

The Role of Stress in the Lives of Nonprofit Employees and  
What Human Resources Departments Can Do to Address It

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*Introduction*

As our world becomes more and more fast paced, the role of stress in our lives is increasing. We are expected to get better results, faster, and more easily. This expectation carries over into the nonprofit sector. Funders, donors, and clients are expecting quality services to be readily available, effective, and easy to use. Nonprofit employees would want nothing less, and have similar lofty expectations and goals for their own work and themselves. They are passionate about their work and the people they serve, so naturally they want to deliver their services in the most efficient way possible and help as many people as they can. They work hard to achieve success and they take a lot of pride in their work. Unfortunately, when expectations get out of control, there's a very bad consequence: stress.

Stress can have extremely negative results, including worsening of physical health, productivity, and happiness levels. There are startling results that are specific to nonprofit employees as well that we'll go over in more depth later in this paper. But the simple fact is that stress is a major problem that must be analyzed critically and evaluated so that we understand its role in our lives and the lives of nonprofit employees and how it can be diminished. It is something that must be taken seriously if we want to keep bright, passionate, successful people in the nonprofit sector's workforce. Otherwise, burnout will cut them out. It is essential that human resources departments have a main role in combating this issue. Human resources departments have access to organizational roles, management activity, and setting cultural climate for organizations. This paper will outline the ways human resources departments can address stress in the lives of nonprofit employees.

*Current Climate: The Role of Stress in the Lives of Nonprofit Employees*

Stress is an interesting area; it's a personal issue that varies dramatically person to person, depending on expectations, pressures, and personalities. The same workload can be stressful to one person and not to the next. In light of this, I decided to administer a survey to nonprofit employees. Because stress is so subjective, I felt it appropriate to include something that is self-reported. I'd like to begin this paper outlining some of the standout results I collected. I sent the survey to my coworkers and former coworkers, to friends who work in the sector (who subsequently shared the survey with their colleagues), and sent it out through the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (YNPN) listserv for the Bay Area chapter. I received 158 responses. In hindsight, it would have been ideal if I had approached more diverse respondents. The majority of respondents were female Millennials who had worked in the nonprofit sector for less than five years.

I started the survey by asking how often the respondent feels stress at work. 55% of respondents said some of the time, 32% said most of the time, 10% said always, and 2% said never. While some stress is only to be expected in any workplace, the fact that 42% of respondents, almost half, are either stressed most of the time or always at their job is a real problem. I looked more closely at the respondents who reported always being stressed. Of that 10%, 69% of them are Millennials, 63% of them have worked in the nonprofit sector for less than five years, and only 15% of them are executive directors. These results prove that stress does not correlate with position in the agency, and that it's not necessarily something that just comes along with greater responsibility. In fact, as people work in the sector for longer and travel up the career ladder, perhaps they utilize stress management techniques as a way to survive to avoid experiencing burnout.

I then asked respondents to report what forms of stress they experience as a nonprofit employee. Respondents were asked to select as many options as applied. The most frequent answer, 66% of respondents, said that they are overwhelmed with the amount of work they have. This figure is not a surprise. The nonprofit workplace is unique in that there are always more clients to serve, more money to raise, and more volunteers to recruit (until you meet your mission – and not many nonprofits are lucky enough to do that!). Rosetta Thurman and Trista Harris discuss this phenomenon in their book How to Become a Nonprofit Rockstar: 50 Ways to Accelerate Your Career. They discuss how nonprofit organizations are understaffed and therefore expect employees to take on tasks that may not be part of their job description. “...nonprofits can be understaffed and ask you to take on another role in which you have no knowledge or skill. Be willing to help out, but be sure you manage your boss’ expectations of you. If you’re asked to do someone else’s job, there should be an understanding of how you will also be able to fulfill your current duties” (2010). There is always more work to do than time to do it, which is something human resources must keep in mind when designing stress management programs.

