



Workplace Satisfaction Project Stress Management Tools

A 2020 survey indicates that NPS employee stress levels are at or near a historic high. Unprecedented levels of commitments and challenges, increasing workplace complexities, short staffing levels, and leadership challenges, among other factors, tend to take their toll on highly-committed and dedicated employees.

Historically, part of NPS culture has been to rely on such dedication to 'expect the extraordinary as the baseline'. The complexity of the modern workplace means that consistent extraordinary performance is much too stressful and too taxing to maintain. Employees at all levels of the organization must be cognizant of, and proactively manage, their own work-related stress levels so that they are not taking more out of the 'energy piggy bank' than they are putting in every day. Burnout and disengagement is the only possible result when stress becomes chronic; no matter how strong the individual, no human can successfully endure unmitigated ongoing stress.

In addition to taking care of themselves, each employee should promote a culture of looking out for others and holding them accountable for their own stress and well-being. As an organization, we must address the problem proactively before it becomes a cascading disengagement problem.

- Employees should recognize the causes of workplace stress, and help address them when they are identified. They frequently include:
 - Feeling like you have little or no control over your work
 - Lack of recognition or reward for good work
 - Unclear or overly demanding job expectations
 - Doing work that's monotonous or unchallenging
 - Working in a chaotic or high-pressure environment
 - Lack of necessary resources and skillsets
 - Poor management practices
 - Poor change management
 - Working too much, without enough time for socializing or relaxing
- Employees should recognize signs of stress and overwork. They may be physical, psychological, and/or behavioral, and may include:
 - Anxiousness, irritability, restlessness, depression, anger
 - Pessimism
 - Fatigue, sleep problems
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Headaches, stomach aches, muscle tension
 - Social withdrawal
 - Reduced performance and productivity
 - Problematic drug or alcohol use
- Employees should also recognize signs of "burnout", which is not the same as stress. Burnout is what happens when stress goes on so long, the employee cannot successfully cope with it anymore by the means available to them. Whereas stress is 'too much' (too much worry, too much stimulus, too many racing thoughts), burnout is 'not enough' (no more motivation, no more engagement, no more care, no more feeling). In some cases, this may be a psychological or behavioral emergency. Signs of burnout may include:
 - Significant detachment and self-isolation
 - Significant lack of focus and concentration

- o Significantly flat affect, no outward sign of emotion except fatigue
 - o Feelings of helplessness, loss of sense of self, being trapped, being out of control
 - o Significant lack of interest or engagement
 - o Nose-diving performance and productivity
- Managers should be watchful for each of the above signs in their employees and address the causes when possible. This may include:
 - o Ensuring each employee feels supported and has the necessary tools to do their job successfully and safely
 - o Giving employees greater autonomy and control over their work
 - o Ensuring that job expectations and roles are clear
 - o Providing frequent recognition and positive feedback for good work
- Each employee must strive to achieve a positive, effective work-life balance, in which work and personal lives are reasonably separate and distinct. This will look different for everyone. While many NPS employees are energized and inspired by their work, they should not make the mistake of over-committing to the work side of the work-life balance – it will inevitably result in overstress and underperformance.
 - The ‘energy piggy bank’ is a key tool for stress management. Activities or events that cause stress are withdrawals from the piggy bank, as the individual needs the energy to engage coping mechanisms and keep pushing forward; activities or events that are relaxing or pleasant are deposits into the piggy bank, and are a primary means of building a strong barrier of resilience against stress. As long as the withdrawals made from the ‘energy piggy bank’ do not exceed the deposits made in the course of the employee’s life (whether personal life, work life, or a combination), the balance should remain positive.
 - Highly committed employees should strive to separate their identity and sense of self from their job, and cultivate a healthy personal sense of self that has no connection to their work.
 - ‘Do More With Less’ has proven itself a toxic, highly stressful concept at all levels within the NPS. All employees should steer clear of identifying with the concept, or giving it a voice.
 - Conflict is often a significant workplace stressor. Employees developing and practicing conflict management skills will contribute to reducing this particular source of stress.
 - Flexibility in the workplace – in scheduling, reasonable accommodation, adaptive strategies, etc – is a key stress reduction tactic.
 - Each employee should be aware of, and practice the concepts of, resiliency. It is not about developing ‘hard armor’ that can deal with any stress or trauma and leave the employee unscathed. Rather, it is about taking care of oneself so that when stress or trauma occurs, the employee has built up enough of a ‘buffer’ to deal with the stress without allowing it to cut too deep. Resiliency buffers are built by taking time off, managing expectations wisely, and building a separate, healthy sense of self outside the workplace.
 - Oftentimes in the NPS, stress can occur when employees feel that they are distant from the resource they are working for, or distant from the NPS Mission. Managers should make time for employees to re-connect with the resource, and ensure that performance management includes a link between the employee’s work and the Mission.
 - Employee ‘Mission Drive’ is a huge organizational asset, but only if it is kept healthy and productive, and not overworked to the point of stress or burnout.
 - Employee well-being should be treated as a nonrenewable resource, and protected.
 - A major step in reducing stress on overworked employees may be an objective assessment of operational obligations and commitments. Some may be vital, some may be useful, but some may be of questionable value. Each team, park, or office can list and prioritize perceived work commitments, and collaboratively identify what the obligations truly are, listed from most important to least. Then it can be a matter of identifying what resources the workgroup has to dedicate to the obligations and planning accordingly. There will be a line beyond which the resources are inadequate to deal with additional obligations; this line can mark the boundary of effective and efficient resource allocation. Employees have limits; recognizing and honoring those limits, and consciously seeking to work within them, will reduce stress.