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The Impact of

STEPS TO CREATING A RESILIENT WORK CULTURE

STRESS at Work

fierce.



THE IMPACT OF STRESS AT WORK: STEPS TO CREATING A RESILIENT WORK CULTURE

Stress has become devastating to the workplace. Burnout, resignation, and anxiety are higher today than ever. The effects of stress are draining money out of the economy and costing organizations billions of dollars and lost talent. The chronic effects of stress dramatically impair human performance and decision-making ability. Our limited energy resources to accomplish tasks effectively diminishes due to stress.

Yet, learning to manage and stress can create massive productivity improvements when you have the right tools to mitigate stress and build resilience. Research continues to show financial gains for organizations that implement strategies to help their people become more resilient. After years of research and experience with Fortune 500 companies, Fierce developed a unique approach to managing stress and building resilience.



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Conversations Strategies

- ✓ Successfully navigating interpersonal relationships at work through effective conversation strategies lower relationship stress and build a culture of resilience. Developing skills, especially around difficult conversations and confrontation can remove a major source of work-place stress.

Mindfulness Practices

- ✓ Learning skills to diffuse stress responses battle the effects of heightened chronic stress. Meditation and mindfulness skills have proven to reduce stress and create increased levels of empathy and emotional intelligence.

Self-Awareness Technology

- ✓ The effects of stress are easily hidden in our fast paced work environment. We live in a state of heightened awareness and do not notice the damage of cumulative stress until late. Current research around stress bio-markers give us new insight into how stressors impact us plus the tools to manage those events.



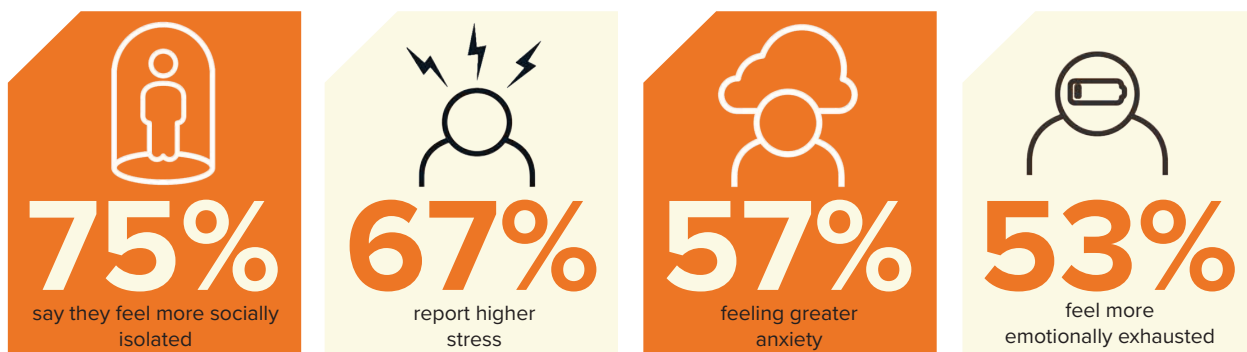
Stress in a Post-Pandemic Workplace

Today, employees cope with traditional stressors such as excessive workload and interpersonal conflicts with coworkers, clients, or supervisors all while attempting to navigate work and personal life impacted by the effects of a global pandemic. Learning to navigate the changing face of the workplace and the economic effects of the pandemic have been challenging.

A recent article by the Harvard Business Review provides some illustrative statistics:

“Since the outbreak of the pandemic, 75% of people say they feel more socially isolated, 67% of people report higher stress, 57% feel great anxiety, and 53% say they feel more emotionally exhausted.”

SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF THE PANDEMIC





For many of us, talking about our emotions, is not a skill we've learned. Nor has it been affirmed or even allowed – especially in the workplace. That gap, the empty space between what we feel and what we actually say in conversations and relationships, is in large part, what drives a lack of mental and emotional health.

When taken together, both traditional and contemporary research suggests that stress has an incredibly destructive impact on employee productivity, wellbeing, and social relationships.

The Impact of Stress on Performance

There is an extensive amount of research documenting the disastrous impact excessive levels of stress have on employee performance. The majority of studies focusing on the relationship between stress and employee performance suggest that as levels of stress increase, employee performance decreases. Studies have shown that excessive amounts of stress can cause employees to be absent from work, quit their jobs, perform poorly at work, and suffer from several medical ailments.