Also regarding the forms of stress that nonprofit employees face, 59% of respondents reported they are not paid enough or not given enough benefits. As nonprofit organizations depend on outside funding sources for their resource base, this cannot always be changed at the management level. What can be managed at the top is communication about pay and benefits to the entire organization. We will discuss further details surrounding this later. The third most frequent response was that 55% of respondents reported that they answer to multiple constituencies. This is another common issue, but not necessarily something that has to be a source of stress.

I then asked respondents how stress affects their work. The most common answer, 57%, was that people work more than 40 hours per week. Hands down, the most common free response phrase I saw was “overworked and underpaid” – and this is probably the phrase I most commonly hear on a daily basis when people are describing working in the nonprofit sector. So frequently, I believe, because it has become an unfortunate underlying expectation of nonprofit employees. Although it’s not encouraged officially or spoken about, it has become an expectation that nonprofit employees work through lunch, come in on weekends, and never take breaks – for little pay. I can personally think of a time when my supervisor at work told me, “I think it’s great you eat lunch in the break room upstairs instead of at your desk.” The fact that he pointed it out at all demonstrates that it’s an anomaly amongst nonprofit employees. I love the response Rosetta Thurman and Trista Harris have to this attitude. “As a nonprofit worker, sometimes you need to get over yourself and stop playing the victim of small budgets, short staff, and weak leadership. It’s not your fault, and you don’t have to overcompensate for the sins of the nonprofit sector” (2010).

Also regarding how stress affects their work, 46% of people said they are not fully present when working with coworkers and clients and 30% said they make more frequent mistakes. These things are huge issues. The high level of stress being experienced by nonprofit employees is hurting our work product, which is not just a material thing but human capital. Our inability to combat the problem of stress amongst nonprofit employees is hurting our clients, the very people we are working hard to help. If this doesn’t cause us to sit up and notice, I don’t know what will.

It's just as important for us to understand how stress at work is affecting staff outside of work, too. We want happy, productive people working in the nonprofit sector. I asked, how does stress affect your life outside of work? No other answer was reported at such a high percentage as the majority answer on this question: 69% of respondents reported that they don't spend as much time on hobbies as they'd like to. 53% of respondents said they sleep too much or too little and 40% said their relationships suffer. In order for the nonprofit sector to be effective, we need to have the best people working at their best. If they are unhappy at home, especially if it's a consequence of working in the sector, no one loses out more than the nonprofit organization and the clients it is serves.

*What Human Resources Departments are Doing to Address Stress in the Lives of Nonprofit Employees*

Unfortunately, I don't have much to write about in this section. The truth is that human resources departments are not doing enough; in fact, many of them aren't doing anything at all. 41% of respondents to the survey I administered reported that HR does nothing to address the issue of stress in employees. This is terrible! Human resources departments should have at least some role, if not a big role, in dealing with this problem.

One slightly encouraging element is that the majority of responses to that question, 43%, were that HR hosts staff appreciation events. While not specifically intentional to address stress, this type of effort does help with employee morale issues, which can have an affect on stress levels amongst employees. When employees are encouraged to relax and have fun with their colleagues, they can strike up friendships, causing more satisfaction in their job overall. I was happy to see this number as the highest response, but still not happy that it is less than half of nonprofit organizations that responded.

Only 13% of respondents said that HR provides wellness classes. This is one way I see that is very proactive to deal with the issue of stress in the role of nonprofit employees, and something that I hope is becoming more prevalent in the sector. Anecdotally, I hear that programs around employee wellness are becoming more popular. While the percentage in my survey's respondents is low, I am hopeful that this number is on the rise.

### *What Human Resources Departments Should Do to Address Stress in the Lives of Nonprofit Employees*

Many nonprofit employees have a very narrow view of the human resources function, an unfortunate consequence of the fact that nonprofit human resources duties are often an afterthought that are combined with finance or operations. In reality, HR has the capacity to transform many nonprofit organizations. They can set policies and procedures, change job classifications, control pay scales, and the like. Importantly, they can also impact employee morale and set the culture of a nonprofit by mandating certain practices and working with management staff to implement values that should be encouraged. Human resources, although it may not have a big role now, can have a tremendous role in addressing stress in the lives of nonprofit employees.

