Reducing Staff Stress

Case Study of a System Approach

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INTRODUCTION

7 months into the Covid Work-From-Home disruption, an HR leader Zoomed me and said: "My staff is *STRESSED OUT! Can you help?"* The content and process of that organizational effort may be useful also in your organization. This paper provides case study details and recommendations for how to approach staff stress reduction that go beyond having Zoom coffees.

The Bottom Line. The study highlights a fairly common practice: it is up to the individuals who are stressed to destress themselves. The sudden Work From Home (WFH) culture shift however ratcheted up stress among many staff members all at once. Staff stress is organizational in nature: it happens in context of work with multiple stakeholders. After HR provides individuals with ways to cope with their personal stress, organizational leadership and team managers should adopt stress reduction as part of their operational responsibility, creating and backing changes in strategy and process. Also, of course, it's just human to help where you can.

This White Paper is an effort to provide information to help you with making those changes. It includes:

- **Stats that surprise.**
- **A list of stressors.**
- **Analysis of stressors.**
- **List of solutions.**
- **Analysis of solutions.**

We look at **WHO** is stressed, **WHAT** the problem is, and **HOW** to destress, including **WHO** does **WHICH** thing **WHEN.**

BIG PICTURE BACKGROUND

Nationally, Organizations Met the Challenge and PRODUCTIVITY IS UP

Although it feels somehow wrong to call out a benefit of a worldwide pandemic, it seems that Covid has helped organizational productivity. Productivity is up and it's good for results.

> "Ninety-four percent of 800 employers surveyed by Mercer, an HR and workplace benefits consulting firm, said that productivity was the same as or higher than it was before the pandemic, even with their employees working remotely." [1]

> "The Harris Poll of 1,200 employed Americans commissioned by Zapier found that, among the newly remote workers, 65% said their productivity has increased since they moved out of the office."[2]

At least in the short run, productivity has increased. But is the increase sustainable? Is it good for the staff who make it happen or is there a human cost? There still may not be enough research to answer that conclusively for the U.S. workforce as a whole, but even if you are not in healthcare you may be seeing a fraying staff since WFH happened.

Nationally, Organizations Have Not Yet Met the Challenge and STRESS IS UP

STRESS. At the beginning of the WFH disruption it was most notable. According to HR Executive,

> "Nearly seven in 10 workers claim the coronavirus pandemic... is the most stressful time of their professional career -- even more than major events like 9/11 and the 2008 Great Recession."[3]

Even in October 2020, **LinkedIn gave an overall assessment of employee burnout as being 33% greater than 2019**.[4] That's not just stress, that's the final stage of stress: employee burnout.

Look at the Census Bureau's Pulse Survey on Health, started when the Coronavirus changed our workplace operations. There has been some improvement since the initial impact, but even the latest available numbers, covering the second half of November, 2020, reveal something stunning. In the income categories where we can expect to find professionals, $50k-$200k+, for every person who says they are doing well, there is another person (or more) saying that they experience symptoms of nervousness, anxiety, unstoppable worry, depression, and/or hopelessness. As a workforce, we appear to be seriously, perhaps even dangerously, stressed.

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[1] Maurer, R. *Study Finds Productivity Not Deterred by Shift to Remote Work.* SHRM online (shrm.org 9.16.2020)
[2] Colletta, J. *HRE's number of the day: Remote work. Human Resource Executive (hrexecutive.com 4.17.2020)*
[3] Mayer, K. *HRE's number of the day: Coronavirus stress.* Human Resource Executive (hrexecutive.com 4.14.2020)
[4] Anders, G. *Burnout signs have risen 33% in 2020.* (linkedin.com 10.7.2020)

CASE STUDY: WHO, WHERE, AND WHEN

This case study presents an engagement with a nonprofit of national scope, about 50 staff, headquartered in Washington, DC. Like most organizations, it had a commute-to-the-office work culture. When Covid hit, nearly all staff went home and went virtual. Some had children they needed to educate while working. Some lived alone. The change disrupted the methods of communication and other habits of work that provided efficiency and stability. Nevertheless, they were focused on continuing to provide value by achieving results. They did what many of us did: they geared up, pitched in, and produced. Productivity went up. So did stress.

To explore their particular situation, we conducted an online 5-question survey with a promise of anonymity. The survey, distributed and returned in October, 2020, had a 70% response rate.