The negative effects of stress are not limited to the employee's work life. Work stressors have been shown to make it more difficult for employees to meet the demands of their family life. The "Work-Family-Conflict" have been linked to lower physical health, lower emotional health, and counterproductive coping behaviors such as drug usage, alcohol use, and other counterproductive behaviors. The cumulative impact of things such as high blood pressure, alcohol consumption, and drug usage can lead to workplace accidents, lost work time, and increased medical costs for the organization.

In addition, heightened stress contributes to lower work-related performance, and lower quality of output (services and products), and can breed a cutthroat work environment. From an organizational perspective, this means a loss of productive workdays, a loss of key talent, and ultimately a negative effect on the profitability of the organization.

FINANCIAL COST OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

\$187
BILLION

\$300
BILLION

Including factors such as
absenteeism, turnover, diminished
productivity, increased medical
costs, and increased legal costs

A review of research conducted in North America and Europe suggested that annually, the financial cost of occupational stress was estimated to be up to \$187 billion (Hassard et al., 2018). In 2019, a more inclusive analysis was conducted by the American Institute of Stress which found that after including factors such as absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity, increased medical costs, and increased legal costs, the total economic impact of stress to US employers was estimated at \$300 billion.



Since the Pandemic, the numbers have skyrocketed. Burnout is one of the major causes of employee turnover, and a recent Gallup study estimated it as a 1 Trillion dollar problem.

One of the commonly cited reasons for decreased performance while under stress is they have fewer personal resources available to focus on constructive endeavors because so much of their cognitive and emotional resources are focused on dealing with the various stressors that they perceive. This creates a vicious cycle—stress can lead to errors, and errors cause more stress.



OVERCOMING STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

Forward-thinking organizations have invested in resources designed to help their employees cope with stressors. For example, a recent meta-analysis (a statistical analysis summarizing individual studies) of 36 individual studies of stress management programs for employees across numerous occupations and geographic locations concluded that stress management programs were associated with reducing strain and increasing employee performance (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008).

Conversations Strategies

Interpersonal and professional communication training, like Fierce Conversations are designed to help participants overcome the barriers to successful communication. For many, the act of communicating can be an incredibly stressful and anxiety inducing activity. Receiving feedback, offering feedback, confronting colleagues, sharing honest opinions, public speaking, and speaking with figures of authority can induce high levels of anxiety in most people. By incrementally building the participant's knowledge base and skill level on how to effectively communicate, these types of training initiatives help to both reduce perceived stress while at the same time help to build crucial skills needed to connect, support, and influence people at work and in their personal lives.

Research has shown that communication skills training courses produce reliable improvements in communication skills (Barth & Lannen, 2011), increase levels of confidence with communication (Braga et al., 2021), increase satisfaction of consumers/clients on the receiving end of communications (Boissy et al., 2016; Lundebj, Jacobsen, Lundebj, & Loge, 2017), and can lead to reductions in levels of aggression of medical patients (Baby, Gale, & Swain, 2018).

In the case of Mary Proctor Trane mentioned above, she had previously attended focused communication training offered by Fierce Conversations. Because of this training, she was able to proactively address a stressful work relationship from a position of confidence. She leveraged the Fierce Conversations template and structured a meaningful conversation. This template gave her a clear advantage over simply "winging it". As Mary put it: "I made an appointment with him the next day, spent some time prepping the confront model, and had the conversation. I learned a lot, he learned, he apologized, I understood (not agreed with) his perspective and we ended the conversation with a hug. We had a good working relationship for years afterwards. Had we not had the conversation, I would have disliked him, avoided him, been SUPER STRESSED every time I was around him. Instead, I felt proud of myself (we teach others how to treat us) and I think he respected me more. He certainly never spoke to me like that again."





It is clear that after using this framework to prepare everything that she wanted to say, she gained meaningful insight into what was driving the behavior in question, and was able to make a truly meaningful connection that proved instrumental in cementing a respectful working relationship with this individual.

Heather Moyer is an educator with many years of experience in the classroom. She is responsible for the education of our youth and for the professional development of new teachers. One of her mentees was creating an unnecessarily unpleasant work environment for the other educators and administrative staff. The mentee in question was new to the school and had vocally complained about a range of issues.

“She was complaining about everything. As a more seasoned teacher, you want to help with advice, so we did... over and over” Initially, colleagues provided advice intended to help her deal with the issues that she was complaining about. However, there was a seemingly endless array of complaints. Heather’s mentee made no attempts at change, so it seemed that the advice was being ignored. That’s when Heather remembered her Fierce training and realized that advice-giving is rarely the answer when trying to get someone to change their behavior. Heather was aware of the situation and for the sake of her coworkers and the sake of her mentee she decided to leverage the Fierce Conversations Confront template to facilitate the important but challenging conversation around the mentee’s attitude and behavior at work.

