

“Tangible Tips for Handling the Endless Stress in Project Management”

Steven Flannes, Ph.D., Principal, Flannes & Associates

www.flannesandassociates.com

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Abstract

The experience of stress impacts the cognitive and behavioral performance of project managers. To perform at high cognitive levels, project managers need to have distinct stress reduction strategies that they apply in the workplace.

This paper describes the cognitive and physiological impact that stress has on project managers, and offers a number of distinct approaches to mediate the impact of project stress.

Topics covered include reasons why stress should be addressed by project managers, descriptions of the physiological components of the stress experience, the deleterious effect of chronic stress, the contributions of individual differences to stress vulnerability, “best practices” for managing stress within the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) framework, proactive interpersonal and attitudinal skills, and three research based stress management approaches that can be used to mediate acute or chronic stress situations.

Introduction

We have all heard the cautionary injunction to “be careful what you wish for,” and this certainly is appropriate in project management. The reasons that we go into project management- the lack of predictability, the crafting of first time ever solutions, working within a matrix system - also serve as sources of stress and frustration.

These stress-contributing variables of project management are not new to us. Sources of stress include the proliferation of virtual teams (Rad and Levin, 2003) and the impact of cross cultural influences.

Recently, economic models of production and delivery such as supply chain management (Friedman, 2005) have contributed further to the stress in the project management, due to the fluid nature of supply chains, the permeability of the boundaries that divide companies, time urgency, and the variability of stakeholder participation. As economic models evolve, there will be new sources of stress for the project manager.

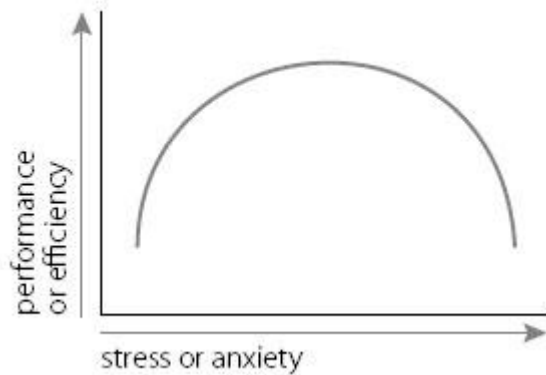
Why Be Concerned With Stress?

Why should we be concerned with the impact in stress in project management? After all, isn't project management really just about completing projects?

This is correct; however I'm reminded of a research result on cognitive performance that I came across years ago. In my role as a clinical psychologist, I was involved in conducting assessments of intellectual functioning. This research found that when the statistically “average” person is under significant stress, his or her cognitive performance, as measured by IQ, temporarily drops by 15 points. That's a significant decrease of mental horsepower, and when this example is applied to those of us in project management, it's clear that being concerned with our stress levels is more than just a concern with “feeling good.” Rather, it becomes a focus on performing at our highest cognitive levels when facing stressful situations.

This connection between the increase of levels of stress and the decrease in performance is often represented by the classic Yerkes-Dodson curve, recently described from Ross (2009) in a Harvard Business Review publication:

The Yerkes-Dodson Curve



As this graph suggests, moderate levels of stress improve our performance; high levels reduce our efficiency. Hence, as project managers, being able to moderate our stress levels is crucial to high levels of performance..

Purpose of This Paper

Everyone knows that “bad bosses,” “dysfunctional organizations,” and “critical customers” contribute to project stress. These factors are givens, and will not be addressed in this paper. Instead, emphasis will be placed on what we as individual project managers “contribute” to our own levels of stress, and what we can do about that.

This paper is about gaining increase knowledge of our personal attributes (and how those attributes can contribute to our own stress) as well as gaining increased skill and competency in distinct interpersonal, cognitive, and experiential approaches to manage our levels of stress.

What is Stress?

Stress is the experience of discomfort, fear, apprehension, or anxiety that we have when we perceive that we face a threat.

The idea of “beauty being in the eye of the beholder” also applies to an individual defining an event or situation as stressful. When one perceives the presence of a threat (defined broadly here as any singular or repetitive event in one’s project management work that carries the tone of personal risk, reprimand, or threat), one experiences changes in physiology, cognition, and behavior.

