

## **Reducing Employee Stress – Practice Consideration-Oriented Leadership and Let Them Text**

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### **Abstract**

As a leader, it is imperative to focus not only on production but, at the same time, to be considerate of employees. In this study, the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) was utilized to measure three general sources of stress; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The *Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire* (LBDQ) was utilized to measure the production-orientation and consideration-orientation of the participants’ leaders. Findings included that the more considerate the leader was the less depersonalized and the less emotionally exhausted the follower felt. The more production-oriented the leader was the more emotionally exhausted the follower was. When analyzing predictors of emotional exhaustion for Generation Y, it was found that the more texting this generation did after work hours, the less job-related emotional exhaustion they felt.

## **Introduction**

While we know from research that leadership effects follower performance and job well-being, there is inadequate research on the degree to which leadership can lower stress in employees. In particular, it is unclear to what degree leadership can impact stress when controlling for other potential employee stressors. The study will examine the importance of specific employee stressors such as time spent commuting to work, time spent outside of work on domestic activities, time spent outside of work caring for family members, as well as demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, age and education.

## **Leadership and Employee Stress**

One dimension that is related to job well-being is feeling emotionally engaged, rather than emotionally exhausted and over stressed. Stress is known to affect employees' well-being as well as organizational success (Singh, Kang, & Singh, 2004). While many types of stress and accompanying definitions exist, stress can be defined as an individual's state of mind when she/he encounters a situation of demand or constraint in an organization and perceives the same as harmful or threatening (Singh, Kang & Singh, 2004). In the United States, 30% of the working population reports that there have been three or more days during the previous month during which work has caused them to behave poorly with friends and family (Sing, Kang & Singh, 2004).

Leadership style has been known to impact multiple areas of follower performance. Kuoppala, Lamminpaa, Liira and Vainio (2008), for example, conducted a meta-analysis of 109 articles and found a significant relationship between effective leadership and job well-being, sick leave, and disability pension claims. Kwag and Kim (2009) found that supervisors' support lowered employees' exhaustion and role overload. In a 2007 study, Hetland determined that transformational leadership was negatively linked to cynicism and positively linked to professional efficacy. Omolayo (2007) found that workers under an autocratic leadership style experienced higher job-related tension than workers under a democratic leadership style. Palm (2007) also found that emotional exhaustion was negatively correlated to job satisfaction. Densten (2005) found that inspirational motivation had a negative effect on emotional exhaustion and inspirational motivation had a positive effect on personal accomplishment.

There are mixed reviews between the variables age, gender, educational level, working hours, and the effect on employee stress. Chauhan (2009) found that managers under age 35 scored higher on depersonalization than managers over 35. Wang, Jing, and Klossek (2007) also found that age had a negative relation with job stress. Conversely, Dyrbe (2009) found that there was no difference in burnout among age groups. Im (2009) also found that there was no relationship between age and stress.

Some studies have found that gender does make a difference in employee stress. For example, Mirvis (2006) found that high levels of depersonalization were significantly more common in women respondents than men. In another study, Bouckenooghe,

Fontaine, and Vanderheyden (2005) found that men reported lower self-transcendence than women and women experienced more stress than men.

Surprisingly, educational level is generally not associated to employee stress. The one study that was found (Michailidis and Georgia, 2005) indicated that employees with college degrees felt more stress than those without a degree.

## **Workplace Generations**

Most organizations have workers representing three generations: Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. While definitions vary of exactly what constitutes the age range of Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, for this study Underwood defines that the Baby Boomers were born between 1943 and 1960 (Underwood, 2007). Comprising about 80 million members, the older segment of this cohort is characterized by the experiences of the turbulent 1960's. This segment questions systems and searches for meaning in life. The younger segment of the Baby Boomers, however, are less idealistic. This sub-group emphasizes wealth and success.

Generation X was born between 1961 and 1980 (Underwood, 2007). This generation is about half the size of the boomer generation at forty-six million. Lancaster and Stillman (2005) note that while boomers were known to be "optimistic," Generation X is perhaps best described by the word "skeptical." In contrast to the younger Baby Boomer "yuppie" mentality of working ever increasing work schedules, this generation stresses work/life balance. As latch-key children, Generation X learned from an early age to rely upon themselves to solve problems and meet basic needs.

