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ABSTRACT

A stress management program was developed for the adult degree completion program admissions team at Warner Southern College, a four-year private liberal arts college. A relatively recent stress-inducing change was caused by an administrative decision to expand the program offerings from five sites to seven, using current staff. Derived from the Matteson and Ivancevich model (1989), four major goals were identified for the stress management program: improving the relationship between admissions team members and the School of Adult and Continuing Education; adjusting policies and procedures to reduce the occurrence of stressful situations; providing training in strategies to reduce stress; and providing for an integrated wellness program. A preventative stress management program was developed for the organizational unit. Strategies are planned to address individual-organizational relationships, organizational policies and procedures, stress management training and employee assistance, and an integrated wellness program. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM FOR THE
ADULT DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAM ADMISSIONS TEAM
AT A FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

by

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February 1996

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brian C. Satterlee currently serves as professor of business and dean of the School of Adult and Continuing Education at Warner Southern College. Warner Southern College, located in Lake Wales, Florida, is a private, four-year liberal arts institution. Prior to joining Warner Southern in 1992, he was director of Technical and Industrial Education at Seminole Community College. He received his doctorate in Occupational Education from Nova Southeastern University, has published nationally within his discipline, presented papers at professional conferences and consulted with numerous organizations on topics related to the development, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM FOR THE ADULT DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAM ADMISSIONS TEAM AT A FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to develop a stress management program for the adult degree completion program admissions team at a four-year private liberal arts college.

The paper will be organized as follows: (1) organizational setting, including recent stress-inducing changes and suspected sources of stress; (2) diagnosis and measurement of stress; (3) the identification of goals for the stress management intervention; and (4) the development of a preventative stress management program for the organizational unit.

Strategies will address individual-organizational relationships, organizational policies and procedures, stress management training and employee assistance, and an integrated wellness program.

Organizational Setting

The College

The organization under consideration for this paper is Warner Southern College, a regionally accredited, small four-year private liberal arts college located in Lake Wales, Florida. The academic aspect of the college is organized into two separate areas: programs offered primarily during daytime hours for traditional age residential students (School of Arts and Sciences), and programs offered primarily during evening hours to

mid-career working professionals attempting to complete the requirements for the bachelors degree (School of Adult and Continuing Education). While the topic of stress management is important to both academic aspects of the institution, this paper will be limited to the development of a stress management program for the adult degree completion program admissions team for the School of Adult and Continuing Education.

The adult degree completion program of the School of Adult and Continuing Education was initiated by college several years ago to: (1) meet the growing educational need for working professionals to obtain the bachelors degree; and (2) provide a financial balance to offset decreasing numbers of traditional-age daytime student enrollments. The results of a need analysis conducted by the college in 1989 indicated that a significant number of working professionals, who have completed at least sixty hours of transferable college credit, would enroll in a bachelor degree completion program offered at times and in places convenient to the student. Initially, the program enrolled seventy-five students at the main campus and at an off-campus site located approximately seventy miles from the main campus. Currently, more than 240 full-time students are enrolled in ninety-five courses offered at seven different locations within a 100-mile radius of the main campus.

Recent Stress Inducing Changes

The School of Adult and Continuing Education has a well-defined admissions process for the adult degree completion program. The admissions process is as follows:

1. Enrollment goals and financial parameters for the recruitment campaign are developed by the dean.

2. The goals are communicated to the admission team, which consists of representatives from the Business Office, Financial Aid Office, Registrar's Office, College Bookstore, and recruiters assigned to the program.
3. The team meets several times to develop and revise implementation strategies, with a written report provided to the dean.
4. The plan is implemented at all sites. Feedback is provided to the dean via a survey which assesses student opinion of the quality of academic support services rendered by the team.

A relatively recent stress-inducing change occurred when an administrative decision was made to expand the program offerings from five sites to seven, utilizing current staff.

Some members of the team have expressed a concern that the administrative decision has added stress to their lives and consequently may affect levels of productivity within the team.

Suspected Sources of Stress

The Organizational Stress Framework developed by Matteson and Ivancevich (1989: 27-31) identifies a list of stressors found in organizations. The model provides five major classifications of organizational stressors: (1) intrinsic job factors; (2) organizational structure and control; (3) reward systems; (4) human resource systems; and (5) leadership. It was suspected that the intrinsic job factors are the prime sources of stress in the previously mentioned situation.

Diagnosis and Measurement of Stress

The literature identifies the importance of measuring stressor, strains, and coping mechanisms. The following studies are representative of the literature concerning these three aspects of stress measurement. These studies will provide the basis for developing an adequate approach to measuring stress in the organization.