### *Communication and Expectations*

One of the most important things human resources departments can do regarding stress is to never dismiss or diminish an employee's request for work-life balance or other flexibility. By respecting employees' requests surrounding work-life balance, you are sending a message to staff that you value the role of a stress-free environment for your employees. "If someone comes to you in your nonprofit and wants to change her work life in some way, ask why and then tell her, 'Good for you!' *Never, ever, ever criticize a work-life*

*balance choice*, or wonder aloud if she's thought her decision through enough, or suggest they wait until a particular project is done" (Heyman, 2011). Being respectful and encouraging requests like these will create a culture of balance in your organization. Human resources departments can encourage managers to do the same.

One major theme I heard from my survey respondents was a desire for better communication throughout their nonprofit organization. This especially was prevalent from the high percentage of people who selected that answering to multiple constituencies was a source of stress. Human resources can have a hand in combating this problem by looking closely at the organizational structure and ensuring that the chain of command is clear and appropriate. Nonprofit organizations inevitably have multiple constituencies to answer to, but that doesn't mean that employees should feel as though they have to be accountable to all of them, which can be stressful. Board communication can be funneled through management staff, a clear staff organization can be laid out, and human resources can step in when lines of communication are being crossed.

Also in regards to clearer communication, expectations of staff members should be clear. Human resources can play a roll in ensuring this by evaluating job descriptions and making sure they are accurate. Job descriptions should be clear, with a list of essential duties as well as other expectations of the position. Of course, almost every job description in the nonprofit sector includes "additional duties as assigned," and that is appropriate as long as the duties are related to the position. It is unfair and stressful to expect a staff member to take on duties out of the blue. If employees understand what is expected of them and see the cohesiveness of their position, their stress level will be reduced.



As was mentioned before, and is well known in the nonprofit sector, low pay and/or benefits is a major source of stress for nonprofit employees. The reality of the nonprofit sector is that financial resources aren't plentiful and nonprofits have a unique relationship with money. Resources often come from outside sources, such as private donations or government grants, and (often) the hope from funders is that as much money as possible is funneled to the programs. I think focusing on increasing wages in the nonprofit sector is a valid interest, but not something that we should dwell on. Instead, let's focus our energies on human resources demonstrating pay equity across agencies. If nonprofit employees feel as though they are getting paid what they deserve, and are receiving a fair wage, I have a suspicion that they will not feel as stressed about their pay. It won't change the number they receive, but it will change the way they feel about that number. And as we know from stress being subjective, that could be all that is necessary.

Another way that human resources can reframe an expectation of nonprofit employees is through results. Nonprofit employees can be stressed because they are unsure of the difference they are making – they can feel as though what they are doing is a drop in the bucket in the grand scheme of things. One tactic is to take the larger results that are stated by the agency and reported to funder and cut them into smaller, more achievable goals that staff members can work to attain. “At Public Allies, Kirsch tried to disaggregate the organization's ambitious mission into ‘bite-sized chunks’ that individual staff members or teams could aim to meet. In addition, the organization looked for ways to demonstrate impact, both in the lives of the Allies and in the organizations where they worked” (Letts, Ryan, and Grossman, 1999). With achievable results, staff members will feel as though they are making a difference, and will feel better about their work and less stressed.

### *Small Perks That Make a Big Difference*

Many survey respondents also reported that flexibility was something they valued in regards to stress management. Human resources departments can encourage this by telling management staff it's acceptable and being open minded when people request flexible schedules. There are certain rules regarding non-exempt employees, of course, and flexibility can only be upheld as far as it is not impacting job duties. But it should be encouraged otherwise. Rosetta Thurman and Trista Harris give examples of a staff member who doesn't schedule meetings after 3:00 each day so they can make sure to pick up their kids from daycare at 5:00, or someone who is in a band that practices in the evenings setting expectations with their coworkers that they always leave by 5:30 (2010). If human resources embraced these sorts of requests and demonstrated respect for flexibility, nonprofit employees would surely appreciate the gesture.

