

Dealing with Occupational Stress – A Self-Changed Model

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Abstract

Occupational stress refers to stress that occur at work. Stress can be good and bad. Life without stress is no life, but life with excessive stress is taxing life. This article discussed about occupational stress based on several stress models and at later part it described a self-changed model as a guide to dealing with stress at work.

Occupational Stress and its Nature

Occupational stress is the psychological loads (i.e. stress) carried by a person while working [1]. Life without stress is no life, but life with excessive stress is taxing life. Stress that facilitates working performance is eustress (i.e. favorable stress) and stress that inhibits working performance is distress (i.e. unfavorable stress) [2,3]. The most stressful event as perceived by workers globally was their work (59%), then followed by finances (44%) and customers (37%) [4]. Various stressors contribute to stress at work which include long working hours, harassment, unsafe working environment, conflict of interest with colleagues, lack of job autonomy, poor career prospect, working in isolation, and poor support from administrator [5,6]. Evidence shows that excessive stress at work is significantly associated with health problems, for examples depression, metabolic syndrome and heart disease [7-9]. As a result, these consequences could lead to declined work output, organizational dysfunction, and raised absenteeism [5,6]. Because of the complex nature of stress, many stress models have been proposed to deal with the issues of stress and ways of individual responded to them [10]. Several relevant stress models are discussed.

According to the person-environment fit model, there are two factors determine stress; environmental demands and person's ability either real or perceived. Stress occurs when there is a mismatch between the environmental demands and the person's ability [11-13]. The emotion felt by a conflict person is an important factor for stress when there are gaps between job expectations and employee's ability to meet the expectations. Stress also can result from task conflicts, for example ambiguous roles set by employers to employees. The employees faced with different roles that difficult to be met within a short notice. Task ambiguity also contributed to stress when employees are given inadequate instruction about their roles. They are blurred with expected roles they have to do. Such conflicts may result in work dissatisfaction and may lead to unfavorable consequences on their work performance [11,12].

According to the demand-support-constraint model, there are three factors determine stress; psychological demands, constraint and support. This model postulates stress occurs when there is a lack of support and a high level of constraint in high demand conditions [14]. Obviously, doing extra works with the same or insufficient support and resources is likely to causing distress, for examples, working in isolation and poor support from administrator result in distress at work [6]. This in line with a study reported that burnout are more likely to occur among individuals who feel unsupported [15].

Based on the stress-appraisal-coping model, stress involves three processes; primary appraisal, secondary appraisal and coping [2,16,17]. Primary appraisal involves perception of individual towards a potential stressor either as a threat or challenge. Secondary appraisal is a process to synthesis possible actions to handle the threat or challenge. Coping is

a process to carry out the chosen actions. These processes are dynamic due to the constant interaction between person and surroundings [2,16,17]. When person appraise their works as challenges, stress can motivate them thus increase ability to get works done [18]. When works are appraised as a threat, stress can inhibit their motivation thus reduce ability to get works done [18].

The job-strain model highlighted two factors that determine stress; job autonomy and psychological demands [19,20]. Job autonomy is the extent of control that persons have over their works [19,20]. Stress at work is less likely to bother persons who have a sense of control over their work [19,20]. Based on this model, working in high demand and low autonomy condition will be the most stressful working condition – high strain job. Conversely, working in low demand and high autonomy condition will be the least stressful working condition – low job strain. The best working condition may be in high demand and high autonomy whereby employees are actively engaged with works and learning to cope with the demands effectively – active job.

The effort-reward model theorized that stress occur as a result of imbalance between the amount of effort required to complete works and the rewards gained for the works done [21]. Psychological burnout was less common among employees who are satisfied with their job rewards [15]. Distress will occur if rewards given to employees are not corresponded to their work efforts, for examples, poor career prospects and long working hours [5,6].

A critical issue concerning stress at work is its effect on employees' working performance; individuals under low stress perform least and those under moderate stress perform most, but those under excessive stress perform worst [6,18]. Thus, training them on how to cope positively with daily stress at work may improve their psychological wellbeing thus improve their working performance [5,6].

Dealing with Occupational Stress

Two approaches of dealing with stress at work; the self-changed and the organization-changed [5,22]. The self-changed approach aims to improve individual ability to deal with stressors through personal

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and professional development, for examples training and counseling services [5,22]. The organization-changed approach requires active involvement at organizational level that aims to create healthy and safe working environments through organizational policies, for examples risk assessment strategy and active preventive measures on stress at work [5,22]. Both approaches are important to deal with occupational stress, but this article discussed on a self-changed model that is rather simple and easy to be adopted; it is known as the DEAL model [23,24]. The DEAL model is a self-evaluation tool to help individual to develop stress management skills through a systematic approach [23,24]. It consists of four principles which include 1) Detection of stressors, 2) Evaluation of stressors, 3) Actions towards stressors, and 4) Learning from stressors through self-reflection [23,24].

The first principle, detection of stressors, is described as ways of employees perceive and receive job demands (i.e. potential stressors) that interact with them [23,24]. In order to detect stressors effectively, certain levels of knowledge and awareness about the potential stressors are required. Therefore, improving knowledge and awareness through a systematic approach about occupational stress would be very helpful and beneficial [5]. Based on this principle, to manage stress effectively employees should 1) improve knowledge about occupational stress, 2) undergo regular training so that awareness level about stress at work will be improved, 3) increase knowledge on effective coping strategies, and 4) becoming aware of signs and symptoms of job stress.

The second principle, evaluation of stressors, is described as a process involving cognitive skills to filter and sort out stressors into priority based on authenticity of the stressors [23]. The stressor authenticity could be measured based on its impact and urgency. This process will enable individual to generate potential solutions to handle real stressors effectively. Based on this principle, to manage stress effectively employees should 1) learn to filter and sort out stressors into priority so that appropriate solutions can be generated based on the stressors authenticity and 2) have healthy and positive mind towards potential stressors because only a few of them will be the real stressors.

The third principle, actions toward stressors, is described as coordination of individuals' emotion, cognitive and physical abilities to handle stressors that bothering them [23]. Conversely, it is ways of coping with the stressors. Effective usage of coping methods might help individuals to reduce stress at work effectively [25,26]. Based on this principle, to manage stress effectively employees should 1) adopt the best practice in dealing with stressors that could be obtained through training and reading, 2) regular practice on coping strategies that best worked in particular context, and 3) develop personal positive coping strategies so that similar stressors would be effectively handled in future.

The last principle, learning from stressors through self-reflection, is described as "a process whereby stress management ability is acquired through one's awareness, experience and conscious effort that allow stressful situations to be handled effectively and efficiently in future," [23]. In fact, this is the most important principle due to it provides an informed self-evaluation to improve individual abilities to deal with stress at work. An informed self-evaluation enables individuals to consolidate their ability to handle stressors effectively [23,24]. Based on this principle, to manage stress effectively employees should 1) learn from the stressors because different stressors provide different learning experience, 2) always reflect what are the insight gained as a result of previous stressors encountered, 3) always ask what else could be done to deal with a particular stressor in better ways and 4) realize the importance of self-evaluation for developing ability to manage stress at work that compatible with personal need, believe and ability.

In short, as employees go through the DEAL model, they will acquire more insight about stress at work and its management that allows stressors at work to be handled effectively and efficiently. Eventually, they become more responsible to constantly improve and develop relevant skills to deal with stressors at work in better ways.

Conclusion

Occupational stress is a real concern because excessive psychological loads will result in many unwanted consequences either at individual level or organizational level. The DEAL model provides helpful guidelines to employees for systematically dealing with stress at work.

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