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How Palestinian managers cope with stress

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Abstract

Purpose – The main purpose of this paper is to identify the primary and crucial stressors that Palestinian employees encounter, and in turn design appropriate stress management and prevention strategies that will promote healthy organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey questionnaire was utilized for collecting data from 400 originations (response rate 77 percent). SPSS (version 12) was used mainly for paired samples *t*-test after transforming and recoding the personality type scale to the same format of the work environment conditions. The Cronbach's alpha test was used for questions 13, 14 to ensure the reliability.

Findings – The differences in employees' personality types, and their stress coping styles, are the primary stressors. Palestinian personality type A, a major factor, largely influenced by living conditions. Employees in the private sector experience more stress than those in public or NGO sectors. Prevention strategies are needed to improve coping skills against the demanding conditions.

Practical implications – Prevention strategies are needed to focus on the employees and improve their coping skills against the demanding conditions through initiatives such as employee assistance programs (EAPs). At a national level, collaboration among industry, labor, universities and ministries is needed to form an occupational health and safety institute to conduct research and monitor the stress in private and public organizations.

Originality/value – This is one of the first empirical studies of organizational stress and prevention strategies in Palestinian organizations. It is valuable to researchers, senior managers, and policy developers for managerial and organizational development in developing countries and conflict regions.

Keywords Palestine, Employees, Managers, Stress

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Work-induced stress, a universal phenomenon, affects many individuals in a variety of working environments. Nowadays, managers, in the course of their daily work, are more likely to experience stress (Analoui, 1993, Analoui and Kakabadse, 2000, Kakabadse *et al.*, 2004):

Too much stress at work can break down a manager's physical and emotional systems, causing mistakes, accidents, reduced performance, absenteeism, dissatisfaction and illness (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2004, p. 31).

The USA provides a good example, in which one-third of its workforce report that their jobs are "often" or "always" stressful (Murphy and Sauter, 2003). Work-related stress is



not unique to the Western world; developing countries too experience their share of stress and strain, which adversely affects their effectiveness (Analoui, 1999).

The conflict in Palestine has undoubtedly contributed to the creation of both life and work-related stress. According to the *Palestinian Human Development Report* (2004, p. 40):

The military conflict and the continued occupation have resulted in the chronic suffering of victims living a never-ending tragedy. When discussing quantitative indicators that describe such victims, it is imperative to mention their broken dreams, their unaccomplished projects and their uncertain future.

Despite the acknowledgement of the presence of the factors related to the creation of stress, Palestinian organizations are not fully aware of the significance of this issue and are thus neglecting its human and financial consequences.

Since, occupational stress is recognized as a social problem, stress management has become an important and urgent need for many organizations (Mizuno *et al.*, 2006). According to Kalia (2002), an estimate of The World Health Organization (WHO) Global Burden of Disease Survey shows that mental health disease, including stress-related disorders, will be the second leading cause of disabilities by the year 2020. This paper, following an introductory discussion and a brief review of the literature on stress and its typology, deals with the scope and objectives of a recent study which aims to identify stress factors in Palestinian organizations. The discussions in this paper point to the necessity for the Palestinians organizations to gain early recognition of work place stress and for employers to allocate more resources to stress management in the workplace.

What is work-related stress? A brief overview

Williams and Huber (1986, p. 243) define stress as:

[...] a psychological and physical reaction to prolonged internal and/or environmental conditions in which an individual's adaptive capabilities are overextended.

Matteson and Ivancevich (1979) refer to stress as personal or internal experience creating a physiological or psychological inequity within the individual. Stress is also defined as:

[...] the pattern of emotional states and physiological reactions occurring in response to demands from within or outside an organization (stressors) (Greenberg and Baron, 2003 p. 122).

Karasek and Theorell (1990) provide the demand control model of job stress. Consequently job stress results from a combination of high levels of workload demands, and low levels of autonomy and control over the job. Lazarus (1990) also states that a stress relationship exists when demands exceed an individual's resources. Schuler (1982, p. 6) provides a definition of stress based on a review of other definitions as "a perceived dynamic state involving uncertainty about something important." The dynamic state can be related to demands, opportunities or constraints.