Stressors

A classic study of stress as a cause and consequence of job performance (Motowidlo, et al, 1986: 618-629) utilized three methods to measure stress: (1) group discussions of employees were used to identify a list of stressful occasions on the job; (2) from this information, a questionnaire was developed and administered to the employees to ascertain major stress situations; and (3) the Somatic Complaints Scale was administered to the employees.

Strains/Outcomes

The Matteson and Ivancevich model previously mentioned posits that the outcome of the perception of a stressor by the individual is strain. Strain is subdivided into three major categories: physiological, psychological, and behaviorable. These categories may be measured by visual observation, self-report, biochemical assessment, and/or performance appraisal (1989:27)

Coping Mechanisms

According to Latack (1986), the level of stress a person experiences depends on how well the person copes with the stressful situation. His study measured three coping

strategies related to job stress: (1) control, consisting of take-charge actions; (2) escape, consisting of avoidance modes; and (3) symptom management, using stress strategies to “manage the symptoms related to job stress in general” (1986:378). A measurement scale was developed via item generation. First, a review of the literature relating to empirical studies of coping was conducted. Second, managers and white-collar employees were interviewed. Third, discussions were held with other stress researchers. These three methods were used to develop the initial pool of items. The initial pool of items was refined into a 27-item scale to measure the three coping strategies.

Due to the applied nature of this project, the small local sample affected, the lack of institutional funding budgeted for programs of this sort, and the humane need for alacrity in the development of the stress management program, the comprehensive research design process reflected in the professional literature is not appropriate. However, several studies were reviewed to identify types of measures applicable to this project. Most of the research studies of role stress have been quantitative in nature. Qualitative information concerning role stress is very limited. “A more open-ended exploratory approach may yield benefits particularly with regard to . . . role stress” (Newton and Keenan, 1987:365). Therefore, the focus of this applied project will be qualitative. The next section will discuss the methods to be used in measuring stress in affected employees at the subject institution.

Measuring Stress in the Admissions Team

Measuring stress will take into account stressors, strains, and coping mechanisms of team members. The process will be as follows:

1. A facilitator trained in conducting focus groups will lead the team in a discussion to identify stressors in the admissions process. Once the stressors are identified, they will be categorized into one of the five following areas: intrinsic job factors, organizational structure and control, reward systems, human resource systems, and leadership.
2. The Stress Diagnostic Survey will be administered to team members to provide an additional valid measure of stress experienced by team members.
3. The focus group will reconvene to (1) discuss the outcomes of the major stressors present in the admissions process and (2) identify methods for reducing stressors in the admissions process.

The results of steps one through three will provide information to be used in the development of a stress management program for team members.

GOALS FOR THE STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Stress management programs should address three questions. First, what are the intended outcomes of the program? Second, who should participate in the programs. Third, what will be the costs of the program (Ivancevich, et al. 1990)? As previously stated, this study is limited to the admissions team for the adult degree completion program. The costs of the programs will be discussed later in this paper.

Four major goals have been identified for the stress management program. The goals are derived from the previously mentioned Matteson and Ivancevich model. They are:

1. An improvement in the relationship between admissions team members and the School of Adult and Continuing Education.
2. Adjusting policies and procedures, if appropriate, to reduce the occurrence of stressful situations. Ganster, et al (1982) identify two approaches to stress management programs: training employees to better tolerate stressful policies and procedures, or alter stressful policies and procedures. The authors recommend the latter approach.
3. Provide training in strategies to reduce stress.
4. Provide for an integrated wellness program.

THE PREVENTATIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Measurement Results

The results of the stress measures indicate that the greatest source of stress in admissions team members was related to intrinsic job factors, specifically, work overload and insufficient control. The major outcome of this perceived stress was related to performance, specifically burnout and quality decrements. This study was limited to organizational stressors experienced by admissions team members for the adult bachelor degree completion program. Other factors, i.e., extraorganizational stressors and individual differences were not measured in this study.

Many times intervention efforts fail because they raise expectations to unrealistic or unreachable levels. Participants become aware of stressors that cannot be eliminated, which then can become stress obsessors. Careful efforts will be made in the development of the stress management program to focus only on organizational issues that can be changed -- not on what cannot be changed.

The effectiveness of a program can be measured in terms of how well it achieved its intended outcomes. In an effort to assist the future evaluation of this stress management intervention, the program will be organized in terms of the goals established for the program.