Generation Y consists of about 76 million individuals. This is the first generation to grow up digital. While boomers tend to see the internet as a tool to help their productivity, Generation Y sees technology as an integral part of life; similar to the air they breathe (Pickels, 2007). Whereas Generation Y latch-key kids learned self-sufficiency, Generation X has been overly supervised by what some authors call "helicopter parents" who have continually hovered around them to prevent injury or decreases in their self-esteem. (Howe & Strauss, 2007 and Underwood, 2007). Consequently, Generation Y looks to parents and workplace leaders for problem solution. This is also the generation in which, "everyone receives a trophy" regardless of whether they lost or won. As a result, Generation Y has an enlarged sense of entitlement and a need for constant praise. (Hastings, 2009).

## **Generation Y and Job Stress**

Numerous studies have found a significant difference between generations/age and job stress. Ilhan and Durukan (2007), for example, found that employee burnout decreased when the participant's age increased; that is scores were found to be higher in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization among young nurses. Alacacioglu and Yavuzsen (2009) conducted a study on nurses and physicians working in an oncology department and found that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were significantly higher in those

participants who were under 29 years old. A study by Randall (2007) examined burnout and age among Anglican clergy and found that the younger the clergy were the higher their scores were on depersonalization and generally emotional exhaustion. A study by Tuuli and Karisalmi (1999) found that the youngest group of participants had more symptoms of emotional exhaustion than others.

### **Generation Y and Leadership Style**

A study by Warner and Sandberg (2010) found that leadership style preferences for Generation Y were leadership competence. The study found that leaders should create room for as much autonomy as possible and on setting broad and challenging targets and milestones for Generation Y members. Another study conducted by Albeion and Gutke (2010) found that Ys are so committed to achievement and to changing the world for the better they embrace collaboration through a shared leadership model. A study (Health by Design, 2008) found that Gen Y employees seek change and challenge and they want managers to create clear, timely career paths. They value communication and prefer an environment of transparency and respect for staff.

### **Generation Y and Texting**

A variance in studies has found the popularity of texting among Gen Y members. A sampling of these includes a study by Plester and Wood (2009) which found that the use of texting among children predicted a significant variance in their word reading ability. Another study by Riley and Obermayer (2008) found that phone texting was an effective method for providing cessation interventions to young adult smokers. Richardson and Lenarcic (2008) found that mobile texting was the most effective way to communicate with college students. A study in the *Eating Disorder Review* (2008) found that text messaging promoted healthy eating during a family-based weight loss intervention and it was found to be a useful and cost-effective tool in treatment programs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although work is sometimes enjoyable, it can cause hardships with personal lives due to stress. While some stress can be positive, such as that associated with pursuing a higher education, other stress is known to be negative. Stress is inevitable in most cases and everyone deals with stress differently. Too much stress, though, sometimes affects health and well-being. Some employees work poorly under stress and this negatively impacts their organizations.

### **Research Questions**

The first research analyzed predictors of workplace stress in the entire sample of this study.

1. Does leadership style impact employee stress when controlling for demographic and lifestyle variables?

The second research question analyzed these predictors for each generation in this sample study.

2. How do predictors of stress vary by generation?

While we know from research that leadership effects follower performance and job well-being, there is insufficient research on the degree to which leadership can reduce stress in employees. In particular, it is unclear to what degree leadership can impact stress when controlling for other potential employee stressors such as time spent commuting to work, time spent outside of work on domestic activities, time spent outside of work caring for family members, as well as demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, age and education.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The sample for this study consisted of working adults from South Texas (See Table 1. Descriptive Statistics). The researchers were allowed access to a variety of organizations to conduct this study. The participants came from a wide range of professions including education, law enforcement, non-profit and for-profit organizations. The sample was heterogeneous in education level, and gender. The sample was predominantly Hispanic.

### *Instruments*

The *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) was utilized to measure three general sources of stress; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (The alpha reliability for the subscales were: .90 for Emotional Exhaustion, .79 for Depersonalization, and .71 for Personal Accomplishment, Maslach, 1986). The *Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire* (LBDQ) was utilized to measure how production-oriented and consideration-oriented the employees' rated their leaders (The reliability by the split-half method is .83 for Initiating Structure scores and .92 for the Consideration Scores, Halpin, 1957). The demographic questionnaire was utilized to measure employee characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, educational level, working hours, personal time, and ethnicity.