“During a commute, she (the mentee) started complaining... I had a very Fierce Conversation with her. I explained how everyone was feeling at work. I told her that I was not trying to hurt her feelings but that this needed to stop.” Heather was able to get the critical information across to her mentee in a structured and helpful manner. While many people would try to avoid confrontation, because of the detailed lessons inherent in the Fierce Conversation training, Heather was willing and able to have this meaningful conversation with her mentee. Heather’s mentee was receptive to the feedback. “She was thanking me at the end of the conversation. She said ‘That was exactly what I needed to hear and thank you.’” This Fierce Conversation also helped to strengthen their relationship. “I gained even more of her trust because something deep inside us really responds to being leveled with.” This example goes to show that the well-designed templates offered by Fierce Conversations can be used in almost any situation where a conversation is needed.

Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness and meditation have been demonstrated to be successful in helping people cope with the challenges that they encounter in their professional and personal lives.

Mindfulness is often defined as a state of focusing one's attention on the "now" or being "fully present" in the moment while observing stimuli and reactions to stimuli without judgment. Stress management programs focusing on mindfulness training have shown promising results in helping to alleviate the physical, emotional, and behavioral consequences of occupational and personal stressors. Generally speaking, mindfulness-based techniques have been demonstrated to reduce stress (Janssen, et al., 2018). Mindfulness has enjoyed increased relevance at work. Leaders become even more effective when they use mindfulness-based techniques (Reb, Chaturvedi, Narayanan, & Kudesia, 2019). When leaders use mindfulness-based techniques, they are perceived as treating their employees more fairly, their employees report less stress, and their employees are empowered to perform at higher levels (Reb, Chaturvedi, Narayanan, & Kudesia, 2019).



Meditation is an umbrella term that has been used to describe a mental discipline of focusing one's mind on an image, an act, a thought, or – more challenging – to focus on nothing at all. For example, several guided meditations can reduce the body's stress response by focusing the mind on a relaxing image such as a forest, a beach, or a stream.

Providing meditation to employees at work has been linked to such beneficial outcomes as increased emotional intelligence, decreased perceived stress (Valosek, et al., 2018), decreased depression, decreased burnout (Elder, Nidich, Moriarty, & Nidich, 2014) increased job satisfaction, and increased job performance (Shonin, et al., 2014).



Benefits of providing meditation to employees at work:

- ▼ perceived stress
- ▼ depression
- ▼ burnout
- ▲ emotional intelligence
- ▲ job satisfaction
- ▲ job performance

