative stressors. Employees who start to feel the "pressure to perform" can get caught in a downward spiral of increasing effort to meet rising expectations with no increase in job satisfaction. The relentless requirement to work at optimum performance takes its toll in job dissatisfaction, employee turnover, reduced efficiency, illness and even death. Absenteeism, illness, alcoholism, "petty internal politics", bad or snap decisions, indifference and apathy, lack of motivation or creativity are all by-products of an over stressed workplace".

Work-related stress is the adverse reaction of physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. It not only harms health but also damages performance and

competitiveness of a person and this is a major expenditure to the organization. In today's intensely competitive business environment, work related stress is becoming a major concern. Stress in the workplace is meant to be a major issue and this is to be a problem of today and the future.

## CAUSES AND TYPES OF STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Pressure is part of every work we do and it ultimately motivates us to perform well. It keeps employees and employers determined. When it becomes excessive and uncontrollable, it can lead to certain consequences. In the case of an individual, this leads to poor performance and ill health and for employers it is a loss as the organization depends on workers efficiency. There are many factors that can lead to stress within the workplace. Some are obvious – for instance, when an organization is going through restructuring or financial crisis. Many other internal causes of stress include miscommunications, long work overload or work under load, working hours, harassment, job insecurity, role conflict, workstation design, non-recognition, lack of competency, inequality, working relationships and so on (see Table 1). Factors such as marital issues, family problems and financial worries could also add up to the aggravation of stress.

**Table 1. Causes of work-related stress**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Organizational culture</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor communication</li> <li>• Lack of leadership</li> <li>• Delay in Decision-making</li> <li>• Unclear goal and objectives</li> <li>• Lack of team cohesiveness</li> <li>• Lack of coordination</li> <li>• Discrimination</li> <li>• Inequality</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Work-home boundary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of family support for work problems</li> <li>• Lack of understanding from colleagues</li> <li>• Work-personal life balance</li> <li>• Domestic violence</li> <li>• Assault</li> <li>• Logistics problems</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Person</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor relationship</li> <li>• Social networking</li> <li>• Unfriendly</li> <li>• Lack of self assurance</li> <li>• Low morality</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job insecurity</li> <li>• Long working hours</li> <li>• Low income</li> <li>• Harassment</li> <li>• Lack of support from colleagues</li> <li>• Improper or miscommunication</li> </ul>

Source: Protecting Workers Health Series No. 6, 2007, World Health Organization, Geneva

These factors (Table 1) overlies one another, get cumulated in the long run and affect an employee's performance. An employee under little or no stress may not be able to make even an effort to perform, however too much stress could make him dislike or distracted to perform his work at his best and in an effective way. Work-related stress is the consequence of a conflict between the role and needs of an employee and the demands of the workplace. It is becoming clear that globally and in all sectors of employment, the experience of stress at work produces unwanted consequences on staff morale and consequently affects the productivity.

Different types of work related stress comes in various forms, for instance:

- **Ethical issues** – Ethics as it relates to workplace. This arises due to the bad and poor communication between colleagues and subordinates.
- **Physical stress** – One obvious reason for this could be due to heavy workload, which could result in physically being exhausted, unable to think and perform, and at times this can be highly demotivating.
- **Multiple roles** – When one needs to replace to complete the tasks of other colleague very often. Women who works full time, could feel work related stress as a result of work and personal life imbalance.

