



AGRIBUSINESS MANAGEMENT

THE MANAGER UNDER STRESS

A few nights ago I was watching the evening news on TV. This particular network had pulled together a brief news report on the impact that rising unemployment and recession were having on the "average American's paycheck." This network chose the hypothesis that economic instability and recession were mirrored in the minds of men via emotional instability and mental depression. To test this hypothesis, network reporters conducted a series of random interviews with corporate executives, industrial psychologists, and some of the more recent additions to the ranks of the unemployed. While the interview process and the results obtained could hardly be categorized as "scientific," there was little doubt in the mind of this TV observer that *stress in the business community was positively correlated with the Dow-Jones Index.*

Stress, and the emotional havoc it can cause, has always been as much a part of the modern agribusiness industry as the annual balance sheet and profit and loss statement. It affects the younger person who is striving to advance up the management ladder. It affects the middle-aged executive who confronts, for the first time, the possibility that his professional career may have reached its peak. And, of course, it does not leave unaffected the person who has already made it to the top, but who must now learn to survive in an economy which no longer abides by old rules and practices, and which seems to be running at a pace almost out of control. When considering the usual social and family affairs plus the uncertainties and

pressures of his business, stress is virtually unavoidable for the agribusiness manager.

Regarding the latter item, 1975 was extremely difficult for the average agribusiness manager. Supplies were often difficult to obtain. If they could be obtained, each shipment was accompanied by a revised price list. Processors were forced to pay record high prices for many row crops and most feed grains. Ever-rising fuel prices had a particularly devastating effect on the transportation sector. And finally, the livestock industry was on the skids due to the rapid rise in feed costs, accompanied with beef prices at the farm gate dropping to one-half that of just a year earlier. No sector of the industry was left unaffected, and 1974 was truly a year of high stress, i.e., a real ulcer creator.

How Do You Identify Stress?

The above suggests that stress is an unfortunate, but unavoidable, part of a manager's life. And, it has been suggested that the year 1974 was generally conducive to more stress than usual. In view of the above, there is little the modern agribusiness manager can do to escape from stress. What is important, then, is that: 1) he is able to identify stress when he confronts it, and 2) he has or is willing to develop the ability to cope with it. These are important because the very personality traits that are indicative of a successful manager -- his drive, combativeness, and an emphasis on individual strength and superior abilities -- make it extremely difficult for him to recognize stress before it gets too great and even harder for him to seek assistance when it is required.

There are some signs of warning, however, which will assist the manager to identify stress. Generally speaking, the existence of any one of these signs is not adequate in and of itself to create stress of damaging proportions. Yet the existence of several signs over an extended period of time should be taken as a serious warning. Here are the eight warning signs as they might relate to your business. Each is preceded by a brief illustration of how such signs are perceived within a business environment.

Joe has managed the retail fertilizer outlet for eight years now. Prior to becoming manager, he was employed in various other positions within the firm. He knows every single aspect of the business and insists that all decisions, no matter how minor, be cleared through him before implementation. Even if Joe is out of town for a day or two, he will be calling into the office at least three times a day to make sure all is running smoothly. Even though his firm employs specialists in each of these areas, Joe insists that he be involved in the development of all new programs in sales, promotion, credit, and distribution. Joe always puts in a ten-hour day and always seems to have a line of people waiting outside his office.

Sign 1: Are you willing to delegate authority to your subordinates or do you insist on making every decision yourself? Remember, if you display a lack of confidence in others it may mean that you lack confidence in yourself; i.e., you fear superior performance by subordinates as being a threat to your managerial position.

Mike is a terribly likeable guy. As the manager of a local trucking company, he has shown tremendous concern for his workers. Perhaps as a result of this concern, Mike has delayed making several major decisions as they relate to the necessary updating of his equipment. Mike is particularly fearful of those decisions, which appear to be irreversible. At the slightest sign of concern by his workers, Mike will

reverse a decision and seek further guidance before proceeding. As a result of his reluctance to make a solid commitment, the local lending institution is threatening to withdraw Mike's line of credit and the operating efficiency of the company is continuing to drop.

Sign 2: Are you able to make a firm decision after a reasonable amount of deliberation? If it is your habit to backtrack often and feel unduly insecure about your decisions, this may be the result of deep-seated anxiety about your own abilities.