CASE STUDY: WHAT (STAFF, STRESSORS & SOLUTIONS)

This section provides aggregated staff responses followed by an explanation of how responses were analyzed (findings and method). "Survey says...":

KEY FINDINGS #1: STAFF

WHO IS **STRESSED**

55% of staff were more stressed than before WFH. 18% were more stressed than before, while 37% of all responses indicated that staff members were significantly more stressed than before. They described themselves using phrases such as "VERY Stressed," "Extremely," etc.

24% were just as stressed as always, no change.

21% were less stressed than before. Out of these, 9% reported having Zero stress.

What This Means

Removing the 24% of staff whose responses indicated little or no change since WFH, it is easy to see that two and a half times as many people became more or much more stressed (the 55%) as those who became less or much less stressed (the 21%). Clearly "my staff is so stressed out" was an accurate assessment.

But you can also see that there are more people than expected for whom this was *not* true. In fact, just under half the staff did not experience increased stress.

This is an important point to note when generating solutions to the increased stress. Consider whether your solutions might make it worse for the significant number of people whose stress level did not increase. For them, the old adage "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" applies well. **Lesson: approach solutions with caution.**

Also, when seeking solutions it is important to ask WHY some people's stress went down and if that which reduced their stress can be useful for those whose stress increased. It may be a logistical situation (no commute) or a mindset shift (enjoying working quietly and without interruption), but the perceptions of the 21% may help the 55% if some of the 55% adopt the ways of perceiving the situation that the 21% use. **Lesson: get your staff to share why it's better or worse for them, and to do so with understanding rather than judgement.**

KEY FINDINGS #2: STRESSORS

WHAT STRESSES STAFF

Survey respondents provided 82 statements of what was stressing them. Not surprisingly, some staff reflected common WFH themes such as disconnection from coworkers and challenges to work-family balance. But the survey revealed more. Some other stressors reported were:

- Endless, non-stop zoom calls.

- Lack of desired positive feedback.

- Having to provide others with definitive answers when they themselves are in an unreliably evolving situation.

- Increased workload; "exponential increase in volume of work;" overwork.

- Priorities stacked one on top of another; everything a priority.

- Others not meeting their deadlines and not acknowledging whether they received emails.

- Feeling out of the loop.

- All one's "free" time devoted to recovering from overwork.

- Emails at all hours every day.

- Intensive "need it now" expectation.

- Insufficient tools or information to fulfill new responsibilities as colleagues are laid off.
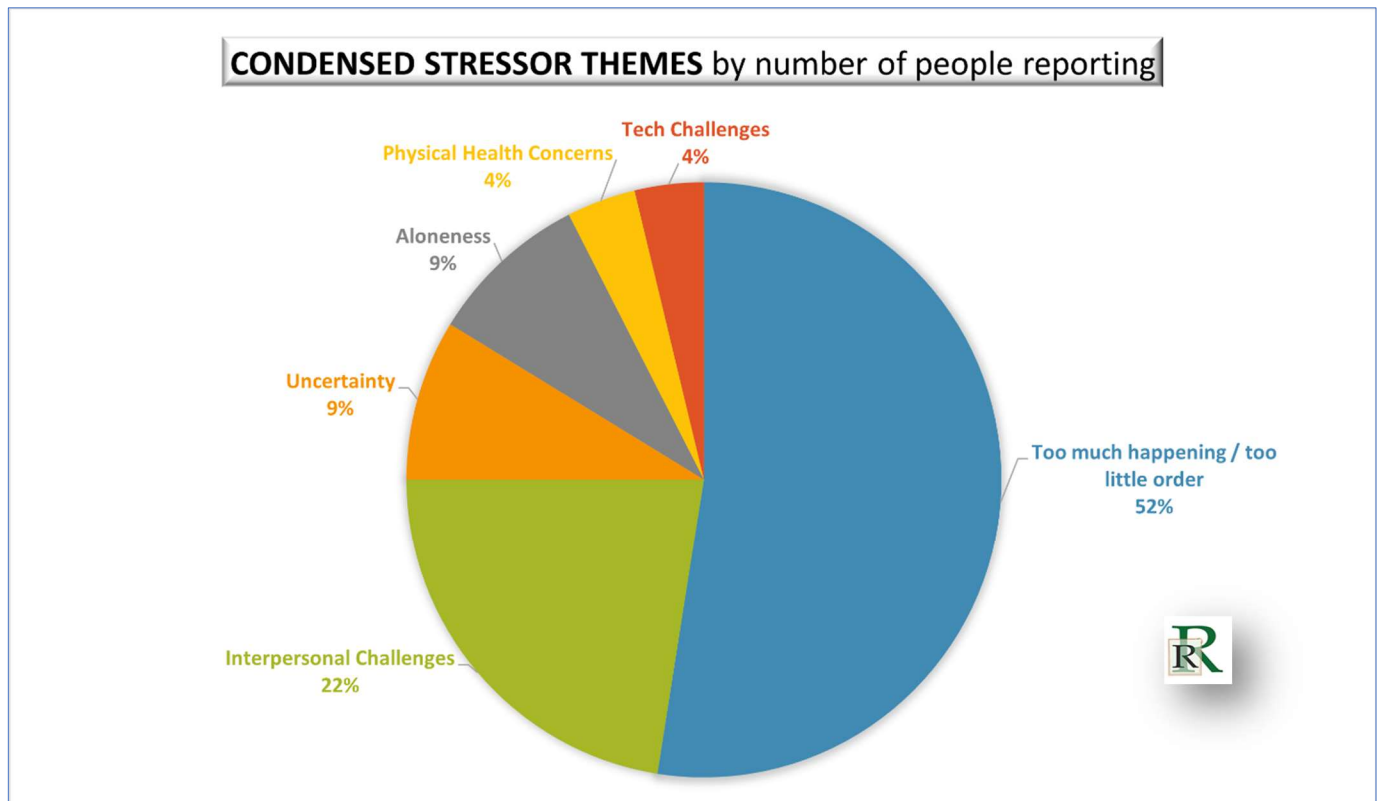
- Catching Covid.