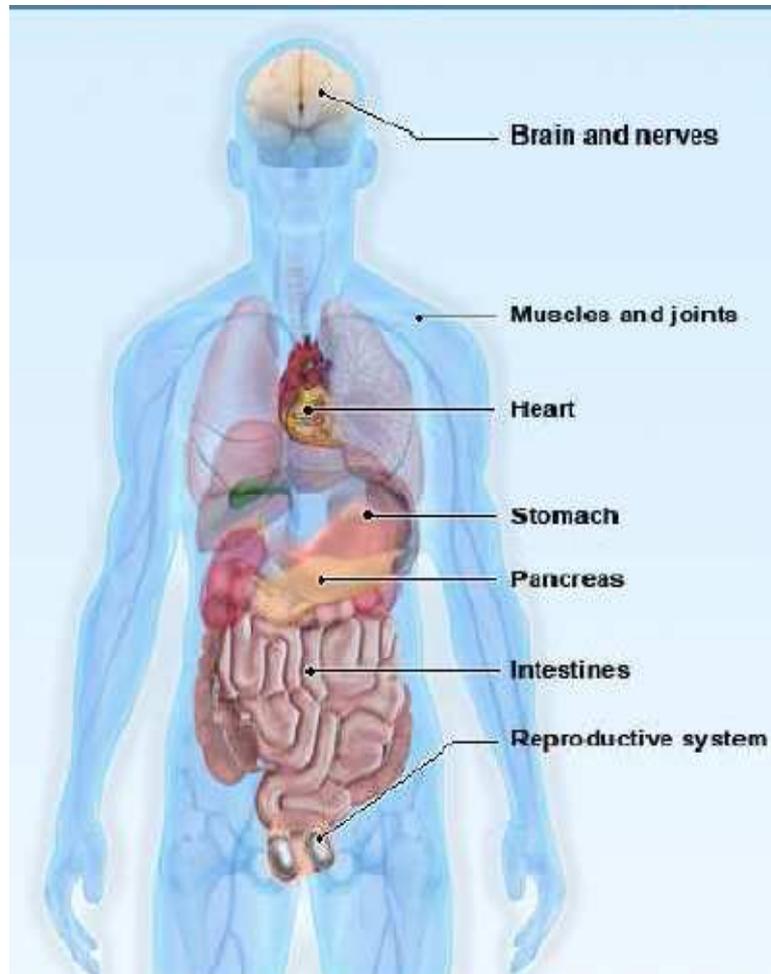
Personal space in a working environment could also be a cause. Depending on the culture to which a person belongs to, some need more working space than others. This varies from person to person. A change in this could make the person feel either intruded or uncomfortable and could cause a friction in the relationship of employees.

## **CONSEQUENCES ON AN EMPLOYEE**

According to Cummings & Cooper (1979), "Stress is any force that puts a psychological or physical factor beyond its range of stability, producing a strain within the individual. Knowledge that a stress is likely to occur constitutes a threat to the individual. A threat can cause a strain because of what it signifies to the person".

Although the symptoms of stress vary among individuals, excess stress can be identified in a variety of emotional, behavioral and even physical symptoms. Generally speaking, excess stress symptoms include sleep disturbances, muscle aches, fatigue, loss of appetite, eating disorder, anxiety, depression and so on. Figure 1 states how stress could affect the areas of an individual's body system. These scientific studies have proven and indicated that high stress levels result in lowered worker productivity and can lead to worse health consequences of the worker. Nevertheless, it is clear that stress is an occupational hazard.

**Figure 1. Areas of the body affected by stress**



Source: 2011 Medicine.net Inc.

Globalization's effects can be felt both at the international and national levels. Rapid scientific and technological developments and the change in the nature of work provide more jobs and contribute to the income of the nation. On the other hand, it pressurizes workers not only forced to learn new techniques and new methods of working, but also demand high quality of work with high productivity. When this becomes impossible it affects the workers instinctively. Research findings from table 2 gives an idea how work and stress are interconnected and how it affects an individual.

**Table 2. Risks for work-related stress and health: How bad can stress be? Some research findings**

High job demands may result in exhaustion (Houtman et al, 1998)	7 times higher risk	for emotional
Low co-worker support may result in shoulder problems (Ariens et al, 2001; Hoogendoorn et al, 2000)	2 times higher risk	for back, neck and
Low job control may result in mortality (Kivimäki et al, 2002)	2 times higher risk	for cardiovascular
High strain may result in morbidity (Belkic,et al 2004) (High demands - Low control) Karasek and Theorell, 1990	3 times higher risk	for hypertensive