Ralph manages a local farm supply cooperative which relies heavily on retail petroleum sales. Ralph is well known around town to be the most energetic man alive. He never seems to stop running. As he moves from the store out to the gas pumps, he is nearly in a full run. His whole philosophy in life is based on a "full speed ahead" approach. As the demands of his growing business increase, Ralph tries to run a little faster and, as a result, he never seems to have the time to stop for a moment and think about what is happening all around him. He is falsely convinced that he remains in full control of the firm and that hard work and long hours will always be the keys to a successful future.

Sign 3: Are you able to pause occasionally and objectively appraise your own performance? Or, do you wear a pair of emotional "blinders," which restrict your view of your own strengths and weaknesses.

Jim is the sales and distribution manager for a large vegetable processor. He has been in the business for a long time and has become more-or-less set in his ways. He takes great pride in telling about his past experiences and accomplishments. Unfortunately, many of his subordinates no longer feel free to go to Jim with

their ideas, concerns, and problems. Jim has a tendency to convey to others the feeling that he is much too busy to talk about their trivial matters. If a conversation does ensue, it's strictly a one-way discussion with Jim doing most of the talking.

Sign 4: Are you willing to take the necessary time to listen to others? Too often managers feel that by virtue of their position they must dominate all discussions. This tendency will only constrain your career to a narrow scope of growth and understanding while placing you in an overly aggressive mood.

Bob has always been known to be somewhat "touchy." He supervises a group of 22 men and women packers and sorters in a fruit warehouse. He knows his business well and maintains relatively good relations with his workers. He has a great deal of pride in both his job and his accomplishments. Yet, unfortunately, this pride is sometimes carried to an extreme and Bob has been known to react badly to most forms of criticism. Even good-natured jabs by his colleagues will sometimes throw him into a defensive mood. Serious criticism will sometimes force Bob into such a depression that his work will actually suffer for weeks at a time.

Sign 5: Do you have the ability to ignore the occasional barbs of sharpshooters and unkind critics whose intent it is to belittle both you and your business? If these attacks cause you to lose your self-control, this form of stress has placed you into a position of defensiveness and will result in a further loss of self-esteem.

A. J. "Pistol" Perkins is the parts manager for a large hardware and farm machinery dealership. His nickname was no accident. Mr. Perkins is a hothead who has a tendency to "go off" with the slightest provocation. His temper is almost legendary, but of late it has become noticeably worse. Parts

for agricultural equipment are now in very short supply and backorders are growing with every passing day. Pistol is in a natural position to receive customer's complaints about the lack of parts. Just recently Pistol lost his temper in the presence of several customers and two of his bin boys. It resulted in the immediate resignation of one employee and the probable loss of some customers.

Sign 6: Are you able to "keep your cool" when dealing with your customers or subordinates or do you habitually blow your stack in response to minor irritants? If you do have a tendency to let off steam in the direction of those who work for you, stress has already generated a deep-seated anger, which may even have its source outside the office.

Leo is the plant manager for a regional dairy-processing firm. Leo's attitude is "strictly business." He comes to work every day, does his job, and leaves. Even though he was hired into his present position about five years ago, no one seems to really know anything about Leo. Leo does not discuss his personal life or his hobbies while on the job. Even the assistant plant manager knows little about where Leo lives or what he does away from the office. On occasion, Leo will make a special attempt not to establish any form of friendship with his workers. He rarely shares his worries with anyone. For example, labor efficiency in the plant has declined in recent months and overtime costs have risen. However, Leo, alone, will carry the sole burden of responsibility.

Sign 7: Do you have a truly personal relationship with at least two or three of your employees or do you remain totally aloof and withdrawn while on the job? Many would argue that mixing friendship with business could result in the loss of both. At the same time, however, I would suggest that the manager who insists on being an "emotional loner" in the office will

find himself to be in a very precarious psychological position -- one most conducive to stress.

Milt is a very devoted company man. He has worked as the credit manager for a medium-sized chemical distributor for almost ten years. He is always willing to make personal sacrifices on behalf of his job. He spends a great deal of time out of town visiting retail outlets throughout the state. Even when Milt is in town, you will often find him working at the office in the evening hours. His colleagues were little surprised to learn that Milt was midway through his second divorce. No one can even recall seeing Milt in public with his family. For all practical purposes, Milt's job is his whole life.

Sign 8: Are you able to place your job aside in favor of your family and your hobbies? If not, you may be using your job as an escape from your domestic and personal responsibilities.

