

Stress Management Case Study

Company: ABC Civil Engineering - an engineering firm

Situation: ABC company has recently made significant cuts in staff and the work load on existing employees has increased. A major RFP is due

Characters : Ted Waltz – Managing Director of ABC Engineering
Elaine Tillman – Civil Engineer

Elaine Tillman looked at her watch – it was 7:30 pm. Just then she knew she would not make it to her son’s final high school basketball game. It took her a moment to collect herself and wipe the tear that had started down her face and onto the ragged-edged 100 plus page RFP she was working on. The RFP, the largest opportunity that ABC Civil Engineering had a chance to bid on in 6 months, was far from ready for the 9:00 AM deadline the following day.

Normally in this situation, Elaine would have collaborated with a proposal team putting together such a big proposal but, since the economic down turn hit, ABC has had to make significant cuts in its staff. It started with administrative staff - first it was two administrative assistants, then a junior engineer, then two tenured project managers. This year alone the Westport office of ABC Civil Engineering cut 35% of its staff.

Of course, that only meant the workload on the remaining team members would have to increase. Sure, there were fewer new projects but there was no shortage of work to do - RFPs, change orders, marketing strategy plans and providing existing customers with better service. Everyone was asked to perform tasks they normally didn’t do or enjoy. Needless to say the climate at ABC Engineering was not good. Well at least until annual raises and bonuses were deferred and an indefinite hold was put on attending professional development conferences, replacing computers and updating software. Then the climate went from poor to non-existent.

All of this weighed on Ted Waltz, the managing director of ABC. He was the one who had to make the cuts, have the termination discussions and try to keep the business profitable. Ted was struggling with the challenges both professionally and personally. Ted started with ABC 25 years ago as a surveyor just out of school. He’s been involved in some the firm’s best projects and he took over the managing partner position 3 years ago. While he always enjoyed developing the company, recently he has found himself spending more time on administrative tasks and less on nurturing the growth of younger engineers. With all of the ups and downs that any professional services firm faces during its lifespan, none have rivaled this one. With the layoffs, the firm has had to abandon a strategic new market they had been developing for the past year and Ted hasn’t even had time to explain it to the other members of the firm. For the first time in his career, Ted no longer feels that he is in control of his work and he dreams of retirement when he can get up and start a day without having to put out a fire, console a worried staff member or call a vendor to ask for new terms.

Case Questions

1. How would you describe the gap between Elaine’s expectations and her reality and what is the impact on her stress level?

2. How would you describe the gap between Ted’s expectations and his reality and what is the impact on his stress level?

3. What factors might be driving these gaps for ABC Engineering (hint: think about the engagement model)?

4. What actions can ABC Engineering take to close the expectation gap and reduce workplace stress?

5. List three personal actions either Elaine or Ted can take to reduce their personal stress.

6. What expectation/reality gaps exist in your organizations that are creating stress?

7. What successful stress reduction actions have you seen individuals or organizations take in the past?
