A Study on the Level of Stress in a Health Unit

Cristina BORZAN, Floarea MOCEAN, Cristina Ștefana BORZAN, Livia VINCZE

Department of Public Health and Management
“Iuliu Hațieganu” University of Medicine and Pharmacy
Cluj-Napoca, nr. 8 Victor Babeș Str., ROMANIA

The Technical University of Cluj-Napoca
Cluj-Napoca, nr. 103-105 Muncii Boulevard, ROMANIA

borzancristina@yahoo.com, florymocean@yahoo.com,
stefy cris@yahoo.com, liviavincze@yahoo.com,

Abstract: Organizational-level stress management is a central issue of the health systems. The investigation was carried out in March 2009 in a city hospital and was based on the application of an original questionnaire containing 39 items to all the employees present at work at the time - which complies with the Provisions of the Ministry Of Public Health regarding personnel. The main stress factors identified by the employees were: inadequate communication, frequent legislation modifications, job insecurity, the patients’ attitude and lack of information regarding the health services offer, as well as the large specific workload. The employees consider that the addition of other stress factors could be avoided by: a correct task assignment aimed at avoiding job-related work overload and the appearance of monotony at the workplace and personnel under use; a better collaboration and communication, both at the same hierarchic levels and among them; objective criteria for the assessment of employees; the attempt to determine the establishment of different types of intercollegiate relationships (common relaxation activities) within the work team.

Key words: Study, workplace stress management, human resources management, managerial feed-back, service quality, workplace relationships, communication

1 Introduction

Even at the level of the health system, the introduction of innovative programmes tends to increase expectations to new levels of enthusiasm. Unfortunately, before a true change occurs, the management is often involved in the next project, leaving behind a questionable labour force. Traditional autocratic management styles are being replaced with surveillance and management techniques focusing on coordination and counselling. This results in a boost of the capacity and of the feeling of trust, the employees developing a sense of ownership in relation to the organization they are working for.

The literature in the field suggests that this transformation of the management style is the process through which fear and lack of trust between the management and the labour force will be eliminated. [6]

While serious and well intended efforts are being made in as far as „quality” is concerned, true progress is often hindered by the fact that these efforts are not materialized, as well as by the conviction that the process is but a temporary solution. These may lead to wounded pride and suspicion, with the members of the organization doubting that the change may truly be implemented and will work out within their organization. [8]

To promote real change within a health organization, the manager must get permanent feedback on the needs of workplace improvement to the benefit of the collaborators and must also devise and implement a real workplace stress management system. [1, 2, 11, 12].

2 Material and work method

We carried out an observational, descriptive study based on an original, anonymous work questionnaire containing 39 questions with pre-formulated answers and open questions, which we applied to all employees (58 subjects) present at the time of the investigation (March 2009). The questionnaire was filled in by self-registration by doctors, nurses, orderly and caretakers working in the Departments of: Paediatrics, Surgery and Obstetrics-Gynaecology of the Health unit under investigation. The study was carried out in a city hospital and was aimed at identifying the stress factors existing within the organization.

The data was processed using statistical mathematical methods. [3]
3 Results and discussions

The subjects questioned were 18-69 years old, the best represented age group (79.31%) being that of 30-59, with the majority of the employees being women (96.55%).

The data analysis reveals that all subjects (98.84%) declare that they know what their work obligations are and that they (82.76%) do not consider them to be more than they can personally handle. 22.41% of the subjects questioned declare that they are frequently required to carry out tasks for which they are given much too little time, and only half of them (53.45%) declare to be given explanations regarding the reasons why some of the tasks must be carried out in this way.

The managerial principle considered to be acceptable by the literature in the field [3, 4] states that in order for a task to be efficiently solved there must be an agreement regarding the financial, human and time possibilities. However, in practice, this principle is often breached: usually additional tasks are given to the person who is known for sure to be able to carry them out in due time and at the required parameters, as they possess the required professional training level, without considering their workload and whether or not additional tasks may still be given to them. In time, this managerial approach will result in an overload of the respective employees, causing them to feel tired and reducing the efficiency of their work.

Most of those questioned (91.38%) declare that they manage to fully carry out all work tasks during work hours, but more than half of them (56.90%) feel they are underused at the workplace.

In the literature in the field, data regarding organizational culture management [3, 4] confirms that the managerial attribute of assigning team roles presupposes the use of all collaborators at their maximum capacity. The existence and implementation of work standards allows for objective decision making and assigning attributions according to the status and capacity of each individual, without under using some and overloading others. Lack of activity and personnel underused within a team specialized in change is just as unproductive as overload. Managers have two tasks: to solve present problems and to prepare for the future. For a better preparation they must know that they can count on the best strategic device of the informational age: namely, the organization specialized in change, which is the organization which anticipates, creates and efficiently reacts to change. [9]

Over two fifths (43.10%) of the individuals questioned appreciate the level of interpersonal conflicts at the workplace to be insignificant.

In contrast with what used to be considered undesirable, in the present day approach to human resources management optimum-level inter-organizational conflict is seen as a beneficial, stimulating force necessary to the desired progress and change at the level of the organization [1, 2, 5].

Only 1.72% of the studied lot of respondents consider the relationship with the direct superior to be unsatisfactory, which might suggest a good inter-organizational communication, the elimination of this stress factor being beneficial to the activities of the team [6]. Employees turn-over may also be considered to be an indicator of the workplace stress management, its optimum value suggesting an environment that is favourable to the activities within the organization.