Alternative Reactions

Each of us has experienced one or more of these signs during our professional lives. The well-adjusted manager will recognize each of the danger signs and will cope with problems before a crisis is reached. To cope, this manager may seek assistance from his wife, his close friends, or others. In search of a solution and peace of mind, he will share his concerns with others. With their understanding, he will actually learn to enjoy his role in business. And finally, his enjoyment will be appreciated by his customers, his family, and by those with whom he works.

A poorly adjusted, immature manager will react to stress in a different manner. He will often deny that serious problems exist even though they are all too obvious to others. He will insist that he is in complete control of the situation even as the business continues to deteriorate. In the process, he will become a likely candidate for a coronary or incur other physical or

psychological ailments. Typically he may eat and drink to an excess, sleep far too little and, in an effort to prove his worth and vitality, work himself far beyond the limits of his effectiveness.

If the preceding discussions remind you of someone you know, it's not too surprising. Our industry, like all others, will find in its ranks a large number of managers suffering in various degrees from the stress of their positions. Some will be only periodically afflicted and the majority will recover so as to lead more-or-less normal lives. But unfortunately, some will succumb to the pressures and drop from the ranks, emotionally broken and physically depleted. This is truly a loss as many of these people have credible managerial abilities. How might they have been saved? I offer no cure-all prescription -- only a few common-sense suggestions.

How Does One Cope?

Most industrial psychologists agree that the first critical step in learning to cope with conditions of stress is **admitting that such conditions exist**. The fear of failure is so great in the minds of some managers that as soon as the going gets rough, they immediately begin to build up a false facade of prosperity and contentment. Soon the fear of failure and the stress factors begin to take their toll. Hence, my first suggestion is that managers must become more open and vocal about their problems. This is not to say that you should bare your soul to each and every customer that walks into your business. However, if you are concerned about rising accounts receivable, share this concern with those customers asking for an extension of credit. If you are experiencing difficulty securing supplies, make sure the supplier is aware of the consequences you're faced with. And, if margins and profits are suffering from an inflationary economy, do not try to keep it a secret from your Board of Directors.

My second major suggestion is to **introduce more balance into your life**. As the pressures of business rise, you

should deliberately take more time to relax or develop new interests or hobbies. An avocation is vital for the manager in his 40's or 50's. This holds true particularly for the manager who has had to accept a somewhat limited role in business. The avocation not only gives relaxation, but also provides a much-needed feeling of achievement.

My third suggestion is to **recognize the mid-life crisis**. Often the realization that what he is experiencing is not unique provides enough reassurance for the manager to seek the help he needs. One executive profile is classic: i.e., the senior executive over 40 who finds himself in an emotional squirrel cage after he comes to the realization that he has gone up the ladder in business as far as he can go. His earlier dreams have been dented or never fully realized. For the first time in his life he sees retirement in the offing and the thought is frightening. His children have left home or as teenagers they are slipping beyond his control. His wife has lost her youthfulness and suddenly he feels old. This is characterized as the mid-life crisis and is often accompanied by a general loss of energy and emotional depression. At this point, Dr. Barrie S. Greiff, a psychiatrist and instructor at the Harvard Business School, suggests that the manager make an effort to view the more positive aspects of this period of a man's life. For example, Greiff argues that a man who is well adjusted to his career and can accept his position in life provides a unique, almost unbiased, view of the business.

General good judgment often accompanies middle-age because the domestic concerns associated with a growing family have diminished. Finally, the chance to look ahead to a totally new and enjoyable life style under retirement should be considered.

My fourth suggestion for dealing more effectively with stress is to **ignore all happiness formulas**. All too often, a manager under stress will look with great envy to a friend or a colleague who appears to really enjoy life. It's only natural to seek his advice or inquire as to the secret of his happiness. The answer received will often lie within a strong avocation, a carefree personality, or perhaps religion. With the knowledge of this happiness formula, the manager now tries to reconstruct his life style to approximate that of his always-cheerful friend. The results are usually unpleasant. Every person possesses a unique bundle of emotional components. As a result, each person must discover his own unique method for coping with stress. Happiness and contentment are not formula generated. So as the stress begins to build, don't waste your time searching for patented solutions. Even the contents of this paper are offered only as "guidelines" and are not meant to be viewed as a faultless prescription for stress avoidance.

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