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# Instead of Stress, Worker Freedom

*We are micromanaging our employees to death.*

By ISAAC GETZ

If President Nicolas Sarkozy wants Frenchmen to be happy, he might worry less about how many vacation days they get, and more about the crushing bureaucracies in which they work.

The French media is busy discussing the series of suicides at France Télécom. Since its trade unions started to track the data in 2008, 23 of the company's employees have committed suicide and 13 have attempted it.

The company's executives are no doubt chafing under the garish limelight, and critics of the coverage may have some points. As with airplane crashes, suicides are attention-grabbing but may be statistically unrepresentative. France Télécom has more than 100,000 employees, so perhaps if data were available on other companies, the suicide rate at France Télécom would not look exceptional. In their list, the unions themselves attribute some of the suicides to strictly personal causes. Like airplane crashes again, suicides can have a variety of combined causes.

But as the French say, there is no smoke without fire. A recent study reported that 52% of working French don't sleep well on Sunday night. But work-related stress is not a French disease, and is ubiquitous and severe in all developed economies. In the U.K. and U.S. 70% of employees don't sleep well on Sunday night either.

Unsurprisingly, work place stress is recognized today as a key contributor in 75% to 90% of all primary-care doctor visits. This, of course, has economic costs. Studies estimate costs for French businesses between €830 million and €1.65 billion per year, while for U.S. businesses these costs go as high as \$300 billion per year, due to stress-induced absenteeism, lost productivity and health expenditures. Besides the costs, stress also leads to much human suffering.

If workplace stress lasts for a short period, it can lead to those mundane modern diseases, such as stomach disorders, back pain, musculoskeletal problems, headaches, skin problems, loss of sleep and energy, and emotional distress. If it persists over a long period, it often results in heart disease. Severe cases amplified by isolation may even lead to suicide.

The unions know it. That's why France Télécom's union called its branch tracking suicide data "Observatoire du stress et des mobilités forcées" ("Observatory of stress and of forced mobility"). But to analyze the root causes, one must understand the mechanism that generates stress in our lives.

It all begins with situations that we perceive as either physically or psychologically threatening. Psychologists call these "stressors." Stressors can include increases in one's workload, or work demands, or uncertainty about what needs to be done or where one will work (in France Télécom's case, see recent forced and sudden changes of employees' workplaces). In addition, stressors envelop all the constraints and inter-personal conflicts that prevent employees from doing a good job, such as being denied resources or information you need for your job.

All the big and small stressors trigger negative emotional reactions, most often anger or anxiety. From there, the road to stress symptoms is all downhill. Sometimes, stress leads to constructive actions aiming to cope with the stressor, such as getting the needed information from somebody else. But most often, the reaction is destructive: flight - hence, turnover and absenteeism - or fight, to include violence to ourselves.

Fortunately there is one extremely important potential ameliorating factor for workplace stress—the perceived control an employee has over his work. When a person believes he has a high degree of control in any given situation, he judges it as less stressful, sometimes simply as "challenging." Military fighter pilots don't typically report seeing their missions, even in combat, as stressful, because they have complete control over their job. This perception of control minimizes a person's emotional reaction to a stressor. For example, facing a sudden upsurge in clients, a salesperson who feels in control will be confident that she'll find a way to keep the workload manageable. Her emotions may even bring a positive feeling of challenge. High perceived control may even lead an employee to search for constructive responses to cope with the stressful event.

For a person with a low level of control over her work, the reaction is quite different. Not believing that she can change the way she does her work, she'll engage in the destructive actions of fighting or fleeing to reduce her emotional distress and feel better. Three psychologists, Hans Bosma, Steven Stansfeld and Michael Marmot, spent five years studying the stress levels of more than 10,000 British civil servants. They found that employees who feel they have little control over their jobs—whether that is true or not—are 50% to 100% more likely to develop heart disease than those feeling as if they are in control of their jobs.

High-level employees can of course find ways to escape bureaucratic procedures. But there is an alternative, much more dramatic way to reduce stress-related costs and suffering for everyone: Treat people as modern pilots, not as soldiers of the old wars. Give people real control over their work, stop giving them orders about how to do their jobs, and their stress will go down. With it, absenteeism will drop, and stress's hidden costs will shrink, while employee engagement goes up. All this, of course, is hard to accomplish in a traditional command-and-control company that often pays a lip service to autonomy but preserves the hierarchical chain of command—but it is possible.

Companies as diverse as French copper alloy firm FAVI or Finnish cleaning service provider SOL have accomplished it. There is more good news: Freeing a company's people to act not only eliminates hidden costs and human misery, it also dramatically boosts its innovation and organic growth. That's the sort of news for which any business would be glad to make the headlines.

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