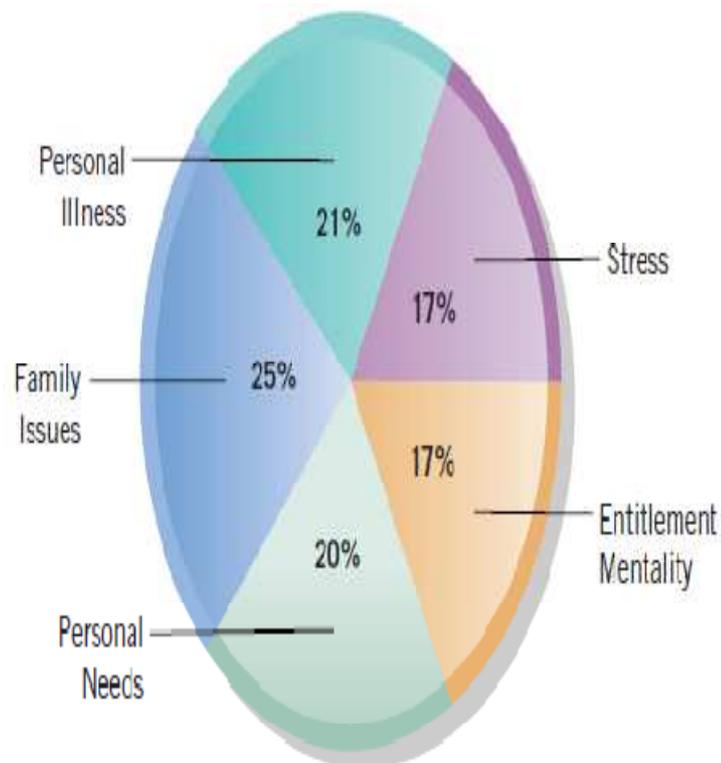
Source: Protecting workers, Health Series No.6, 2007 World Health Organization, Geneva

Human body and mind are highly complex and integrated. When workers undergo office-related stress, it could lead to behavioural, physical and psychosocial changes. Stress and mind induced effects on the body are far more harmful than the external pollution on our bodies.

- **Behavioural changes** may include mainly absentism, impatience, quickness to argue, memory problems, neglect of responsibility, poor job performance less productive, committing errors, withdrawl or isolation from others and so on. As it can be seen from the figure 2,17% of absenteesm could be one of the main causes for stress.
- **Physical changes** may include headaches, grinding of the teeth, clenched jaws, shortness of breath, excessive sweating, increased adrenaline production, increase in the palpitation rate or heart ailments, increasing muscle tension, high blood pressure, kidney problems, insomnia, fatigue, diabetes and so on (Fig. 1).

- **Psychosocial changes** include anxiety, irritability, fear, depression, mood swings and anger. One of the main reason for the change could be because of bad relationships with co-workers and supervisors in the workplace.
- **Cognitive changes** include lack of concentration, memory loss, incapacity to do the work, fear of losing self-respect, lack of self-confidence etc.