Time management tips are also something that many people requested in the survey. Rosetta Thurman and Trista Harris speak of the importance of evaluating how you are using your time and implementing time management tips such as batching tasks – turning off the email notification and only responding to them twice a day, batching phone calls, meetings, etc. (2010). Human resources departments could certainly provide time management tips or trainings for staff, and they would certainly feel more in control over their workload with that sort of support.

Alison Stein Wellner echoes this sentiment in her article *How to Manage the Stress of Work at a Charity*. She speaks specifically about the importance of getting in control of your workload and organization at work, that gaining control of these factors make things feel so much better (2004). At one nonprofit organization that I worked at, every Tuesday and

Thursday from 10:00 – 12:00 was designated quiet time. If you wanted, you could put your phone on do not disturb, turn off your email, shut your door, and put up a sign that you were honoring quiet time. Staff members were told not to interrupt coworkers during this time. It was well received by most staff members and employees were amazed at the great work they could do with just a couple of designated uninterrupted hours during the week. This is a simple thing that human resources could spearhead to allow for staff members to regain control over their to do lists and diminish some of the stress that comes with mounting tasks and sporadic fires.

Alison Stein Wellner also emphasizes the importance of breaks and breathing exercises for nonprofit employees, and even gives a small example of one breathing exercise (2004). As I mentioned earlier, only 13% of respondents to my survey said their human resources department provides wellness classes. This is an easy fix that can be done – if it's not possible to offer the classes or bring someone in, allow for staff to use a few hours a month of work time to participate in offsite classes. Numerous respondents expressed a desire for something like this. Providing this sort of training is something easy human resources departments can do for their employees.

### *Ditching the Martyr Lifestyle*

Rosetta Thurman and Trista Harris coined the phrase martyr lifestyle in relation to nonprofit employees and unfortunately I think it fits perfectly (2010). There is an unfair underlying expectation that nonprofit employees must work through lunch, late, and on the weekends. If you work a 40 hour workweek, you're not working enough. I believe this attitude is the core of our stress problem in the nonprofit sector. Most employees take this underlying expectation to heart and, as nonprofit employees are usually working for the

greater cause and not only to generate an income, they want to do their best and live up to expectations. We are well meaning but we are perpetuating this expectation. I challenge nonprofit employees to take a stand by not adhering to this. Take lunch away from your desk, leave at 5:00, and keep your weekends to yourself. Don't get me wrong, still work hard, but also play hard. Realize that life is short and there's no reason to work it away, even if it's for a good cause. The work will still be there tomorrow morning.

I do feel as though each of us has a duty to go against this expectation, but for real change to occur, this type of mentality has to change from the highest level. And this direction can come from human resources. Executive directors and management staff can't just talk the talk, they have to walk the walk as well. And pay attention to their staff – ask if they took their lunch away from their desk, make sure they leave early, etc. I'm not saying and handholding will be necessary, and of course, we are all adults. But I do feel as though if management laid out an expectation that the workday ends at a reasonable hour and lunch is necessary, that much of the stress of working crazy hours will fade away. And that, I believe, is the crux of the solution.

## **The Role of Stress in the Lives of Nonprofit Employees and What Human Resources Departments Can Do to Address It: Suggestions for Human Resources Departments**

Compiled by Chapin Cole, 7/3/12

Stress is an undeniable problem in the nonprofit sector, but there are straightforward ways that human resources departments can combat this issue. Less stressed employees will mean more productivity and better results for your nonprofit – it's win/win. There's no reason not to implement some of these easy tips in your nonprofit organization.