Palmer (2000), writing for the Centre for Stress Management and City University in London, notes that the impact of stress is seen in the areas of behavior, affect (emotion), sensations, imagery, cognitions, interpersonal functioning, and in our physiology. Of special note is his articulating the impact of stress in the area of imagery (where one may carry images of hopelessness and/or failure) and in the area of cognitions (where we may silently repeat negative cognitions such as “*It’s an awful situation on this project and nothing’s going to change it!*”). It has been my experience that the issues of “applying negative

imagery” and “repeating negative cognitions” are the two most frequent behaviors that project managers may engage in that will elevate stress levels.

Changes in Our Physiology

When our perception of a situation suggests that a threat rises to a certain level of discomfort (angry customer, critical executive, anticipated project failure, etc.), we experience a distinct physiological reaction that hampers our performance.

When we perceive a threat or risk, we are entering into the familiar “fight or flight” reaction, in which our sympathetic nervous system jolts us out of our status of physiological homeostasis, increasing our level of central nervous system activity and the secretion of energy producing epinephrine (adrenaline). This stress response and its resulting decrease in performance ability is described by Staal (2004), who investigated stress and performance in a research effort sponsored by NASA Ames Research Center.

Staal describes stress effects on information processing as follows:

- One initially evaluates a situation as stressful and then continually reassess the threat level in an iterative manner
- Emotions surface, which draw resources away from a goal directed focus
- Narrowed attention span occurs, along with poor concurrent tasks management

As this process continues, the following performance issues surface:

- Poor decision making occurs, as well as poor encoding of new information
- Shifting of project strategy and/or “task shedding” (dropping key tasks)
- Reduction of “pro-social” (team building and “nurturing”) behavior

Hopefully, as we address the stressful situation, we are able to act on the threat in a way that jump starts the parasympathetic nervous system, the system which helps the body return to the quieter pre-threat state of physiological homeostasis. We can help ourselves engage the parasympathetic system, and “wind down,” by:

- Pausing and taking deep breathes
- Focusing on the bigger picture of what is going right on the project
- Slowing down, and avoiding the “quick fix,” if that is appropriate

The Deleterious Impact of Chronic Stress

When we are in periods of prolonged exposure to stress, we are at risk for “chronic sympathetic nervous system activation,” which is analogous to the stress throttle being stuck on “open.”

During such continual activation, we are at risk for a list of serious issues. Performance based issues that surface during this type of ongoing activation include (Schager, 2009):

Narrowing of attention	Over emphasis on short term decision making
Deterioration of situational awareness	Decision overflow
Cognitive paralysis	Implied lack of creativity or innovation

Clearly, stress reduces our performance. Now, let’s look at some of the personal style attributes that can increase our vulnerability to creating stressful situations for ourselves.

Contributions of Individual Differences

The concept of individual differences relates to the search for uniqueness within an otherwise homogeneous collection of objects, data, or phenomena. The pursuit of identifying individual differences within project management is noted by the following: *Even though the members of this team are all*

electrical engineers, what are the unique traits, attributes, and behaviors that separate one team member from another, hence creating that team member's "individuality?"

The concept of individual differences forms the foundation for the idea that "what is stressful for one person is not stressful for another person." The following section will explore a number of individual differences, or attributes, that we may bring to our work that can create a greater propensity for vulnerability to the stress experience.

"Maladaptive" Type A Behavior

Meyer Friedman and colleague Ray Roesenman coined the term "Type A" behavior as a result of work with cardiac patients at Mount Zion Hospital in San Francisco (Friedman and Rosenman, 1974). Since then, Type A behavior as a concept has infiltrated our language when we desire to describe someone as hard charging, possibly a workaholic.

A more precise definition of Type A behavior is the following: *the individual exhibits a strong degree of perfectionism, operates with an unrelenting sense of time urgency, and appears to others as often crabby, irritated, close to the edge of being angry.*

Clearly, perfectionism and time urgency are mixed blessings. Such qualities can serve one well in "getting things done," and completing excellent projects, but these qualities, when allowed to run out of control, can create stress for a project manager who has trouble deciding "when good enough is good enough."