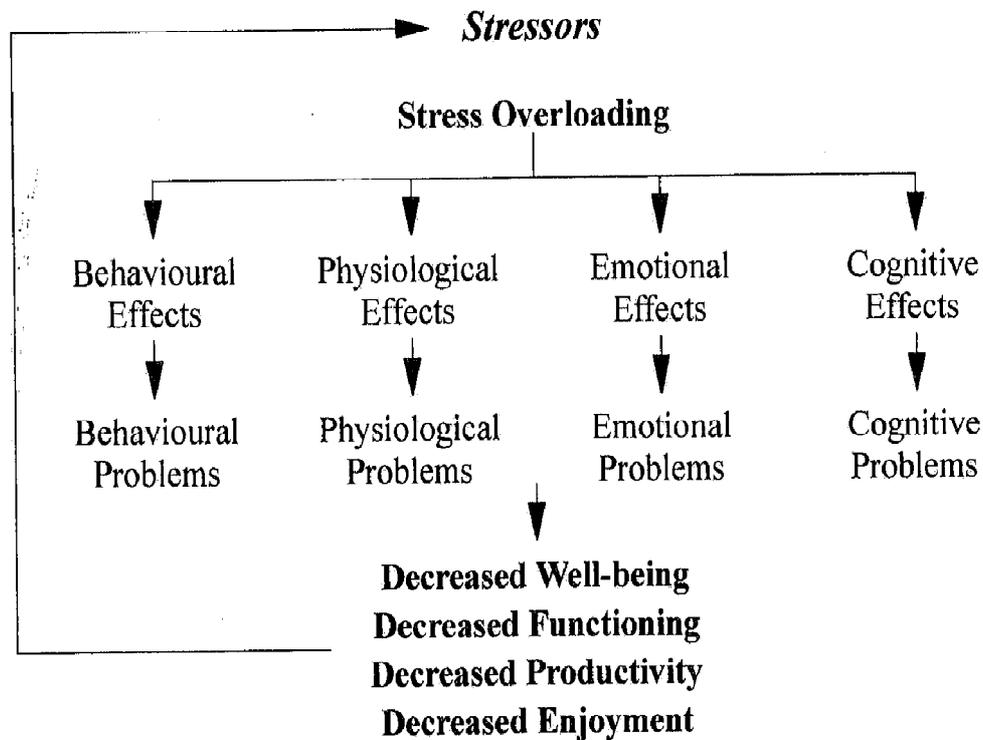
**Figure 2. Reasons for absenteeism**



SOURCE: Data from CCH Survey of over 400 firms, as presented in "Why Workers Don't Show Up," *Business Week*, November 16, 1998, 8.

Any combination of the above, increase the pressure for individuals and can have serious impacts. The shown distress cycle (Fig. 3) resumes the consequences.

**Figure 3. Distress Cycle**



*Source: Stress Prevention in the Workplace: Assessing the costs and benefits to organizations, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working conditions, Ireland*

Employees are exposed to many stressors. Chronic job stress is considered to be a major hindrance for an effective organizational functioning and it leads to social and financial loss.

### **IMPACTS ON THE WORKPLACE**

As it goes without much explanation, work stress affects organizations' effectiveness in a huge way. It can be a real hassle to the organization as the organizations' productivity mainly depends on its capacity and well being of the employees. Work- related stress is a management concern. If the level of stress of the employees not monitored regularly and cautiously, it often results in:

- Low productivity
- Increased staff turnover rates
- Poor quality work
- High accident rates
- Unsatisfactory complaints from clients

- Number of legal claims and commitments
- Organizations' reputation at stake

Though certain jobs having required a level of pressure and when this gets exceeded, it can have a very destructive contagious effect on workers. In such case, obtaining the best work performance out of workers becomes unrealistic. Thus productivity goes down and staff turnover goes up.

## **PREVENTIVE MEASURES**

### **BY THE MANAGEMENT**

“Improving communication and assigning appropriate workload are two of the most important preventive measures management can instill in an organization to reduce chronic stress.”

The management of an organization has an ethical responsibility to be aware of attempt workplace stress. It is necessary for employers to identify work-related stress as a significant health and safety issue. An organization should take efforts to make sure that employees are not introduced to unnecessary stress.

If the problem is obvious and persistent, it is the management's responsibility to implement stress reduction programmes. This can be through primary method by reducing work environment stressors or by secondary methods through the introduction of training, or through tertiary methods by employee assistance programs (Dewe, 1994).

One way is to identify the causes and then to implement policies and procedures, which could help to reduce and prevent. It should clearly focus on the issues, analyze and implement timely action.

The stress levels of employees should be regularly and attentively examined. For a better performance and productivity to the profit of an organization, the management has a responsibility to ensure that the employees are in a state of well-being and incorporate fair treatment and positive feedback.

Also a good job designing (Job design refers to the attempts to organize tasks, duties and responsibilities into a unit of work) could be carefully formulated considering tasks, duties and responsibilities as it can influence the performance of an employee which incidentally lowers the costs of the turnover and absenteeism besides shaping up mental and physical health. This could also make a substantial difference in the performance of employees in certain jobs.

Work stress can also be assessed by the risk management approach (Fig. 4) as it analyses the possible risks in the working environment that may cause specific hazards to physical or psychological deterioration of health of employees.

**Figure 4. The basic steps in stress risk management**



Source: Protecting Workers' Health Series No.3, Work Organization & Stress, WHO, 2003

It could also be assessed by taking measures through

- Effective communication
- Knowledge sharing
- Planned organizational design
- Timely training and development
- Clear Job descriptions
- Assign fair grading
- Gender equality
- Job rotation
- Fair and equal treatment

The major goal for the management is to break the distress cycle (Fig. 3) by identifying and modifying the stressors and also increasing employees' ability to cope with stress: either it could be applied individually or in combination.