According to Robbins (2001) stress is associated with constraints and demands. Constraints are the forces that prevent individuals from doing what they desire and demands refer to the loss of something desired, thus impacting on their effectiveness (Analoui, 2007). However, for potential stress to become actual stress, individuals must

feel that outcomes are important and uncertain. Stress is highest for those who perceive that there is doubt about the outcomes they seek to achieve and when the outcomes are considered important to them. Several authors point out that stress level is determined by an individual's perception of the situation rather than the situation itself (McGrath, 1976; Schuler, 1982; Williams and Huber, 1986; Robbins, 2001). It is contended that stressful work conditions are associated with employee tardiness, increased absenteeism, lower productivity, high labor turnover, and thus a waste of the investment made in their training and the cost of training new employees to replace those who quit. Moreover, more sick days will be claimed, more depression will result and the possibility of hurting ones-self and others will increase (Murphy, 1984; Motowildo *et al.*, 1986; Williams and Huber, 1986; Farrell and Stamm, 1988; Daniels, 1996; Buchanan and Huczynski, 1997; Arnold *et al.*, 1998). Besides working condition, it is also believed that that the personality types (A and B) can act as primary stressors. Since the relationship between the personality type and stress constitute the core of present study there is a need for further explanations here. In the next section, the background to personality types and their implications for coping with stress will be reviewed.

Individual differences and types A and B

Matteson and Ivancevich (1979) emphasize that individual differences in reactions to stressors are important and must not be underestimated as each employee has a slightly different vulnerability range. In their model of organizational stress research, they present individual differences as moderators where personality moderates the relationship between organizational stressors and outcomes. Based on their conceptual model, they suggest several proposals for future research, which include individual differences that incorporate personality and demographic variables. They state that different individuals will react differently to the same set of organizational stressors.

While Matteson and Ivancevich (1979) consider personality factors as moderators for stress, others consider them as a source of stress (Buchanan and Huczynski, 1997; Robbins, 2001; NIOSH, n.d.), in addition to other sources, including organizational and environmental sources. Price (1982) emphasizes the need to observe type A patterns in populations other than those that have been extensively studied. The author provides a theoretically-based conceptual model that is based on a cognitive social learning model that identifies factors in the person and in the environment that encourage the maintenance of the type A pattern. Identifying these factors helps devise successful treatment intervention programs that bring about change in type A behavior. Price (1982), in her cognitive social learning model for examining type A behavior, emphasizes the four sources of influence on type A personalities, namely; behavior, environmental conditions, physiological variables and cognitive factors. Cognitive factors are the prevailing socio-cultural values and beliefs that are communicated through family, schools and the mass media. Cognitive factors also include personal beliefs and related fears such as the belief of having scarce resources which creates a competitive spirit or that universal justice may not exist and it becomes up to the individual to personally ensure justice for him/herself. Accordingly, these kinds of beliefs set the stage for the observable features of the type A pattern. Buchanan and Huczynski (1997, p. 139) typically state that:

[...] other psychologists argue that personality is determined by environmental, cultural and social factors. This implies that our feelings and behavior patterns are learned and shaped through our experience of living and interacting with other people in society.

Analoui (1993) and Kakabadse *et al.* (2000) comment that this belief may hold partial truth about the sources for human behavior. A variety of prevention techniques have been suggested to minimize stress and its symptoms.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) (n.d.) publication, views differ on the significance of worker characteristics such as personality type versus work environment conditions as primary causes of job stress. Accordingly, if the workers characteristics are the primary causes, then prevention strategies should focus on workers and on developing coping mechanisms that would allow for easier management of demanding conditions. On the other hand, if work environment conditions are the primary cause of stressors, then job redesign will be the primary prevention strategy (Murphy, 1988; Dewe, 1994; Maslach, 2003).

Scope and objectives of the study

The main purpose of this research was to identify the primary and crucial stressors that Palestinian employees encounter and in turn design appropriate stress management and prevention strategies that will promote healthy organizations. Assessment of employees' perception of work environment conditions and personality factors is required in order to determine the risk of stressors on employees' health and behavior. Moreover, this research was intended to build awareness about work stressors and the need to secure Palestinian top management's commitment to stress reduction and prevention programs.

The research particularly intended to achieve the following objectives:

- Assess whether respondents' perception of stress is more related to work environmental factors or their personality type.
- Identify the percentage of Palestinian employees who have stress prone personalities and question the extent to which the respondents' personalities were shaped by the consequences of experiencing the unusual and difficult context and conditions of life in Palestine.
- Decide whether individual and organizational stress management interventions do exist, and if so evaluate if they are sufficient for the reduction of the negative influence of stressors on Palestinian employees

Methodological considerations

This exploratory study was aimed at not only discovering the types of stressors but also at gaining better understanding and comprehension of the nature of the problem in the Palestinian context. It is the only study of its kind that has been conducted in Palestine. The study was conducted over a period of 12 months. It began by testing the existence of perception differences amongst the respondents towards how central personality type and work environment conditions as stressors are, as well as identifying any adopted interventions by Palestinian organizations or employees to manage and reduce stress.

