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MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS THROUGH GENERAL SEMANTICS

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Stress is a creatively ambiguous word with little agreed-on scientific definition (Khan, 1987). This word has served as an overarching precept for the domain concerned with how individuals adjust to their environments, achieve high levels of performance and health, and become distressed in various physiological, medical, behavioral, or psychological ways (Quick, Quick, Nelson & Hurrell, 1997). While there may be good reason for stress to retain its “creative ambiguity” (e.g., people can find common cause by commiserating over the stress in their lives), general semantics, a system based on science, tends toward operational definitions of terms. Let us look at how the scientific community characterizes stress.

Stress, a currently trendy notion, has a strong scientific base of medical, physiological, managerial, and organizational research dating from Walter B. Cannon’s work on physiological stress response at the Harvard Medical School just prior to World War I. (Cannon labeled stress the “emergency response.” The stress concept gained popularity as the “fight-or-flight response” and became more widely known due to the comprehensive medical hormonal research

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of Hans Selye during the middle part of the twentieth century. In the latter half of the century, psychologists Robert Kahn, Richard Lazarus, Harry Levinson, and Charles Spielberger have made contributions to the understanding of the social psychological, appraisal and coping, psychoanalytic, and clinical psychology aspects of the stress response.

Four key concepts have emerged from the scientific research that provide more precise and explicit definitions of stress. The concepts are stressors, the stress response, eustress, and distress.

Four Key Concepts

Stressors and the Stress Response

A stressor is the physical or psychological stimulus to which an individual responds (another term for stressor is demand). The stress response is the generalized, patterned, unconscious, mobilization of the body’s natural energy resources when confronted with a demand or stressor. Four mind-body changes constitute the stress response. First, there is a redirection of the blood to the brain and large muscle groups and away from the extremities, skin, and vegetative organs. Second, there is a powering up of the reticular activating system in the ancient brain stem, which leads to increased alertness. Third, there is a release of glucose and fatty acids, which are fuels that sustain an individual during this emergency period. Fourth, there is a shutting down of the immune system and the body’s emergent and restorative processes, such as digestion. These four mind-body changes prepare a person for action during a stressful situation. The stress response can lead to eustress (a positive outcome) or distress (an unhealthy outcome).

Eustress and Distress

Hans Selye coined the term eustress (from the Greek root “eu” for good), which can be defined as the healthy, positive, constructive outcome of stressful events and the stress response. (Some of the positive, healthy effects of an optimum stress load on performance have been know since 1908, and are stated in the Yerkes-Dodson Law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). This formulation recognizes that optimal stress load on performance varies by individual and task — individual considerations include susceptibility to stress, fatigue, psychological and cognitive skills, and physical capacity. Task considerations include complexity, difficulty, duration, and intensity. A situation with too little stress and
arousal often fails to stimulate performance, just as too much stress and arousal can interfere with performance.)

The word *distress*, with the Latin prefix *dis* meaning “bad” (Selye, 1976a, p.15), refers to the unhealthy, negative, destructive outcomes of stressful events or the stress response. Individual distress can contribute to disorders such as cardiovascular disease (physiological), depression (psychological), and violence (behavioral). Individual distress can contribute to organizational distress (e.g., an on-the-job accident can result in increased medical costs to the organization, lost work time, and replacement work costs). Other manifestations of organizational distress include direct costs, such as absenteeism and dysfunctional turnover, and indirect costs, such as poor morale and faulty working relationships.

**Medical And Psychological Models**

**The General Adaptation Response**

Hans Selye, a physician, researcher, and president of the International Institute of Stress from 1976 until his death in 1982, began researching stress in animals and humans in 1932. He showed that a main effect of stress was the release of adrenal gland hormones, normally leading to useful adaptation to the stress-producing stimulus. When the adaptation process malfunctioned the person was susceptible to one or more diseases of maladaptation. Selye formulated the general adaptation syndrome (GAS) to explain how humans react to stress.

The GAS has three main stages: **alarm** (the alarm reaction is analogous to the *stress response* and Cannon’s *emergency reaction*), resistance, and exhaustion. It is at the resistance stage that stress-related diseases emerge and Selye termed the result **diseases of adaptation**. Selye has been the single most influential individual to raise public awareness of the role of stress in health and disease.

**Psychological Contributions to Stress Research**

Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) incorporated social psychological theory into the stress domain. Their research showed how the conflict and confusion that occur in social processes of an organization can lead to individual distress — with concomitant organizational costs.

