

## State of Mind – February 2008

The American Psychological Association has completed an extensive study on stress in America; their survey report states: “stress is taking a toll on people — contributing to health problems, poor relationships and lost productivity at work...Money and work continue as the leading causes of stress for three quarters of Americans.” The study goes on to cite the following statistics:

“Nearly half of all Americans report that stress has a negative impact on both their personal and professional lives. About one-third (31 percent) of employed adults have difficulty managing work and family responsibilities and 35 percent cite jobs interfering with their family or personal time as a significant source of stress. Stress causes more than half of Americans (54 percent) to fight with people close to them. One in four people report that they have been alienated from a friend or family member because of stress, with 8 percent connecting stress to divorce or separation.”

As various pressures mount on employers and employees, the chance that various forms of negative behaviors may arise does increase. While poor work habits that decrease productivity (and profitability) are obvious concerns, more disturbing attitudes and actions are being seen. Now, more alarming trends are being seen that include various forms of hostility that sometimes escalate into physical aggression. Employers cannot ignore any of the forces having an adverse impact on the company and its workers.

With increasing financial pressures caused by things such as increasing gas prices and falling home costs, most people are left with the sense that they are losing control. It seems that no matter where small business owners turn, we are faced with trying to find ways to maintain profitability while being squeezed with higher costs and demands that we charge less for our services. The dilemma is similar for employees. It becomes frustrating when you cannot find a realistic target to blame.

Obviously, such demands create stress and this may lead to anxiety and depression. In spite of strides made in decreasing the stigma about admitting to emotional problems, there is still great resistance to seeking help. Based upon TV ads, promises are made that taking a pill will cure what ails you. Not so true. Medications are a piece of the puzzle and their singular usefulness has been

grossly oversold by the pharmaceutical industry and the professionals who prescribe them. Consistent with the American preference for easy fixes, this is a route taken by too many. Health insurance programs do not pay for psychotherapy/counseling and even if they did, many mental health professionals do not get it; they must deal with real life issues demanding real life solutions, not just encourage self-awareness or seek to reduce symptoms. It is essential that each individual be viewed as part of a complex system that demands the development of coping skills, which in turn demands effort and a commitment to personal responsibility.

There are no pills or quick fixes to address the rising tide of anger seen in the workplace. Regaining a sense of control is critical to addressing the threats to comfort and safety. People who feel that bad things are happening to them and that they cannot do anything are likely to exhibit fear and frustration. When someone raises concerns and these seem to be dismissed, this will inflame the sense of resentment. Employers who feel their concerns are dismissed by bureaucrats and financial institutions are as prone to outbursts as the employee who feels disrespected. Corporate cultures become dysfunctional as options seem limited and the sense of helplessness becomes the overriding theme influencing everyone.

To stem the tide of disruption, it may first behoove folks to read what is commonly known as the "Serenity Prayer" for a realistic perspective. Focus on what can be realistically **controlled** and realize the **change** may be painful at first. It is necessary to realize that **interdependence** is key to maintaining a thriving environment. This will be enhanced by showing **mutual respect** to all with whom you work whether this is demonstrated toward a coworker, supervisor or subordinate. The **genuine feeling** that you are **understood, respected** and **cared** about will minimize the likelihood of letting negativism poison the state of mind of today's businesses.

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As a small business owner, I feel the obligation to provide health insurance to those who cannot find coverage through another family member. Unfortunately, this has become the single largest expense in our budget aside from payroll. Increasing deductibles helped reduced premiums, but we have not found any other ways to cut the costs of this moral imperative. Governor Manchin has offered some hope, but there is a hitch: you have to be without insurance for a

year in order to qualify to participate in the state offered plan. There needs to be a better way!

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It is interesting to revisit some TRUTHS about “working *on* versus working *in*” one’s business. Recently given the task of putting 5-year goals on paper has reminded me the value of this seemingly simple task especially with regard to setting measurable targets for performance. It forms the basis for all actions and is as essential as establishing a fiscal budget. Benchmarks arising from this specific effort will allow others to know where the company is going and create a sense of purpose that is critical to a healthy culture.