A questionnaire was designed and piloted by a group of experts ($n = 24$) for content evaluation and face validity. It consisted of 24 questions. The first part (questions 1-11)

was in reference to respondents' biographical data and employment information. The second part was related to diagnosing personality type and work environment conditions as stressors and the adopted interventions followed by employers to manage work stress. Those respondents who did not suffer from work stress were asked to stop completing the questionnaire after question 17. However, those who did suffer from work-related stress were requested to complete the questionnaire in its entirety (question 24) in order to enable us to determine the level of stress, its influence on their health and the individually adopted interventions used by respondents to manage and reduce their stress.

An internal reliability test (Cronbach's alpha) was used for questions 13, which provides insight into the respondents' various personality type; and 14 which measured the respondents' perception of work environment stressors. The results obtained were 0.6978 and 0.8085 respectively, which indicated an accepted level of goodness of measure. Most researchers consider an alpha above 0.70 to be an acceptable level to which to measure the scale reliability (Nunnally, 1978; Sekaran, 2003). Whether most respondents tend to have personality type A, which is stress prone, or type B was assessed in question 13. This scale consisted of a seven-item bipolar scale of eight points and was originally adapted from Bortner (1966) and found in Gordon (1999, p. 64). A revised version of the Bortner Scale was used in a previous research of Chinese oil workers (Chen *et al.*, 2003). Question 14 is a 17-item neutral Likert scale of five categories that shows the degree of agreement or disagreement with regard to work environment factors that are mentioned in the literature to precipitate the feeling of work stress in respondents. These items included things like management support and recognition, workload, incentives, family/life balance, job security, role ambiguity, communication, fairness, job nature and design, and relationships with colleagues. The scale was designed by the researcher after a literature review was performed on the topic from a number of different sources.

Sample and analysis

A multi-stage disproportionate stratified random sampling method was employed. The population was first divided into meaningful segments of different organizations, private, non-profit and public, and a disproportionate number of organizations were selected from each strata. The questionnaire was then distributed to a disproportionate number of employees working at different levels in each selected organization. The questionnaire was distributed to 400 employees and 310 were returned for analysis and evaluation. The response rate was 77.5 percent and that was as a result of the continuous follow up. Analysis was carried out using the SPSS software version 12, where the researcher mainly used paired samples *t*-test after transforming and recoding the personality type scale to the same format of the work environment conditions' scale to answer the research's major question.

Respondents' biographical data

Most respondents are between the ages of 20-40 (85 percent). The majority are male respondents (62.5 percent), while female respondents are (37.5 percent). Most of them are married (55 percent) and (74 percent) have either no dependents or one to three dependents. The majority of the sample (71 percent) earns an individual monthly income that is less than \$1,000 (or 4,500 New Israeli Shekel (NIS)). Around 86 percent of

respondents are educated with a bachelor degree or higher. The majority work for private companies (54 percent) and those who work for the public sector and the NGO sector are (26 percent) and (20 percent) respectively. Most respondents are employees (97 percent) and non-owners. The mean of work experience is eight years and they occupy a wide range of jobs such as computer programmers, engineers, administrators, managers, etc. The commute to work for the majority (67 percent) is less than half an hour.

Findings and discussion

The results revealed that 71 percent of the total respondents" (310) reported that in general they suffer from work-related stress and, of those who report stress, 46 percent believe that they experience high levels of work stress while 16 percent felt that they suffer from extensive work-related stress. Only 38 percent mention that the work stress they experience is average. The majority of those who feel stressed (87 percent) perceive that their feeling of stress is internally caused in relation to the job and work organization such as their relationships with their superiors, poor communication, work conditions, salary and colleagues. On the other hand, 12 percent indicate that their feeling of stress is a result of external causes such as personal conditions, family, economic and political factors. The result of the analysis shows the opposite where job and work conditions had less influence on respondents' feeling of stress than did personality type, as shown in the following discussion.

Personality type is a crucial stressor

Following the transformation of the scale that measures personality type from eight categories to five categories similar to the work environment conditions scale, and after testing the hypothesis, which assumed that there is no difference between personality and work environment conditions as primary stressors for Palestinian employees using a paired sample *t*-test, the null hypothesis is rejected as the level of significance (two-tailed) is equal to 0.0001 which is < 0.05 . The alternative hypothesis is accepted as there is a difference between personality type (stressor 1) and work environment conditions (stressor 2) as primary stressors to Palestinian employees where personality type with a mean of 3.38 (towards personality A) seems to be more crucial than work environment conditions with a mean of 3.04.

The analyses of the data indicate that the personality type of respondents is a primary stressor. Table I shows that only 28.6 percent of respondents who answered this question (297) tended to have personality type B and the majority 71.4 percent tended to have personality type A, a stress prone personality. Out of the A personality type, 51.5 percent scored 120 or above on this test which means an A + personality type where they experience a very high level of stress.

