

Knowledge Stress and Knowledge Workers

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tion workers across jobs. They increase it when they organize people into interdependent work teams or install computer networks in the workplace, when they build advanced technology factories that flexibly produce a wide line of products, and when they empower workers, giving them discretion and responsibility, and then demand that workers participate in quality management. Leaders increase knowledge stress when they reengineer work or push for continuous improvement in every step of production.

The boundary between knowledge work and production work is eroding. Technicians (so-called gray collars) constitute the fastest-growing class of workers in the information age. They have substantial education and credentials, and leaders expect them to exercise knowledge and judgment. Most technicians have specialized training, many have four years of college, and an increasing number in health services, biotechnology, and electronics have advanced degrees. U. S. workers with broad job titles such as engineering technician, computer programmer, clinical laboratory technician, science technician, and paralegal already number 20 million. By 2005 it is estimated that they will represent one fifth of total employment.¹

Effective leaders understand that as they increase the learning and knowledge components of work they subject people to multiple, severe sources of stress. Each source alone is troubling; cumulatively they can be overwhelming. Knowledge stress decreases people's ability to focus and diminishes their performance. It can cause or aggravate a constellation of health problems. Competent leaders understand that the context of work has changed and that they need to alleviate and manage the following sources of stress: situational complexity, ambiguity, multiple sources of influence, temporary relationships, and vulnerable self-esteem.

Situational Complexity

Leaders and their staffs face turbulent, complex global situations each day. Forces around the globe interact, affecting product, market, and investment decisions. China may be opening or closing its markets; Japan may be softening or hardening its stand on trade; inflation may rise or fall; the Federal Reserve may tighten or loosen interest rates. This environmental complexity is compounded by the complexity of the options available to meet it. Leaders can select goals from among a wide array of possible markets, products, manufacturing methods, and financial arrangements. Often, as they pursue multiple goals, they belatedly discover that some goals are contradictory, such as getting a product to market early and producing it efficiently. Leaders may have to change their priorities in response to customer demands or competitors' actions. Leaders need continually to create and evaluate alternative products, prices, and markets. Rarely can they devise an option without facing

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Leaders involved in a competitive race for knowledge need to be aware of two fundamental factors that affect leadership in the late twentieth century. First, there is the incessant, almost frantic drive to acquire and use knowledge before one's competitors. This drive for speed produces a new kind of stress—knowledge stress. Leaders need to know the sources of knowledge stress so that they can manage its debilitating effects on learning and adaptation. The second critical factor is the character and attitudes of the workforce. Today's workforce consists of increasingly sophisticated thinkers and users of knowledge who have distinctive views and attitudes about the role of the leader, their work, and themselves. In this chapter, we first talk about the stresses of knowledge work: complexity, ambiguity, multiple influences, temporary relationships, and vulnerable self-esteem. We then explore the special characteristics and attitudes of knowledge workers: desire for freedom to question, independence and self-responsibility, quest for personal growth, and a concern for corporate morality.

THE SPREAD OF KNOWLEDGE STRESS

Knowledge stress is not exclusively a white-collar problem. It has spread to blue-collar work that is continually upgraded by organizations to include a heavier knowledge component. Leaders increase knowledge stress when they enrich production jobs or rotate produc-

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some undesirable side effects. Some options may increase debt and raise the firm's break-even point; some may require closing plants and laying off people; some may change the distribution system and arouse the resistance of dealers. Whatever leaders decide, the results will be affected by competitors pursuing their own goals and interests. Complexity escalates as people work on several projects simultaneously. While they work, projects change and new crises erupt continually. Effective leaders understand that people pay a heavy mental and emotional price as they try to juggle and adapt to this complexity.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is another component of knowledge stress. Often people cannot see how things fit together. One executive in a mid-sized electronics company described the ambiguity of identifying a stable product-market niche in his industry this way: "It's like searching for a black cat in a dark room when you're not sure that the cat is still in the room." In the new global competition, people face heightened ambiguity, and many leaders feel that they are chasing the black cat that may not be there. Leaders cannot definitely say that their actions are the sole cause, or the principal cause, of the results they measure. Some outcomes result from what they have done, but others may have occurred despite what they have done. Conjectures about cause and effect are riddled with ambiguities, amplifying leaders' stress when they have to make decisions in the future.