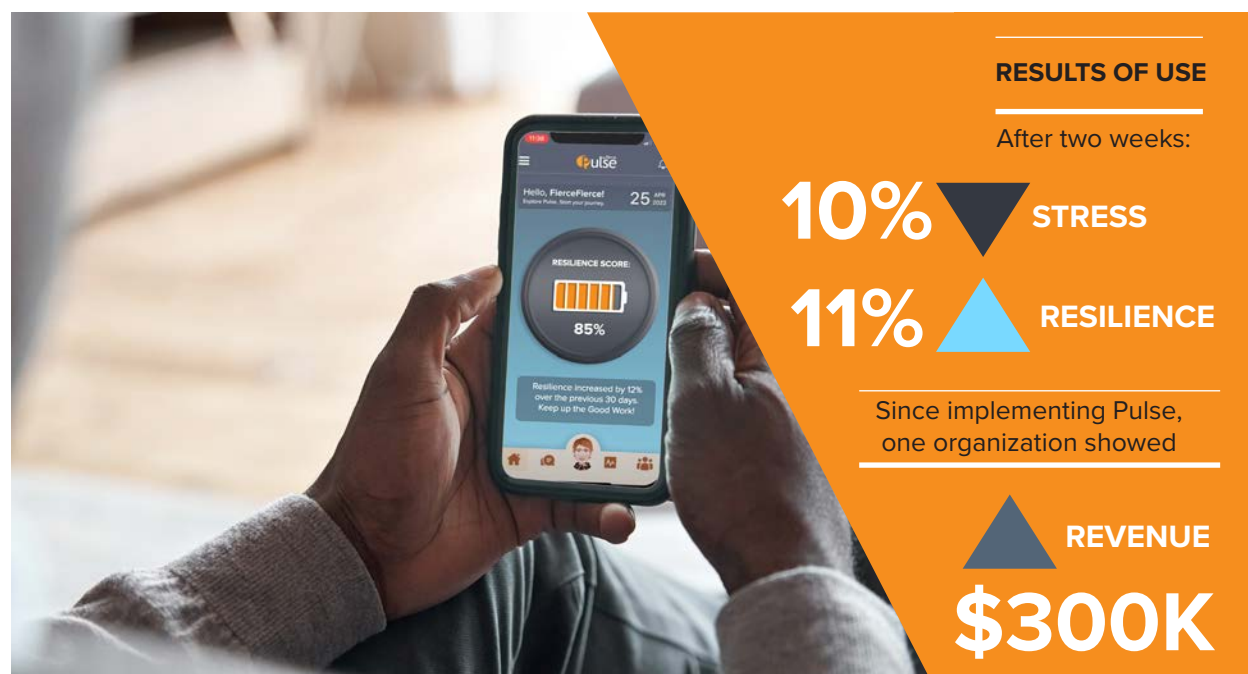
Self-Awareness Technology

Traditional stress management is often too generic and fails to produce long-term sustainable results that transform the work culture. They can deliver valuable change for some individuals, but not for many because of one simple fact. Stress is personal. No two people have the same lived experience, we're all unique, and our perception of stress plays an even bigger role in what causes us stress than even the stress event itself.

Self-awareness is a critical skill for resilience. Most generic wellness solutions lack personalized objective data that helps build unique self-awareness around stress. Studies have shown that while 95% of people think they are self-aware, only 10-15% truly are.

Without self-awareness, we don't identify the true causes of stress in our life. This is the major reason most wellness solutions don't work for everyone. Participants never develop self-awareness skills that help identify how their internal state reacts to their environment.

Developing stress self-awareness takes time to reflect on your work life and how events impact your internal state. Journaling has proven to be an effective tool and discovering the stressors that impact performance. However, while effective this process can take time before results become apparent.



Recent research has found several bio-markers that indicate levels of the stress response. With the prevalence of wearable technology such as the Fitbit or Apple Watch this data can be mined to quickly build self-awareness. Fierce researchers and developers used this technology to build the Pulse App that identifies those bio-markers of stress. Through a sophisticated AI those stress markers can be connected user's calendar, identifying stress levels, and tailoring actionable steps to mitigate stress and instill new skills.

Early testing demonstrated stress levels decreased on average by 10% and resilience increased by 11% in as little as 2 weeks. One organization was able to show a \$300K increase in revenue and showed a 13% increase in a successful execution of strategic initiatives since implementing Pulse within their organization.



One early participant began tracking her biometric responses with Pulse. After reviewing the data, she noticed there was one weekly meeting that always produced a Level 4 stress response. She was shocked at the results. This was a mandatory meeting, but one where her role was minimal and she had very little input, so she ignored the data.

After several more meetings, Pulse continued to register a Level 4 for this event, so she booked a meeting with her Pulse coach. Discussing the event, she realized that apathy was a major stressor for her. Later that week she met with her boss and asked to be removed from the meeting or given a bigger role in the agenda and discussion. Changes were made and she became a productive part of the meeting. Stress-events like this meeting would have remained hidden and slowly eroded her work-resilience without the self-awareness driven by Pulse technology.

FINANCIAL GAINS FROM MANAGING WORK STRESS

When implemented correctly, these solutions are associated with reductions in stress, increases in productivity, retention, and engagement. These types of interventions are also related to strong financial outcomes for organizations. For example, a recent analysis of a stress management program implemented at an electronics manufacturing organization found that the stress management program was associated with a 1.4% reduction in absences from work, a reduction in medical costs of approximately \$120 per employee, and more than a 5% reduction in turnover (Phillips & Phillips 2017).

Similarly, a randomized controlled trial of an internet-based stress management program revealed an average savings of \$204 (€180) per employee included in the program. This study is noteworthy in that employees were randomly selected to participate in the stress management program. On average, employees who were randomly enrolled into the program experienced significantly increased performance and significantly decreased absenteeism (Ebert et al., 2018).





The company's well-being efforts have improved its Business Health Culture Index from **69%** in 2013 to **79%** in 2018, with **1%** change in the Index delivering a **\$90-\$100** Million (EU) impact on their operating profit.