### *Research Design*

Using a multiple regression, the study examined the relationships among the independent variables of: production-oriented leadership, consideration-oriented leadership, gender, age, marital status, educational level, ethnicity, working hours, how personal time was spent and the dependent variables of: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for the 138 participants in the study.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	138	18	65	38.31	9.18
Generation Y	37	18			
Generation X	64	30			
Baby Boomers	37	47			
Gender	138				
Male	82				
Female	56				
Ethnicity	138				
Hispanic	99				
White	31				
Other	7				
Part Time Hours Per Week	8	4	32	17.00	8.75
Full Time Hours Per Week	131	20	56	40.76	3.84
Actual Working Hours Per Week	137	8	80	45.20	11.27
Production Orientation	138	1.5	5.0	3.466	.76
Consideration Orientation	138	1.3	4.9	3.498	.85
Emotional Exhaustion	138	.0	6.0	2.629	1.66
Cynicism/Depersonalization	138	.0	6.0	1.864	1.57
Personal Accomplishment	138	2.7	6.0	5.268	.73

Age ranged from 18 to 65 with a mean of 38.31. There were 131 participants who worked full time and 8 who worked part time. The minimum number of part time hours worked per week was 4 hours, while the maximum number was 32 hours. The number of full time hours a respondent indicated she/he worked per week ranged from 40 to 56 with a mean of 40.92.

The leadership score of production-orientation was the rating the participant gave to his or her leader on the LBDQ. Production-oriented leadership is the degree of encouraging overtime work and pushing for increased production. Scores ranged from 1.5 to 5.0 with a mean score of 3.47. Consideration-oriented leadership was the rating the follower gave their leader as being friendly and approachable as well as treating all group members as his/her equals. The leadership score of consideration ranged from 1.3 to 4.9 with a mean score of 3.50.

The burnout subscale of emotional exhaustion ranged from 0 to 6.0 with a mean score of 2.63. Emotional exhaustion is the extent to which the employee felt emotionally drained and burned out from work. The burnout subscale of Cynicism/Depersonalization ranged from .0 to 6.0 with a mean score of 1.86. Cynicism/Depersonalization is the extent the employee felt less interested and less enthusiastic about work. The burnout subscale of personal accomplishment ranged from 2.7 to 6.0 with a mean score of 5.27 and measured the degree the employee felt she/he had accomplished many worthwhile things in her/his job as well as feeling like she/he could effectively solve the problems that arise at work.

## Results

### *Employee Stress*

A series of full and reduced model multiple regressions were run to predict emotional exhaustion using the predictor variables. Using three blocks of variables, block one consisted of control variables that were considered demographic; these were age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, education, and organizational type. Block two consisted of the lifestyle control variables of number of actual working hours, hours spent on work related emails, hours spent on work related phone calls, hours spent on work related texting, hours spent preparing for the next day, hours spent commuting to and from work, hours spent caring for children or other family members, hours spent on domestic activities, and hours spent on other family needs. Block three consisted of leadership variables which were consideration-oriented leadership and production-oriented leadership. The step-wise method was used within each block and four significant predictors were found.

How consideration-oriented the followers rated their leaders explained 10% of the variance in emotional exhaustion ( $R^2 = .10$ ,  $B = -.32$ ,  $r_p = -.36$ ,  $p = .00$ ). The partial correlation for leader consideration was  $-.36$  indicating that the more considerate the leader was the less emotionally exhausted the follower felt. How production-oriented the leader was explained an additional 7% of the variance in emotional exhaustion ( $\Delta R^2 = .07$ ,  $B = .27$ ,  $r_p = .23$ ,  $p = .00$ ). The partial correlation for leader production was  $.23$  indicating that the more productive the leader was the more emotionally exhausted the follower was. The age of the participant explained an additional 3% of the variance of emotional exhaustion ( $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $B = -.18$ ,  $r_p = -.18$ ,  $p = .03$ ). The older the follower was the less emotionally exhausted she/he felt. The variable on hours spent preparing for the next day explained an additional 3% of the variance in emotional exhaustion ( $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $B = .17$ ,  $r_p = -.19$ ,  $p = .03$ ).

A full model was also run to predict cynicism/depersonalization (See Table 2. Summary of Findings). Results of a multiple regression using the same independent variables found only one significant predictor of depersonalization. How consideration-oriented the leader was explained 6% of the variance in depersonalization. The partial correlation was  $-.22$ . The more considerate the leader was the less depersonalized the follower felt.