When Citibank's profits improved in 1993 after several years of huge losses, some people said that it was due to a change in leadership. Others said that leadership had eviscerated the bank by draconian layoffs and cuts in expenses. Some said that the low interest rates paid on deposits were the key because they gave the bank a low-cost source of funds. Others said that interest rates were not critical because loan volume was down. Others said that the key was the bank's ability to generate earnings by charging consumers high interest rates on credit-card debt. Still others said that it was the banking regulators' forbearance while the bank scrambled to obtain capital to improve its unacceptably low reserve position. Some said it was all of these factors plus others that they couldn't identify. Ambiguity like this forces leaders to make decisions as best they can with incomplete information and fuzzy concepts. Effective leaders understand that ambiguity is a major part of knowledge stress. They do not add to that stress by demanding that their staffs find certainty in simple cause-and-effect relationships that are unrealistic and may not even exist.

Multiple Influences

Many people with different interests see their leaders and their organization as targets to be influenced. Leaders need to collect and

understand the views of these different interests. The quality of decisions often depends on that knowledge. In addition to listening to their formal superior's, for example, leaders need to listen to high-level managers in other parts of the firm. They need to listen to functional specialists in marketing, production, and human resources; to customers, suppliers, and union officials; to regulatory agencies, legal advisers, and environmentalists. All these parties have, or claim to have, a right to influence decisions. The struggle to address and to balance these conflicting interests and claims is a major source of stress.

Temporary Relationships

People live on a merry-go-round of temporary relationships. Leaders expect people with knowledge to move to where they are needed, for as long as they are needed. Leaders and their people are expected quickly to form, and then to dissolve, task forces or project groups. Theoretically, they should be able to work effectively, instantaneously, in cross-functional design teams or production teams that disappear after a product is marketed. Everyone is supposed to know how to work in a disposable group, building and ending relationships with the ease of going through a revolving door. Downsizing should not trouble people; they are supposed to be cool and unaffected as they watch their careers disappear. People shield themselves from this miasma of emotional turmoil by not getting close to others. Inwardly, however, they pay a heavy price. They live with the anxiety of impermanence and imminent disposability. Effective leaders help people cope with these feelings by giving them an anchorage, a shelter from the storm of temporary relationships.

Vulnerable Self-Esteem

In knowledge-driven competition, people rise and fall with their ideas. Knowledge and insights have become people's primary contributions. Even the best people, however, occasionally propose poor ideas. Effective leaders have learned to separate their evaluation of an idea from their evaluation of the person who proposed it. Leaders know that when they reject an idea, the person who proposed it often feels that his or her self-esteem has been attacked. They carefully control people who persistently undermine the ideas of others and play a game of "one-upmanship." Poor leaders, however, turn underminers loose to taunt and intimidate people.

In sum, effective leaders understand that knowledge stress disrupts performance. They know that it is painful to their people and costly to their organization. They pay attention to the sources of knowledge stress and manage them so that people can continue to work effectively.

UNDERSTANDING KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

It is hard to lead if you do not understand whom you are leading. Effective leaders understand the concerns and attitudes of people who work with knowledge. The diffusion of knowledge across the organization and down to the factory floor is changing the attitudes and culture of the workforce. People who work with knowledge often seem obstreperous because they value freedom to question, independence and self-responsibility, personal growth, and corporate morality. Effective leaders understand and productively channel these attitudes; poor leaders misunderstand and attempt to suppress them.

Freedom to Question

People who work with knowledge want the freedom to ask questions. They prefer to use the discovery method: If you don't know, find out yourself by using your own reasoning ability. They like to develop their own theories and to invent their way out of a problem. They question the status quo and challenge authorities. They can be very confronting, pointing out discrepancies between what people say and what they do. They strongly believe that learning depends on being free to ask questions. They feel that it is reasonable to ask leaders to explain the rationale for their decisions.