Someone noted their inability to "just pop in" to someone's office for a quick response, and instead, having to schedule a call, presumably regardless of how small or urgent the matter was. Another respondent described their increased workload as due to unintended process change: *"One phone can turn into 5 phone calls to accomplish the same task."*

WHAT THIS MEANS.

Analysis by Category: One way to assess the impact of stress is to locate the impact in person or role (**WHO** or **WHAT**). Did stress affect the human or the work? In our case, humans were affected more than task completion was. The information is useful when solutionizing.
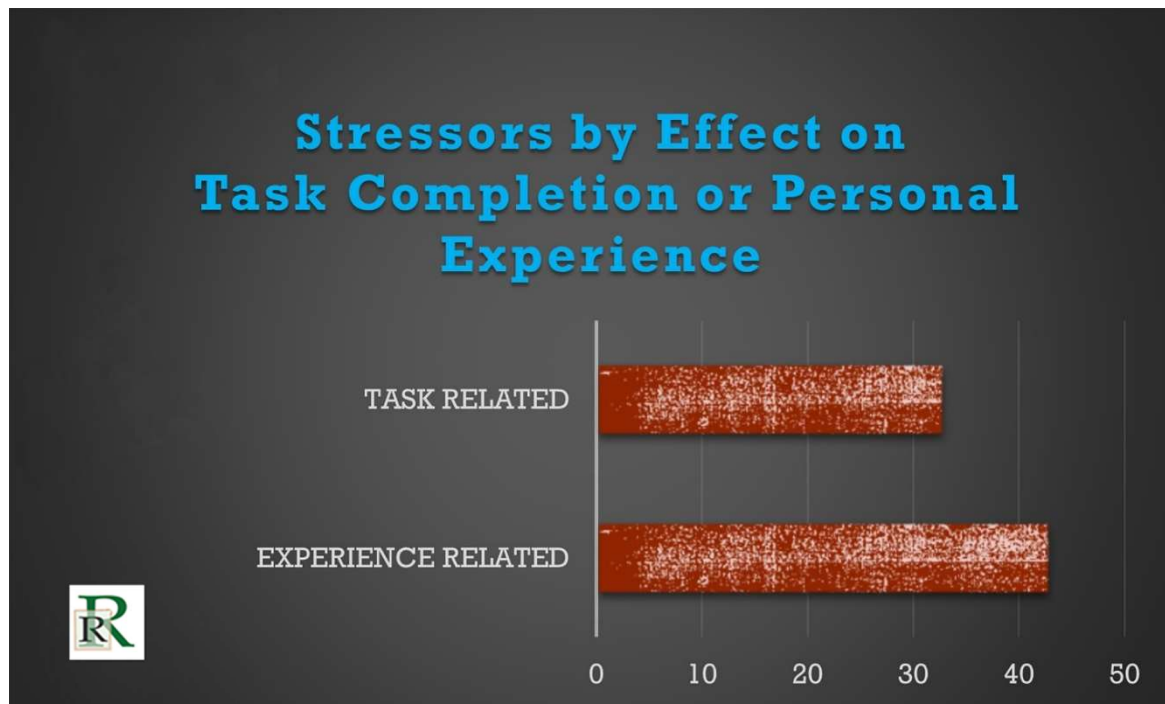
Analysis by Category: To get a clearer picture of how many suffer from what, I abstracted the 82 responses into six categories. Abstracting particulars into concepts is an invitation for researcher bias, so as I pared down the responses to their essential elements I used the respondents' words, then matched the content of the stressors, using *In Vivo* Coding and Concept Coding.