The management of any organization should realize that when employees are healthy and satisfied with their work and the climate, productivity would be at the maximum to the profit of the organization.

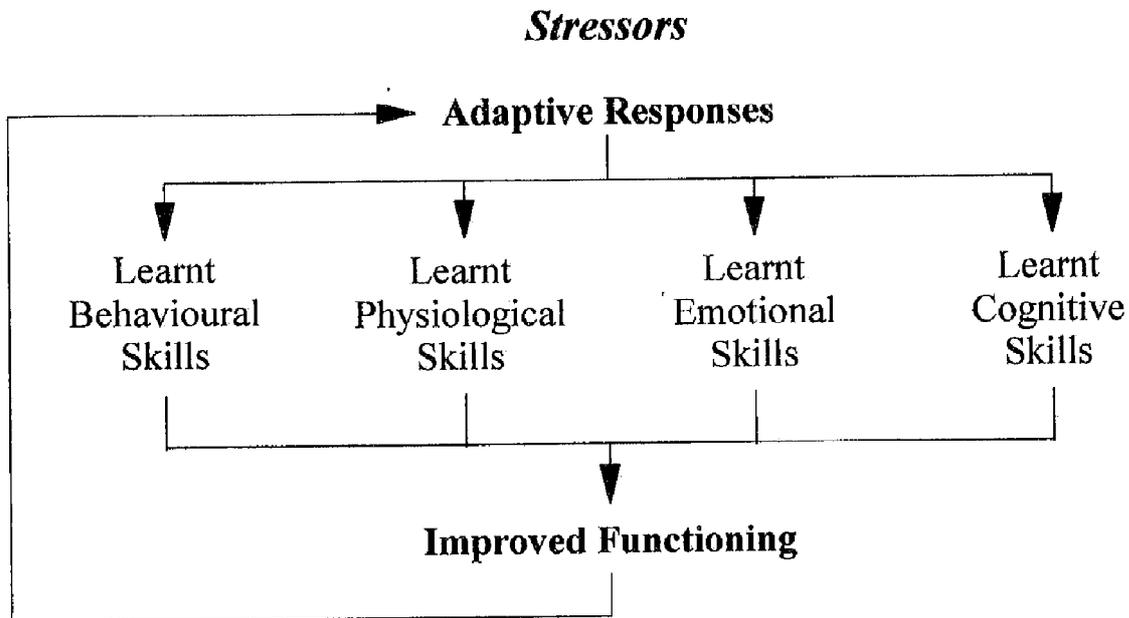
### **BY AN INDIVIDUAL**

Stress is unavoidable and unknowingly created by both bad and good circumstances. Experts' studies indicate that if an individual knows how to overcome stress or how to handle stress more effectively, he would be happier and live longer comparatively. However, it is believed that individuals should know and learn to manage their own stress and they have to learn to tolerate stress through:

- Better communication
- Regular exercises and or relaxation training
- Healthy habits
- Developing healthy and different approach
- Building strong family rapport for support
- Possible social networking
- Behavior modification

The wellness cycle (Fig. 5) explains the concept of developing skills for individuals to control feelings and behaviour. If they can activate coping resources to stress, the demands can be met more effectively and productively.

**Figure 5. Wellness Cycle**



Source: Stress Prevention in the Workplace: Assessing the costs and benefits to organizations, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working conditions, Ireland

Each employee should initiate to find his or her own means to overcome stress. Some strategies could be communication and sharing information, social networking, exercise, yoga and meditation, counseling and so on. By applying possible strategies, research studies prove that one can be more functional. It is also said that key to stress management is to take breaks in between work. When dealing with chronic stressors, it is important to find things that will help to take a break from whatever is causing pressure.

“A happy worker is a productive worker”. An individual who practice a kind of stress- control tool in the work place is to be more successful than the others.