An interesting trend has surfaced in the work on Type A behavior. This trend makes a distinction between "maladaptive Type A behavior" and more productive applications of the behavior. Maladaptive Type A behavior is noted for the tendency to have self critical or guilt inducing self statements when the lofty goals of perfectionism and urgency are not met. And by implication, a more adaptive (less stressful) form of Type A behavior would be noted for:

- Having high work and project standards
- An urgency to get tasks done on time, and an
- Ability to "forgive" oneself when perfection is not achieved

This adaptive form, in essence, encourages us to say *"Let's have high standards while realizing that some actions are outside of our control, and when we don't meet our standards, that is not necessarily a negative comment about us as project managers."*

To work towards internalizing this less self punitive form of Type A thinking, it can be helpful for project managers to:

- Remember that projects can still be "excellent" even when not "perfect"
- Monitor the tendency to allow scope creep
- Don't assume that others necessarily have the same standards you have

Too Much "Feeling" in the Project Manager

The project management profession is familiar with the application to teams of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). This personal style instrument has been researched and applied in many settings (Consulting Psychologists Press, 2010).

One of the style comparisons on the MBTI is the description of one's preferred method of making decisions, in terms of what type of data or approach one desires to take. Within the MBTI system, one is described as having a preference for "Thinking" or "Feeling." The Thinking based decision maker prefers to make decisions with the "head," considering an analytic review of data.. Conversely, the Feeling decision maker prefers to make decisions based in a more subjective ("heart") manner, wanting to consider how an action will impact team morale, motivation, and interaction.

Both approaches to decision making are valid within a project milieu, and any one individual can apply various degrees of either approach in making a decision. However, I believe that the Feeling based project manager may be more at risk to experience stress, due to that person's focus on "feelings," both theirs and those of team members. Specifically, the Feeling based project manager may be at risk for stress because of tendencies to:

- Focus too much on "being liked" by team members and stakeholders
- Lose sight of the tasks of the project, focusing too much on the interpersonal status of the team
- Avoid resolving conflicts because of an over concern with team harmony.

A Feeling project manager can moderate the risk for stress by consciously:

- Remembering to focus on "facts" and make appropriate decisions with the "head"
- Focusing on not taking the behavior and comments of others too personally

Too Structured or Too Flexible?

Another comparison on the MBTI is the description of whether one approaches tasks in a "Judging" manner or a "Perceiving" manner. The Judging project manager values planning the work, working the plan, and has a strong drive towards closure. The Perceiving project manager, however, prefers a more open-ended approach, desiring to keep options open and to have solutions or closure emerge in a more organic fashion, (Again, as with all MBTI qualities, neither approach is the "right" approach to use in all project settings).

In applying of the ideas of Judging and Perceiving to stress in the project world, we can see that too much of either approach can create a great deal of discomfort and stress for a project manager. For example, the Judging project manager is at risk for stress because of the desire to get closure and do things "the right way." Consequently, the Judging project manager can reduce the risk for stress by remembering:

- Just because you've created a sophisticated plan, that does not mean it will work when it's implemented
- To stay open to input from others, realizing that the goal is to complete the project, and not just implement your plan
- To find ways to become more comfortable with change and ambiguity

The Perceiving project manager may experience stress because too many options are left open because of the desire for "additional data." The Perceiving project manager can reduce that style's risk for stress by:

- Remembering that it is an imperfect world, and that you will not have all the data you believe you need to make a good decision
- Creating some vehicles to make decisions, so that your work load stays manageable

MBTI "Best Practices" for Managing Stress

Through an examination of research and experience in applied settings (Flannes and Levin, 2005), I have found that the following grid nicely summarizes the stress management implications for the eight MBTI variables. So, assuming you have a working knowledge of your four-letter MBTI style, you can circle the content next to your preferences, thus creating your own stress management "best practices" approach.