CONDENSED STRESSOR THEMES by number of people reporting

- Tech Challenges 4%
- Physical Health Concerns 4%
- Aloneness 9%
- Uncertainty 9%
- Too much happening / too little order 52%
- Interpersonal Challenges 22%

Looking at aggregated responses, themes emerged. The major theme of "Too much happening / too little order" would need a finer tooth comb before it could be used to provide solutions. It was made of two subcategories that I termed "Too Great a Workload / Overextended" (21 responses) and "Lack of Order" (14 responses). Those too had subcategories. The second largest stressor theme, "Interpersonal Challenges," mostly reflected a subcategory I termed "Increased Difficulty of Communicating and Collaborating" (13 responses). Logic then points to looking for making staff workload less by prioritization, better organization, and establishing communication agreements. The next section explores how staff had been trying to reduce their stress.

KEY FINDINGS #3: SOLUTIONS

**WHICH** SOLUTIONS THEY CURRENTLY EMPLOY

Staff related 74 solutions they use to destress. They included, for example, <u>in their words</u>:

- Eating way too much.

- Taking daily walks.

- Avoidance.

- Keeping in close touch with direct reports.

- Email and contact staff for everything I need and also for what they may need.

- Healthy eating.

- Venting.

- Find affirmation elsewhere.

- Writing down everything that needs to be done.

- Make my own flex daily schedule.

- Like many Americans, more alcohol.

- Meditate.

- More organized to-do lists.

- Walking away from my desk to do something mindless and then coming back after to finish task.

- Prayer.

- Pursuing hobbies.

- Trying to turn off computer every night at 6 and not work weekends.

- Playing background music.

- Stretching.

- Hold conversations on Slack that include work & non-work.

- I try to appreciate my colleagues and be responsive to them and make their lives easier.

- Drinking too much caffeine.

- Reduce # of meetings and move to asynchronous interaction for some things.

- Got on an anti-depressant.

What This Means.

Categorizing the content to see at a glance which solutions people already use:

1. **Mental/Emotional/Spiritual** Solutions

2. **Body Oriented** Solutions

3. **Time Management / Priority Management** Solutions

Current Staff Stress-Reduction Solutions
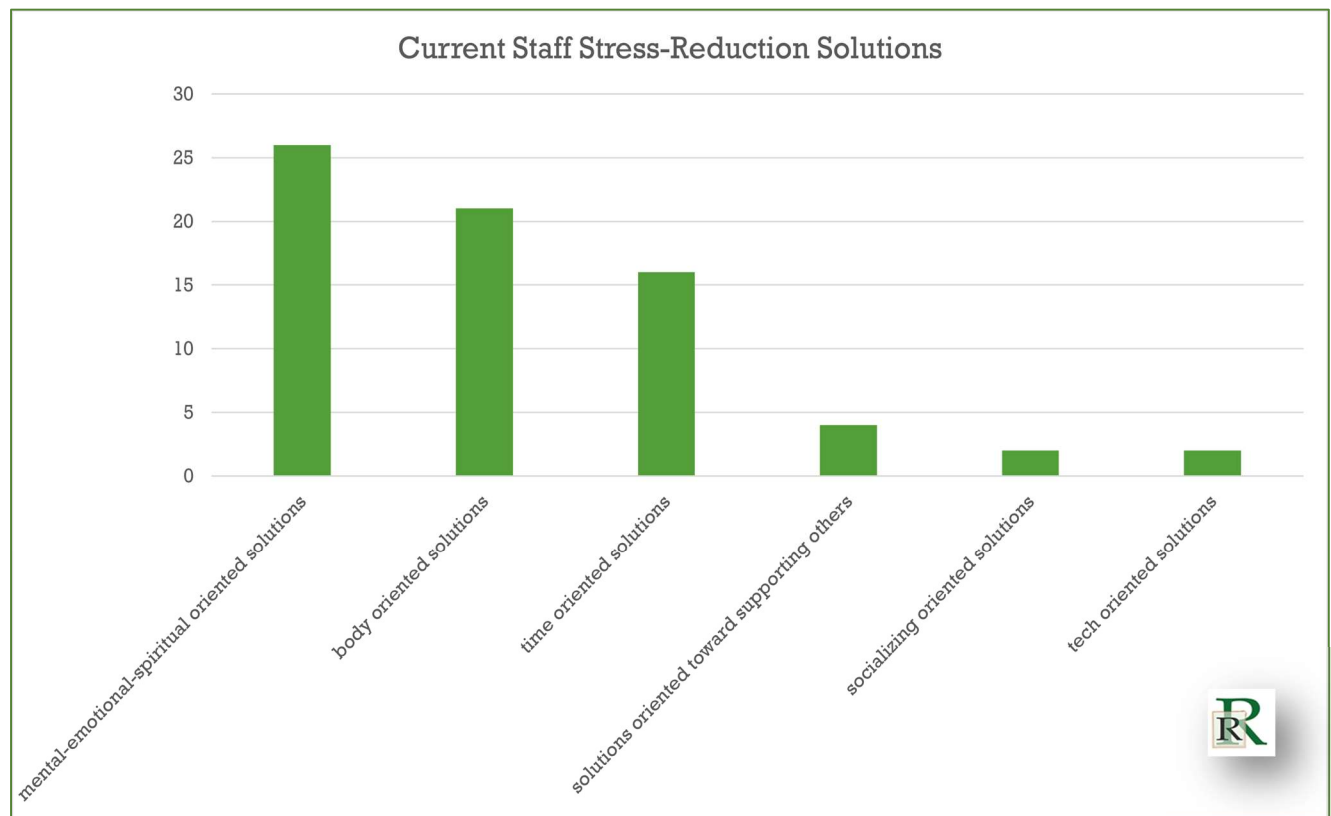
Note that implementation of most of the solutions that are currently used is primarily the responsibility of the individual staff member. Mental/emotional/spiritual and body-oriented solutions tended to be language as tasks that individuals do and should do. My manager can't take a walk for me, have an after-hours drink for me, or make me write a list.

WHICH SOLUTIONS THEY WANTED GOING FORWARD

Staff provided 63 solutions. The solutions that staff wanted implemented going forward however, were more, a matter of setting team agreements and influencing culture. They were more, though not always, a management responsibility.

They included, for example:

- Shorten the work week.

- Define "emergency".

- Be non-judgmental.

- Keep supporting flexible schedules.

- Re-evaluate internal deadlines.

- Leaders to communicate encouragement.

- Take regular breaks.

- Only one staff zoom meeting per week.

- Create time and provide funding for staff development.

- Being more open about staffing changes.

- Be more strategic.

- Require [regularly scheduled] communication between supervisors and employees.

WHO Needs to Act to Provide the Solution.

1. Solutions that require each **individual** to provide their own stress relief

2. Solutions that require **leadership / management** action to reduce stress

3. Solutions that require everyone, or a critical mass of people to act / adapting **culture**

Most solutions requested by staff require action by leadership and/or management.[5] This points to the structural causes of stress and is elaborated in the next section, "CONCLUSIONS." Solutions at the individual level implemented, there is still need for manager and leader action.

Notably, staff did not list or suggest the many social solutions that most organizations do to reduce the feelings of disconnection and isolation. This was due, in part, to having tried them and then having lost interest in them. In an Appendix, this paper provides an abridged but hopefully informative list of solutions, including social solutions, that I assembled from conversations with numerous HR leaders.

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[5] "Staff" here includes *all* respondents: those without direct reports, and leaders and managers.