Due to the nature of the activities carried out within a unit having the specific of the medical assistance services, the personnel is exposed to additional workplace stress factors. For an effective management of these, it is necessary to possess a high level of knowledge and mastering of the techniques of communication, as well as extensive practical experience in order to acquire experience in interpersonal relationships. Most of the answers obtained from the studied group (93.10%) assessed the relationship with the patient to be good and very good, which suggests that this is not an additional workplace stress factor, the employees considering the small frictions to be normal and resulting from the fact that in everyday activity one comes into contact with persons belonging to various categories.

The organizational culture also involves noticeable aspects, basic values and beliefs formed as a result of common experiences and activities which, in time, become a model for the newcomers. The role of the leader is to understand, model and create the organizational culture that welcomes change [4, 7, 10]. The relationships among employees may be those of simple involvement in the carrying out of the common objectives and will have as possible result professionalism within the framework of the working environment. Human resources management also allows for a different approach to interpersonal relationships within the organization, with various possibilities of correlation among collaborators, such as: spare time activities or shared events occurring at the initiative of the organization that may stimulate the development of communication outside the strictly professional environment.
Approximately two thirds of the answers demonstrate that the employees only have a professional relationship, although there are also answers confirming the presence of shared relaxation activities, friendships, that have managed to make the employees know each other better and work better as a team (graphic 1).

![Graphic 1. The number of respondents depending on the type of interpersonal relationships at the workplace](image)

Assessing collaborators is one of the managerial responsibilities that cannot be delegated. In time, what the manager appreciates or censures will influence the organizational culture. Employees assessment must be based on clear standards, known by all employees, that should rely on values accepted by the organization and their stability should create a stimulating and justifying organizational framework necessary to increase performance [3, 4]. More than a third of the employees included in the study consider the manager’s assessment of employees to be subjective or choose not to answer this question. This evaluation of the assessment activity is the result of the transition of the system towards the implementation of standards. The creation and functioning of the new system should replace the subjective assessment or levelling based on theoretical too wide and universally valid assessment criteria – impersonal job descriptions – with an objective system. This, in its turn will become resistant to implementation until the mentalities of the persons working in the health system will change and until the new standards will be accepted. (graphic 2)

![Graphic 2. The number of respondents depending on their opinion regarding the manager’s assessment of the activity carried out by employees](image)

The 32.76% of the answers considering workplace assessment and compensation to be unsatisfactory may be interpreted as the real situation, but also as a lack of communication and information in the human resources management.

8.62% of the employees included in the study believe that there is a high level of workplace uncertainty within the larger present-day context of legislative and financial instability that also mark the Romanian health system at present.

We tried to assess the aspects regarding change management at the level of the organization under study by asking an indirect question on the degree of information and counselling the employees receive prior to the implementation of a change. The answers received demonstrate that there is a lack of communication: 37.93% of the respondents declare that before a change they only rarely or very rarely or even never get any information on its role and aim, despite the fact that more than half of the employees in the study group feel the need for change (58.62%).

Because of the profile of the organization in which the inquiry was carried out (public hospital), the changes are not entirely the appanage of the health unit manager, but belong to a higher managerial level, which is why the explanation for the answers given by the respondents is not the lack of communication or defective management at this decision-making level. (graphic 3)
The various workplace stress factors are perceived differently by the members of the organization. 22.41% of the respondents in this study feel that their daily activity presupposes a certain amount of job tasks-related stress. The frequent legislation changes regarding the health system are considered to be an additional workplace stress factor by 27.59% of the subjects involved in the study, and family relationships also constitute additional workplace stress factors for 3.45% of the respondents. For 34.88% of the individuals included in the study the social problems of those they come into contact with represent additional stress factors (figure 1).

**Figure 1. Declared workplace stress sources**

Absenteeism may be considered an indicator of the level of professional stress. Given the chronic diseases declared, the number of days of medical leave for temporary work invalidity for the employees in question is within normal limits. When asked if they resort to medical leave when under stress, only one person admitted to sometimes resorting to this form of „individual protection” in periods of organizational crisis and one other person admitted to taking frequent medical leaves.

44.83% of the respondents consider themselves to be adequately remunerated from the point of view of their responsibilities and job requirements when compared against the workload. Nevertheless, most of those questioned (93.10%) consider that a more appropriate way of salary personalization would be based on the remuneration depending on workload, efficiency, efficacy, quality of services.

More than 90.00% of the employees questioned declare themselves to be satisfied by the comfort of the workplace, but a quarter of these (25.86%) declare themselves to be dissatisfied with the quality of the existing equipment.

To improve workplace environment under the present legislation on the profile of the activities carried out within the health unit in question, most of the members of the organization (98.28%) consider that it is necessary to take part in various forms of continuous education on workplace stress management, intra and extra-organizational communication techniques as well as on the use of computer science in daily activity. This would prove useful in accessing information regarding the health system, on-line libraries, national and international databases, and facilitation of extra-organizational communication.

4 Conclusion

The main aspects of the activity which have been identified by the employees as workplace stress factors and which could be improved are the following:

- collaboration and communication at all levels
- team work and interdisciplinary partnerships
- the use of objective criteria in the assessment of the personnel
- being given the tasks in due time
- complying with the attributions stipulated in the job description
- taking responsibility at all hierarchic levels
- improvement of interpersonal relationships
- reviewing the remuneration criteria and those for the granting of extra-payment
- appropriate equipment
References:


[12]. Sutherland V., C. Cooper, Strategic stress management: An organizational approach, MacMillian Business, Basingstoke, 2000