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Communicating Under Stress

Written by Beverly Y. Langford
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Communication is challenging, imperfect, and potentially ambiguous even under the best of circumstances when things are going smoothly and everyone seems on the same page. But rarely in today's workplace do we find that set of circumstances. As a society, we're touchy, brash, and easily offended. Add to that situation the pressure cookers in which many of us work. In most cases, we're stretched thin, on a deadline, light on sleep, and heavy on caffeine. The result is a stressful environment that doesn't bring out the best in our ability to communicate.

Put simply, stress occurs when we don't get what we need. We need more time, more support, more money, more clients or customers, more up-to-date equipment, and these things aren't forthcoming. We know that a certain level of stress can make us more alert, focused, and effective, but too much unabated stress becomes debilitating. We feel frazzled, overwhelmed, and threatened, and we often take it out on the people unfortunate enough to cross our paths at the time.

Our personal style may determine what creates stress in each of us. For some, losing control of a situation is a huge stressor. For others, not receiving proper recognition or having coworkers angry with them can create real heartburn. Some find change particularly stressful or hate having too many projects or deadlines to handle at once.

As a result, different personality types react differently to stress. Some become demanding and dictatorial while others go on the attack. Still others completely shut down, appearing to implode before our eyes. Certain people under stress appear apathetic and detached. They just don't seem to care when we feel that they should be fully engaged.

Further, when we are in a stressful situation with someone whose reactions seem so different from our own the problem becomes even more maddening. What stresses one person may be standard operating procedure for another, so we may find ourselves in situations where our internal stress doesn't spark sympathy in our coworkers, friends, or even clients.

Even though we all may communicate in a variety of ways when we're under stress, we still can follow some practical guidelines for communicating in those trying times.

Recognize How you Tend to Communicate under Stress

Does stress make you loud or rude? Do you shut down? Does that great sense of humor become caustic sarcasm? Examine your communication style when you are under stress. In many cases, you throw your natural style into high gear, and it may be too much for others to handle. Or maybe you become another person entirely when stress takes over. Learn to step back and tell yourself not to go there. Consciously monitoring your stress communication style can help you control it. Identify the source of the stress and its effect on you

Joshua Uebergang refers to taking responsibility for feelings in his article on stress communication [5 Tips to Communicate Effectively Under Stress in Conflict](#). When you clearly understand the source of your stress, you won't be as prone to let it infuse your communication. Sometimes you will need to delay a conversation or a performance review until you can put your own stress in the background.

Discuss your Situation with Colleagues

Without being overly dramatic, describe your current situation with others in a calm unembellished way. Acknowledge your behavior that may be occurring as a result. If people know what's going on in your work or life, they will be more open to understanding your vulnerability and the possibility that your words or actions may reflect the current circumstances. They in turn may make an extra effort to keep communication low key and nonadversarial.

Modify the Environment that is Causing the Stress

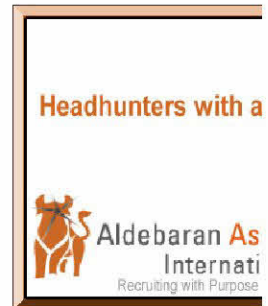
According to Atlanta-based consulting firm Triaxia Partners, you should be alert to times that everyone seems particularly stressed or angry. Does the monthly budget meeting bring out the worst in the team? Is the boss always in a bad humor when she returns from a long trip? Resolve not to let yourself be drawn into conversations that may not turn out well, and try to avoid controversial topics when you know that colleagues are already on edge. When you do have to communicate in an environment that is not ideal, controlling your own behavior can have a positive effect on others. Studies show that in a conflict situation, the cooler demeanor will have a calming effect on someone who wants to rant.

Be Sensitive to the Particular Stress Levels of Others

Learn to read the signals in your coworkers. Acknowledge that someone is demonstrating stress behavior, and realize that it may not be the right time to have a coaching session, initiate a new assignment, or report that a customer just called to complain about her. If you aren't able to postpone the conversation, an awareness of the other person's situation can help you modify your communication to avoid making the

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situation any worse than it has to be.

We can't avoid stress, but we can learn to minimize the damage that it does in our relationships with others. Awareness and action can go a long way toward maintaining a civil, productive, and supportive workplace.



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