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# Leadership Strategies to Reduce Employees' Occupational Stress

Ransford Davidson, DBA

## Problem

Occupational stress contributes to productivity losses, accounting for 40% of all work-related ill-health cases (Health and Safety Executive [HSE], 2017). Over \$300 billion is expended by organizations each year for employee lost productivity and health care costs because of occupational stress (EU-OSHA, 2014).

- The **general business problem** is the increase in the occupational stress phenomena in the banking industry negatively affects employee productivity.
- The **specific business problem** is that some managers in the banking industry lack strategies to reduce employees' occupational stress.

## Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies some bank managers use to reduce employees' occupational stress.

## Significance

Managing workplace stress can reduce health impairment costs, enhance employees' well-being, and improve the productivity level of the workforce (Dunkl et al., 2015; Larsson et al., 2014).

- Support business leaders to identify insights into the leadership skills, techniques, and interventions required for managing workplace stress.
- Inspire leaders to balance job demands and job resources in such a way that employees remain healthy, motivated, and productive.

## Social Change Implications

By investing in occupational stress prevention, socio-demographic factors improve and the burden of health care costs to employees, their families, communities, and organizations reduce; thus, enabling increased investments in social provisioning.

Organizations' investments in social provision ensure communities have access to employment opportunities that pay living wages and sustains the environment (Underwood, Hackney, & Friesner, 2015).

## Theory or Framework

The conceptual frameworks for the study were:

- **job demands-resources (JD-R) model** (Demerouti et al., 2001, revised by Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The key constructs underlying the **JD-R model** framework are (a) demands, (b) resources, (c) burnout, and (d) engagement.
- **transformational leadership theory** (Burns, 1978, expanded by Bass, 1985), with the key tenets of (a) idealized influence, (b) intellectual stimulation, (c) inspirational motivation, and (d) individualized consideration.

## Relevant Scholarship

The impact of occupational stress on workplace productivity and the broader economy has been considerable (ILO, 2016). In Europe, at least 40 million employees are affected by work-related stress which cost the European Union at least €20 billion yearly, while the US expends over \$300 billion because of stress-related causes (CDC, 2014; EU-OSHA, 2014).

Work-related suicidal deaths were found to be related to work stressors (Routley & Ozanne-Smith, 2012). Other research has associated stress-related illnesses such as musculoskeletal disorders, cardiovascular diseases, depression, and cancer with workplace-related stress (Eurofound, 2016; WHO, 2017).

Primary attributes of transformational leadership such as employee support, employee empowerment, and a positive relationship between leader and subordinate; could mitigate the development of stress in the work environment (Dunkl et al., 2015; Fernet et al., 2015).

An imbalance between job demands, job resources, and the capabilities or needs of an employee may influence occupational stress (Salem, 2015). The JD-R theory supports a balance between employees' job resources and job demands to reduce stress (Demerouti et al., 2001). Those organizationally related aspects of the job that causes stress and the job resources required to induce employees' development and well-being (Demerouti et al., 2001).

## Research Question

**What strategies do bank managers use to reduce employees' occupational stress?**

## Participants

Using purposeful sampling, the selected participants were **5 bank managers** from 1 banking organization in the Caribbean who successfully implemented strategies that reduced occupational stress.

## Procedures

Data collection included

- face-to-face semistructured interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. The 9 questions were researcher-generated.
- review of company documents.

Member checking strategy was used to engage participants on the accuracy of data gathered.

## Analysis

Data were categorized in data analysis matrices and transmitted to computer-based tools to facilitate the generation of themes and derive patterns from interview transcripts.

## Findings

Findings revealed four emergent strategies that accentuated the direct effect of adequate job resources in attenuating the negative effects of job demands and reducing occupational stress;

### Organizational Protection and Leadership Strategy

- Explored transformational leader behavior and employee work engagement within the context of occupational stress reduction

### Supportive Organization Strategy

- Focused on employee development, employee reward and recognition, performance feedback, employee satisfaction, and social support

### Occupational Health and Well-being Strategy

- Improve employees' well-being and reduce stress by implementing health and wellness programs

### Prevention Strategy

- Address psychosocial hazards linked to working conditions, the culture of the organization, work-life balance, job-fit, and labor relations.

## Interpretation

Findings from the study are congruent with existing research and support the JD-R model. Results revealed strategies are readily identifiable to support workers psychological, physiological, and psychosocial health. Unanticipated benefits include an affirmation of existing transformational leadership practices and the creation of a psychological safety climate (PSC) that values improvements in employees' well-being.

## Limitations

Potential limitations of this study include:

- The use of a purposeful sample population of only five individuals.
- Participants were from one banking institution located in the Caribbean; this has implications for the research validity.

## Recommendations

Leaders should design and implement an overarching occupational health and safety policy, to reduce potential occupational risks and the burden of stress in the work environment.

Leaders can enhance worker-stress coping mechanisms in the job environment and improve employees' psychological well-being by providing support through employee assistance and counseling programs, wellness facilities, work process improvements, and work systems modernization and optimization.

Future research could address a lack of generalizability in findings by expanding the scope and sample population of this study to include other organizations and managers within the specific industry observed in this research.

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