In reference to work environment conditions as a source of stress 45.3 percent of total respondents (264) show agreement that work conditions including work environment, management support and recognition, job security, role ambiguity, colleagues, routine, delegation, communication, equity, noise, excessive work load and other factors are all sources of stress. A total of 2.7 percent were neutral and the majority of the respondents (52 percent) indicate their disagreement with statements that are related to the existing work environment conditions as a source of stress. The mean on this 17-item five-point Likert scale, which measures the degree of agreement

Personality type	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
<i>Valid</i>				
Less than 90 B	55	17.7	18.5	18.5
90-99 B +	30	9.7	10.1	28.6
100-105 A –	13	4.2	4.4	33.0
106-119 A	46	14.8	15.5	48.5
120 and more A +	153	49.4	51.5	100.0
Total	297	95.8	100.0	
<i>Missing system</i>				
Total	13	4.2		
	310	100.0		

Table I.

Personality type A or B

Source: Data analysis

on work environment conditions as sources of stress, is 3.04 (almost neutral). The highest dissatisfaction is from the lack of incentives and recognition. The results are indicative of the fact that respondents' personality types are more crucial to respondents feeling of work induced stress rather than work environment conditions. The unique Palestinian context with all the complications, stressful conditions and instability, has shaped the Palestinian personality into a stress-prone one that perceives and deals with its surroundings in a stressful manner. Therefore, prevention strategies that focus on employees and ways to help them cope with job demands may be needed although one must not neglect job redesign and work condition improvement as another prevention strategy.

Organizational interventions to cope with stress

It was discovered that Palestinian organizations provide very limited initiatives to help employees cope with work-induced stress. 71 percent of the sample mentioned that their employers do not deal with stress problems and never provide any stress reduction interventions. Only 19 percent said that their employers provided time management training courses. 98 percent mention that no counseling is available to assist employees in handling work-induced stress. The majority (88 percent) never had flexi-time schedules or any flexible work arrangements and fair scheduling. 99 percent have no in house sports facilities and 98 percent have no health centers or a medical doctor to provide treatment when necessary.

Individual interventions

It appears that many of those who feel stressed do not take part in any type of sports (63 percent). A minority (24 percent) tend to resort to the occasional use of sedatives or analgesic drugs to reduce stress and anxiety. Those who feel stressed were asked to prioritize some individual interventions that are followed to reduce stress levels. Their response to this question is very rational as most respondents are educated. In the first place, respondents tend to organize their time and prioritize tasks and duties. The next choice is trying to discuss the sources of work inducing stress factors with management and colleagues to find solutions. Next, they try to take breaks and relax. Finally, they try to take a short leave and the least preferred choice is trying to look for another job or organization where the work stress is at a lower level.

Conclusion, recommendations and implications

Although the respondents reported that stress is triggered by conditions in the work place, the results of the analysis clearly show that the Palestinian personality type was found to be more critical as a stressor and major influencing factor than the work environment. Most respondents tended to have a type A personality, which is more stress prone. However, further empirical studies are needed to investigate the link between the situational variables which affect Palestinian lives and their role as a major contributing factor to forming type A personalities.

Overall, the indications are that Palestinian employees tend to suffer from a lack of recognition and incentives, limited management support and participation in decision making, heavy workloads, and employers provide very limited initiatives to help employees cope with work-induced stress.

The percentage of respondents who reported stress exceeds those who do not in all categories of the biographical data questions. Employees in the private sector reported experiencing more stress than those in the public or NGO sectors.

The study reveals that the differences in employees' personality types, and their stress coping styles, are the primary stressors. This warrants a recommendation for more preventative strategies that focus on the employees and improving their coping skills against the demanding conditions. Palestinian employers also ought to act positively to create awareness of the stressors and ways of coping with stress at work such as, time management, relaxation, meditation, learning to live a healthy life style and accepting support from others.

Management needs to seriously consider the stress level of the human resources and calculate the financial, emotional and safety impact of stress. Training and awareness raising programs, changes in organizational policies and procedures to reduce sources of stress, initiatives such as employee assistance programs (EAPs) and counseling will undoubtedly help to create a better work environment.

At a national level, collaboration among the Palestinian industry, labor, universities and ministries is needed to form an institute for occupational health and safety as a governmental agency that is responsible for conducting research into a better understanding of work stressors, the influence of stress on employee health and safety, and ways to reduce it in the workplace. These research programs can result in providing educational materials that can be utilized by employees and organizations to raise the awareness of the threat of work induced stress.

Finally, more empirical research is needed to identify the influence of environmental factors and personal beliefs on the prevalence of type A personality. A combination of stress management and organizational change is a useful approach to help prevent work stress and its negative impact in the Palestinian organizations.

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