

GUST CSD Policy Brief

Creating Resilient Workplaces: Turning Stress into Sustainable Engagement

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Highlights:

- Modern stress models that divide stress into challenge (or positive) stress and hindrance (or negative) stress are lacking due to:
 - Not differentiating between stress and its causes
 - Assuming that people appraise stressors as solely challenging or hindering
- Employees simultaneously appraise stressors as challenging and hindering, as predicted by the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987).
- Individuals hold different mindsets or beliefs about stress, with some seeing stress as being enhancing and others seeing stress as debilitating (positive and negative stress mindset, respectively).
- Stress mindsets not only determine how occupational stressors are appraised but also how these appraisals are related to work engagement.
- A positive (negative) mindset enhances (attenuates) challenge appraisals and buffers (boosts) hindrance stress appraisals.
- Challenge stress appraisals are a critical mechanism to boost engagement, while hindrance appraisals are detrimental to engagement.

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Stress is a ubiquitous part of working life, and the relationship between stress and work-related outcomes has been debated among scholars and practitioners. Earlier conceptualizations argued lopsidedly that the relationship between stress and performance is overwhelmingly negative, calling it a plague or an epidemic (Blythe, 1973). A more typical view argues that the relationship between stress and work-related outcomes is more akin to an inverted U, with little and too much stress being detrimental and moderate stress being optimal (the proverbial Goldilocks region).

A recent model of stress made the distinction between challenge and hindrance stressors. Challenge stressors are work-related demands (e.g., workload and work complexity) that, while stressful, are conducive to personal growth and development when overcome. Hindrance stressors (e.g., role conflict and role ambiguity), on the other hand, impeded growth and goal achievement (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). This view attributes the effects of stress to the type of stressor rather than the level of the experienced stress. However, this model failed to consider individual employee differences that influence how stressors are appraised and how these appraisals influence attitudes and behaviors (Al Hajj et al., 2023). Al Hajj et al. (2023) tried to overcome these shortcomings by testing how stressors are appraised and how an individual's belief about the nature of stress (i.e., their stress mindset) can determine appraisal formation and appraisal reaction.

Al Hajj et al. (2023) findings show that stressors that have been assumed to be either challenging or hindering are, in fact, appraised as being both simultaneously. The authors also show that individuals who believe that stress has an enhancing nature (i.e., those with a positive stress mindset) will appraise challenge stressors in a more positive light and underestimate the negative attributes associated with hindrance stressors. On the other hand, individuals with a stress-is-debilitating mindset (i.e., a negative

stress mindset) will appraise challenge stressors as being less positive and overemphasize the negative nature of hindrance stressors. Al Hajj et al. (2023) also show that regardless of how people appraise the stressors experienced, those with a positive mindset will be more engaged at work, thus putting more energy into their work, feel a stronger sense of pride about their employment, and are more likely to be proactively immersed in the workflow. Those with a negative mindset will approach work less vigorously, experience low dedication, and have a higher sense of detachment.

Policy Implications for Sustainable Workplaces

1. *Promote a Positive Stress Mindset Across the Organization:*

- *Why it matters:* A positive stress mindset is a powerful tool for improving employee engagement, which can better predict work performance than job satisfaction. Employees who believe that stress is enhancing are more likely to see work challenges as opportunities rather than obstacles. A stressful work environment that alienates employees can be transformed into a more decent place of employment due to the shift in how work stressors are perceived.
- *How to implement:* Stress mindset is malleable and can be changed using organizational interventions (Crum et al., 2020). Thus, introducing stress mindset training programs that educate employees about the potential benefits of stress can teach employees how to reframe stress as a source of motivation and growth. Interventions such as workshops, seminars, and mindfulness practices can be used to instill a positive attitude toward stress.
- *Sustainable impact:* A workforce that views stress positively will be more resilient and better able to cope with the demands of a fast-paced

and evermore-changing work environment. Recent studies have investigated the intra-personal effects of experiencing radical change at work (e.g., Al Hajj and Vongas, 2023) and found that the increasing radicality of change in the workplace (e.g., the introduction of disruptive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence) can be detrimental to goal commitment and attainment. Building resilience and grit supports the long-term sustainability of organizations by, among other things, reducing burnout and turnover while enhancing productivity and innovation.

2. Reframe Stressors as Opportunities for Growth:

- **Why it matters:** Since any type of stressor is appraised as both being a challenge and a hindrance simultaneously, changing perceptions about stressors can be invaluable in changing the type of appraisal these stressors are given. When employees perceive stressors as challenges, they become more engaged, motivated, and committed to their work. Reframing stressors allows organizations to tap into the potential for growth that stress can provide, thus fostering economic growth at the organizational and national levels.
- **How to implement:** Redesign job roles and organizational structures to highlight growth and learning opportunities within stressful situations. For example, organizational leaders can provide clearer objectives, higher levels of control and job crafting opportunities to employees facing high-pressure tasks, and encourage a culture where challenges are seen as stepping stones for personal and professional growth and development.
- **Sustainable impact:** By encouraging employees to see stressors as opportunities rather than hindrances and threats, organizations can foster a culture of continuous learning and development. This improves individual engagement and drives innovation and long-term business success.

3. Minimize Hindrance Stressors to Improve Employee Well-Being:

- **Why it matters:** Hindrance stressors such as bureaucracy or red tape, role ambiguity, organizational politics, and conflicting job

demands undermine employee engagement and productivity. These stressors are typically seen as uncontrollable obstacles that block progress, leading to frustration, lapses in psychological well-being, disengagement, low performance, and heightened turnover rates. This creates a destructive feedback loop where individuals with compromised mental health fail to achieve, resulting in further mental strain and even lower performance. Minimizing hindrances becomes imperative to break that vicious cycle.

- **How to implement:** Since appraisals of stressors are not uniform across employees, managers and their subordinates might be at odds in evaluating organizational stressors. Conducting organizational audits to identify and eliminate common hindrance stressors would be an invaluable technique that ensures leaders understand how their employees assess the stressors at work. In addition, streamlining and simplifying processes to reduce red tape, clarifying job roles and responsibilities, and ensuring that employees have the resources they need to do their jobs effectively would minimize the amount of hindrance stress experienced at work. Providing support systems such as coaching, mentoring, and employee assistance programs to help employees navigate unavoidable stressors would attenuate how threatening stressors are perceived to be.
- **Sustainable impact:** Reducing hindrance stressors improves employee morale, well-being, and job satisfaction. A happier and healthier workforce is more productive and less likely to leave the organization, contributing to greater social sustainability, a more equitable workplace, and economic prosperity.

Too much of a good thing can be bad.

Managers must not assume that the suggested positive relationship between challenge stressors and engagement could be capitalized on by randomly increasing such stressors. Challenge stress is not a silver bullet against disengagement as regardless of the type of stress experienced, at extreme levels, stress remains detrimental to health due to its association with physiological and psychological strain. Frequently measuring perceptions of the type, level, and appraisal of stressors at work allows managers to gauge whether employees are coping well and whether job redesign and

stress interventions are needed. As employees develop their abilities and work responsibilities vary, this “optimal” level of challenge stressor changes over time and thus needs active tracking.

Conclusion

In order to build sustainable business practices, organizations must adopt a more nuanced approach to stress management via the

promotion of a positive stress mindset, reframing stressors as growth opportunities, and reducing hindrance stressors, thus enhancing employee engagement and resilience. These strategies improve individual well-being and contribute to the organization’s long-term success and sustainability. A resilient, engaged workforce is crucial for any business looking to thrive in a competitive and rapidly changing world.

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