### **Communication and Expectations**

**Respect all requests for work/life balance.** Any time a staff member comes to you with a request for flexibility in their job, be respectful. Even if you know it won't work out, listen to them, acknowledge their request, and tell them it will be considered. This will send a strong message to all employees that human resources cares about stress management and wellness in staff.

*Do this today:* Send an all staff email telling employees that all requests for work/life balance (within reason) will be considered, and mean it.

**Improve communication.** Nonprofit employees get stressed when they have to answer to multiple constituencies. You can combat this by evaluating the organizational chart, ensuring chains of command are clear, and managing board and staff communication.

*Do this today:* Look at your staff organizational chart and consider the number of people employees are accountable to. See if that number can be lowered.

**Clear up expectations.** A big source of stress is having seemingly unrelated tasks be assigned to you. I know at a nonprofit it can be hard to manage everything, but be intentional about the expectations you are setting for employees and the extra tasks that are being given to them.

*Do this today:* Take a close look at your employees' job descriptions. Are they truly representative of what's being done? Are they cohesive?

**Demonstrate pay equity.** Although low wages are often complained about, you don't necessarily have to pay more to get happier employees. If you simply don't have room in the budget, ease this problem by showing staff they are being paid what they deserve.

*Do this today:* If you have a compensation policy, share it with staff. If you don't, develop one. Show staff they are being paid fairly and why.

**Redefine results.** Often employees feel overwhelmed because they feel like their work is a drop in the bucket compared to the problem the nonprofit is working to tackle. If you break up the big goals into more achievable results, employees can look forward to achieving them and feeling great about their work.

*Do this today:* Take the lofty goals you have set for funders and break them into smaller pieces that employees can achieve. Work with employees to set these goals.

(continued)

## **Small Perks that Make a Big Difference**

**Encourage flexibility.** One of the most commonly desired stress management tools is job flexibility. Employees want to set their own work schedule, work from home, and the like. If this is possible for the position, encourage this behavior. Chances are just knowing it's an option will help combat stress employees feel.

*Do this today: Share with managers that flexibility in work schedules will be available. Have them discuss individually with staff as they see appropriate.*

**Offer time management tips and training.** Many nonprofit employees feel stressed because of the amount of work they have to do. As we all know, there is never enough time to do everything you need to at a nonprofit. Offer tips and training to help staff better manage their time.

*Do this today: Research a training service near you and host an optional staff training on time management.*

**Give staff time to get in control of their task lists.** Feeling out of control is something that often leads to stress. Communicate to employees that it's important that they take time to manage their workload and be intentional about their work.

*Do this today: Consult with management staff about the idea of hosting "quiet time" for two hours a week where staff do not interrupt each other, turn off their emails, and have dedicated time to get control of their workload.*

**Encourage breaks and wellness practices.** These small practices make a big difference. Make sure supervisors are modeling appropriate break behavior and encouraging staff to do the same, and celebrate wellness activities.

*Do this today: Consider the feasibility of offering wellness classes for employees. If not possible, partner with a reputable agency that will offer them to your staff and give employees some time during the workday to participate in these classes.*

**Eliminate the martyr lifestyle.** This is the big overarching problem that causes stress in the lives of nonprofit employees – this is the "overworked and underpaid" catch phrase. We must eliminate the underlying expectation that nonprofit employees work crazy hours. This expectation is what well-intentioned nonprofit employees are accepting and attempting to live up to, and it is causing stress and burnout fast. We're not going to be able to change the workload of our employees (unless of course we can manage to add staff, but that's usually not the case). But we can manage our employees' relationship to their work. We need to change the attitude of the culture to understand that the work will still be there in the morning, and it's OK to leave at a decent hour and come back to it.

*Do this today: Work with management staff to encourage employees to work reasonable schedules. Make sure they assure employees that it is acceptable, neigh, celebrated when they leave on time and take regular breaks. Then management must adhere to the same ideas. They must work a reasonable amount of hours and take real lunch breaks whenever possible – because nothing will change unless we all mean it.*

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