Lazarus and his associates introduced the concept of cognitive appraisal and coping with respect to stress (Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman, & Gruen, 1985). Their research centered on the individual’s perception of the stressor, rather
than on the stressor itself. Bodensteiner, Gerloff, & Quick (1989) extended this model and showed that individuals may engage in problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies to manage their experience of stress.

H. Levinson (1978) defined stress through the use of two main concepts: the ego-ideal and the self-image. The ego-ideal is the unconscious element of personality that a person develops from parental models and from hopes and fantasies about self-perfection. The self-image is composed of positive and negative attributes that individuals develop about themselves. In Levinson’s model stress is the tension between the ego-ideal and the self-image — the more divergence, the more stress.

**Stress within Organizations**

Job stress is the mind-body arousal resulting from physical and/or psychological demands associated with a job (J.S. Quick & Nelson, 1997). Job stress can lead to enhanced job performance up to an optimum level of stress (eustress) and it can place an employee at risk of distress if it is too intense, frequent, or chronic (Selye, 1976b). Understanding job stress is vital to decreasing job distress associated with stress in organizations. (Factors that can lead to job stress include task-specific demands, role demands, interpersonal demands, and physical demands (Quick & Quick, 1984). High stress jobs, characterized by high job demands and low employee control, have significant higher rates of distress. (Theorell & Karasek, 1996).) Decreasing job distress is frequently accomplished through stress management programs — strategies for channeling job stress into healthy outcomes.

**Managing Organizational Stress through General Semantics**

The author of this article has used the techniques and formulations of general semantics in organizational stress management workshops to positively influence cognitive appraisal, lessen conflict and confusion, and expand self-awareness to decrease occupational distress and increase eustress. The following are some of the formulations and techniques, with real life examples, that I offer to participants in our workshops.

**The Value of Delayed Reactions**

To make effective evaluations and decisions, general semantics recommends the use of delayed reactions. This technique, which involves the human ability to consciously engage one’s higher brain functions and delay long enough to
evaluate something before reacting to it, tends to produce much better results in situations than reacting quickly or impulsively.

**Example:** When his boss and co-workers asked John to do something he immediately acceded (even if the request concerned work that was not related to John’s job). As a result John felt anxious and depressed from having accepted too much work. The use of the delayed reaction technique gave John some time to decide what requests were appropriate for him to accept and which were not. Feeling more in control of the situation, John became less anxious and depressed.

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**Distinguishing Facts from Inferences to Avoid Jumping to Wrong Conclusions**

To make accurate assessments of situations, and to avoid jumping to wrong conclusions about them, it is useful to know how to distinguish facts from inferences. Unfortunately, the ability to do this, an aptitude that is highly emphasized in general semantics, is often poorly developed in people (one important reason for this is that young people do not receive sufficient training in fact/inference discrimination in school).

**Example:** Mary was under the impression that her supervisor disliked her because the supervisor did not smile and respond to Mary’s cheerful greetings in the morning. This “snub” caused Mary to be angry with her supervisor and to act with hostility when the supervisor gave her assignments. Through investigating the situation, Mary discovered that her supervisor did not smile or greet anyone cheerfully in the morning. This revelation led Mary to realize that her supervisor’s non-responses to her greetings were not personally directed toward Mary and she was able to view the situation with greater equanimity.

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**Using the Scientific Method to Problem Solve**

To solve everyday problems more effectively, general semantics advocates the use of the scientific method (observe, test, evaluate). This approach, which has produced many important and useful scientific discoveries, views problems as challenges that call for active responses.

**Example:** Tom was discouraged and demoralized after being laid off from his managerial job (the industry in which he worked was rapidly downsizing). Colleagues told him to forget about getting work in other industries because the job he had been doing was quite specialized and his salary requirements were too high. However, instead of taking their advice, Tom did research to locate
companies in other fields that might need his managerial skills. Emphasizing the values of having an experienced and hard-working person as a manager, Tom sent out cover letters and resumes to companies that he thought would be able to use his services. The result: three job interviews and offers of employment.

**Overcoming the IFD Syndrome to Reduce Distress**

The IFD syndrome, originally proposed by Wendell Johnson in his general semantics classic *People in Quandaries*, describes a condition in which high ideals combined with continued frustration can cause a person to develop a “what’s the use attitude.” More specifically the IFD syndrome refers to a sequence that involves someone going from Idealization to Frustration to Demoralization.