### **ROLE OF COMMUNICATION AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE**

Communication is a skill and it is essential to have in our day-to-day life. Efficient and effective communication flow and transparency are a must for a successful reach of any organization to support and involvement in a working environment. Communication is life-blood of an organization. It is an absolute need for an organizational stability or growth. All process in an organization pass-through the bottleneck of communication. Many problems in an organization materialize either due to lack of communication or miscommunication.

Being social animals, human beings would like to communicate, to share the feelings and to be respected. By ignoring the basic trait of a human being, focusing solely on the jobs leaves people distressed, isolated and depressed. Also the immense developments in technology led unfriendly social contacts by spending more time with computers rather than direct face-to-face contacts with each other. This creates a gap, steering to misunderstanding, creates unpleasant ambiance and ends up to burnout situations. Thus, to avoid ending up to the burnout stage, effective communication can be a starting point for any action.

Communication relates to the foundation of an organization: staff and management. Internal communication is an important tool to focus on the objective, for binding an organization, cheering employee morale, for a better transparency and eliminating slow unseen destructions within the organization.

Below, is a statement in a report about internal communication published by the International Labour Office (ILO) published in February 1999. An informal working group presented this to the Director-General of the ILO:

“Internal communication should be taken in a broad sense, involving information sharing, interaction and cooperation among colleagues, working both through formal and informal channels in a complementary way. It is by definition a two-way street, encouraging dialogue, listening, networking and an exchange of ideas; it implies finding common ground for diverse approaches, negotiation, the resolution of conflicts and the search for fair and agreed solutions. It is, in the final analysis, internal communication, which constitutes the key for sound and firmly grounded decision-making at every level. It is a management tool but also a means of expression, reflecting interpersonal and human relations in a multicultural and multilingual context.

It is only when we are able to communicate successfully within the Office that we can best convey the ILO-s values and messages to the outside world”.

By identifying and eliminating communication hindrances, the success of an organization is halfway through. Communication flow could lead the work-flow to run smoothly and create stress-free ambiance within the organization. Communication is a necessary tool for people to participate in an organization’s process and activity. Any break in the communication system can lead to loss of efficiency.

Good communication between all levels in the workplace, from top management to the lower level management is an effective way of combating stress. The management should encourage having open communication with its staff by holding regular meetings to relay further developments and that gives an opportunity for the workers as well to express their opinion. This way of improving communication flow and sharing information are considered to be the most important and effective measures to be taken to reduce stress-free environment in an organization.

Other factor is 'knowledge' and 'sharing'. Exchange and sharing information helps not only for a better understanding but also to promote action to achieve the objective. Knowledge is cumulating information that is gained through learning, education or experience over a period of time. It is naturally renewable and sharable. It is the only boundless resource that can be engaged and applied to situations as they pop up. Knowledge sharing does not occur in a wink. By providing information and encouraging staff to participate in the training programmes, the management helps its staff to regain confidence and also formulate them to realize that sharing knowledge is not risky but profitable. When the benefits of it is distinctly seen and felt, it is understandable and appreciated.

## **CONCLUSION**

The goal of any organization is to gain the higher productivity and recognition. Without efficient employees, the goal could be difficult to achieve. Highly motivated and committed employees are the key essentials for the success of any organization. Sharing the ideas and working together through better interaction and cooperation would take the organization to the higher level.

Although no one strategy will work in every situation to reduce stress in the work place, applying two or more strategies would guide to success. While the management is aware of the key to success, efforts should be taken to make it available to employees to apply. Stress management techniques can be easily taught to the employees by providing the knowledge and skills that need to identify and to combat. Also providing support for change, clearly defining the roles of the employees, by giving proportionate workload and providing opportunity for social support would make the organization environment friendlier. If these are properly considered and followed, a stress-free organization could be built and cherished.

As we are aware, the sound of one hand clapping would be a complete nothingness. To generate a peaceful environment and increased productivity, an employee should also take an effort to combat stress to be proactive and productive while the management takes steps to nurture stress-free atmosphere. Not only that, but controlling and finding a way to eradicate stress at work will also flourish the positive impacts on interpersonal relationship outside work. Thus, both the employers and employees need to consider taking initiative to eliminate stress by introducing stress reduction programmes and applying strategies and to achieve organizational goals.

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