Finally a model was also run to predict personal accomplishment (See Table 2. Summary of Findings). Actual working hours the followers worked explained 7% of the variance in

personal accomplishment. Hours spent on domestic activities explained an additional 5% of the variance in personal accomplishment. The partial correlation was .23 explaining the more working hours the follower worked the more the follower felt personal accomplishment.

Table 2.  
Summary of Findings

	Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Accomplishment
Production Orientation of the Leader	$\Delta R^2 = .07$ B = .27 $r_p = .23$		
Consideration Orientation of the Leader	$R^2 = .10$ B = -.32 $r_p = -.36$	$R^2 = .06$ B = -.24 $r_p = -.22$	
Time Spent Preparing for The Next Day	$\Delta R^2 = .03$ B = .17 $r_p = -.19$		
Age	$\Delta R^2 = .03$ B = -.18 $r_p = -.18$		
Hours Spent On Domestic Activities			$\Delta R^2 = .05$ B = .27 $r_p = .23$
Hours Worked Each Week			$R^2 = .07$ B = .27 $r_p = .27$

Note. All findings significant  $p < .05$

### *Generational Findings*

The Demographic questionnaire provided allowed the participant to identify their age. The researchers then classified the participants from Generation Y, Generation X and Baby Boomers. A 3-way Multiple Analysis of Variance found no differences in the levels of emotional exhaustion, cynicism and personal achievement as a result of generation, gender or ethnicity. This indicates that the three generations feel similar levels of exhaustion, cynicism and achievement. What contributes, however, to each generations emotional exhaustion in the workplace was considerably different.

To further explore what contributes to workplace stress for each generation, the same multiple regressions were run separately for each generation. The regression models for depersonalization and personal accomplishment were not significant for each generation. The predictors of emotional exhaustion at work however were striking. How consideration-oriented the follower rated the leader was the strongest predictor of reduced exhaustion in all three generations. In Generation Y, however, this was a

particularly strong predictor ( $R^2 = .29$ ,  $r_p = -.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, the amount of texting Generation Y did with friends after work discussing their work day was a strong predictor of lowered exhaustion. ( $R^2 = .20$ ,  $r_p = -.53$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Table 3

*Summary of Findings for Emotional Exhaustion by Generation*

	Generation Y	Generation X	Baby Boomers
Consideration-Orientation of Leader	$R^2 = .29$ $B = -.63$ $r_p = -.65$	$R^2 = .07$ $B = -.23$ $r_p = -.25$	$R^2 = .20$ $B = -.50$ $r_p = -.54$
Hours Texting About Work, After Work	$\Delta R^2 = .20$ $B = -.45$ $r_p = -.53$		
Hours Preparing for the Next Day		$\Delta R^2 = .07$ $B = .27$ $r_p = .29$	$\Delta R^2 = .12$ $B = .37$ $r_p = .39$
Hours Spent on Domestic Activities		$\Delta R^2 = .05$ $B = -.25$ $r_p = -.24$	
Production-Orientation of Leader		$\Delta R^2 = .05$ $B = .22$ $r_p = .23$	

Note. All findings significant  $p < .05$

**Discussion**

It is often believed that if leaders encourage overtime work and emphasize surpassed competing groups along with pushing for increased production that organizational goals will get accomplished and employees will be happy. Even though increased production is always desired, it is imperative to consider the individual needs of each employee. Out of all the independent variables that predicted employee stress in this research, leadership stood out. This research found that the more considerate the leader was the less depersonalized and emotionally exhausted the follower felt. Conversely, the more production-oriented the leader was the more emotionally exhausted the follower was. As a leader, it is imperative to focus not only on production but at the same time be considerate of employees. This may reduce employee stress and, in turn, lower turnover rates.

For Generation Y in particular, practicing consideration-oriented leadership appeared to be very important in lowering workplace emotional exhaustion. While it is a popular derision to joke about Generation Y's constant texting, blogging, and social networking, this study found that encouraging Generation Y to text after work about their day was strongly related to lowered emotional exhaustion. While texting is generally a foreign

activity to most Baby Boomer leaders, it seems to serve a very therapeutic purpose with Generation Y. For leaders who have Generation Y followers, the message is clear – be considerate and encourage them to text.

### *Future Directions*

The use of technology questions in this study were targeted toward activity after the work day. Given the strong relationship between texting after work and the reduction in work stress, future studies should focus on the use of technology during the work day and how it impacts work place stress.

Two emerging technologies that were not included were Twitter and social network sites such as Facebook and Myspace. Future studies should also see to what degrees they could impact workplace stress.

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