

## **What Stress Tolerance Gives the Teams of Today**

- James Terrell and Marcia Hughes

Stress is defined as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand for change." by Hans Stele, one of the first researchers to investigate the subject. Well into the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the demand for change seems to be both constant and increasing. Indeed, we tell teams these days that stress is often a euphemism for pain. Today's teams are increasingly willing to speak about their stress and, fortunately, there are many powerful ways to manage stress.

We can help teams respond resiliently to the often irrational demands to "do more with less" by utilizing the early warning system that their emotional self-awareness provides through reading the emotional signals of the situation accurately and responding to them effectively. Team members need to know how to respond to the complexity of observing and learning how each of their fellow team members automatically responds to stress. It is this automatic response that can be so problematic for teams and individuals because it is hardwired in the brain. It automatically cranks into gear when it encounters stimuli in the world that is threatening -- the sound of your boss's voice when she gets "that tone," the look that means the boss isn't happy because her expectations have not been met and you are responsible.

One of the most enduring ways to build stress tolerance is by building strong relationships among team members. That takes time, effort, flexibility, trust and every so often a dose of forgiveness. As you learn how to respond to each other when under stress, you will become more aware of your own behavior patterns. With that key data in hand, you can start rewiring those patterns.

## **The Seven Ingredients of Stress Tolerance for Teams**

1. **Environmental Awareness.** Awareness of one's physical and social environments is essential. To some extent one's ability to accurately read what is expected within the social environment actually determines how much stress is experienced. Being conscious of and regulating the emotional pressures in the social environment and the physical tensions in one's body gives team members the ability to manage stress. This can be done through attentive listening to determine what you, and those around you are feeling, and why. These listening skills are often called emotional self-awareness and empathy respectively. To read them accurately team members need to silence the cognitive chatter in their mind and re-sensitize their awareness to the subtle messages they are constantly receiving. Focusing one's attention on his/her breath is one of the easiest techniques for doing this.
2. **Assertiveness.** When team members have accurately sensed what is going on and why, the next step in stress management is to tell the team. For instance, if your boss gave a plum project to a colleague, you might say, "I feel disrespected because you promised that work to me, and then you gave it to someone else." This kind of a self-disclosure is "taking your emotional pulse in public," and the more comfortable team



members feel in doing this in appropriate circumstances, the better your team will function. Stating one's own reality provides immediate, accurate information to the team that they can synthesize and respond to right away. It's efficient. It's accurate. It takes the guess work out of the equation. One doesn't have to hope that the team will figure it out, and the team doesn't have to hope they can read your mind. It's your responsibility to tell people what you need and want.

Of course, self-disclosure is risky business. No wonder it's so important to spend time building relationships and deepening trust. The other critical factor is functional, adult communication. The stronger your team's communication skills, the easier it is to be assertive. Coaches and consultants can do wonders in facilitating a shorter learning curve for these skills. Their expertise and objectivity can move a team to a higher level of performance faster than any other strategy.

3. **Self-Regard.** Self-regard calls for team members to accept themselves, warts and all. The only way people can change their behaviors and work more successfully together as a team is if they feel confident that they are valued by the team. They have to be able to trust that even if they make a mistake, they won't be punished. When a team member makes a mistake, accountability is appropriate. A mistake is an opportunity to teach and to learn. Both are invaluable. If embarrassment and social rejection are used, instead of teaching and learning, self-regard, creativity and risk-taking all plummet. On high-functioning teams, all members respect and care for the self-regard of each team member. That's what gives the team a sense of identity and makes the members feel like they want to belong. You know your teammates are looking out for you, and although they may offer constructive feedback about your performance within the team, you know that they would never criticize you publicly.
4. **Wellness.** Because stress endangers one's physical health, high-performance teams value wellness and check in regularly with strategies for supporting each other's physical and mental well-being. This has to be done very elegantly so it does not come across as judgmental. You can be a supportive teammate by your behavior. For instance, if a team member is trying to tackle a weight problem, don't bring junk food to a meeting. .
5. **Humor.** When the going gets tough, the tough can laugh at themselves. Laughter actually stimulates the production of endorphins, strengthens the immune function, and reduces the levels of highly corrosive stress hormones such as cortisol,

adrenaline and epinephrine. In addition to the neurochemical benefits of laughter, humor helps us refocus our perspective. Having that kind of flexibility not only helps teams manage stress, it helps them be highly innovative in solving the problems that are their work and purpose. Teams will function more effectively when their members heed the popular adage, "Those who laugh... lasts!"



6. **Flexibility.** To be able to bend without breaking in the daily winds of change at work is a critical ingredient of stress tolerance for teams. Strength in a team is well reflected in the old parable about being able to break a bundle of 10 sticks one of the time but finding it impossible to break all of them at once. By knowing each other's strengths, complementing them and working together, the team achieves its power. However, endurance and flexibility are even more valuable than this kind of strength. Endurance in the workplace can actually best be enhanced by more periods of rest. Many people at work have been running so hard and so long that they are literally exhausted. Chronic exhaustion diminishes the power of the team, because team members lose resilience, creativity and especially stress tolerance!

Flexibility comes from stretching muscles just a little bit further each day. It does make the muscles stronger but more importantly, it gives the ability to bend and reach to the full extent of one's capacity. This is what it takes to be able to adapt to change. This is what it takes to be able to envision new strategies and novel solutions to the problems in the workplace. This is what it takes to be able to adjust to a global marketplace which is fueled by an ongoing explosion of knowledge and unparalleled technological advantage. In such an environment it is essential to be able to bend and not break.

7. **Humility.** This is probably one of the most powerful ingredients of stress tolerance, but it is also one of the most advanced. Jim Collins pointed out in *Good to Great* (2001) that humility shows up in great leaders as the ability to attribute successes to the people around them while personally taking responsibility for the failures themselves. The ability to add this ingredient to the recipe for stress tolerance means that a team member has worked diligently to develop a larger, more comprehensive vision of life. That person has learned how to weave together the experiences, relationships and priorities in his/her life to produce whatever is most meaningful and valuable to that individual. Humble team members realize that it is impossible to meet goals without the help of others and that sometimes circumstances will thwart even the best of efforts, but perseverance will produce the best results possible, and that will be enough.

We sincerely encourage you practitioners of team wellness to always include (if not start with) some practice in the TESI competency of Stress Tolerance when you are helping your teams relieve the pain of doing more with less in a culture that never considers how much is *enough!*