A recent case study published by Forbes on the efforts of SAP on employee wellbeing also helps to illustrate the financial benefits of employee wellbeing. SAP takes a holistic approach to employee wellbeing and offers many of the stress reduction techniques mentioned above. "the company's well-being efforts have improved its Business Health Culture Index from 69% in 2013 to 78% in 2018, with each 1% change in the Index delivering a \$90-\$100 Million (EU) impact on their operating profit."

Given the well-noted impacts that stress can have on an employee's physical health, emotional wellbeing, social relationships, workplace performance and the cumulative impacts that excessive stress can have on an organization's bottom line, more and more organizations are providing their employees with the tools necessary to help cope with contemporary stressors. One of the most important tools employers are providing to help employees cope with contemporary stressors (which, as a reminder, negatively impacts the business and its bottom line), is training that develops the highly coveted skill set of effective communication.

FIERCE APPROACH TO INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY

Fierce Conversations employs a systematic approach to reducing stress in the workplace by eliminating barriers to effective and authentic communication between employees and leaders. The tools offered by Fierce Conversations help individuals build communication skills and provide a solid foundation of self-awareness and self-confidence. Through Fierce's training solutions, we've taught hundreds of thousands of employees across the globe how to improve their communication skills with colleagues and customers.

For example, Temple Health, a major health care system in Philadelphia, engaged Fierce to help provide mid to senior level Temple Health managers the tools needed to coach employees as well as handle interpersonal conflicts and issues within their own departments, rather than taking those issues to HR. The result was a 33% decline in turnover and a 50% drop in employee discipline.





Goodway Group, a digital advertising agency with a remote workforce of 350 employees, was struggling with the assertive working style of a new team member. “She talked and moved fast, and that would stress the team out,” recounts Kandi Gongora, the company’s vice president of people and organizational development. “Because she’d get frustrated when the team asked questions, they stopped asking and started making assumptions.”

The situation seemed unresolvable until one team member, trained in the new feedback framework provided by Fierce Trainings, approached the new member after an especially tense meeting. He recounted some of the things she had said during the meeting, and their impact on the team.

“The new team participant had no idea how the rest of the team felt,” Gongora says. “She took the feedback to heart and let the team know she cared about them and was only pushing so hard because she wanted them to succeed.”

In response, the new team member could explain the motivation for her intensity – that she wanted the team to succeed. It also allowed her to reveal the stress and pressure she was feeling and clear the air with everyone involved. This one conversation resolved the tension and strengthened the relationships among the entire team. Tailored to any organization, Fierce Conversations training, can lead to less stress and anxiety, as well individual and collective success.



Fierce is an award-winning employee training and leadership development company, with a portfolio of training products and services designed to:

- Increase your company’s overall performance.
- Navigate through difficult periods and organizational change (like now!).
- Build a company culture that aligns with goals.
- Ensure inclusivity – giving everyone the chance to be heard.
- Give your leaders the confidence they need to actually “lead the way”.

To find out how much your business can save by reducing stress for your teams, contact us at **(206) 787-1100** or visit <https://fierceinc.com/contact-us/> to be connected with our leads specialist.

About the Authors



Gabe de la Rosa

Chief Behavioral Science Officer

Gabriel De La Rosa, Ph.D., brings more than 14 years of industrial and organizational psychology experience to the Fierce Team as their new Chief Behavioral Science Officer. He earned his Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Bowling Green State University in 2008 and has published work in journals such as the Journal of Addictive Behaviors (an international peer-reviewed journal), and edited books such as The Handbook of Employee Engagement, which is considered an invaluable resource for organizational psychologists.

Gabe has spent over 7 years at The Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control, where he was responsible for understanding and enhancing organizational factors impacting performance among sailors and marines.

Ed Beltran

CEO

Ed brings 20 years of expertise in finance and operations and has been a leader at Fierce since 2017. He holds two Bachelor of Science degrees from Arizona State University in Accounting and Computer Information Systems, and an MBA from the University of Michigan. He has held an active CPA license since 2004 and holds certificates in Entrepreneurship from Wharton and Harvard.

Prior to joining Fierce, Ed was Head of Finance with large multinational organizations such as Agilent Technologies, Avnet Inc., PricewaterhouseCoopers, Arthur Andersen as well as advising and supporting start-ups and early-stage companies.

Ed is an avid road bike cyclist clocking 120+ miles a week year-around helping his mental, physical, and spiritual balance as he puts it. He is passionate about helping those who don't have the privilege, background, or resources to be fully prepared to engage in effective conversations at different levels in life (College, Professional, Personal, Parenthood).



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