Stress Management Approaches Using the MBTI Attributes	
Your MBTI attribute	Do this to reduce your stress
Extravert	Interact, but don't over extend your self
Introvert	Withdraw at first, but don't internalize
<i>Sensing</i>	<i>Take action now, but remember the big picture</i>
<i>Intuition</i>	<i>Look for possibilities, but stay practical</i>
Thinking	Analyze, but also pay attention to your feelings
Feeling	Be expressive of feelings, but don't forget the facts
<i>Judging</i>	<i>Make a plan, but don't get rigid</i>
<i>Perceiving</i>	<i>Be flexible, but seek some closure</i>

Proactive Approaches to Reducing Stress

The discussion so far has focused on what the individual project manager, based upon individual differences brings to the project that increase the risk for stress.

The remainder of the paper will focus on behaviors and approaches that any project manager, regardless of personality or personal style, can use to reduce the risk for stress.

Interpersonal Skills

Five interpersonal skills and/or attitudes that help reduce stress will be described succinctly.

1. *Detach or dissociate:* Consider the team meeting where you are extremely frustrated by seeing wasted time or the personal posturing from a team member. To use detachment or dissociation, allow yourself to mentally “check out” of the meeting as much as is appropriate, letting your mind wander to a more pleasant image. Obviously, these approaches are used selectively and discretely.
2. *Monitor “what if?” thinking:* In the middle of a stressful event, it is natural to engage in “what if thinking,” asking ourselves “*What if we'd only done this in the past, then we might not be in this crisis right now?*” As is evident, this form of “what if” thinking involves a focus that is not present oriented. An alternative to this form of thinking is to focus very much in the present, such as posing this question to your self: “*It's Thursday at 3:17 PM, I've just received bad news about the project. What can I do in the next hour to take a small step towards improving the situation?*”
3. *Develop potent conflict resolution skills:* We add stress to our work lives by either under reacting to the stressful situation (avoiding or denying it) or over reacting to the stressful situation (coming on too strong). Both approaches increase our stress. A menu of conflict resolution skills (which will help reduce stress) is found in Flannes and Levin (2005).
4. *Know when enough is enough, and stay away from debating:* A natural but often unproductive approach to resolve a stressful situation is to debate another person about the wisdom of your point of view. This does not mean you should not assert your belief, but you should know when to stop, often when your message has been heard. At this point in the dialogue, if we continue try to be seen as “right,” we are actually increasing our stress. It's better to stop earlier than later; it can be a matter of diminishing returns to continue to be seen as “right.”

Here's a probably unexpected example of "when to stop." The British philosopher Alan Watts made this point of being able to know when enough is enough- when he was speaking as an early advocate of the use of psychedelic drugs. Watts' guide to those using such substances towards looking for greater realizations or growth: "*When you get the message, hang up the phone.*" So, as a project manager, when you get the message that the discussion is turning into debating, hang up the phone, and know when enough is enough.

5. *Look for a paradoxical component in the situation:* In the midst of a situation that is legitimately stressful, we may find ourselves taking ourselves, or the situation, too seriously. Cognitive behavioral psychologists would say that we are engaging in "catastrophizing" behavior, in which we take a singular, negative event, cognitively "run with it," and then find ourselves believing, for example, that the entire project is probably doomed because of this one serious problem. An antidote to this is to find a paradoxical cognition that you can hold onto, something that will put your stress and worries in perspective.

Illustrating the use of paradox to reduce stress, I am reminded of a quote by former football coach John McKay of the University of Southern California. After his team was crushed in a game, McKay was asked what he was thinking after such a bad loss. McKay said something to the effect that "*the one good thing was that millions and millions of citizens in China weren't even aware that we had a game today, let alone the fact that we got destroyed.*"

Three Research-Based Stress Management Approaches

This section explores three schools of thought on stress management. Each approach has been heavily researched and has direct application to reducing project stress. Consider which one is the most effective one for you to use.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology involves our looking at a demanding situation with a realistic eye, but still trying to find a genuinely positive aspect in the "mess" that we can hang onto as a means of crafting a more positive/less stressful posture. This approach helps one to be motivated to address the problem situation, and this motivation increases our ability to tap into our cognitive, problem solving abilities.