CONCLUSIONS

More than half a year into the disruption, 55% of the organization's staff reports being more or VERY VERY much more stressed than before. In this situation, sustaining the new higher level of productivity without changing workflow will mean more employee burnout. Maybe even on the magnitude of 2020's 33% increase in burnout.

Staff was most stressed in two categories that are addressable through process solutions. The solutions staff most often cited were ones that most staff members could not implement without supervisor permission. "Too much happening / too little order" needs decision making by leaders and managers. To that end, the top two solutions were "Stronger Processes" and "Demonstrate Care, Give More." Details follow below.

The essential learning is that management needed to get more involved changing old processes and creating new ones, like setting team communication expectations. After the initial Covid adjustment it is not enough for individuals to go for a walk or take a drink, and not enough for HR to create group social experiences. It calls for renewed processes and increased interpersonal awareness and care.

At the time of this publication, the organization presented here is implementing the suggestions outlined in the Recommendations section below, starting with a task force. It is being productive about it, but not stressing out.
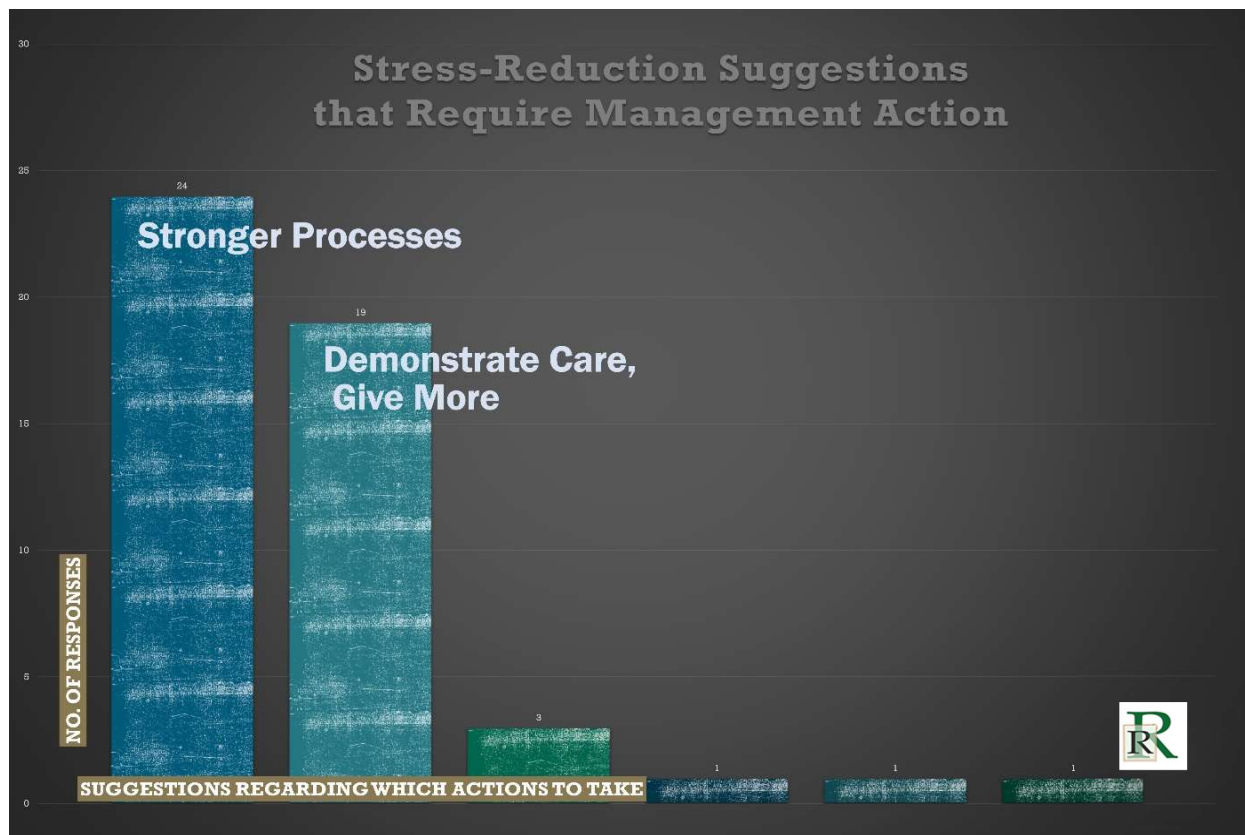
"STRONGER PROCESSES" included, for example:

- Work hour delineation, even with flexible hours
- Clarity re expectations about communication
- Meeting structure
- Follow through, including accountability
- A mandatory day off

"STRONGER PROCESSES" also included, for example, **fewer**:

- Priorities / Deadlines / Important To-Do's
- Meetings
- Emails
- Workdays
- "Emergencies"
- Eliminate formal semi-annual performance reviews and provide feedback when needed.