**Example:** Rita was terribly unhappy and wanted to quit her job as an elementary school teacher because the children in her class fooled around too much and the administration did not give her enough support (she had also developed an ulcer). Learning about the IFD syndrome led Rita to realize that her idealized vision of public school teaching, where children hang on the teacher’s every word, where administrators are always there when you need them, was the source of her great distress. By revising her conception of teaching, to take into account that children will often misbehave in class and administrators will frequently be preoccupied, Rita found ways to cope more effectively with the demands of the job.

**“Logical Fate” and Productive Job Assumptions**

General semantics recognizes the important role that assumptions play in determining how we think and behave through its notion of “logical fate.” This important concept, borrowed from mathematics, contends that from our assumptions particular consequences (our conclusions, evaluations, attitudes, and behavior) will inevitably follow.

**Example:** Mark found his work stultifying and boring and as a result he hated to go to the office. However, using the idea of logical fate, Mark decided to change his attitude and view his situation at work as a problem that could be improved. He asked his boss for additional assignments and put more enthusiasm into his on-the-job relationships. The upshot: Mark received a promotion, was given more responsibility, and had increased motivation to get up and go to work in the morning.
The “Extensional Theory of Happiness”

This theory contends that to reach a measure of contentment and a sense of success, we ought to form reasonable expectations, work hard, and be prepared to not get exactly what we want.

Example: Tiffany worked hard to obtain a Ph.D. degree in English and she became despondent when she was not able to obtain a full-time college position (there was a glut on the market for English Ph.D.s). Exposure to the extensional theory of happiness raised Tiffany’s spirits and led her to conclude that, even if she never secured a full-time college position, the skills she had learned in pursuing her studies were transferable and could be productively applied to other interesting jobs and careers.

Dating: Change Occurs over Time

Dating is a general semantics device that involves attaching dates to people, objects, and events as a reminder that change occurs over time — John Doe_{2002} is not John Doe_{2004}.

Example: Bill, a junior high school counselor, was extremely dejected because he thought the students he was counseling were not making significant progress on their problems. He was helped to get past his gloomy mental state by using the dating device: “Recalcitrant” students (today) who are not making progress on their problems will not necessarily be “recalcitrant” students (two years from now).

Indexing: A Reminder that no Two Things are Identical

Indexing is a general semantics tool that involves examining cases within a larger category to combat “allness” thinking.

Example: Back to Bill, the unhappy school counselor. Bill complained that the teachers as a group were impossible to work with and that none of his students would ever improve. He was helped to reframe the situation by using the indexing tool: Just because teachers_{1, 2, and 3} are not being supportive that does not mean teacher_{1} is behaving in a similar manner. And just because students_{1, 2, and 3} are not making progress in counseling, that does not automatically mean student_{4} will not make progress.

The Importance of Being Able to Adapt to Circumstances

We know from science that at each moment everything in the world is changing, sometimes slowly and sometimes very quickly. Because things are con-
stantly in flux, general semantics suggests that to get good results in situations it is important to adapt in order to respond appropriately.

**Example:** Millie had been doing secretarial work for the same boss for fifteen years when one day he decided to retire. The new boss wanted Millie to learn new computer programs and do filing in a different way. These demands caused Millie to feel resentful about the need to learn new job responsibilities (she believed the old computer program and filing system were adequate for the work) and resentful toward her new boss (why does he have to make these changes). She was helped to get over her dysfunctional feelings through an awareness that in a volatile and uncertain world the ability to adapt can be thought of as a scientific way to success.

**The Map is Not the Territory**

There is an analogy in general semantics that words and statements are like maps that describe territories. The purpose of the analogy is to remind us that words, like maps, only *represent* reality and are not reality itself (the map is not the territory). To find out how well words represent reality, general semantics suggests it is a good idea to check the map against the territory — examine what is being labeled or described to see if the words that describe it accurately portray what is really going on.

**Example:** Ralph had been taught that those who work hard and play by the rules rise in business and that is the way he thought he would get ahead in his company. Unfortunately, Ralph’s quest to move up the organizational ladder was doomed to failure since the road to advancement in his workplace was through office politics and assertiveness. It was only when he revised his theoretical map of how to succeed in business, to take into account the realities (the “territory”) of the office that he was actually working in, that Ralph began to stop having gastrointestinal problems and began to have some hope for advancement.

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**