Here is an example: A project manager has a disruptive team member, who frequently criticizes her during team meetings. This criticism has been personally painful, with the project manager withdrawing during meetings as a way of handling the stress.

Using positive psychology, the project manager is encouraged to find one positive aspect of this situation that she could hang onto as a way of handling her stress when dealing with this team member. In this case, the project manager chose to focus on the opportunity to develop more assertive skills in handling this team member. Her focus, then, is to make the task one of *fine tuning her repertoire of assertive behaviors* as compared to *wondering how to survive another attack from this person.*

This quote from the 20th century American writer, William Arthur Ward, nicely captures the true essence of positive psychology: "*The pessimist complains about the wind, the optimist expects it to change, and the realist adjusts the sails.*" As project managers, let us focus on adjusting the sails.

Cognitive Behavioral Strategies

Cognitive approaches to managing our stress are grounded in theory that says that how we think, impacts how we feel, which impacts how we act. Thus, we are trying to modify how we think about a stressful situation in order to feel differently about it, and ultimately to act differently towards the stress situation.

One cognitive approach is the creation of a “neutral cognition.” When we are under stress, we often find ourselves thinking in absolutes, such as *“This is never going to change.”* Such absolute cognitions can trigger the adrenalized physical reactions of the sympathetic nervous systems, adding physical anxiety as an overlay to cognitive worry.

When one focuses on creating a neutral cognition, the goal is to be realistic, but to hold the door open for a possible change. Here is a neutral cognition:

“Yes, things might not change, as they’ve been this way for a long time, but let me see during the next meeting if I can find something that is a bit different.”

A second cognitive strategy that can be very effective is a focus on *“What are the aspects of the stressful situation over which I have some control and what are the aspects of the stressor over which I have no control?”*

This form of listing have control/have no control is very powerful, in that it lets the project manager apply personal energies and resources to working on the variables that can be impacted, and detaching energy from those can’t be controlled.

Getting Involved in “Flow” Activities

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997) has developed an approach to creativity and operating “at the top of one’s game” that he has labeled as participation in “flow activities.” The concept of being involved with a personal flow activity has much to say for reducing stress.

He states flow activities are activities that, when we are involved in them, we lose track of time and become less self-conscious. At the end of such activities, we generally feel refreshed, and feel better about ourselves and our place in the world.

Each person has a different list of flow activities. These activities can include playing music, reading, running, woodworking, or travel. The list can include simple tasks (taking a walk in the fall) to more elaborate efforts (taking a kayak class for one week on a remote river).

To pursue the concept of flow activities, you would:

- Ask yourself what activities you really care about
- Consider whether or not you currently are involved in these activities
- Make a commitment to take small steps towards some level of involvement in your flow activity

Summary

Stress management in the project world is about functioning at our highest levels on cognitive tasks and in interpersonal transactions. It is not just about “feeling better.”

Our focus in reducing stress, and therefore in functioning at our highest levels, should be directed towards what we as individuals contribute to make our work life stressful, and what we can do to make it less stressful. The focus should not be on what “others” do to us to make us stressed. That focus is short term, limited in potency, and an abrogation of our responsibility to take care of our selves.

Our unique personal attributes predisposes us to certain risks for the experience of stress. In addressing these attributes, our goal is not to change who we are, but to make sure we actively develop strategies for minimizing or moderating those aspects of the attributes that increase our risk for stress.

We can also think about managing project stress from the perspective of what distinct stress management approaches are suitable for any personal style. These coping strategies consist of interpersonal skills and attitudes such as:

- The ability to detach or dissociate
- Monitoring “what if?” thinking
- Enhancing conflict resolution skills
- Staying away from debating, and
- Using paradox to gain a broader perspective

Also, we can use stress management techniques representative of three distinct lines of research in the management of stress and the enhancement of well being. These research based techniques include:

- Positive psychology
- Cognitive behavioral strategies, and
- Emersion in personal flow activities

Managing our stress, towards the goal of maximizing performance, is an ongoing process, involving the ongoing experimentation with different approaches.

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