"DEMONSTRATE CARE AND GIVE MORE" included, for example:

- Encouragement & acknowledgment of efforts, successes, and staff value
- Transparency re staffing changes
- Activities, e.g. online lunchtime yoga
- Time to care for self through 4-day work week and/or vacation days
- Funding for professional development
- Reinforcement of work-life balance through in policy, when communicating, and in re-staffing
- Communication that addresses job security

Staff solutions NOT DEPENDENT ON MANAGEMENT were much fewer, but included, for instance:

- Mix with other departments
- Interact non-judgmentally
- Don't bother others with unnecessary emails or online events, stick to the minimal necessary, timely responses, acknowledge requests

EXECUTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW

When all is said and done, this case study provides a process to reduce stress in your organization.

1. **GET SOME DATA:** do a survey, talk with people**.** Find out exactly what and who is being stressed, and how seriously, or if task completion suffers more than people do; don't assume that being familiar with your world means you know the truth about it. Hiring an experienced outside researcher and change agent might help avoid some staff mistrust.

2. **GROUP THE DATA** to provide a narrative that explains which manifested pains are caused by which underlying symptoms. Keep practical solutioning in mind when creating categories.

3. **USE THE DATA** to reduce stress.

   a. **Set up a stress reduction task force.** Include on it people who have the institutional authority to say yes to changes, the people who make the changes (or their representatives), and the people familiar in granular detail with the processes and people involved in the changes.

   b. Using the stress narrative you created in step 2, try to **solve underlying symptoms** rather than manifested pains, but avoid going too large trying to solve all underlying structural causes right away. Balance meaningful wins with quick ones. Keep momentum going; culture change happens incrementally and needs constant priming.

   c. **Pay special attention to management responsibility** and ability in creation & reduction of stress. Your staff is already doing what it can individually to reduce their own stress; further stress reduction is now on leadership and management.

   d. Make sure that various subgroups of staff you identified in your stress survey **understand** why the **other groups** are the way they are. This brings understanding that will help the task force come up with and implement ideas that really work.

   e. **Build coalition.** The task force doesn't "decide & implement." Since a key source of sustained staff stress is their lack of feeling that they can control (or even influence) their environment, the task force needs to use a process that empowers staff to decide & implement rather than tells them what to do.

4. **YOU GOT THIS.**

For questions or comments, please contact the author at eyl@reframedreality.com.

APPENDIX - OTHER ORGANIZATIONS' SOLUTIONS

MENTAL-EMOTIONAL SOLUTIONS
- Leadership conveys that they get seriousness of challenge
- Add employee wellbeing as a category in employee review process
- Creating a Fears Group (*name it to tame it:* start with 3 minutes to name 3 fears)
- Mental Health Week (speakers; yoga; mindfulness workshops)
- Download the Action for Happiness app
- 10 Days of Happiness (free online coaching program)
- Daily guided 30-minute mindfulness session / Daily walks

TIME-MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS
- Flex schedule for WFH parents (60% do this)
- Mandatory days off
- Reduce meeting times from 1 hr to 45 minutes
- Zoom-free Fridays and other "no Zoom" times
- Employee "Office Hours" of availability
- Compressed work week
- Avoid looking at social media during work

SOCIAL SOLUTIONS
- Discussion forum for WFH parents
- Group Community Service (e.g. letter writing party to make cards for front line hospital workers)
- Use Yammer to create groups about topics people wanted to talk about
- Brownbag lunches from various countries + talk about not-work topic
- Food and recipe contests
- "Quarantine Quest" timed home treasure hunt
- Virtual Happy Hours / Scheduled Coffee Breaks with assigned host
- Company wide virtual coffee 15 minutes w/top execs – updates and Q&A
- Monthly virtual breakfast with President/CEO giving overview update, including Q&A (or not)
- Essential Skills (soft skills) trainings for managers
- Group physical challenge (performed individually, e.g. 50,000 steps, 10 pounds lost)