



Employee Stress – The Source Might Surprise You

Stress that typically causes employee burnout is often caused not by the customer, but by the environment created by management. This is clearly demonstrated when you look at employee surveys and exit interviews. You don't have to dig deep to see what is below the surface to find the root cause.

When customer service personnel know that management treats each employee as an individual, has created an environment that is supportive, and understands that stress is a part of the business day, they will be able to tolerate and bounce back from even the worst day. Here are points to observe to create that supportive environment:

- 1. Know your employees.** Each employee works for a different reason, whether for recognition, advancement or just wanting to be "shown the money". Management must know those reasons, otherwise productivity and attitudes will suffer.
- 2. Management must have consistent moods.** Even if you are a jerk, at least be a jerk every day. Jekyll and Hyde management only confuses everyone.
- 3. Be consistent in rules and structure.** Even the tightest rules are tolerable if they are consistently enforced.
- 4. Analyze your rules.** Are there any that don't make sense? Are there some that even management hates to enforce? Identify and eliminate them or at least come to some kind of compromise. This will not be seen as a sign of weakness, but as a strength.
- 5. Let your employees vent.** Listen to them. Don't judge. Don't fix. Just listen. Your employees want to do well. They didn't hire themselves and they didn't start to work by expecting anything less than success.

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7 Ways That Employees Can Reduce Stress

What can the employees do for themselves to relieve stress? The following are stress-busting ideas for customer service employees to help keep calm and maintain perspective.

1. Don't take it personally. A customer's frustration has nothing to do with you, so don't take it personally. In their emotional state, all they can think of is how upset they are. Most don't realize the impact they might be having on you. Ignore any personal attacks and exaggerations. At this point in time, they might not be rational.

2. Look for the silver lining in the current dark cloud. Underneath a stressed out or angry person was once a pleasant human being. Think of them normally reasonable, and in a good or neutral mood, but right now they are expressing themselves in a less than useful way. They've probably called you before with a routine question, and been okay. Now you're experiencing a blip in their behavioral radar. When talking to them, remember there's a nice person in there someplace, and if you keep your cool and work with them, you'll discover that nice customer again. Typically they'll apologize and thank you.

3. Frustration is often a result of not getting their needs met. Uncovering their expectations will help defuse the emotion, help you keep cool, and keep the conversation focused on problem solving. Keep focusing on what you can do to close the gap between their unmet expectations and their experience of your company's services and products. When customers are dealt with sincerely and professionally, they are more open to alternative solutions.

4. Set the controls on your mood. When you're in control of your emotions, the customer responds, and the conversation takes less time and is less emotional. When their frustration "pushes our buttons" we're less effective. The tone of the call is emotional rather than conversational. If you've 'fallen off the wagon', take a break, regain your cool, and resolve that the rest of your shift you'll be in control. Find a way of rewarding yourself for your first day 'in control', although the lack of stress you'll feel at the end of your shift is reward enough!

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5. There is more to life than excellent customer service. Remember you are not the job, have the perspective that you are here to do an excellent job, but it is not who you are. A nice way to maintain that perspective is with a current family or personal photo at eye level in his/her cube. When calls become stressful, look at the photo as a reminder that dealing with customers is your job, and there is an outside life.

6. Humor is the stress antidote. Find ways to bring a playful atmosphere into the work environment. This can be an individual or group effort. Remember the last time something made you burst out laughing? Keep a list with key words to trigger your memory of the scenario. When you're feeling stressed and depressed after a call, look at your list to neutralize negative emotions. Keep in mind that while it can be helpful to decompress by laughing about difficult calls with colleagues, you are also reliving the situation and your emotions, so don't dwell on it. Look for humor outside stressful situations.

7. Stress is from an adrenaline release so treat your body right. Remember that stress has a physical component. Keep a "stress ball" at you desk that you can squeeze to work off that burst of adrenaline during a call. Get up and move around for a few minutes right after a stressful situation to use up the extra energy. Eat for mental alertness and low stress. Get plenty of sleep and limit the sugar and caffeine while at work. The combination of sugar, caffeine, lack of sleep and stress can leave you more vulnerable to emotional reactions. Many people find incorporating more protein in their diet keeps them positive. Try high-protein snacks like sunflower seeds, nuts etc. and see if you notice a difference. Also, it's important to drink plenty of water. Feeling foggy and frustrated can indicate dehydration or insufficient protein. Eat and sleep for success, and you'll feel calmer and in control throughout the day.