Poor leaders feel that people with these attitudes are dangerous. They believe that people who ask questions or seek information, "that shouldn't concern them" can disrupt the organization. They suppress questioners and try to keep them under tight control. Effective leaders, in contrast understand these attitudes and rise to the questions. They use the challenges as springboards to involve the questioners in continually improving performance.

Self-Responsibility

People who work with knowledge expect to take responsibility for themselves. They see themselves as independent professionals trained through a strong code of internal standards and therefore as not needing supervision. Their knowledge, they believe, gives them the right to participate in decisions. It also gives them a heightened sense of responsibility, and duty, because they understand how easily things can go wrong. They often prefer to work in teams that are self-managing. They began taking self-responsibility at an early age, and they expect to be treated as responsible people after joining an organization. Poor leaders put such people in a double-bind. On one hand they demand that people take greater responsibility. On the other hand, they are ample on the need for self-responsibility by treating people as if they were irresponsible and unreliable. Effective leaders respect their independence and self-responsibility. They challenge people

by clearly defining goals and then saying, in so many words, "You are on your own; do what is necessary to make the project succeed."

Personal Growth

Some cynical leaders think that people should grow on their own time. People who work with knowledge, however, have tasted the excitement of learning, and they want opportunities for personal growth at work. They look for challenges that keep them alert. They want to stretch and learn. They have a continual need for education that feeds their hunger for new knowledge and skills. Effective leaders arrange for such people to attend at least one course or development program each year to expand their intellectual horizons and give them tasks that keep them intellectually sharp and that use their full capabilities. People who work with knowledge may complain about overwork, but deep down they relish the intellectual challenge. Poor leaders on the other hand, assign repetitive, unchallenging tasks to these people. They offer little support for external education and severely demotivate them.

Corporate Morality

People who work with knowledge are accustomed to handling concepts. They can see the big picture as well as its parts. They see organizations as part of a larger social fabric, and they are concerned about socially responsible leadership. They are wary of mischievous leaders who hide in a corporate cocoon of narrowly defined self-interest. They are appalled by leaders who conceal the dumping of toxic waste, knowingly pollute waterways, or exploit public lands; they are repelled by leaders who deny accountability for hazardous products or violate employee civil rights; they are angered by leaders who use financial manipulations and then walk away from catastrophic leveraged buyouts after sacrificing the livelihoods and savings of thousands of people.

People who have a significant component of knowledge in their work are especially attentive to the morality of leadership. They are embarrassed when leaders engage in deceptive practices or promote social inequities. Knowledge workers bring their theories of political economy and social justice to work. They know that corporate and government leaders are fallible and need guidance in controlling destructive practices and correcting injustices. They expect leaders to operate the organization legally and morally. Poor leaders say it's not one's business how they run their companies. They look aside when there is unethical behavior and shift blame when it is uncovered. Effective leaders accept responsibility and root out illegal and unethical behavior.

SUMMARY

Knowledge stress has become an important obstacle to performance. Creating and acquiring knowledge—that is, learning—increases knowledge stress and can decrease performance. Effective leaders understand and manage the sources of knowledge stress: complexity, ambiguity, multiple influences, temporary relationships, and vulnerable self-esteem.

Organizations are populated with a new type of worker—people accustomed to thinking, learning, using knowledge, and solving problems. Effective leaders understand that people who work with knowledge have special characteristics and attitudes. The knowledge workforce thrives on freedom to question, personal growth, self-responsibility, and corporate morality. They are demotivated by autocratic, controlling, socially indifferent leaders who misunderstand these characteristics.

The leader's role is a challenge because of the need to master the three elements of leadership—knowledge, trust, and power—and their interplay. All three components, of course, are present in each situation, but for analysis and discussion we have separated them. In Part I we have explored the knowledge component. Underlying our discussion there has been an implicit assumption that people trust their leaders and each other. Trust allows leaders to tap into the organization's distributed pools of knowledge and creates the commitment that leaders need for effective implementation. In Part II we focus on trust. What is it? How do leaders build it? What are its determinants?

II

TRUST

*The only way to make a man trustworthy is to trust him,
and the surest way to make him untrustworthy is to distrust him
and show your distrust.*

Henry L. Stimson