

The ABCs of Work: Stress

Law Department Management

Career Development



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Is there a formula for success at work? Are there simple rules that you can follow to increase your chances of getting what you want? Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau thinks the answer is yes. In this series of articles, *The ABCs of Work*, he shares the formula with you.

Greetings readers and congratulations! Simply by virtue of being here you are already on the path to increasing your odds of success. While luck plays a gigantic role in life, that does not mean you are helpless to control your fate. If you want to think of it this way, the tips we'll explore are ways to increase your odds that luck will find you.

Today's topic explores why sustainable performance at work requires you to manage your **Stress**, both at work and outside work.

Last time we discussed why and when you should take Rest breaks at work to drive peak performance. Today we examine the related topic of managing Stress to ensure you continue to perform your bet.

Stress drives performance, but only to a point

You probably know that no stress is no fun. That is, without any pressure to perform, people have a harder time motivating themselves. To perform our best, we need to see there's something at stake.

The psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson demonstrated the relationship between pressure and performance. They showed that increased attention and interest drive performance, but beyond a certain point extra stress impairs performance because of anxiety.



In the "goldilocks" zone of engagement we balance between boredom and stress — here, creativity thrives. Artwork by Antlii / *Shutterstock.com*

The trick is, of course, to find the optimal stress level. That zone when we're properly motivated but not overly anxious. It is surprisingly tricky. Why is that, you ask? Because stress never comes to us in isolation.

We get little stress doses from many different work tasks. We encounter more from daily life (running errands, paying taxes, etc.), and still more from family and friends.

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As the manager on a project, you may be applying the exact right stress to the team, but they'll respond differently because they start with different stress baselines. The one who's relative recently died or who has a child struggling in school, responds far less favorably to your well-meant prodding.

When healthy stress risks becoming unhealthy

Here too, your thoughts and emotions are a good guide. If you're feeling more stress than is comfortable, that's a signal to act. And when you're the manager, be alert to signs of unhealthy stress on your team. Here are some times when you should be particularly on the lookout.

- **You have trouble sleeping**. If you're tossing and turning because you can't stop thinking, chances are good that you're suffering excess work stress.
- **You have work dreams**. A sure sign for me that work stress was too high was when I dreamt of work problems. This leads to sleep being less restful.
- **Your physical health suffers**. This can be reflected in more easily catching colds, gaining weight (or, for some, losing weight), or an increase in sick days.
- **You're more emotional**. If you're flying off the handle, or feeling more highs or lows than usual, this is a good time to break your routine and do something else. A related sign is you find yourself dreading work.

How to build your resilience

Because we perform in high-stress environments, we're more competitive when we expand our capacity to handle stress. There are various ways to build resilience. One is to simply tell ourselves we're the kind of person who thrives on stress. Just saying it helps it to become true.

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Another way to build stress resilience is to take period rest breaks like we discussed last time. By first

building and relieving stress, we become accustomed to the cycle. Simply feeling stress, even high stress, is no cause for concern, because we know we can soon find relief.

Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as knowing how to manage stress. Our formula will necessarily be incomplete. But the formula has impact, and all the more so because we've kept things simple. Here to finish are some honorable mentions to serve as food for thought.

Separate — You may find delight in separating your work life from your life outside work. I used my commute to switch gears and switch mindsets. On the way home, I left work behind and embraced home and family. The morning time I spent getting back into the in-house mindset. By focusing intensely on the relevant audience and avoiding distractions, you can improve your performance in both arenas.

Success — Only you can define what success means to you. Society will try mightily to tell you the meaning of success. Accept parts, reject parts, or make your own definition. The key is to live according to your principles and values. I discuss this further in Career Path: The Stoic Career.

System — A good system, consistently applied, beats our extraordinary one-off efforts. And the system is easier to maintain and improve over time. Whenever you do work that repeats, consider ways to systematize it. Once you make it a process, you can share the work, question the work (is it necessary, how important, etc.), and optimize the work, among other benefits.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.