Improved Individual-Organizational Relationships

Individual-organizational relationships can be improved in a number of ways: the psychological contract, recruitment and selection processes, socialization programs, and career planning and development (Matteson and Ivancevich, 1989:114-131). The results of the focus group indicated that of these items listed, only the psychological contract was significant.

Several applied strategies for reducing stress and controlling its negative effects on job performance have been suggested: (1) change job conditions to eliminate unnecessarily stressful events; (2) use selection programs to filter out individuals who might be overly stressed by job conditions; (3) use placement programs to place stress-prone individuals in less stressful jobs; (4) use training programs to modify behavioral dispositions of employees experiencing stressful job conditions (Motowidlo, et al, 1986:627). Due to previously mentioned organizational constraints, it has been determined that the most feasible strategy for this institution would be to change job conditions to eliminate the unnecessarily stressful events. This decision is based on a study by Decker and Borgen (1993), who found that where there was a clear stress - strain relationship, a person-workplace intervention is preferred over a person-focused approach (1993:447). Since intrinsic job factors such as work overload and insufficient control were identified as major stressors, the goal of improving individual-organizational relationships will focus on these items.

Team members expressed a concern that the administrative decision to expand the adult degree completion program, without increasing staff to handle the additional

assignments, created job stress. Additionally, team members felt that they lacked control over this aspect of their job. An analysis of the empirical literature, conducted by Sullivan and Bhagat, indicated that "overload at work is experienced as being stressful when work is not self-generated, but imposed by others" (1992:364). Hence, both stressors identified by team members are connected. Further, both stressors were quantitative in nature, specifically, responsibility for the additional registration sites impedes their ability to complete the admissions process in the time allotted. Strains were associated with feelings of burnout and decrements in the quality of work.

In an effort to ameliorate strains caused by these job conditions, the following changes are recommended by team members to improve individual-organizational relationships:

1. Registrations across the state are normally scheduled to be completed in one week. As a result of this study, the schedule has been expanded to a two-week period, allowing more time to complete the tasks.
2. When traveling to off-campus sites, team members will be provided the option of either returning to campus at the end of the registration, or making provisions for overnight lodging.
3. Team members will hold pre-registration and post-registration meetings in order to provide more opportunities for open communication.

Adjusting Policies and Procedures

Matteson and Ivancevich recommend a number of techniques concerning policies and procedures: goal setting, participative decision-making, job enrichment, work scheduling, and the use of survey-feedback systems (1989:137-152). Based on the results of the focus group, the most feasible strategy concerning policies and procedures would be to increase participative decision-making. In the future, decisions affecting the team will include input from team members. Exceptions, of course, will be situations of a sensitive nature, such as personnel decisions.

Provide Stress Management Training

The focus group indicated that training in stress management would be beneficial to them, both professionally and personally. A stress management training program will be developed, following the "Four-by-Three" model identified by Matteson and Ivancevich (1989:207-208). In this model, employees attend four three-hour blocks of training over a three-month period. Block One provides an overview of stress and its potential consequences. Block Two covers the concept of self-analysis. Block Three includes coping methods. Block Four concludes the training with the development of a personalized plan. An outside consultant will be utilized to conduct the four modules.

An Integrated Wellness Program

Wellness programs can be grouped into three levels. Level I programs focus on awareness programs, such as newsletters, posters, and educational classes. Level II programs focus on lifestyle modification, such as fitness programs and ergonomics classes. Level III programs focus on creating an environment to help employees develop and

maintain healthy lifestyle behaviors, such as providing a worksite fitness center, providing healthy food, and removing temptations to behave in an unhealthy manner (O'Donnell, 1986).

In consideration of the above, the integrated wellness program will combine elements of all three levels. At Level I, a wellness awareness campaign will be conducted. Results of this research project will be made available to team members. Team members will also be encouraged to attend health-related courses at the college. The cost of this aspect of the integrated program is small, i.e., the cost of printing this paper and ancillary items, and attending a class which will be taught whether or not the employees enroll.

Level II and Level III will be combined for employees. Team members will be encouraged to use the fitness training facilities, located on campus. All college employees are allowed to use the facilities. However, few take advantage of this employee benefit. Participation in wellness programs have helped employees improve fitness levels and reduce the effects of worksite stress factors on employees. Absenteeism, injuries, and health care costs tend to be reduced for participating employees. In order to increase the effectiveness of these programs, efforts should be made to increase participation of employees (Gebhardt and Crump, 1990). Again, the cost will be minimal, since the benefit already exists for employee use.

Finally, healthy food choices will be offered. Nutrition information will be posted next to menu items in the college cafeteria. Vending services will stock snack machines with more healthful foods, such as fruit, yogurt, nuts, and the like.

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