

OCCUPATIONAL Stress

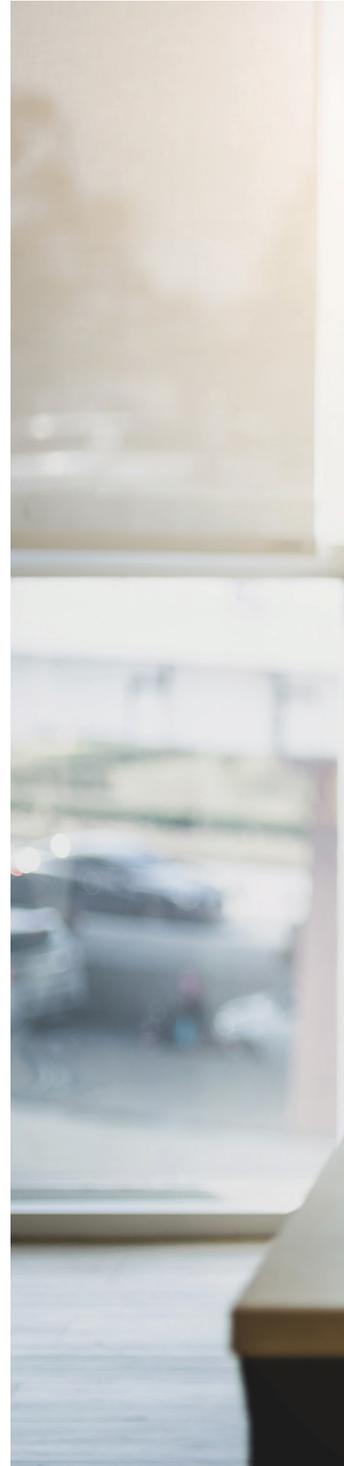
and Productivity in Right of Way

Strategies and best practices

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Mental health remains a stigma around the professional environment due to the pressures that surround the professional workplace. There is a fear that talking about your mental well-being might come off as you are too weak or unable to perform the tasks assigned. A major contributor to poor mental health is occupational stress, which can be difficult to alleviate. Occupational stress remains an enigmatic problem for most organizational leaders due to the uniqueness of individuals. However, leaders who do not attempt to proactively mitigate occupational stress within their organization are more prone to entice toxic work environments and create a counterproductive workplace.

In a recently published qualitative doctoral study, I explored strategies that a land management service company used to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. The findings of the study were synonymous with recent and relevant literature regarding occupational stress and stress reducing strategies. Along with reading and referencing over 300 peer-reviewed articles and books to support the study, I interviewed leaders of an unnamed land management service company to explore their direct input on strategies to reduce occupational stress. Three themes to reducing occupational stress emerged from the intense review of literature and the interviews with the participants.







The best way to become a better listener would be to simply *listen first, respond second*.



1. Provide communication. The number one response from the interviewees and most recognized discussion topic in the cited literature of the study was communication. Both direct and indirect communication tended to be an overarching theme that was recognized early in the process of the study. Direct communication was illustrated by the participants as picking up the phone and talking or getting face-to-face interactions with their employees to discuss issues, tasks and current situations the employees were dealing with. Indirect communication was represented in the form of transparency via emails, weekly touchpoints and recurring events.

By providing open communication with their employees, leaders who participated in the study expressed the direct correlation between their employees' well-being and productivity. Leaders who continually communicate and provide transparency into organizational strategy, objective goals and other relevant information that may or may not directly involve the employee allow the employee to collaborate and see the big picture. A lot of times, folks just simply want to know "Why am I doing this?" Overcommunication can stifle that itch for employees and allow them to stay focused with a clear understanding of the why and perform appropriately.

2. Set boundaries and expectations. The second theme that was apparent from the literature review and participant interviews was the need for leaders to set boundaries and expectations with their team. Clearly defining the expectations of an employee enables the employee to have a transparent view of their job duties. Job ambiguity is a primary contributor to occupational stress, and providing employees with a clear understanding of job responsibilities can reduce or eliminate occupational stress.

In addition to setting expectations with employees, leaders who provide and define operational boundaries can also alleviate unwarranted stress. Most of the candidates who participated in the study noted that they encourage time away from work. Participants also outlined that they felt that because of the COVID-19 pandemic and everyone working remotely from their residence, now more than ever, it is important for employees to know that there is a separation between home life and work life. It is too easy to feel like you never leave work whenever your office is within 30 feet from your recliner, and employees need to know that whenever they are off the clock, they do not need



to think about work. Leaders and managers who instill this notion and understanding into their employees tend to have a less stressful working environment because the employees can unplug and recharge before the next workday commences.

3. Create trust or a bond. The third most reiterated strategy to reducing occupational stress that I discovered was the need to create trust or a bond with the employees. Leaders and managers who create an empathetic relationship with their employees tend to establish a form of trust with their employees. Creating trust within a workplace relationship sets the foundation for employees to confide in and express their ideas, concerns and opinions with their leadership. In order to decrease occupational stress, leaders must first recognize there is occupational stress within their team. Occupational stress is not always visible, and some people have the ability to shield themselves from displaying the effects of it.

Some simple ways to establish an empathetic relationship and encourage trust between leaders and teammates is to simply listen. Employees do not always come to their manager because they are seeking counsel or advice on how to accomplish a task. An employee may be stuck on a project outside of work and may just need to vent, or maybe they are working through a solution to a task, and they would just like to run the idea by you without criticism or objectiveness. In my experience, nobody likes a know-it-all. The best way to become a better listener would be to simply listen first, respond second.

Occupational stress within the right of way industry is prevalent whether you are a contracted field employee or a corporate manager. Contracted field employees are at the mercy of being contracted to a client and never knowing when the contract could suddenly stop. In attempt to mitigate this stressor, leaders of the contracted field employee should communicate and remain transparent with the field employee by outlining duration expectations, continually updating the field employee with project statuses and build trust so they know they will be taken care of by their leadership.

Corporate managers may not experience the same stressors as a field employee, but they could face stressful grievances that could be mitigated by their leadership. For example, if a manager is seeking to move up the corporate ladder, and they feel that they are being overlooked or not considered for advancement. As a result, they may be stressed and feel like they are not in a positive environment to thrive. However, there could be a plethora of factors to their advancement situation that they may not be aware of. This is where the corporate leadership should be communicating and setting expectations so that these individuals know they have a path forward. By the corporate leadership getting involved and maintaining a trusting open dialogue, employees will be able to put this stress away knowing what lies ahead and taking the guesswork and uneasiness out of day-to-day work life.

Occupational stress is adversely related to productivity in the workplace. Whenever discussing, researching or mitigating occupational stress, I tend to revert to the Golden Rule and treat others how I would like to be treated. The three themes that emerged from my study can all be applied to this simple principle of decency. I encourage all readers to apply the Golden Rule to their day-to-day work life and personal life. Even if you feel that you already encouraged direct communications, set boundaries and expectations, and created trust or a bond with your employees, continue these efforts. There is always room for improvement. Be better. Try harder. Enjoy life. 🍀



Bradley Irby recently graduated from Walden University with his doctorate in Business Administration (DBA). Bradley's doctoral study, "Strategies for Reducing Occupational Stress and Increasing Productivity," was officially published in the ProQuest database in August of 2023. Bradley has been in the right of way industry for over 15 years and is currently a senior manager for Contract Land Staff, LLC and an active member of IRWA Chapter 26.